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ESSAY: VULNERABILIZING YOUNG PEOPLE: INTERRUPTING THE ETHOS OF VULNERABILITY, THE NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITY, AND THE PRECISION EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

ABSTRACT

This essay is about the ethos of vulnerability, young people, and policies and practices related to youth support systems in Finland. Our aim is to scrutinize the alliance of the ethos of vulnerability and neoliberal rationality as well as its outcomes in terms of support systems and young people from various backgrounds. In the end, we take our analysis further to see how this alliance is associated with education and how it works by de-politicising, narrowing, and individualizing education toward a new kind of highly tailored precision education governance.

INTRODUCTION

Young people from various backgrounds are commonly conceptualised as vulnerable in transnational, national, and local policies and their implementations (e.g. Farrugia, Smyth and Harrison 2015; McLeod 2012; Brunila et al. 2017; 2018). The vulnerabilization of young people has shaped various types of interventions which we understand as youth support systems. A range of national, transnational, and local policy bodies, educational and other institutions and NGOs have made massive investments based on political initiatives to develop support systems intended to reach young people considered as vulnerable and to bring them back to the 'right track', in other words into education and work. Nevertheless, in spite of

the vast amount of support systems, they tend to be falling short in terms of meeting the interests of young people from various backgrounds and lowering the unemployment rates.

This essay is based on our research project *Interrupting Youth Support Systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability* (2017–2021)¹ with the aim to scrutinize the ethos of vulnerability that stems not so much from the individual young person's choice, being, or doing, as from the condition of possibility. Rather, according to our findings, the ethos of vulnerability seems to work through discursive practices that state not only what is desirable, but also what is recognisable as an acceptable form of being and doing. We also aim to advance current understanding of the possible conditions in which the ethos of vulnerability steers and guides young people,

and of the potential position of various kinds of support systems in that steering and guiding.

The wider context of the project is the neo-liberalization, marketization, and privatization of the Nordic welfare state and especially how it takes place via vulnerabilizing (e.g. through market-oriented, individual, therapeutic, psychological, medical, and diagnostic) policies and practices (e.g. Brunila and Ylöstalo in press; Kurki, Masoud, Niemi and Brunila 2017). We are all interested in questioning how the ethos of vulnerability changes expectations, policies, and practices related to young people and support systems. We understand support systems as referring to various kinds of short-term youth education, training, counselling, and rehabilitation projects and programmes, as well as outreach youth work, psychosocial and peer support, and functional activities. The project combines different approaches to the ethos of vulnerability; in this essay we analyze it as a psycho-emotional discourse shaping the subjectivity of young people and as a form of neoliberal governance shaping education and training.

Young people in our data include those outside of education and work, those who live or who have lived in prison, those who are considered to have mental-health problems and learning difficulties, those who are asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants, and those involved in all kinds of support systems, short-term programmes, projects and outreach youth work, and those who just have not found their place in a society. These young people nowadays face rather complicated and highly pressured situations in their lives. To understand these situations better, we have addressed cross-sectoral policies and practices of support systems discursively. By that we mean that discourses, as connected to knowledge formation, are considered to be practices emerging within and

producing power relations, which contribute to constituting the phenomena of which they speak (Foucault 1977; 1978).

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. We have investigated youth support systems in Finland and interviewed young people, youth workers, teachers, counsellors, and other professionals who work with young people. In addition, the group has analysed several hundred policy and other official documents about support systems as well as leaflets, webpages, media texts, public registry data, and statistics.

The methodology of the research project is characterized as multi-sited, nomadic, deconstructive, discursive, and policy ethnography (e.g. Brunila and Ryyänen 2016; Brunila and Ikävalko 2012; Ikävalko and Brunila 2017; Mertanen and Brunila 2017; Kurki, Ikävalko and Brunila 2016). 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. Furthermore, we have given thought to counter-politics, forms of activism, and the ways in which people form assemblies to act, to influence, and to resist. In addition, we have produced theoretical and conceptual insights on the ways to understand the ethos of vulnerability (e.g. Tiainen, Leiviskä and Brunila 2019; Ecclestone and Brunila 2015).

HOW THE ETHOS OF VULNERABILITY WORKS

One of the very first outcomes of our shared research findings was that the ethos of vulnerability plays a central role in shaping cross-sectoral youth transition policies and

their implementations. (Brunila et al. in press b, c; 2018, 2017; Ecclestone and Brunila 2015). This is the situation in Finland, where young people tend to be recognized through the prism of inherent vulnerability, with a parallel notion of the self that is in different ways deficient. Accordingly, the ethos of vulnerability as a policy imperative related to youth policy steering tends to frame ideas of young people's subjectivity as diminished and psycho-emotionally deviant, even in the school context (Lanas and Brunila 2019). The psycho-emotional in this article means a wide array of psychological, therapeutic, and medicalized discourses from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to positive psychology and individually based diagnoses of emotional needs and behavior problems drawing from different strands of counselling, diagnostics, self-help, and (psycho)therapy (see further about diagnoses Honkasilta 2019).

When we looked closely at policies and practices related to young people, it became clear that they place increasing demands on young people to develop individual-based competences such as self-discipline, resilience, and continuous self-development in terms of a stronger employability. (e.g. Brunila in press; Masoud, Kurki and Brunila in press; Mertanen, Pashby and Brunila 2019; Brunila et al. 2016). Consequently, enhancing these individual-based competences tended to be considered as an individual responsibility in order to manage uncertain and changing labour markets. Typical forms of support included rather market-oriented and individualised activities, such as interventions aimed at raising self-esteem and mapping and analysing emotions, as well as different behavioural and emotional training.

Several researchers have argued how the so-called psy discourses (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, therapeutic technologies, and self-help) coined by Rose (1996) have

been closely allied with the governing of young people considered vulnerable. We have shown that psy discourses, together with neoliberal rationality, associate with the ethos of vulnerability especially as a policy imperative. In our research, psy discourses work in parallel with the assumption that young people's inherent vulnerability takes a specific psycho-emotional form. This works in an alliance with a neoliberal rationality, because they both share a focus on the 'self-steering' capacities of the subjects themselves: the ideal young person is suitably autonomous, self-responsible, entrepreneurial, flexible, and self-centred, and also inherently vulnerable (Brunila in press.) We also follow Kate Brown who has analysed the ethos of vulnerability in social policy as a powerful conceptual mechanism that underpins various interventions for young people, and which she relates to paternalistic and bureaucratic condescension, selective systems of welfare, and social control (Brown 2011; 2014).

We have indicated how the ethos of vulnerability is associated with a wider societal therapeutic turn where Western advanced and liberal democratic societies have been fascinated with emotional and psychological governance (see also Wright 2011; Ahmed 2014; Rose 1996). The psy discourses could be considered as emblematic manifestations of the therapeutic turn encompassing a spectrum of discourses, social practices, and cultural artefacts that discursively and institutionally pervade not just support systems but social and cultural life (Brunila in press; see also Wright 2011).

Based on our results, once young people have been categorised as psycho-emotionally vulnerable, they are expected to absorb how to belong to that particular category, and thus to become submissive to these vulnerabilities. When young people targeted by the support activities act as expected, yet remain unemployed,

the problem can easily be reflected back on them. Thus, policies and practices of support systems form a circle where activities can be repeated endlessly because the problem is always to be found in the young person both through legacies from the past and not absorbing the right psycho-emotional orientation for the present and future. Furthermore, the orientation towards psycho-emotional vulnerabilities tends to ignore young people's capability, political agency, and citizenship.

We have also shown how various types of support systems that are supposed to carry potential benefits for 'vulnerable young people' are shifting the aims and potential of education, training, and lifelong learning onto a different path (Kurki and Brunila 2014). This shift has contributed to building knowledge hierarchies rather than equal opportunities among young people. Accordingly, a young person's activity as 'behavior' can be steered so that each person has to have the ability to assimilate to the context and its demands. This type of governing (re) produces normativities, as well as ideas about the 'right kind' of knowledge and knowing (e.g. Lanas and Brunila 2019). At the same time, young people are expected to transform their competences into productive outcomes.

In the ethos of vulnerability, psycho-emotional resilience as a form of self-discipline becomes an ideal competence whereby learning to carry one's own choices and responsibilities, as well as learning to become developmental and trainable, is considered as being competent in the right way (Brunila in press; Brunila et al. in press a; in press b; in press c; see Honkasalo in the introduction of this issue). This ideal resilience is in connection with the illusion of individual autonomy, which is created as a consequence of 'autonomizing' and 'responsibilizing' the self and making it accountable. Underlining the resilience of young people reflects the wider

spread of psy disciplines in which the focus is on psychological, psychotherapeutic, 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 and Millei 2016). The ethos of vulnerability produces a certain type of professional discourse in which the cultural, historical, political, economic, and social aspects of the problems young people face may be ignored. In other words, economic problems receive therapeutic solutions. We have been especially concerned about the relationship between the ethos of vulnerability and societal differences. These types of policies and implementations, as we have analyzed, tend to be useless when problems young people experience are, for example, gendered, ableist, or racialized (e.g. Kurki, Lahelma and Brunila 2019) but considered as problems of individuals instead of discursive practices.

It looks like the neoliberal rationality with its alliance with the ethos of vulnerability forms a joint framework for the rise of the therapeutic Nordic welfare state model in order to build its' citizens as resilient and prepared for the (inevitable) competition. We have earlier 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 (Brunila et al. press a). Therefore there are even more persistent changes than competitiveness that are focusing on young people. These rather persistent changes shape the ways in which young people are perceived and how they should perceive themselves both as psycho-emotionally vulnerable but also necessarily resilient and competitive.

The question is not whether to intervene, but which type of governance is the most

effective in producing and fostering suitably resilient subjectivities that could cope with insecurity. Hence, an individual's sense of psycho-emotional vulnerability is not simply an individual concern: it is an aspect of efficient governance aiming at harnessing existence to achieve neoliberal gains, meanwhile ignoring the systematic and social and cultural pressures that put young people under stress and anxieties (e.g. Brunila in press). In spite of its promise, the ethos of psycho-emotional vulnerability tends to promote a rather narrow, individualised, decontextualized, and instrumentalist approach.

CONCLUSION: THE RISE OF THE PRECISION EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

It is crucial to acknowledge the ethos of vulnerability in Finland because there is a largely unchallenged view that it exemplifies Nordic welfare as integral to educational and social justice. As researchers involved with educational research, we ought to ask what this means in terms of education and not least because a number of researchers across the world are repeatedly referring to a major crisis in education, arguing that it is failing to produce the outcomes it should produce. We locate this crisis as taking place within the neoliberal rationality enabling un-educational and de-politicised ways of thinking about education. Alongside this crisis, the current educational situation is characterised with a sense of disorientation about the purpose, content, and values of education. The role of education seems to be shifting from knowledge-based activities towards the development of specific character, skills, competences, and types of emotion, namely the positive. To put it simply, the ethos of vulnerability strengthens neoliberal policies and implementations that respond and support

individuals instead of aiming to solve problems as political, economic, societal, cultural, and structural.

In Western societies, educational institutions have been active in promoting and disseminating psychologically and therapeutically oriented policies and practices with an increasing concern with a scientific and personalised management of populations from children to adults (Wright 2011; Lanas and Brunila 2019; Petersen and Millei 2016; Ecclestone et al. 2015; McLeod 2012; Burman 1994; see also *Popular psychology, selfhelp culture, and happiness industry* -research network website). The current reforms within and beyond education have worked towards de-politicizing education toward a new kind of individually and personally tailored precision education requiring a specific type of ideal learning subjectivity.

This could be interpreted as an outcome of the neoliberal rationality, which requires people to submit to their individually understood vulnerabilities, and where a lack of socio-economic activity becomes an indicator of personal deficiency. However, in terms of the rise of marketization, privatization, datafication, and digitalization of education this might not be enough. We are already witnessing yet another shift, this time from psy knowledge to neuro-based knowledge and behavioural genetics giving power to scientifically engineer individual traits, strengths, and vulnerabilities from birth (e.g. Gillies and Edwards 2016; Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2017; Plomin 2018). This we have coined as precision education governance alongside the individualized and personalized attempts for benefits for educating, teaching, and learning. Alongside private companies and marketization the precision education governance includes a wide variety of disciplines, such as psychology, neurobiology, evolutionary biology, pediatrics, and behavioral

genetics forming new networks of governance in order to tailor education towards individually defined needs. In accordance to the ethos of vulnerability as in accordance to the precision education governance, people are supposed to become more easily governed: trainable, learnable, flexible, and employable through more and more individually tailored education.

In education, we should perhaps be more interested in what is happening in a society. In fact, the whole educational field is shifting the emphasis from educational sciences to learning sciences, from teaching to learning, from knowledge to (positive) emotions, from structures to processes and performances together with the self-development and self-learning of individuals. In parallel, the focus on welfare states and structures is turning towards the steering of wellbeing of individuals and emotions.

The ethos of vulnerability has the capacity to provide more efficient governance through various opportunities for more tailored and individualised engineering of learning. This type of governance cultivates policies and techniques for young people to become more learnable, manageable, and reliable: someone who has development potential, someone who knows their place, and makes realistic plans to achieve them. However, it could be understood, following Lauren Berlant (2011), as a slow death, the physical wearing out of a population under capitalist regimes of structural subordination and governmentality.

NOTES

- 1 The research project Interrupting Youth Support Systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability is funded by the Academy of Finland. The authors are all part of the research project located in the AGORA for the study of social justice and

equality – research centre in the University of Helsinki. The whole research team is focused on sociological, philosophical, feminist, historical, social, political, and economic perspectives in order to study social change in education and beyond and to highlight some of the contradictions of policies and practices of education and the related potential for change.

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