The Positivity Imperative in Youth Education as a Form of Cruel Optimism

Kristiina Brunila¹ • Saara Vainio¹ • Sanna Toivainen²

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Abstract

In this paper, we revisit the persistent positivity imperative in Finnish youth education by analysing findings from an on-going research project related to various educational interventions targeted at young people ‘at risk’. The article is focused on youth education as an emblematic manifestation of therapeutic ethos and neoliberalism. These manifestations are part of the emergence of the Nordic therapeutic welfare state where neoliberalisation and therapisation have formed alliances in aiming to produce resilient citizens while the relationship between the state and citizenship (as well as rights and obligations that citizenship carries) has changed. In terms of youth education, as a rationality of governing, the alliance between therapisation and neoliberalism results in the creation of suitably resilient, self-responsible, anxious, uncertain and inherently psycho- emotionally vulnerable young people.

Keywords Youth education · Positivity imperative · Neoliberalism · Therapisation

Introduction

This article focuses on positivity imperative in youth education in Finland, where the social democratic welfare state has over the last three decades shifted towards a neoliberal governance on competitiveness (e.g. Kantola and Kananen 2013). This shift has created new demands in relation to the production of knowledge, behaviour management and human capital. Not surprisingly, in Finland, as in other Western societies in general, the extent and impact of academic and wider public attention to psychology, happiness, positivity, wellbeing, optimism, emotions, strengths and

✉ Kristiina Brunila
Kristiina.brunila@helsinki.fi

¹ AGORA for the Study of Social Justice and Equality in Education–Research Centre, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

² University of South-Eastern Norway, Drammen, Norway

resilience have increased considerably (e.g. Petersen and Millei 2016; Cabanas and Illouz 2019;

Brunila and Lundahl 2020). Alongside old and new networks of scientific paradigms including psy-, bio- and neuro-expertise, educational sciences, behavioural economics, private companies and coaches, trainers and learning consultants have formed new alliances and gained authority, social power and cultural influence offering solutions to societal problems such as social exclusion and unemployment.

By youth education, we mean formal and informal educational activities and networks, life management training, youth guidance and rehabilitation in the form of courses, interventions, projects and programmes, youth work and preparatory training. This article is based on our on-going international research project *Interrupting Youth Support Systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability* where we have previously shown how the most common aim of youth education offered to young people in Finland is to support, train and guide young people towards behavioural changes and to achieve wellbeing, resilience, self-responsibility, empowerment and employability (e.g. Brunila et al. 2019, 2020). What tends to unite these interventions is a persistent positivity imperative in youth policies and youth education practices. By bringing our individually produced data together, we aim to understand how positivity imperative is connected to youth education and with what wider ideological underpinnings. In the analysis, we acknowledge how the various types of youth education are part of the emergence of the Nordic neoliberal and therapeutic welfare state in which neoliberalism and therapeutic ethos have formed alliances in producing resilient and self-responsible citizens, while the relationship between the state and citizenship as well as rights and obligations that citizenship carries has changed (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2020).

The Rise of the Nordic Therapeutic Welfare State and Its Resilient Citizens

Over the last three decades, as one of the Nordic welfare states famous for its happiness and equality, Finland has undergone significant reforms which are crucial to acknowledge in order to understand how youth education is shaped. Welfare policies and ideals have been repeatedly problematised and replaced with a Schumpeterian competition state paradigm (see Jessop 2002) which consider state and society in terms of market efficiency and competitiveness. As Kristiina Brunila and Hanna Ylöstalo (2020) have argued before, neoliberal state reform often entails a mixed set of market-driven reforms in the public sector, including its privatisation and adoption of new, market-oriented ways of organising tasks. Accordingly, neoliberal emphasis alters the relationship between the state and citizenship as well as the rights and obligations that citizenship carries. When neoliberalism is considered as a political rationality, it involves a specific organisation of the social, the subject and the state (Brown 2006). It casts the political as dominated by market concerns and organised by market rationality. Instead of just facilitating the economy, the state is construed and construes itself in market terms and develops policies that figure citizens as economic actors: as individual entrepreneurs and consumers (Brown 2015). The state can be understood as a powerful instrument of neoliberalism taking place through active policy interventions

that remould institutions and individuals in ways that are compatible with a market ethos.

The basic argument in this article is that in Finland neoliberalism has found a working alliance with therapeutic ethos because the aim of both is to produce resilient and future-oriented youth citizens who provide for their own needs and continuously develop their competitiveness, with proper capabilities to foresee and manage changes and accomplish economic growth (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2020; Brunila 2012a, 2012b). In Finland neoliberal welfare state reform is not only intensified by the therapeutic ethos, but as Kristiina Brunila and Hanna Ylöstalo (2020) have argued, the state also acts as a powerful instrument in this reform. In other words, it is not only competitiveness and efficiency that are shaping citizens. There are even more persistent changes in the ways citizens are perceived and how they should perceive themselves, not only as being psycho-emotionally vulnerable but also as being necessarily resilient, future-oriented and competitive enough to take control of their lives and changes. Accordingly, in Finland as in other Western countries, psychologically and therapeutically oriented language has become prevalent in welfare policies as well as social and cultural practices (Brunila, 2012c).

This reform allowing the structural deficits and contradictions to be rendered in terms of therapeutic and individualised responsibilities took place in Finland while the changes in definition of welfare took place. As said above, in the 1990s, Finland adopted Schumpeterian strategies through which the Finnish economy and labour force were reimagined and recalibrated in terms of market efficiency and competitiveness. In this context, citizens were expected to work for their welfare and the welfarist social right of access to state protection and support transformed into an obligation to work (Kananen 2012; Kantola and Kananen 2013). This shift also turned the locus of political action towards the individual actor so that the political reform was no longer about changing society, but about changing the individual (Kantola 2003; Brunila and Ylöstalo 2020). This made room for a therapeutic ethos aimed at improving individuals' capabilities and, consequently, the competitiveness of citizens (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2020; Binkley 2014).

The fascination with, and tendency to, psychologise and therapise social problems has been the focus of sociological research for a long time (e.g. Rose 1998, 1999; Foucault 1967; Parker et al. 1995; Wright 2011; Rieff 1987). Political imperatives and concerns over the mental and emotional condition and wellbeing of citizens have been manifested in various countries and studies alongside social theoretical critiques from several intellectual traditions arguing about the wider shift towards interiority (Nolan 1998; Rose 1998, 1999; Parker et al. 1995; Wright 2011; McLaughlin 2011). Ole Jacob Madsen (2014) and Kristiina Brunila (2012, 2014) and Irisdotter Aldenmyr and Olson (2016) have brought the analysis of the therapeutic turn and 'therapisation' to Nordic societies including Finland. However, it is still rather rare in Finland to critically scrutinize psychological and therapeutic implementations in education, probably because Finland's reputation as a model country of education and equality is still rather persistent.

It is important to keep in mind that the rise of the therapeutic ethos is not solely the result of capitalist expansion; rather, it has been a more complex and contradictory development (Wright 2011). However, if we think of neoliberalism in the Nordic welfare state context, it is not just a theory of economic practices. Neoliberalism should be regarded as a new stage of capitalism because of its persistent expansion of the scope

of economics to all fields in a society and cultural life. Cabanas and Illouz (2019) provide an ambitious list of neoliberalism's expansion project. They relate it to the rising demand for technical-scientific criteria to account for political and social decision-making, a renewed emphasis on utilitarian principles of choice, efficiency and profit maximisation, the exponential increase in labour uncertainty, economic instability, market competition, risk-taking behaviour, and organisational flexibilisation and decentralisation, the increasing commodification of the symbolic and immaterial, including identities, feelings and lifestyles, and finally to the consolidation of a therapeutic ethos that places both emotional health and the need for individual self-realisation at the core of social progress and institutional interventions. In Finland, this expansion project is taking place in a similar way.

In this article, we are interested in formal and informal youth education as an emblematic manifestation of therapeutic and neoliberal welfare states. As Kristiina Brunila has previously argued, the rise of the therapeutic ethos in Finland and in education extends further than what concerns psychological selfhood or individual therapy. It encompasses a wide array of discourses, policies, social practices and subjectivities that in this article we aim to grasp using the concept of therapisation as a form of power that is simultaneously an imperative and an outcome. Therapisation together with neoliberalism find and form alliances, strands of discursive power, encompassing subjects that can be known and spoken about, and gaining legitimacy from the popularisation of therapeutic and neoliberal orthodoxies and explanations. It is also an inherent part of wider reforms, namely, neoliberal state reform, an order of normative reason that when it becomes ascendant, 'takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values and practices to every dimension of human life' (Brown 2015, p. 30).

Data and Analysis

This article is based on research results and analyses in an on-going Academy of Finland project *Interrupting Youth Support Systems in the Ethos of Vulnerability*. Over the period of four years, the researchers in the project have explored a wide array of cross-sectoral policies and practices of youth education (e.g. Brunila et al. 2019, 2020). Altogether, the data produced within the project include observations, field notes and interviews in over 50 on-going publicly funded youth education programmes from short-term youth projects to preparatory programmes, training courses and peer support activities. The data includes over 400 interviews with both professionals and young people 'at risk', who primarily came from outside education and work and participated in the above-mentioned programmes and activities. The interviewed youth and professionals also represent different geographical locations in Finland, such as metropolitan area of Helsinki and regional areas of Eastern Finland. Furthermore, the dataset also includes EU policy and national youth and education policy documents, statistics and media presentations of young people in general and also 'at risk'. The EU data is chosen, as EU has a primary role in guiding ways youth education is arranged with member countries, including Finland. Moreover, we have also analysed Finnish youth training program and project descriptions, training materials and blog posts that are targeted to young people at 'risk'. These materials have been produced by youth professionals as well as young people in the projects, and they underline the practices through which young people are instructed to produce themselves in relation to positivity imperative.

In this article, we have adopted a discursive approach as our analytical strategy (Bacchi and Bonham 2014). We refer to youth education as discursive practices and as *both* symbolic and material practices on how knowledge is formed and produced, and what consequences these practices have (Bacchi and Bonham 2014, p. 174). This has helped us to unpack some of the taken-for-granted ideas and practices related to the positivity imperative we found in the data in various youth education contexts (e.g. Bacchi and Bonham 2014). We want to highlight that our data is diverse and experiences of young people in youth education are also various. Youth education as a field is scattered so that it would be impossible to harness it into one big picture which is neither our attempt to do in the article. For the purposes of this article, we have focused on the positivity imperative through our discursive reading of the data. We have attempted to identify, how it is shown in our various data of youth education practices and policies, what it does, what terms and possibilities it offers and with what consequences in terms of young people's subjectivities.

In the on-going research project, we have purposefully gathered previously collected data and new data in order to get a wider picture of the positivity imperative in youth education in various settings, such as in this article, short-term youth projects and preparatory programmes, youth workshops and life management training. All the data were produced between 2014 and 2020. Our analysis was also motivated by the findings from the project's previous research results which have repeatedly shown that despite the youth education activities offered for young people in school-to-work transitions there are consistent mismatches between the agendas of youth education and young people's interests.

We have chosen a rather un-orthodox approach to the presentation of the data to highlight how the imperative of positivity operates and moves effectively across various discursive sites, from policy to practice and the self-representations of young people. As a prevailing discourse, positivity becomes something inexorable to subjects, an all-consuming affective entity, within which we also want the reader to enter. This is why we have chosen an un-orthodox way of rolling out our data extracts first. Firstly, we start out with a set of cases that we have crafted from our data, including professional and youth interviews, policy documents and observations from youth education. The cases we have chosen represent typical examples of how the positivity imperative appears in youth education. They help to contextualise the positivity imperative in youth education in Finland by shedding light on different though interconnected dimensions of positivity imperative. Following the cases, we invite the reader out from the affective 'positivity bubble' as we critically unfold and reflect on the data and how it connects to wider ideologies. We are particularly interested to analyse what the positivity imperative in our data does, what terms and possibilities it offers and with what consequences in terms of young people's subjectivities.

Manufacturing Positiveness

If You Try Really Hard, You Can Make It

During a short training programme in prison, a young adult explained how everyone in the programme is expected to set the goals they are supposed to reach. He continued: 'Here in the project it's really all up to you. If you try really hard and work with yourself, you can be successful and make it' (youth interview in short-term youth education programme in prison, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2015).

You Can Be Happy Too!

In a short-term training programme for young people ‘at risk’, there was a session of happiness training. Young people were taught about the importance of positivity and happiness by referring to Indian people. The teacher enthusiastically said ‘the people in India might be quite poor but despite being poor, they are very happy. You can be happy too if you really put effort to it’ (field notes in short-term youth education training programme, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2016).

Stay Positive and Keep the Negative Away

Young people need all kinds of support and we must give it to them. This means you have to stay positive and keep all the negative away. (Youth worker interview, short-term youth education project, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2016)

Smile on My Face

I face young people with a smile on my face. I want to do it this way because they need positivity in order to survive. (Youth worker interview, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2017)

Happiness Is an Illness You Want to Get

Happiness is like an illness you want but how can you get yourself infected. (Notes from a youth programme, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2018)

There is so much negativity in this world. This is why we need to take the positive attitude and help young people to see things in a more positive way. (Youth worker interview, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2018)

The Importance of Happy and Positive Matters in Life

I just gave feedback to one 9th grader, that she doesn’t have any dreams. No joyful, positive things in life, you know. You are probably pretty worn out and tired, I said. And I did recommend some psychological support, therapeutic

conversations for this young person. (Social worker in a group interview, a short-term youth guidance project in North Karelia region, Eastern Finland, 2014)

It is probably the kind of general hopelessness and lack of vision that is... quite typical for our clients, if you dare to make generalisations like these. [Interviewer: 'Lack of vision towards what? Educational opportunities...'] 'Pretty much everything in life, really. (Youth guidance project worker in a group interview, a short-term youth guidance project in North Karelia region, Eastern Finland, 2014)

At the moment I am mostly concerned about my own coping, as I still have symptoms of depression [...] I have this problematic way to react to new things, that I get depressed. My mood gets low and I get a feeling that I will not make it. This happens nearly every time when something new arrives, I can't help it. It is a kind of defensive mechanism according to my psychologist, a sort of habitual and safe way for me to react. (Interview, young woman 25 years, a short-term youth guidance project in North Karelia region, Eastern Finland, 2015)

The Importance of Desire

In a short-term training programme aimed at young people 'at risk', there is a group activity discussing 'the rules of working life'. The counsellor of the group, consisting of about ten young people, leads the discussion to a new theme: 'Then there were these weaknesses'. The group starts discussing showing your weaknesses, and the counsellor suggests as her key thought that it is best to show a desire to learn: 'It is always good to say that you are willing to develop and learn'. Some of the young people get annoyed: 'why can't you just say that you don't know or that you're bad in doing something – instead, you have to be ready to "develop" or "learn"'. One of the young people, Siiri, says: 'as an employer I would appreciate it if someone says they don't know how to do something.' The counsellor replies: 'Siiri is right, you have to say that too, but that you have the desire to learn' (notes from a short-term youth guidance project in North Karelia region, Eastern Finland, 2014).

Empower to Turn Dreams into Reality

Against the backdrop of reflections on the future of Europe, now is the time to listen to young people and empower them to turn their dreams into reality (European Commission 2018).

Becoming Architects of Your Own Life

Young people should not only be architects of their own life, but should also contribute to positive change in society (European Commission 2018).

Dream Big

Dreaming gives direction to life and inspires us to make life meaningful. Each of us changes along the way, so give yourself permission to change direction. (Excerpt from a blog text concerning a youth project, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2019)

If you want to make your dreams come true you have to first define what your dreams are. Your dream can be small or big, near or far. Trust that you can get to your destination along many different paths. (Excerpt from a blog text concerning a youth project, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2019)

What keeps people from dreaming and climbing towards goals? Who ultimately has that power and right to say you don't have it? Because someone always wins, someone becomes that famous singer or tubett, top athlete or writer. Success requires work, passion, and the strengths put in place. (Excerpt from a blog text concerning a youth project, Helsinki metropolitan area, 2019)

How to Interpret Positivity Manufacturing in Youth Education

In our data, the alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation involves a series of tensions. The direction of youth policy and the educational implementations are built around wellbeing, happiness, desire, hope, dreams, resilience and empowerment whilst simultaneously making strict requirements of performativity, employability, standardisation and accountability. As the 'architects of the future', young people are considered to be holding infinite potentiality but fulfilling that potentiality is predetermined by efforts to determine and define it via more efficient behavioural governance. Our data above demonstrates how young people from various backgrounds are repeatedly expected to 'dream big', cultivate aspirations and to put their 'strengths in place', that is, to invest more of themselves in their education and future careers, both financially and emotionally, whilst at the same time, the likelihood of ending up under- or unemployed grows ever-greater. The to overcome these tensions and fulfil potentiality is youth education and its positivity imperative.

The positivity imperative emerged at the turn of this century after the pervasive cultural process of individualisation and psychologisation transformed the political and social orders of accountability within advanced capitalist societies (Cabanas and Illouz 2019). Positivity in youth education is a strong individualist imperative focusing on the remaking of the self. Its message is in accordance with the alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation and filled with potentiality 'you are independent, free and autonomous, responsible and capable of governing your psycho-emotional states at will, and pursue your interests, goals and success'. Self-appreciation and recognising

one's potentiality can be understood as a powerful instrument for human capitalisation (Paju et al. 2020) in the post-Fordist systems in which workers do not sell their labour power but their potential and selves (Feher 2009).

Putting the positivity—or the lack of it—to the fore leads to neglecting more critical, broader and problematic aspects such as austerity and structural unemployment, problems in access to education, poverty, indebtedness, forms of marginalization such as racism or other institutional, social and cultural forms of othering, which are part of the everyday life of young people often considered to be 'at risk'.

Through the lens of neoliberal ethos, life is viewed as a dynamic field of potentials and opportunities, and happiness is presented both as goal and a monetary instrument, realised through a strategic programme of emotional wellbeing (Binkley 2014, p. 1). Therefore, happiness can be considered as an instrument of a free, enterprising subject, who orchestrates their emotions and psychological wellbeing in a rationalised manner. Thus, the psycho-emotionally vulnerable subject is constructed in relation to the imperative of happiness, leaving emotional deprivation to be understood as the result of misused potential and freedom. This discursive strategy is also followed by young people who formulate a sense of their selves, social realities and their subjectivities (see Staneva and Wigginton 2018), referring to unmanaged and poorly administered feelings and desires as failures in becoming successful architects of their own lives (European Commission 2018).

Sam Binkley (2014) compares the imperative of happiness as a figure of enterprise: it is something one pursues in a spirit of entrepreneurship and opportunity, wherein self-knowledge derived through relations with or under the tutelage of others appears as an environmental circumstance to be maximised or as an organisational resource to be exploited. As an entrepreneurial project, happiness serves a specific function, providing a basis for emotional and personal life of a form of government that similarly envisions a life of entrepreneurship, and has remained a realm of economic conduct (Binkley 2014, p. 3). Therefore, in many psychosocial interventions for young people, maximising happiness follows a similar pattern: because the future is a risk that is difficult to control, the individual must develop sufficient emotional resistance, including optimised orchestration of feelings, hopes and desires to control and maximise the contingent prospective of future (Harni and Saari 2015).

Alongside the ambition to fulfil potentiality, education and related support that is targeted at young people from various backgrounds tend to be associated with such things as good intentions, optimism, happiness, empowerment, encouragement, success and hope. The education targeted at young people as holding infinite potentiality that can be actualised through the positivity imperative is similar to the idea of neoliberalism's ever-increasing growth and profitability, latent potential, that must be realised in the capitalist economy (Blacker 2013).

The disadvantage related to individualised positivity is the ethos of vulnerability and psycho-emotional vulnerabilisation. The rise of psycho-emotionally vulnerable subjectivity, as we have argued elsewhere (Brunila et al. 2019), has rapidly become a starting point as well as an outcome of various types of transnational and cross-sectoral governmental youth policies and their implementations. On the basis of our research, we also argue that this type of subjectivity succumbs to and strengthens neoliberal rationality as it enables the management of anxieties, insecurities and other effects produced by the neoliberal politics at the level of the workable 'self'.

While the positivity imperative has been a quite strong imperative, at the same time, our data shows how young people who lack ‘hopes and dreams’ are constructed as psycho-emotionally vulnerable. Here, the fragility and sensitivity of young people and their mental state come to the fore, and because of this, they need to be handled with care. When a youth worker comments that ‘when you sit down with the young person and you start going a bit deeper, all kinds of needs for support start to emerge’, it legitimates support for a psychologically and therapeutically oriented vocabulary with attributes such as emotional management, resilience and self-esteem. Additionally, ‘all kind of support’ refers to an idea, that the need for support in life is so wide, that psychological and therapeutic vocabulary and understanding seek to solve problems in an increasingly diverse area of life (Toiviainen and Brunila [forthcoming](#)).

Vulnerability and Cruel Optimism

With regard to young people and fulfilling their potentiality, the variety of youth education in our data includes interventions encouraging them to acknowledge and analyse their emotions and their emotional wellbeing, as well as activities aimed at raising self-esteem, hopefulness, offering emotional guidance and happiness training. Governing through affect, through a ‘pedagogy of optimism’ (Arts and Van den Berg [2018](#)) happens through teaching young people to accept and embrace their current situation and simultaneously enable them to ‘escape it’ by assisting them to construct particular orientations towards the future, through imagination, hopes and dreams (Berlant [2011](#)). Perhaps not surprisingly, the response from young people relates to practising gratefulness and self-responsibility. Young people from various backgrounds in our data repeatedly acknowledge how it is their own fault if they cannot find a job and that their future was in their own hands. Some consider how the system makes them feel as though they were a burden so that they have to work harder with themselves. Even the youth workers we talked to agreed that most of the interventions they knew tend to treat young people as broken or problematic in a way or another.

In our data, lack of dreams in life and visions about the future were considered problematic, which demonstrate the instrumental value of ‘hopes and dreams’ in leading young people in the right direction in society: towards what Sara Ahmed ([2010](#), p. 21) calls ‘happy objects’, norms and ideals claimed to be good. The imperative to cultivate one’s dreams and optimism is closely connected to responsibilisation. As our data above shows, pessimism or lack of future quickly becomes something which young people are to ‘fix’ through therapeutic and pedagogic means.

The challenge that all systems of liberal government face is how free individuals can be encouraged to use their freedom appropriately (Rose [1998](#)). The alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation provides a grid of intelligibility for thinking about and governing citizens with certain identifiable and controllable propensities. In doing so, the alliance plays an important role in producing self-governing subjects eager to fulfil their potentiality accordingly. Again, the potentiality which is understood through freedom creates the illusion of choice in which cultural and structural inequalities organising life have been eradicated. The illusion of freedom also sheds responsibility for failure to the individual, in which case failure is easily understood to be due to

individual characteristics (Harni and Saari 2015), which, again, increases the need to develop oneself according to the neoliberal ethos.

In terms of youth education in Finland, as a rationality of governing, the alliance between therapisation and neoliberalism results in creating suitably resilient young people: self-governing, anxious, uncertain, flexible, self-centred but also inherently psycho-emotionally vulnerable. Neoliberalism's connection with vulnerability is perfectly captured by Bronwyn Davies (2005), who argued that the neoliberal discourse has shifted governments and their subjects towards survival being seen as an individual responsibility. As a crucial element of the neoliberal rationality, this has meant the removal of dependence on the social combined with the dream of wealth and possessions for each individual who gets it right. Davies argues that vulnerability is linked with individual responsibility and that it is central to neoliberal subjectivity which is about becoming both vulnerable and necessarily competitive (Davies 2005).

When we promote positivity, we are also at least implicitly talking about negativity, especially if we agree that meaning is relational (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Clarke and Phelan 2015). In youth education, the positivity imperative works by neglecting 'the negative' such as structures, institutions, systems, cultures, histories, hierarchies, differences and power relations and aims to provide highly individualized support by educating, training, empowering and coaching potentiality, future potentiality. Such positivity works so that it is not questioned by its own grounding. Instead, it is typically taken as granted, meaning good and doing merely good. In contrast, the negative is that which unsettles and disrupts the comfortable stance of the given order of things in youth education. However, seeing it as bringing potentiality to strengthen young people's societal position is left unspoken.

The positivity imperative derives from positive psychology, which enables a kind of work on oneself which seeks to create a new subjective perspective, from which the resistance of the substance to be worked—within or outside ourselves—becomes an illusion (De La Fabián and Stecher 2017, p. 604). Where the sociological imagination 'promised' above all the treatment of private troubles as public issues and insights into the 'human variety' produced by myriad ways of living, the psychological imagination promises the isolation of public issues as private concerns rooted in individual biology, mentality and behaviour (Nehring and Frawley 2020). In order to be more productive and even happier, individuals have to work on their anxiety and finally negate the negativity of the substance (De La Fabián and Stecher 2017, p. 604). Hence, the positivity imperative communicates particular ideas about solutions to social problems, the nature of human beings and how they can be known and the goals that individuals and societies ought to pursue.

The inconsistencies and contradictions related to the positivity imperative as well as how it operates through the vocabulary of desires, passions and hopes in youth education is well captured by Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism'. According to Berlant (2011, p. 1), 'a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'. For Berlant (2011), cruel optimism refers to the affective way people adapt to the prevailing neoliberal ethos and the fantasies of the good life it involves, even though these fantasies remain profoundly unattainable and their continuous pursuit begins to threaten the wellbeing of the person pursuing them. Cruel optimism thus points to a relational dynamic in which individuals remain attached to 'compromised conditions of possibility' or 'clusters of promises' embedded

in desired object-ideas, even when these ideas actually inhibit their flourishing and the promises they entail are never realised (Berlant 2011, pp. 23–24).

Cruel optimism encapsulates the harsh reality of youth education and its positivity imperative offered alongside precarity and insecurity. The position offered to young people relates to sites of infinite potentiality and future images claimed to be desirable that can and must be actualised through endless individualised support and positivity. At the same time, in accordance to neoliberalism, the ideal outcome of the support is when young person aims to fulfil that potentiality by acting in accordance to the manuscript that must be something calculable and measurable. The support industry and transition machinery (Brunila and Lundahl 2020) offered to young people works by constantly measuring up and in this way, a young person is never done. This way of support becomes a form of cruel optimism when young people who are kept busy in aiming to fulfil that potentiality in accordance with what is expected from them do not necessarily see how that might even threaten their wellbeing. This is because the very fear of losing the promising object, of relinquishing the quest to attain top scores and gain access to that sought after institution or career, ‘will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything’ (Berlant 2011, p. 24).

We consider it important to acknowledge this alliance and its interplay in order to challenge these power relations and their outcomes before the crisis wears out young people and spreads across their every life sphere until they become numb with the promise of the positive, misrecognising it as achievement and before they are constituted in their precarity just developing and performing skills for adjusting and learning to live with a sense of slight excitement and in whatever enclaves and pleasures they can produce amid threat (see Berlant 2011, p. 73).

Conclusion

The alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation in youth education in Finland culminates as a positivity imperative by establishing the self as the object of allegiance and where the cultural understanding of the self is significantly based on an ever more inward focus. Youth education in the alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation helps to constitute the psycho-emotionally vulnerable subjectivity, which here refers to political and other claims that are increasingly based on the assumption that inherent vulnerability takes a specific psycho-emotional form.

The strong positivity imperative in youth education does not turn its targeted objects into passive ones simply because it could not work unless young people consider themselves capable and free of action. Discursively understood, it is a practice by which the citizens of the Nordic therapeutic state are inclined to turn themselves into manageable subjects within the current ethos. In this process, the young person is empowered, emancipated, esteemed, affirmed and actualised after he/she gets rid of psycho-emotional problems and deficiencies. Resiliency also derived from positive psychology is the ideal result of a way of governing which fabricates subjectivities prone to operate productively in terms of therapeutic and neoliberal ideals.

In terms of positivity versus negativity, youth education with a variety of forms could be seen to be offering a surplus of the positivity while enhancing mechanisms for enjoining young people to see and shape themselves as self-responsibilising and

entrepreneurial citizens (see also Clarke and Phelan 2015). Therefore, the alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation is a highly political rather than just an economic project while neoliberalism has been argued to be a political response to the democratic gains that had previously been won by the working classes and which, from capitalism's perspective, had become barriers to capital accumulation (Panich and Gindin 2012, p. 15).

In education, new multi-level arrangements and networks with a variety of stakeholders, interests and disciplines, commodification, human capitalisation, 'pedagogical paradigm' narratives of learning society and self-responsibilisation have emerged and framed education by imperatives to respond in future-oriented ways to problems of educational systems with promises of a better future. Highly individualised educational systems are part of the development of the new understanding of learning-derived societies is justified by ideological claims through the vocabulary of choice, competition and customers, in the name of behavioural training, support and responsiveness to market requirements. Youth workers alongside teachers are expected to keep promoting the promise of support and responsiveness in terms of achievement and the associated assurance of this being exchangeable at some future point for the good life. They are therefore deeply implicated in the state of the alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation helping young people to find out 'how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least' (Berlant 2011, p. 10). The positivity imperative reflects an underlying tension in the alliance between neoliberalism and therapisation. On the one hand, it promotes and inculcates the desire for wellbeing and success, but on the other hand, it restricts and denies access to the ability to consume through the promotion of increased inequality. That is as cruel as it can get.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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