'Education is important, but …' Young people outside of schooling and the Finnish policy of 'education guarantee'

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
‘Education is important, but . . .’ Young people outside of schooling and the Finnish policy of ‘education guarantee’

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Background
Early school leaving and dropout are widely recognized as problems, leading to further marginalization and exclusion of young people from society at large. The Finnish government has set a target that, by the year 2008, 96% of those who complete compulsory education will continue without interruption in secondary education or in the 10th grade. This policy is known as ‘the education guarantee’.

Purpose
The purpose is to present preliminary results from a research project in progress, which is part of an ESF/EQUAL II funded development project called ‘VaSkooli’. The project aims at a regional model of education guarantee by which a place of study and other forms of support can be offered for every young person finishing compulsory education.

Target group
The target groups of the project consist of: (1) students in the final years of comprehensive school who have various kinds of difficulties at school; (2) students who do not apply for a place in secondary education after finishing comprehensive school; (3) those who apply for secondary education but do not find a study place; and (4) students who have dropped out of secondary education or who are in danger of doing so. It was estimated that in the region where this project is being carried out (Turku and Salo regions in south-west Finland), there were some 310 youngsters outside of education. This paper reports findings from the first round of data collection during summer and autumn 2005, including 124 returned questionnaires and 15 interviews based on an opportunity sample.

Design and methods
In the first round of data collection the target population was contacted mainly through other participating sub-projects and their resource centres. In addition, a larger survey was mailed to all those who applied but did not gain a study place at the Turku Vocational Institute (N = 174). The questionnaire was also distributed through various project workers. In-depth interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis.

Results
The situation of the respondents was relatively good, indicating the difficulties in reaching the most vulnerable youth. One-third had enrolled in the 10th grade and 24% were studying in regular upper secondary education. Fifteen youngsters with an immigrant background were in special preparatory education, 14 had regular jobs or were in practical or apprenticeship training, and three had enrolled in some other short courses. The number of those without any study place or work was 22 (18%).

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The respondents valued education relatively highly; 90% said that they would need education in order to realize their dreams. Two subgroups can be identified: those for whom education/work is relatively important and those who value free time/friends/hobbies more than others. The interviews highlight the various social problems and disaffection from school that are behind exclusion.

Conclusions
At this point, the conclusions of this research in progress remain on a quite general level. Proposed measures in breaking the vicious circle of school exclusion include the redefinition of ‘at-risk’ youth and their social problems, reallocation of blame, investing in measures which prove to work and applying empowering inclusive policies. It should be recognized that learning at school does not suit everybody. Instead of being an institution that ‘disciplines and punishes’, the school should act as an agency of empowerment, allowing each young person to develop their strengths and find their ‘own thing’ (‘oma juttu’).

Keywords: Social exclusion; Marginalisation; Youth at risk; Dropping out; Early school leaving

Introduction
Schooling is, in terms of its duration and ramifications, an important phase in young people’s lives. Education socializes adolescents into (adult) society; it inculcates our cultural heritage and qualifies for the world of work, giving young people an occupational and professional direction—or, at least, it is supposed to. From this perspective it is understandable that exclusion from education, leaving school early and dropping out are considered a starting point for further marginalization and exclusion from society at large.

At the European level, the prevention of early school leaving is one of the key policy priorities in fighting poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2004). In Finland the government has set a target that, by the year 2008, of those who complete compulsory education, 96% will continue straight into secondary education or the 10th grade. This policy is known as the ‘education guarantee’: everybody should have access to a suitable place in the educational system after completing compulsory education.

In Finland, practically everybody participates in the joint application system for secondary education, either for general upper secondary schools (lukio) or for vocational schools. In 2004 the share was 98%, and of those 55% enrolled in upper secondary schools and 39% in vocational schools. Some 3% continued in the voluntary 10th grade of the comprehensive school. Thus, altogether 5% (3% who did not get any place and 2% who did not apply) did not continue in education (Statistics Finland, 2006). This means that on the national level the target has almost been reached.

This paper reports preliminary findings from a regional development project funded from the European Social Fund, EQUAL II. The main objective of the ‘VaSkooli’ project¹ (http://www.vaskooli.fi/frontpage.html) is to develop a regional model of the ‘education guarantee’ by which a place of study can be offered for every young person finishing compulsory education (comprehensive school). The basic
tools of the model include extended multi-vocational support and guidance centres for students and young people at risk of falling outside education. The project promotes flexible cooperation between schools and authorities, and between education and working life, in order to ease transitions from comprehensive school to secondary education, and from secondary education to working life. The idea is to enhance students’ overall life management skills, to support them in taking responsibility for their own educational careers and to increase their experiences of working life.

VaSkooli is divided into eight different sub-projects, which are all implemented by separate project organizations in the Turku and Salo regions in south-west Finland. They include comprehensive schools and vocational institutes, along with youth and educational authorities of the municipalities involved. The research project reported here is an individual sub-project managed by the Research Unit for the Sociology of Education (RUSE) at the University of Turku (http://www.vaskooli.fi/subprojects.html).

The project’s target groups consist of young people at risk of falling out of education, and who are in danger of becoming socially excluded. These groups include, first, students in the final years of comprehensive school who have various kinds of difficulties in school; second, a special group of students who do not apply for a place in secondary education after finishing comprehensive school; third, those who apply for secondary education but do not gain a study place. The fourth major target group is made up of students who have dropped out of secondary education or who are in danger of doing so.

Sub-projects are experimenting with new guidance and support service methods and developing new ways of disseminating and receiving information regarding young people’s transitions. The idea is that these new models and practices could encourage young people actively to apply for education and training and reduce the number of early school leavers and dropouts. A project is also offering young people opportunities to gain hands-on experience of different fields of education before they make their choices. Young people who are left outside of education also have the opportunity to take up practical training for a couple of months. During the training period, they are assisted in finding educational opportunities. If the young trainee, for instance, likes the work (s)he is doing, a counsellor helps in finding suitable courses in the field and assists in the application process.

ESF-funded EU projects like VaSkooli seldom include extensive independent academic research. They are usually straightforward, practical undertakings that aim at finding the ‘best practices’ for a narrow, politically pre-defined set of problems—in this case, early school leaving and dropout. The idea of developing something called an ‘education guarantee’ must, in this context, sound very promising from the Brussels perspective. Saying this, and referring to the discussion of ‘young people at risk’ in the next section, means that we, as researchers, have to remain objective and professionally focused.

The research project concentrates on the mechanisms of educational and social exclusion. We are looking at how and why young people end up in—i.e. are socially selected for—the different groups that can be described as being ‘at risk’. The objective is to produce new information and understanding concerning the
mechanisms of exclusion, and the life paths and educational careers of young people at risk.

The research project has two sets of research questions. On the one hand, we look at how young people (and their families) operate during transitions and how they interpret and experience the various problems involved. On the other hand, we concentrate on the functioning of the specific measures developed in the other VaSkooli sub-projects.

The first set of research questions has two interrelated sub-questions:

- On which kind of representations regarding (1) the possibilities offered by the education system, and (2) their own aptitudes and opportunities, do young people (and/or their families) ground their educational and career choices?
- How is information on educational and other opportunities acquired, interpreted and utilized?

The second set of questions relates to the problem of the ‘rehabilitative’ measures adopted in the project:

- What kind of guidance and counselling do young people (and their families) themselves think that they might need?
- How do project workers see and interpret the various situations and practices of guidance and counselling, the problems encountered and, eventually, their effectiveness?

We believe that the Finnish case provides an interesting example of current educational policies designed for fighting social exclusion and marginalization, especially if one takes an objectivist approach to social problems. The attempt to raise participation rates from the current 95% to the government’s goal of 96% may sound both desperate and unnecessary to colleagues in many other countries. On the other hand, if one looks at the problem from the individual’s point of view and at the ‘class-roots’ level, there are hundreds of young people facing various kinds of problems in their transition from compulsory education to the secondary level. Their problems are the same as for other young people, including, for instance, domestic troubles, learning disabilities or purely age-related motivational problems—their magnitude simply varies.

We wish to emphasize that this paper describes research in progress. The preliminary results and experiences are discussed in relation to the larger background and framework of the project, and earlier research and ideas. The focus will be on the transition from the comprehensive school to upper secondary education where the ‘normal transition’ is threatened by a ‘vicious circle of marginalization’, and on the processes of guidance and counselling devised to break the circle.

‘At risk’—by whom and of what?

The problems inherent in simplifying notions like ‘youth at risk’ are now widely acknowledged (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Kelly, 2003; Te Riele, 2006). It is equally clear
that the concept of ‘youth’ does not refer to a homogeneous entity with a clearly definable set of attributes and risk factors (Hoikkala, 1991). According to Kelly (2003, p. 167), youth is an ‘artefact of expertise’. It is constructed by experts, politicians and practitioners in a wide range of knowledge domains, including: education, family, mass media, popular culture, crime, and so on. Each of these domains poses, to a varying extent, both risks and possibilities for young people.

Taking a historical perspective, it becomes evident that the ‘category of humanity labelled youth’ (Parsons, 2005, p. 189) has always constituted some kind of problem to the other category, ‘adults’, being an incomprehensible, deviant and a potentially threatening ‘underclass’ (MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). Thus, the primary problem with youth seems to be that ‘they are not adults, but instead the objectives of intensive adult scrutiny and concern’ (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 202).

We cannot, however, escape the fact that social problems exist, constructed or otherwise. If an adolescent takes drugs, drops out of school and is involved in petty crime, the situation is not changed if we start talking about ‘youth with possibilities’ instead of ‘youth at risk’, or ‘inclusion’ instead of ‘exclusion’. It is a truism that everybody carries some potentials and possibilities. Thus, also from the point of view of the VaSkooli project, the question is how to approach young people and to find the measures that bring out their potentials and possibilities.

While approaching a group of young people—in our case, the potential early school leavers—it is advisable to use language that does not further marginalize the marginalized (Te Riele, 2006). There is, however, another and even greater ‘at-risk paradox’ here, namely the tendency to interpret the problems as inherently ‘youth problems’ (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 145). We might as well ask what is wrong with schools. Thus, in addition to the identification of the problems, we need a redefinition and reallocation of blame (Parsons, 2005).

Understand youth, their lives and choices

In our present society, described as high-modern (Giddens, 1991) or post-modern (Bauman, 1992), the traditional linear and fairly predictable life course, and the transition from school to work, has transformed and become non-linear and heterogeneous (Thomson et al., 2002). The lives of young people are divided into different life spheres, including family, school, friends and leisure, hobbies, work, etc., which have their own rules and regulations, values and objectives. They tend to be increasingly separate, and young people have to navigate and balance between them. According to a Finnish study (Siurala, 1994), experiences of disappointment and failure in one sphere can lead a young person to concentrate on other spheres and seek positive experiences and approval from them. These ‘fateful moments’ are ‘moments when the individual must launch out into something new, knowing that a decision made, or a specific course of action followed, has an irreversible quality, or at least that it will be difficult thereafter to revert to the old paths’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 114).

The spectrum of fateful or critical moments, from the point of view of the fragile decision between staying or leaving, is wide, as described by Thomson et al. (2002).
In the sphere of family life it can be parental unemployment, divorce or sexual abuse. In school, bullying, conflict with teachers or failing in exams are typical examples. In the sphere of leisure and consumption, the typical story, especially from parents’ perspective, is one of ‘bad company’. In the sphere of friends and social relationships, we know that losing a boyfriend or girlfriend can have devastating consequences.

From the point of view of education and early school leaving, we should note that the events described above, which can be passing episodes, can also form a ‘vicious circle of marginalisation’ (Takala, 1992). According to Takala, the process of social exclusion can be analysed as a five-stage process that extends and becomes worse after every stage. Again, from the point of view of school failure, the first symptoms are various difficulties at school, for example, underachievement, truancy and/or disorderly behaviour in class. Young people may, or may not, share the above-mentioned background factors like parental unemployment or living in a single-parent household. Constant failure in school can produce what Takala calls ‘school allergy’. This notion comes close to Paul Willis’s idea of resistance (Willis, 1977). A typical outcome of school disaffection is leaving early or dropping out.

In the third phase of the vicious circle, the young are faced with the fact that they are not fit for the labour market. In Finland unemployed under-25s remaining outside secondary education are further penalized by state authorities trying to ‘force’ them back to school. According to current legislation, these young people are not entitled to a labour market subsidy if they do not actively seek education. This is one additional reason why early school leavers stay at home doing nothing, or they simply hang around in the city with friends who are in a similar situation.

The fourth stage of deep marginalization includes negative attitudes to work, substance abuse and criminal activities or withdrawal. In the fifth stage the vicious circle can lead to institutionalization and isolation (Takala, 1992, p. 38).

There is no space, or need, in this paper to engage in any discussions concerning the degree of determination in this kind of vicious circle. From the practical point of view set out by the VaSkooli project, two important questions emerge: first, how to identify the symptoms, and secondly, how to make the intervention that will break the circle.

Reaching the target groups

Data and methods

The problem of reaching marginalized and excluded groups is a common area of discussion in youth research. In the case of reaching those young people with the most severe social problems, including violence and crime at home or homelessness, it usually requires extensive collaboration between researchers, social workers and other professionals, and even the police (e.g. Broadhurst et al., 2005).

In the VaSkooli research project the initial idea was to reach the young through the other sub-projects. In addition, a questionnaire was sent to all those who had applied for the Turku Vocational Institute but had not received a study place (N = 174). The questionnaire was also distributed through project workers and used at special youth
events organized by the Turku Employment Office. As expected, considering the nature of the target group, it was fairly difficult to motivate the young people to fill in the questionnaire or participate in the interview. Furthermore, the guidance sessions that young people attended (as part of the project) were often so intensive that they did not have the energy to participate in the research after spending one, or even two hours, with the project workers trying to plan for their future.

The interviews were based on an opportunity sample. An opportunity sample is one form of non-probability sampling where the subjects are selected on the basis of their availability to the researcher who makes his/her own judgement concerning their representativeness. This usually means that the subjects are volunteers who, according to the judgement of the researcher, can offer useful information on the research topic.

The researcher spent several hours in the project’s resource centres and at a place called the ‘guidance station’ where those without a school place can seek information, advice and guidance. She was also present at the youth events where schools and institutes were advertising their available study places for potential applicants. On these occasions the researcher talked to the young people, checked their suitability for the research and asked them to complete a questionnaire and/or participate in an interview.

The focus of the interviews was on the situation of the young people, their experiences and opinions concerning education, guidance and their own possibilities in school and working life. Six out of 15 interviews with young people were conducted over the telephone and the rest were face-to-face interviews. Three of the face-to-face interviews took place at the youth events; three were conducted at youth centres; two at schools; and one in our research institute. The interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 1 hour.

The questionnaire, which was an attempt to explore some of the basic features of the target group, proved quite a challenging method for gathering data. The postal questionnaire had a particularly low response rate, which was expected given the target group. The exact response rate is unknown because the same questionnaire was available for those young people who visited the guidance stations and it was impossible to keep a record of how many actually took the form. We can estimate, however, that some 25% to 30% of young people returned the postal questionnaire. There are, however, some interesting findings from the responses to the questionnaire.

The preliminary findings reported in this paper are based on the first round of data collection in the summer and autumn of 2005. The data include 124 returned questionnaires and 15 interviews. This research can be considered as a type of multiple case study, and it should be emphasized that the findings are analytical generalizations to theory and not statistical generalizations to a clearly defined population (Yin, 1989, p. 21).

What is the extent of the population?

At the beginning of the project, specific efforts were made to obtain an accurate estimate of the total number of young people outside of education in the Turku and
Salo regions, and their division into the different groups highlighted in the introduction. For this task statistical data were extracted from the register of the joint application system, and this information was checked against school records. Table 1 shows the main results of this exercise. The population under examination consists of the pupils who are completing the 9th or 10th grades. We can see from the table that the largest group outside of education were those who applied but did not succeed in accessing a study place (277). The number of young people who did not accept the study place they were offered or who dropped out early was quite large (145). The number of young people who did not even apply was clearly the smallest (77); many of them were disabled and had special arrangements for their further training.

In addition to the 10th grade, which is an extension of the comprehensive school where pupils have the opportunity to develop their learning skills and mature their plans, there are other forms of short-term education outside the joint application system. A number (189) of the young people had utilized these options. Thus, the total number outside of education was 310 or 7.6% of the total eligible population.

### Situation and plans of the young

In spring 2005 nearly all of the young people (91%) had applied for a place in secondary education in the joint application system. Of those, 81% were unsuccessful. One in ten had received an offer but refused. Seven youngsters (6%) had started studying but dropped out. There were only two young people who, after getting a place, were studying at the time of the research.

Table 2 shows the overall situation of young people at the time of completing the questionnaire. We can see that, despite their difficulties during the initial application period after completing comprehensive school, the majority had managed to gain a place of study. One-third had enrolled in the 10th grade and 24% were studying in regular upper secondary education. Although they had not succeeded in the first application round, they had been able to find spare places, for instance, by contacting vocational institutions directly.

Fifteen youngsters from minority ethnic backgrounds were in special preparatory education aiming, among other things, to enhance their language skills. Fourteen had

### Table 1. The number of compulsory school leavers in 2004 and those outside of education in the Turku and Salo regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population (number of pupils in 9th and 10th grades)</th>
<th>4065</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not apply through joint application system</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied but did not find a study place</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not accept a place or dropped out</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in the 10th grade or other forms of education</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total outside of education</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion (%)</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: National register of joint application and school registers.*
regular jobs, or they were in practical or apprenticeship training, and three had enrolled in some other short courses. The number of those without any study place or work was 22, which is less than one-fifth of the respondents we accessed via our questionnaire.

**The (over?)emphasized role of education**

Young people recognize the importance and value of education. They know that without education their future in the world of work will be highly insecure. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 90% said that in order to realize their dreams, they will need education. In another question, assessing the relative importance of the different spheres of life, school gained an average value of 3.96 on a five-point scale (see Table 3). However, the most important life sphere was the family and home (4.64).

Notwithstanding that in young people’s lives everything seems to be highly important, further analysis, using principal components, suggests that the respondents can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are those for whom the combination of education and work is, in relative terms, highly important. On the other hand, there are young people who give high importance to friends, free time and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In 10th grade</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In upper secondary education</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without a study place</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In preparatory education for immigrants</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working, practical training, apprenticeship</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a short course</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source*: VaSkooli questionnaire.

*Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sphere of Life</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and home</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>0.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free time</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source*: VaSkooli questionnaire.
hobbies when compared to the other spheres. There were some interesting differences between the different groups shown in Table 2. It seems, for instance, that the 10th-graders score relatively high on the free time–friends–hobbies dimension when compared to the education–work dimension.

This indicates that their future plans for education and work are quite underdeveloped. On the other hand, those working or in apprenticeship training scored below average on both dimensions. This means that, in addition to their disaffection from school, youngsters in the latter group are not very highly committed to the world of work, either. They would like to work and earn their own money but they have various problems in adjusting to the requirements of working life, which became evident in some of the interviews. There were some young men, for instance, who had difficulties with punctuality and complying with the rules of the workplace.

If we look at the future plans of the respondents, we can also see that education is the number one option. Of those who were outside of education, 90% wanted to find an educational place as soon as possible. The great majority (87%) of those who were in the additional 10th grade also planned to seek a place in secondary education. Over one-half (57%) of those who were working, in practical training, or in apprenticeship training planned to return to school. For them, however, staying in working life was a more common future plan (79%).

Thus, in addition to education, the possibility of finding employment was also in the minds of the young respondents. Of those who were outside of education and planned to apply again, 35% were also considering the labour market option. For those in the 10th grade, the corresponding figure was 21%. This highlights, again, the dilemmas of the current market-driven society where the spheres of free time and consumption are highly important in young people’s lives. Many youngsters, especially those with a practical orientation, would prefer working and earning their own money in order to realize their personal interests and wants. However, they lack the necessary qualifications and social skills.

Multiple faces of youth at risk and the problems of guidance

Of the 15 youngsters interviewed, six were still outside of education. Four of them were school dropouts, one had been unsuccessful in the joint application process and one had refused the offer. Despite the highly individual nature of their stories they, however, share certain common features, discussed above, under the problematic concept of ‘youth at risk’. The boys, in particular, exhibited clear signs of disaffection from school. They would rather be engaged in practical work with their hands than sit in class. They had pursued vocational education but soon realized that ‘it was not their thing’. It seems that the Finnish school-based vocational education, where the first year is rather theoretical (see Kivinen & Silvennoinen, 1999), provides a disappointment to many of these young people.

Vocational diplomas take three years to complete and they also include general and theoretical subjects. One reason for the lengthening of vocational training is that vocational diplomas nowadays give general eligibility to higher education studies. One of the young people interviewed as part of the research was hoping to find a
course, lasting no longer than a year, and leading to a diploma giving access to the labour market. The problem is that in Finland these kinds of intermediate qualifications are not available.

On the other hand, the girls, who usually do better in school than boys (OECD, 2004), often start at the general upper secondary school but then find it too competitive and demanding. The demanding nature of the Finnish general upper secondary school was also revealed by a recent study that found that 25% of the students had experienced stress and exhaustion because of schoolwork (Klemelä et al., 2007). One of the interviewees in this study dropped out after suffering total burn-out. Now she is thinking of going to a vocational school or taking an apprenticeship, but her overall educational preferences are still quite weak. Her comment includes a telling critique of the prevailing guidance ideology, which can be described as ‘humanistic-individualistic, learner centred and non-directive’ (see Ahola & Mikkola, 2004, p. 95). In the worst case, it means leaving young people alone with their problems and decision-making:

One thing I have learned is that if you want to get ahead in life, you have to do everything by yourself. That’s the truth, nobody comes and helps, you have to figure it out yourself.

(Girl, aged 20)

The story of this girl is just one example of how the process can go wrong, but there is also other evidence concerning the discrepancy between school guidance and counselling and the needs of young people. According to a large national evaluation study (Numminen et al., 2002) both school headteachers and counsellors had a more positive image of guidance than the pupils themselves. While school personnel tend to emphasize the formal features of guidance, young people value guidance according to the practical help they receive in order to solve their acute problems.

The present guidance and counselling system in Finland seems to be unable to provide young people, especially those coming from the most challenging groups, with the kind of information they would need and desire. More than information on opportunities or the grades required or other requirements related to access, young people seem to need information describing the substantial features of different lines of education and courses, and the realities of the world of work. However, the individualistic and non-directive attitude, which emphasizes freedom of choice, turns guidance into a supermarket where everything is abundant and just waiting for the chooser. The following quote describes this type of situation:

I have been saying that I have always wanted to become a children’s nurse, and then the teacher just said that, like this, and she gave me that book [the guidebook for secondary vocational education] where I could find all the schools and other things. (Girl, aged 19)

Another life story provides further evidence of the problems involved in school guidance and counselling. This girl had relatively good grades at school but did not consider upper secondary school, probably because of her working-class background. She had hobbies relating to youth work, and she had been a leader at a youth camp.
Consequently, her initial plan was to study youth work. However, this line of education is not available in the Turku region. The institution she had in mind was quite far away (about 160 km) in another town. She was insecure about her choice, both in general and in terms of leaving home, and when the school counsellor advised against her plans, she changed to another line of education. It was, however, a disappointment, and she dropped out. Now, being a year older and also more confident in leaving home to study in another city, she has applied for several places related to youth work.

In many cases, the underlying problem is poor school success, and the negative attitude towards school, which narrows down the feasible options considerably. Those few young people in our target group who had strong educational preferences were usually left without a place in the joint application system because they were opting for the popular fields of study that were difficult to access. Among our interviewees, a typical case was a girl with an immigrant background whose first language was not Finnish. In our previous study (Ahola & Mikkola, 2004), school counsellors highlighted that immigrant families usually valued education highly and had high aspirations for their children. However, due to their low proficiency in the Finnish language, which becomes critical in the final years of basic schooling, gaining a place at secondary school is relatively difficult for these young people.

On the whole, the majority of the young people that we interviewed had weak educational preferences or they had little idea what to do after completing comprehensive school. They usually dropped out due to their intensifying disaffection or because they realized that they had ended up in the wrong field.

Fighting school exclusion: some concluding remarks

Who is missing in this picture?

In the first year of the VaSkooli project, we have only been able to scratch the surface of the problems relating to young people outside of education. This relates to the difficulties in reaching the youngsters, and their families, who do not participate in any of the special services provided by the sub-projects. However, as previously mentioned, our main target group were those young people who became the ‘customers’ of the other sub-projects, their resource centres and the guiding station.

The main problem at the beginning of the project was the collaboration between the researcher and the other project workers. The ideal case would have been if the project workers, as experts in guidance and counselling, had conducted the interviews. The project workers had their own confidential data to gather in addition to the researcher’s data collection exercise, which meant that some young people were reluctant to participate in an additional interview. During the second year of the project, many of these problems have been avoided due to increased mutual understanding and collaboration and the researcher has been able to find suitable subjects with much less effort.

There are a number of issues which need to be considered when undertaking work of this kind, in particular, in relation to undertaking EU-funded projects and engaging with the professionals working with these young people. The challenges
linked to undertaking EU-funded projects focused on timetables, budgeting and the intense bureaucracy. It was, for instance, challenging to integrate the needs and schedules of the research project with the other sub-projects working with a different logic and timetables. In addition, all the reporting and repeated planning typical of EU-funded projects was both time-consuming and felt to be unnecessary from the research point of view. Although the project provided a good network for conducting the research, there were also challenges related to working with the different professional groups involved. One major problem related to matters of confidentiality. The project workers reported difficulties regarding confidentiality issues, especially in working with social services.

**Breaking the vicious circle**

Thus far we have been able to reach the most active young people in the target group. However, a very familiar picture of school exclusion is emerging. The preliminary results also highlight some of the structural features and ‘bottlenecks’ of the Finnish educational system quite well.

One of the starting-points of the project is that, before organizing additional systems of guidance and counselling, there have to be sufficient suitable places where young people can be directed. This requires intensive collaboration with, and also persuasion of, policy-makers and officials responsible for educational planning. The problem of the present system, grounded in liberalistic, individualistic, elitist and excluding policies (Parsons, 2005), is that it shows little interest in preventive and rehabilitative measures. This is part of the vicious circle (see Figure 1) of school exclusion where, paradoxically, the starting point is the school itself, the institution of

![Figure 1. Breaking the vicious circle of school exclusion: adapted from Parsons (2005)](image-url)
'discipline and punish' if we use the Foucaultian term. Figure 1 is also an attempt to pinpoint the main strategies needed in order to break the circle and facilitate the integration of the new practices developed in projects like the VaSkooli, described in this paper, into the education system.

In the case of Finland, one indication of the low interest in preventive measures is provided by the intensified discussion concerning the inadequate resources allocated to school guidance and counselling (Ahola & Mikkola, 2004). This was also highlighted in the previous national evaluation report (Numminen et al., 2002). The needs for intensive guidance and counselling, as well as special education, increase (Kivirauma et al., 2006) while education budgets are in stagnation and subject to cutbacks. In addition, there are huge regional differences in the numbers of guidance and counselling personnel in schools. This is partly because of funding structures, whereby local authorities and education providers can quite freely allocate their budgets between different functions. Combined with the lack of suitable placements, this leads to a situation where young people are shunted between different experts and officials and are in danger of being marginalized. This increases the number of young people categorized as at risk.

The first measures in breaking this kind of vicious circle of school exclusion include a number of redefinitions in the current discourses of social problems and youth at risk. It also includes a redefinition and reallocation of ‘blame’ (Parsons, 2005). This means, for instance, that it should be the school that adapts to the needs of the young people and not always the young people who should adapt to the requirements of the school. It should also be recognized that learning at school does not suit everybody. Instead of being an institution of ‘discipline and punish’, the school should act as an agency of empowerment, allowing each young person to develop their strengths and find their ‘own thing’ (see Kivela, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2005).

One critical question of the project is whether it will produce permanent results. The special measures developed while the project is working may be realistic and effective, but after the project, having invested additional resources, it is often difficult to convince policy-makers that long-term funding is required. In the VaSkooli project much effort was devoted to the dissemination and mainstreaming of activities. Through the increased knowledge of the functioning of these measures, like the guidance station, new understanding of youth and their ‘problems’ emerges. Consequently, the policy-makers may see them not as ‘youth at risk’, but as ordinary youth with various problems that need to be taken care of. One indication of this would be the willingness to invest in new types of rehabilitative and inclusive measures, not just continuing the ‘back to school’ policy implied by Figure 1. In order to break the vicious circle of school exclusion, thus, the project has to demonstrate that its innovations and new measures really work, and in this task our ongoing research project can be a valuable addition.

Notes

1. The Finnish word ‘vaskooli’ means gold pan, and it describes the basic philosophy of the project where every young person represents a gold nugget worth saving.
2. The Turku and Salo region represents a well-developed urban area where Turku is the central city with 175,400 inhabitants but also the more concentrated social and educational problems. The surrounding cities and municipalities range from 15,000 to 25,000 inhabitants.

3. Turku Vocational Institute represents one of the sub-projects and also the administration of the VaSkooli project.

4. The first principal component relating to hobbies explains 32% of the variance and the second relating to education and work explains 26%. As pointed out, however, the analysis is highly suggestive because of the skewness of the distributions.

5. This was in reply to a multiple-response question.

6. It is not possible, in this paper, to go into the details of the complex funding structures of Finnish municipally organized and governed basic and secondary education. The central government shares the costs by granting statutory government transfers to the local providers. The statutory government transfer is calculated on the basis of a unit cost (€/pupil) determined annually by the Ministry of Education. In 2006, for instance, the government paid 55% and municipal authorities 45% of the cost of basic education (http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/yleissivistaveskoulu/koulujaopistoja/rahoitus/?lang=en).

References


