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REFORMING YOUTH TRANSITION SUPPORT WITH THE MULTI-AGENCY APPROACH? – A CASE STUDY OF THE FINNISH ONE-STOP GUIDANCE CENTERS³

Reformisanje podrške tranzicijama mladih kroz multisektorski pristup? Studija slučaja finskih One-Stop Guidance centara

ABSTRACT: *Finland is trying to expedite and support young people's transition to productive adulthood in various ways. Face-to-face guidance in multi-agency service points, the One-Stop Guidance Centers, has formed a central means for the last three governments. In these centres, a young person under the age of 30 can get help from different professionals in matters related to work, education and everyday life. This study asks how the centres define their tasks and target groups, and how the centres relate to the service reformation. The data consists of peer-learning surveys for the employees of the centres, conducted in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The research approach is inspired by membership categorisation analysis (MCA) pointing out that institutions think and act by means of categories: they produce client classifications and problem definitions, which define their service provision. The data analysis mixes MCA and content analysis.*

The centres have no dominant administrative sector or profession that would provide the target settings and categorisations to be directly applied in their work. Instead, these are negotiated inter-professionally and locally. The analysis shows that the employees reflect their task against the problems of the old service provision system. The centres want to stand apart from the bureaucratic and siloed service provision system as a youth-centred and holistic service. Developing a new way of working necessarily means questioning the conventional categories of clients and actions. Yet, the possibility to develop the "new" varies between the professional groups and the geographic areas. The detailed and detached legislation of different administrative branches also delimit it.

KEY WORDS: categorisation, multi-agency service, reformation, young people

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APSTRAKT: *Finska nastoji da podrži tranziciju mladih u produktivnu odraslost na različite načine. Lično savetovanje u centrima multisektorskih usluga - One-Stop Guidance Centers, jedan je od centralnih načina kojim se to sprovodi tokom poslednje tri vlade. U ovim centrima, osobe mlađe od 30 godina mogu dobiti pomoć različitih stručnjaka u pitanjima koja se odnose na rad, obrazovanje i svakodnevni život. U ovom radu se pitamo kako ovi centri određuju svoje zadatke i odabiraju grupe, kao i kako se odnose prema reformi sektora usluga. Podaci potiču iz anketa o učenju od vršnjaka sprovedenih sa zaposlenim u centrima tokom 2015, 2016 i 2017 godine. Istraživački pristup je inspirisan analizom kategorizacije članstva (MCA) koji upućuje da institucije razmišljaju i deluju po principu kategorija: one proizvode klasifikacije korisnika i definicije problema, čime određuju pružanje usluga. Analiza podataka kombinuje analizu kategorizacije članstva (MCA) i analizu sadržaja.*

Centri nemaju dominantni administrativni sektor ili profesiju koja bi obezbeđivala da fokusiranje ciljeva i kategorizacije budu direktno primenjene u njihovom radu, već se oni pregovaraju među stručnjacima i lokalno. Analiza pokazuje da zaposleni promišljaju svoj zadatak u odnosu na stari sistem pružanja usluga. Centri žele da se distanciraju od starog birokratskog sistema pružanja usluga kao holistički centri fokusirani na mlade. Razvijanje novog načina rada neminovno znači propitivanje konvencionalnih kategorija korisnika i postupaka. Ipak, mogućnost da se "novo" razvije se razlikuje između grupa stručnjaka i geografskih oblasti. Detaljno i nepovezano zakonodavstvo različitih administrativnih podela je takođe ograničavajuće.

KLJUČNE REČI: kategorizacija, multisektorske usluge, reforma, mladi

Tackling youth transition problems

Labour markets have been long undergoing a major transition in the wake of technological progress and the global redivision of work. Young people are more likely to be subject to precarious labour market positions and lower employment security than the older population: adequate income is not guaranteed, even if they have jobs (Eurofound, 2013; Albæk et al., 2015; France, 2016:133–4). Instead of linear progress, the everyday existence of young people is often fragmented into a circle of employment, training and unemployment periods. This causes shifts in status and gaps in income. Furthermore, new forms of work present a challenge for the way social protection and benefits are structured in Finland. They are based on detailed sector-specific and detached legislation and on earning full-time and stable salaries. (See Hiilamo et al., 2017.)

Like the rest of Europe, Finland is trying to expedite young people's entry to education and working life in various ways and reduce the share of NEET young people (not in employment, education or training), which is close to the OECD-average (OECD 2019). At the same time job security has become weaker and the rules for getting unemployment and social benefits tighter, especially for young people (Haikkola, 2018). The Finnish Governments (2011–2015; 2015–2019; 2019–2022) have offered multi-agency face-to-face guidance services – One-

Stop Guidance Centers—as one solution (see for example Government action plan 2018–2019:17, 28). The centres are an integral part of the Youth Guarantee launched in 2013 (Youthwiki,2018; TEM, 2018).

A One-Stop Guidance Center (Ohjaamo in Finnish) is a multi-agency, inter-professional service point where a young person, aged 15 to 30, can get help in matters related to work, education and everyday life. The centres provide the public services and work in cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs) and businesses. It is a platform for developing an inter-professional approach for youth guidance and coordinating detached services so that young clients can reach these easier. The services of the centres are free of charge for the people who use them. There are over 60 centres across the country; some of them are open every working day, others less often.

The central government, the European Social Fund and the participating service providers, mostly municipalities, fund the service. On the ministry level, the centres fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment; but the development work also involves the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. All of these transnational, national and local actors have high but slightly differing expectations regarding the proceedings and outcomes of the new service.

This study analyses qualitative peer-learning surveys that outline the views of the centre employees. It asks how the centres define their tasks and target groups. What needs are they addressing and what are they expecting to gain? Theoretically, the analysis is inspired by member category analysis (Sacks, 1992; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002). Earlier research shows that while the institutional categorisation practices are often hidden, they are also powerful, because they produce client classifications, need and problem definitions and offer certain remedies for these. In order to function efficiently, institutions need fairly stable categories on which to anchor their practices. (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002; Jokinen, 2012.)

Conducted in the years 2015, 2016 and 2017, the peer-learning surveys supported the exchange of information between the centres, while also observing their operation from a research point of view. The centres form a unique case, because they bring different organisations and professionals to work physically in the same place. There is no dominant administrative sector or profession that would provide the target settings and categorisations to be directly applied in their work. For example, they do not have shared needs assessment templates for the clients nor common follow up registers. Most of the employees use profession-specific tools and registers, which vary from one centre to another (Määttä, 2018). This means that the central classifications and categorisations are not institutionalised.

Reforming by integration

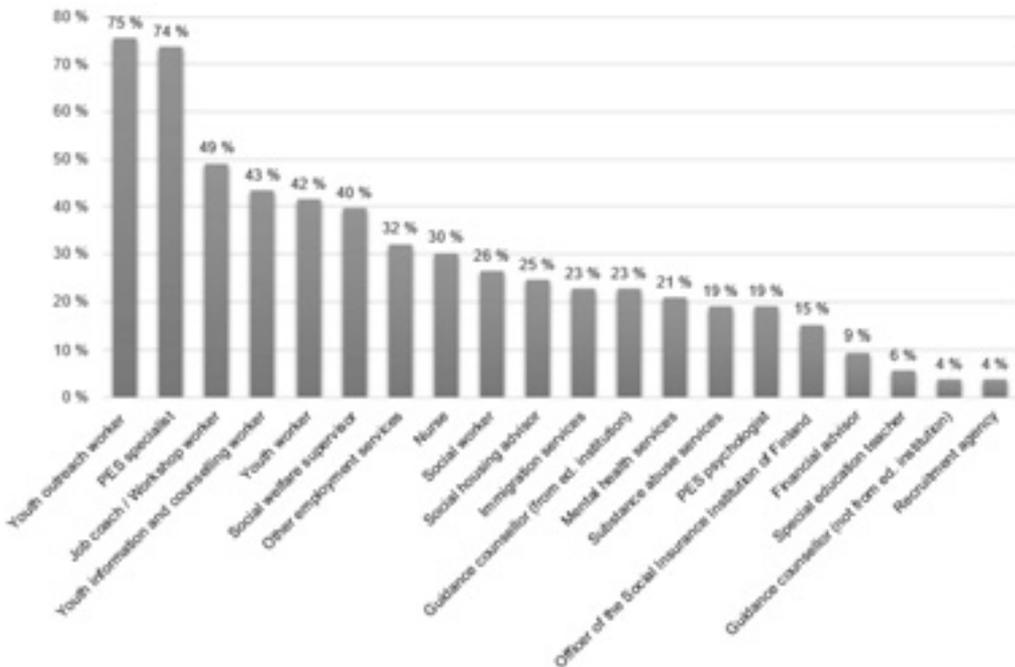
The political-administrative steering of the centres emphasises all young people as the target group, the integration of different services (including public, private and third sector) and low-threshold access to services and, sooner or

later, the eventual employment of young people (TEM, 2018). The goal of the centres is seen widely, including by government officials, as one of creating a new operative culture in the field of youth services (Savolainen et al., 2018). This also means a search for inter-professional understanding of clients and actions. The centres offer a cooperation platform and develop practices for youth guidance.

The employees of the centres represent and work under the management of different organisations and have differing legal guidelines and professional backgrounds. They also understand the goals and methods of advice and guidance differently and use their own professional approaches while ideally learning from the others in the multi-agency work community. In the client meeting, they may utilise the competences and powers of different professionals to assist the young person in the best possible way. (See Helander et al., 2018.) By bringing together key public sector services and by working together with the third and private sector, the centres aim to revamp the services to facilitate smoother transitions for young people.

To give an idea of the range of services in the centres, Table 1. presents the share of the centres that have certain services available at least once a week. The table shows that outreach youth workers and public employment service (PES) specialists are mostly present in the centres. Altogether, there are over 500 employees working in the centres at least once a week.

Table 1. The availability of face-to-face services (min. one day a week) at the One-Stop Guidance Centres, Autumn 2018, 53 units.



The importance of negotiations among the centre employees is heightened by the fact that their approach is inter-professional and they are managed cross-administratively; their supervision comes from different institutions. The tasks and responsibilities of the centres are negotiated at local and national level, and sometimes views are divided on questions such as, who should the centres serve the most? Against this background, it is also possible to ask does this multi-agency model bring a new understanding of young clients, their needs and the ways service is provided? Is there a new operative culture evolving in the youth services?

The theoretical background and materials of the study

The theoretical tool in posing the questions is inspired by membership categorisation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002). It allows me to take a step back and defamiliarise myself from the ways centre employees talk about their work, clients and operations. Membership categorisation analysis emphasises the natural habit of human beings to discuss and categorise the world. Categories help people to anticipate social situations and make sense of their social worlds (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 129). The central thesis of the membership categorisation analysis is the strong influence that categorisation has on practices. Categorisations produced within institutions, such as public services, have particularly far-reaching consequences. As Mary Douglas (1986) puts it: institutions think and act by means of categories. That is why it is important to study them.

In order to function efficiently, institutions need categories to determine who has access to a given service, which issues are addressed and by which means. Categories mark the position and duties of the client and the advisor as well as different professional groups. The categorisation of services also involves decision-making and the wielding of power, by which services, benefits and future opportunities are either granted or withheld. The power used by institutions, in other words, is exercised through the practice of categorisation. Those working for institutions, and partially even those using the services of institutions, think and act based on the categories produced by the institution in question. (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002.)

The texts produced by institutions – client classifications, process monitors and annual reports – produce and renew practices and communicate the purpose and outcomes of the operations. In fact, institutions define and identify problem categories for clients, which leads to the emergence of various instruments of control held by the institution. (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002; Jokinen, 2012.) Strong institutional categories may also narrow down the perspective from which professionals identify and respond to the clients' needs. In such situations, the client may find the support to be bureaucratic or even offensive. What is central to the service experience of young people is whether they as persons, and their needs, capabilities and hopes, are acknowledged in guidance

(see Mäkinen&Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2018). It is also possible that institutional definitions, time constraints or even the need to clean up statistics determine the operations, rather than the needs of the clients (Haikkola et al., 2017; Lidman, 2018).

Institutional categories are often linked with the division between acceptable behaviours that support the goals of the institution and society at large and reprehensible behaviours that are in opposition to those goals. Institutional categories are also used for determining the rights and obligations of client-citizens (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002; Määttä & Aaltonen, 2016), and part of the obligations can be counter-productive. Active labour market measures, for example, can lead to short-term solutions such as unsuitable, but obligatory training courses or job contracts that control young people's use of time. These may hinder longer-term solutions and block their way forward. (Haikkola et al., 2017; Haikkola, 2018.) These questions are also relevant to the centres. The way a certain institution interprets the rights, responsibilities and obligations of client-citizens is a central point of interest in social research.

Membership categorisation analysis investigates locally constructed categories and what they are used for in a given situation and what the repercussions of such categorisations are. Categories should, therefore, be studied as integral to the practices in which they are produced. (Juhila et al., 2012.) The interpretation of categories requires awareness of the practices and interactions inherent in the activities. In that respect, my study benefits from the long duration (four years) of investigation of the One-Stop Guidance Centres and my on-going discussions with the employees, which I have used to provide more depth to the analysis of peer-learning surveys.

I gathered three different e-mail or Webropol-based peer-learning surveys from the centre coordinators in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The purpose of the surveys was to support the verbalisation of local development work and mutual exchange of knowledge between centres and to monitor their operations from the perspective of research. The questions of the surveys addressed the starting points and knowledge base for operations of the centres and the achievements and challenges faced by them. They were asked to describe for example the aims of their centre's activities and what kinds of client needs does the centre respond to.

I asked the coordinators to answer the questions with their team (employees of their centre) to the latter two surveys. The centres had one to two months to respond to each survey. After the responses were collected, they were collated and shared with all centres. At the time of gathering the last survey, at the beginning of 2017, the number of centres was 38. Of the centres, 31 responded to the survey at least once. Ten of the centres responded to all surveys. From the material (totalling 145 pages), I looked for extracts for analysis with special interest in the questions of target groups and the needs for services. I used the Atlas.ti software for the systematic content analysis. In the presentation of the results of the surveys, I give priority to views that were frequently expressed in the material.

Results

The necessary and difficult categories

In the 2015 peer-learning survey, I asked the centres: To what kind of needs does the One-Stop Guidance Centre aim to respond? Based on the responses, the centres particularly wish to *provide young people and young adults with guidance on a broad scale, whatever the need*. They emphasise the nature of the place as an open meeting point. The centres offer services that “support youth employment, smooth paths to education and help in life-management”. This is the definition that most centres subscribe to: work, competences and everyday wellbeing for the young people. This classification can also be used in categorising young people according to their main questions and needs of support. Most of the centres that responded to the 2015 survey had only just launched their operations, and therefore they were open-minded about the service needs in their area.

Another cause of the demand for the services of the centres is due to *the shortcomings in the rest of the service provision system*. In 2015, the deficiencies were described as follows:

Young people have difficulty finding the right organisation to help with a specific need. The service guidance needed at points of transition is also lacking – young people are passed from pillar to post in the system, where various courses, workshops and work try-outs alternate without leading to a permanent solution.

The centres describe the service provision system as an uncoordinated jungle where the client walks round and round, and may even get lost. Activating measures follow one after another but lead nowhere. The system, which emphasises the short-term outcomes of siloed administrative branches, cannot be supportive of young people’s real progress and is not economically sustainable (Lidman, 2018).

In addition, *rising youth unemployment and training needs have increased the demand for the centres’ services*.

A major challenge is the prolonged duration of youth unemployment periods and long-term youth unemployment. If the situation in 2016 and 2017 continues the trend established in 2015, the deterioration of young people’s working life skills and mismatch with working life expectations will form a significant obstacle. Due to the lack of hope caused by the high level of unemployment, young people live from day to day without committing to any long-term life-management plan.

The respondents talk about poor employment opportunities and the lack of hope of some young people, which may lead to a loss of life-management. Fears become a reality, and the centres must come up with improved instruments to intervene in the vicious cycle. The centres direct their expectations of change specifically at the service system, probably because it is easier to modify than the labour market situation.

The peer-learning survey of 2017 included the question “If anything was possible and you did not have to consider political correctness, what would you change in this youth service provision system and its steering?” In their responses, the centres emphasised differences between their service and the old service system. The problems of the old system stem from the system-centred approach and the rigid categorisations, such as age limits, which hamper clients’ access to services that would help their progress in life.

The support system badly needs more flexibility => if you do not fulfil a criterion; you are simply denied a service. Juggling between different client statuses is really tough on the youth and the people providing the service. Sometimes it seems that nobody knows which forms of support the young person is entitled to when things get really complicated.

The employees see the categorisations in the service provision system as occasionally problematic and counter-productive to the support that the young person needs. It assigns clients varying statuses based on their age, health, studies and situation in the labour market; and different forms of support and their combinations require high precision. The centres often struggle with problems arising from the rigidity of the service provision system. It is not possible to surpass these obstacles in the centres.

When operating in the centres, the professionals are governed by different legislation and regulations, and the amount of discretion and flexibility varies between their occupations and localities. For example, public employment service (PES) specialists have stricter regulations from their organisation than outreach youth workers, partly because they make official decisions about activation measures and unemployment benefits – they take care that their clients fulfil the normative expectations of activating society. These two professions have differing job descriptions and targets in their work, also defined in their sector-specific legislation. While the former may be described as street-level bureaucrats, who often have vague organisational expectations (see Lipsky, 1980), the latter could be described as anti-bureaucratic actors.

When asked about changes needed in the guidance and service provision system, the respondents raised, in particular, the system-driven approach, bureaucracy and strict privacy legislation. The legislation complicates collaboration and client-specific information sharing between the professionals and provision of holistic support to young people. In the opinion of the employees, a young person should be able to move between services with as little red tape as possible and under a single consent for data sharing and a client plan. This seems difficult, because the sector-specific welfare state apparatus, built piece-by-piece over decades, is not easily reformed in line with the multi-agency approach. What used to be the welfare state criticisms from the 1970s – bureaucracy and inefficiency of the welfare state – seem to get some kind of counterpart in these multi-agency practitioners of the 2010s. Yet the centre employees generally want to change the system to offer flexible support to young people rather than foster market mechanisms, as proposed by many critics of the welfare state (see Procacci, 1998).

The centres also stressed that services should be evaluated from the client perspective and the users' critique should be closely listened to and duly acknowledged. More consideration should be given to those partially fit to work and those on a disability pension and their intentions to participate in the workforce should be supported. Of the other youth groups the centres particularly wish to support, the respondents mention immigrants and those without an upper secondary level certificate.

According to the responses received from the centres, a young person is seen as someone who is willing and capable of finding his/her way in society, but often needs time and space as well as support to make further plans, which the bureaucratic system – tuned to speed up transitions – does not often allow. It would be helpful, for example, if schools were able to provide more working life information and individual career guidance. The centre does not aim to respond to all needs alone, but it may have more credibility as a multi-agency operator to raise issues that need actions than an organisation that would be overstepping its boundaries.

Open to all and inclusive...

The client base varies from one centre to the next: some attract more one-off visitors who are looking for information and advice while others receive mostly clients requiring longer-term guidance. Reaching clients who have fallen outside the sphere of the services or those over the age of 25 has been a challenge in many of the centres. These groupings represent the ways that clients are categorised according to their guidance needs (one-off information seekers and long-term guidance clients), age groups and earlier use of services. The centres also use categories of clients' educational and immigrant backgrounds and categories about their abilities to work, as shown earlier in this article. These are some of the basic and quite unspecified ways used to classify the clients.

Many centres emphasise in their activities that they are “open to all young people” but, in practice, this seems to mean two different things among the centres. It may mean lowering the threshold for young people in a poor position, such as offering talking support to intoxicated clients or, contrarily, that centres want to especially reach those who are already “doing well”, for example, young adults with university degrees. Some of the centres especially want to serve those who are outside of the services. Openness to all goes hand-in-hand with the idea of destigmatisation. The One-Stop Guidance Centres aim to achieve this by different means: by using positive messages in communications and marketing, including young people from different backgrounds and situations in service development, and by offering a wide range of services in facilities that are attractive to young people and can be accessed without the fear of stigmatisation. National-level communication also builds the reputation of the centres among possible clients and collaborative networks.

The centres should be seen nationally as a place for opportunities, not as a problem-based service. Special attention should be addressed to this in national marketing. The centres should not be stigmatised as service points for only those who are marginalised. This stigma is difficult to fix afterwards.

If the centres are seen, locally or nationally, as a place for marginalised youth, the reasoning goes that a young job seeker or an employer looking for a recruit may not want to visit. In that case, the centre fails to meet the task of opening job markets for young people. This would risk supporting youth employment in general. However, if the centres turn their back on those in need of inter-professional support and those who have fallen outside the services or are overwhelmed by the complexity of the service palette, the task of the centres to open up opportunities to all young people and promote inclusion is undermined. As a result they could risk becoming “cherry-pickers” who are able to show promising short-term results but little more.

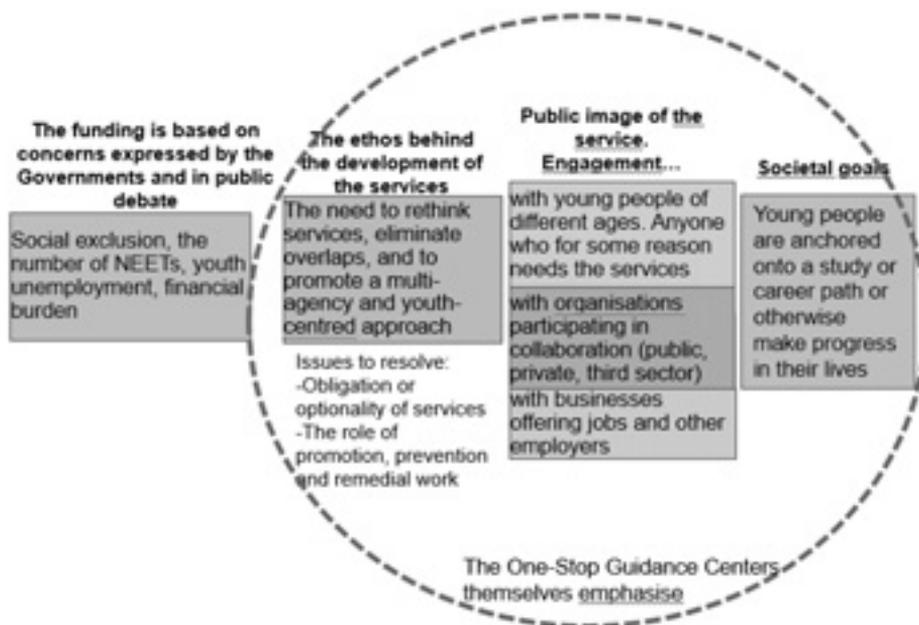
It is, therefore, vital that the centres cater for young people of different backgrounds and from all kinds of circumstances. Yet the goal that the centres would be a low-threshold service point that all young people find interesting is difficult to achieve in practice; different groups and individuals perceive the thresholds and stigmas in such widely different ways (Nieminen, 2018). Therefore, the centres should seriously consider what type of competence clusters could respond to young people with a need for intensive support and, on the other hand, what the limits of the professional competencies are and at what point a young person should be referred to specialised services.

To become attractive

To conclude, the task definition of the centres seems to be based on the expectations of different stakeholders. In order to be successful in meeting the goals of youth employment, the centres must offer young people, and employers, real opportunities and match the two. They also need to offer guiding services for young people who are not ready for the labour market or studies. In order to be attractive to public sector and third sector operators they invite to join the collaboration as the service providers, the centres must demonstrate that the collaborative multi-agency model is useful for professionals and productive with “added value”. To be a plausible partner for bodies steering and funding the operations, the centres should continue efforts to crystallise their tasks and results. To be able to develop a new type of youth-centred guidance practices, the centres have to take seriously the participation of young people as individuals and in groups while acknowledging young people’s own goals, not only those of society or service system.

Figure 1. outlines the task definition of the centres. It is based on peer-learning data, discussions with the employees of the centres, and also on the official guidelines of the centres (TEM 2018; The Government’s interim budget negotiations 2017). The aspects that the centres themselves emphasise in their tasks definition are circled with blue.

Figure 1. The tasks definition of the One-Stop Guidance Centers



One-stop Guidance Centres step back from the public discussions that stress worries about youth exclusion. Rather they aim at responding to the needs of the young people by developing the service and having a positive approach. Nevertheless, the centres are balancing the questions of obligations versus optionality of the service, and what kind of support the centres are able to and should offer – promotion or remedial work. To be successful in their societal goal – easing young people’s paths forward – the centres should reach young people with positive messages and bind partners and employers to cooperation. These kind of engaging messages require that the centres challenge typical problem categorisations and find alternative ways to tell about their work.

Discussion

The article presented the question of which categorisations the One-Stop Guidance Centres produce when describing their target group and tasks, and how the centres relate to the service reformation. Defining the tasks and the target group of the centres has proved a challenging exercise, at least in finding nationally shared ways. The multi-agency nature of the centres – that the centres gather several established services under one roof – has the effect that the categorisations are negotiable and debated. The centres are governed by legislation and regulations from a range of administrative branches, which means that there is no shared set of categories available that could be readily used for defining professional aims and practices, producing statistics and communicating results.

There appear to be no established ways for the centre staff to talk about their clients and tasks, but in a multi-agency context, they accumulate experience on the ways young people are defined by different administrative branches and other actors, such as CSOs and employers. They also accumulate experience on how significant such categorisations can be for the opportunities of young people. Maybe this experience also leads to critical thinking and caution against stereotypical categorisation, shown in the reluctance of centres to describe a “typical” client or stress their problems. These descriptions could delimit the clientele. At its best, a multi-agency approach helps the professionals to step outside of the discursive boundaries of their own administrative branch.

The government treated the One-Stop Guidance Centres in its interim budget negotiations (2017) as a measure preventing youth exclusion, and ESF programmes use a similar choice of words. Such negative phraseology flies in the face of the very objective of the centres to be an attractive source of support for all young people, different service providers and employers. At the centres, young people are seen in a positive light, although there are reasons for concern, too, such as the poor employment situation.

Mäkitalo & Säljö (2002) point out that “to cope with complexity, institutions need reliable, productive, and relatively stable categories and classification devices that function within routine practices”. Routine practices are not something that the centres are searching for; rather they hope to offer a mutual search for good options with the young clients. Choosing stable categories that classify clients, tasks and results has far-reaching influences. For development purposes, is it even better to avoid classifying young people in certain prescribed ways in assessment and follow-up procedures? Or if management and evaluation necessities demand these, categorisations should be done carefully, fully acknowledging the task of the centre, which – for them – seems to be reformed and youth-friendly services.

In future, it is essential to determine the direction in which the definitions of the centres’ tasks will develop in the crossfire between organisations and their categorisations. Will the operations of different branches be reconciled harmoniously or will one of the background organisations – youth or employment services, social welfare or healthcare services, educational institutions and so on – assume the upper hand in the future? How could young people’s views, potential of every professional, and authority of national steering be integrated to the remodelling youth transition support?

The goal of the One-Stop Guidance Centre operations is seen widely, including by ministries, as one of creating a new operative culture in the field of youth services (see Savolainen et al., 2018). A reformative task is never easy. Currently, the latitude that different professionals have in changing their practices varies a lot, based on their background organisations and local managers. The centres are in search of a new, shared way of working, but it is still negotiable which elements it should be constructed of, how a young person is seen, and what their rights and obligations are.

The centres want to develop positive ways to talk about young people and their possibilities, but also recognise their needs and the limits of different

services to address those needs. The employees at centres strongly reflect their tasks against the problems of the service provision system. They want to stand apart from the outdated, bureaucratic and siloed service provision system as a youth-centred, flexible and holistic service free of time constraints. The burning critique expressed by the centres is to do with the rigidity and unhelpfulness of the service provision system from the perspective of young clients – and they have a solution, collaborative platform and developing practices to offer. Is that enough for reforming the system?

As showed in the analysis, rigidity of the service provision system lies partly on the legal basis of different administrative branches and a long history of specialised welfare state services. Reforming youth services with a multi-agency approach in Finland is difficult without the support of new, integrated legislation that gives structures for the collaboration of different services and enables information sharing between professionals. The article has analysed the One-Stop Guidance Centres as a developing endeavour, in a process of becoming, maybe reforming, and at least rethinking youth services.

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