Becoming entrepreneurial: Transitions and education of unemployed youth

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Abstract
In Finland, young people who are neither employed nor in any education or training programme are expected to participate in short-term education, the aim being to improve their work life and employment skills, and thus make them more accountable for their labour market outcomes. An extensive assortment of so-called transition activities is created to guide young adults ‘into society’. The empirical data is analysed by using a discursive approach. The focus is on the consequences of entrepreneurial discourses, with specific attention given to project-based educational practices that train young adults on the margins of education, working life and society. Based on their results, the authors show how entrepreneurial activities offer skills for representing oneself in accordance with entrepreneurial ideals, but might limit opportunities to speak otherwise.

Keywords
Young adults, transitions, publicly funded project, entrepreneurial education, subjectivity, discursive approach

Introduction: economic worries, entrepreneurial solutions
People who are outside are separate from actions that the society considers necessary for its members. (Ministry of Employment, 2011: 24)

The above quote sums up some of the concerns governmental institutions currently have over young people: some people do not operate the way ‘the society’ considers necessary or expects from them. This positions them ‘outside’ and ‘separate’. The most important
'actions' that society expects from its members are employment and, when it comes to young people, education (Ministry of Employment, 2011: 24). In another report by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, it is assumed that:

Despite the effectiveness and quality of [the Finnish] education system, not all young people do well. There are many health and mental health problems that delay the transitions to education and work. In addition to supporting a young person’s growth and development, the prevention of exclusion is important also for the national economy. Young people’s exclusion costs society hundreds of millions of euros. (Ministry of Employment, 2012: 6)

The governmental measures offered to young people without education and work seem to locate the problem in the individual: the return to ‘society’ becomes possible through constant individual improvement and development. The aim is to understand oneself as an ‘entrepreneur’, who can always start again and try something else – if one just wants or chooses to take the chances offered. As an entrepreneur, ‘you can if you want to’ (Backström-Widjeskog, 2008).

As the concept of entrepreneurship refers not only to having a business, but also to certain attitudes, orientations and ‘mindsets’ that can be taught (Kyrö and Carrier, 2005), education is seen as an optimal infrastructure to ‘provide both skills and exposure as a contribution to fostering entrepreneurship’ (European Commission, 2003: 13). Education has been detached from formal and centralized educational institutions and extended into a broad range of social policies, programmes and measures. Discourses on constant individual learning and development are encountered in many political strategies or measures of Western welfare states. These discourses are crystallized in the all-capable, flexible, innovative and productive subjectivity of the entrepreneur (Brunila and Mononen-Batista Costa, 2010; Rose, 1991).

The focus of this article is on project-based educational practices that are targeted at young people who are considered to be ‘at risk’, on the margins of education, working life and society at large. First, we introduce the political and governmental situation in which youth transitions have become both more unpredictable and complex, but at the same time more controlled. We understand that the changing nature of youth transitions is not organic or unavoidable, but a particular outcome of the neo-liberal project. Societal and structural ‘problems’ (unemployment and lack of education) are being managed as individual deficits that can be solved through continuous education, constant self-improvement and entrepreneurial attitudes. After introducing our methodological tools, analysis and data, we continue to the analysis. By analysing education targeted at the young unemployed, we draw critical attention to the entrepreneurial discourse in education and some of its consequences from the perspective of young people themselves. We address questions concerning the ways in which ‘being outside’ comes to be understood and managed as a personal deficit.

Managing youth transition

In Finland, approximately 9% of young people aged 15 to 29 are neither employed nor in education or training, which is clearly below the average among the countries of the OECD and EU (Asplund & Koistinen, 2014: 4). The fact that there is a group of young people whose transitions from mandatory education do not proceed smoothly is considered a national concern, since, in addition to its negative effects on the national economy, periods of unemployment leave ‘long-term scars’ in terms of lowered life incomes and health conditions, and amplify social segregation and exclusion. Completing secondary education, a
quick entry into employment and job security, as well as the shortest possible periods of unemployment, have long been the central aims of Finnish youth politics. Even though Finnish young people have never been as educated as they are today, and demographically the age groups are smaller than before, the transitions and adherence to working life have paradoxically become more difficult, complex and prolonged (Asplund and Koistinen, 2014: 3, 5). In general, the idea of transitions being linear and progressive has been widely criticized in the Western context. Nowadays, these normative transitions are being replaced by practices of continuous learning, self-development and education, and the blurring of the borders between leisure and work, the public and the private.

In Finland, the 1990s were a period of economic recession, deregulation and decentralization, and market solutions enabled the entrepreneurial discourse to permeate into the public sector (e.g. Julkunen, 2006). The educational landscape was redefined. Education began to be seen more as a direct instrument for economic growth and for increasing the economic productivity of work (Filander, 2007: 263). In this new educational discourse, ‘economic’ and ‘social’ are inseparably intertwined (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 249).

The market-oriented shift in general has had several consequences for young people. Their unemployment and lack of education have become a growing concern in the media and among educators not only in Finland, but all over Europe and particularly in the European Union (EU). The view that these young people and their transitions should be managed more closely has created project markets. Different educational projects have become a common approach to dealing with the rising level of youth unemployment and social reintegration. An infrastructure of publicly funded educational youth-related projects was created alongside new professions such as learning professionals, coaches, mentors and evaluators, and with young people often being referred to as ‘customers’ (e.g. Aapola et al., 2005; Brunila, 2011; Hansson and Lundahl, 2004). Increasing the number of projects was considered a key to preventing social exclusion (Lähteenmaa, 2006; Paju and Vehviläinen, 2001). Identifying and nurturing entrepreneurial potential among young people was believed to have long-term implications for the EU’s economic and social development. In EU policy documents, education was repeatedly acknowledged as crucial to the formation and maintenance of a better-qualified entrepreneurial workforce and to global competitiveness (e.g. Copenhagen Declaration, 2002; Helsinki Communiqué, 2006).

Much concern has been voiced regarding ‘weakly educated’ young people, who have been seen to be in the most ‘vulnerable’ position (Brunila, 2012; Ecclestone, 2010). Positioning some people in a category of ‘being at risk’ has functioned as a legitimation for the continuous and multiformed strengthening of the control mechanisms for young people’s conduct in the name of national and individual well-being (Harrikari, 2008: 10). The reform of public well-being and social security services to encourage and activate the people dependent on these services has resulted in a growing and more subtle means of categorization (Hänninen and Palola, 2010: 22).

The transnational measures that have been created to solve the problems of youth unemployment and education have been publicly funded interventions in the form of projects. On a national level, objectives and priorities imported from the social, employment and educational policies of the EU began to surface in the aims of these projects (Bache, 1998; Lähteenmaa, 2006). The projects began to introduce concepts such as entrepreneurship, but also competitiveness, efficiency, prosperity, partnership, technology, innovations and growth – terms found in almost every political programme concerning education (Brunila and Mononen-Batista Costa, 2010). These interventions have been normalized and made
obligatory through measures such as the Youth Guarantee, and broader strategies such as Youth on the Move, the European ‘comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe’. In order to ‘avoid a lost generation’ (European Commission, 2013: 2), one of the key aims is to enforce entrepreneurial mindsets and attitudes through continuous entrepreneurial education and training:

Evidence suggests that developing entrepreneurial mindsets is a key ingredient of endogenous growth, and a must for sustainable local and regional development and social cohesion. The role of education in promoting entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours is widely recognized today. Transversal competences like creativity, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship will help young people to develop their capacity to think creatively and to innovate, to develop pro-activity, flexibility, autonomy, the capacity to manage a project and to achieve results. (European Commission, 2012: 5)

In order to secure the entrepreneurial subjectivity described above, entrepreneurial education has been given more prominence, as well as European Social Fund project funding, in Finland. Already in 2008, Finland was considered a forerunner in entrepreneurial education, as Kyrö and Ristimäki (2008: 260) have argued. It had done more than any other European country in this area by disseminating entrepreneurship into the entire educational system. Since the 1990s, ‘the strategy of promoting entrepreneur education and projects that support it have been actively implemented’ (Gustafsson-Pesonen and Kiuru, 2012: 7). During 2000–2010, over 150 publicly (mostly European Social Fund) funded projects concerning entrepreneurial education were carried out (Gustafsson-Pesonen and Kiuru, 2012). Due to the influence of the EU and other economic and political organizations, such as the OECD, there seems to have been a shift of practices in the domain of education towards entrepreneurial and individualized discourses. For education to legitimate itself, it has required the formation of the ‘right kind’ of subjectivity as one of its objectives (Brunila, 2011; Kallo and Rinne, 2006; Korhonen et al., 2011).

Not much is known about how entrepreneurialism in education is internalized and how it transforms and reshapes subjectivities. What is known is that educational practices and the governance of youth employment have been strongly influenced and managed by the rationalities and technologies employed and transferred by cross-national organizations, such as the numerous directives of the EU and OECD. We also know that entrepreneurship education ‘ranks high on policy agendas in Europe and in the US, but little research is available to assess its impact’, and ‘the effects emanating from entrepreneurship education are still poorly understood’ (Von Graevenitz et al., 2010: 90–91). Also, Pittaway and Cooper conclude ‘a systematic literature review’ by stating that:

What is unclear is the extent to which such education impacts on the level of graduate entrepreneurship or whether it enables graduates to become more effective entrepreneurs. The findings also highlight a lack of consensus on what entrepreneurship or enterprise education actually ‘is’ when implemented in practice. (Pittaway and Cooper, 2007: 479)

**Methodological tools, data and analysis**

Our aim is not to study the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial ethos with regard to its assumed outcomes related to the increasing rate of start-ups or economic growth and well-being in general – which is also a contestable claim (Shane, 2009). Instead, we are
interested in the ways in which the politics of promoting entrepreneurship has an effect on the ways in which young people who participate in these administrative-political measures negotiate and understand their subjectivity in relation to the entrepreneurial discourses. Our critique is not addressed at single persons or projects. Nor does it claim that these actions or actors are not doing a good job or that no one could benefit, be included, feel better, get a job or be happy when taking part in these ‘empowering’ activities. We also acknowledge that the way the people interviewed spoke to us is situational – constructed in that certain situation. Furthermore, we agree, with some caution, that if a certain kind of entrepreneurial subjectivity is constructed, some people might benefit from entrepreneurial mindsetting, as suggested by the European Commission:

In particular, young people at risk of social exclusion (low-income youth, school dropouts, adolescents in danger of long-term unemployment, refugees, etc.) may greatly benefit from this type of training. It can raise the motivation of those who learn best by doing, and who have difficulties in more traditional subjects. Some programmes addressing these target groups proved very successful both in terms of start-ups and of social integration. (European Commission, 2012: 68)

As Kelly (2006: 17–18) suggests, the terrain of ‘youth at risk’ – the discursive formation of those who are separate and outside – is a space in which the entrepreneurial self can be illuminated: the entrepreneurial self is the positive opposition, the other side of the pole, in relation to which the individual ‘at risk’ or ‘outside’ can be constructed. The discourses that construct and name the ones who become ‘outsiders’ simultaneously reveal the truths about who we should become.

We want to emphasize that, instead of focusing on individual projects or on individuals who speak, it is more important to analyse what is said: How is the object of the speech constructed? We use the concept of discourse as an analytical tool to refer not only to speech and writing, but also to productive and regulative practices (e.g. Davies, 1998; Foucault, 2002). Entrepreneurial discourse is a way of representing knowledge about a particular domain at a particular historical moment. It defines the domain and produces the objects of knowledge within that domain (Edwards, 2008: 23). This approach enables one to see how entrepreneurial discourse works and the kinds of consequences it has, especially from the perspective of young adults themselves.

Over the past few years, we have developed an analysis of both the policies and practices linked to the entrepreneurial discourse in the education of young people (Brunila, 2009, 2012; Brunila and Mononen-Batista Costa, 2010; Brunila et al., forthcoming; Mononen, 2007). In this article, we show how our two data sets – both of which focus on different elements of the education of young people – were largely comparable. We elaborate on the idea of the pervasive ‘nature’ of the entrepreneurial discourse, seeing it as something flexible enough to be encountered everywhere.

We draw on Mononen-Batista Costa’s PhD study on the practices and contents of Finnish entrepreneurial education using a feminist and post-structuralist discursive approach. Her interest lies in the production of subjectivity, knowledge and agency – the construction of the entrepreneurial self – in the context of (trans)national neo-liberal education policy. During 2008–2013, she interviewed researchers, developers, teachers and public employees who were developing, promoting and defining entrepreneurial education. In addition, she has interviewed long-term unemployed persons who have been directed to entrepreneurial education by the Finnish Employment Office and have started up their own
businesses. She has also analysed political documents and followed the changes and expansion of entrepreneurial discourses. Further, she has observed entrepreneurial education in secondary schools. In addition to policy extracts, we use in this article interviews with two young entrepreneurs – one a special education teacher and one a representative of a third-sector association that provides entrepreneurial education and research.

Brunila’s postdoctoral research (2010–2015) concerns the education of young adults considered to be ‘at risk’. The analysis derives from a research project that focused on 80 educational projects targeting young adults in transition from school, and particularly those who remained outside the education system and working life. The analysis began in 2010 with an examination of documents from 60 publicly funded projects from the 1990s and 2000s, including project reports, web pages, marketing material, articles and newsletters. In 2010–2015, over 10 educational projects in the Helsinki metropolitan area in southern Finland were visited. These projects provided education, guidance and rehabilitation to young adults who were seen to be at risk of social exclusion. In practice, such projects are usually publicly funded, as are the short-term projects funded by the EU, government ministries, municipalities and associations. In addition to the examination of documents and observation of projects, in-depth interviews were conducted with 60 young people between the ages of 19 and 29. In this article, the interviews with four young people and two youth workers are used.

Young adults are defined here as individuals ranging in age from 15 to 29, who are in transition between school and work or are long-term unemployed, which in Finland refers to someone who has been continuously unemployed for 500 days. By ‘educational project’, we mean publicly funded (by the EU, government ministries, municipalities, foundations, associations, etc.) education or training that usually takes place outside the formal education system. These projects have certain predetermined goals, such as promoting the employment, further education and life-management skills of young adults. They offer short-term – three-month to one-year – courses for thousands of young adults and are more often than not mandatory. This article discusses projects related to Finland, but similar efforts can be found all over Europe (e.g. European Commission, 2007, 2009).

We have chosen to combine our data in order to understand how the enterprising discourses function. Furthermore, we examine how the young people we interviewed engaged in the discourses as part of their subjectivities. The data that we use was selected according to the concepts we employ. The extracts of the interviews in this article are examples of certain ways to speak that illustrate how entrepreneurial discourses work. We are especially interested in the consequences they have for young people and how they understand problems that are dealt with in these employability measures. We have used the concepts of ‘power’ and ‘subjectivity’ to deconstruct the most often repeated and heard statements that have been used to justify and rationalize the importance of entrepreneurial interventions, as well as the expected outcome: the free, autonomous and responsible subject. By understanding the diverse formulations of power as articulations of competing politico-ethical projects that endow it with a variety of meanings, a conceptual space is opened up for an analysis that pays attention to how power operates to normalize and naturalize certain values and practices – that is, how power works in the discursive practices of education and what its effects are (St. Pierre, 2000).

By the concept of ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’ we refer to a subjectivity maintained through project-based and entrepreneurial discursive practices (Davies, 1998; Davies and Bansel, 2007). Our research has been inspired by the thinking of Michel Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1990, 1991): we study the practices related to entrepreneurialism in terms of power, by acknowledging the relations between knowledge, discourse and power as productive and regulative (Davies, 1998;
The process of subjectification is always tied to the discursive positions that are available situationally. This way of understanding the formation of subjectivity means that the ways in which one speaks at a certain moment might tell us more about the formative power than about the ‘individual’ who is speaking – and at that moment when resistance or alternative subjectivities come into play, the normative power becomes even more visible:

We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from outside. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very conditions of its existence and the trajectory of desire, the power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence. (Butler, 1995, quoted in Davies, 2006: 426)

If we think about the subject as something that does not exist outside or prior to the acts of discursive formations, becoming a subject means simultaneously mastering and submitting to the discourses which are available at that moment. Davies (2006: 426) argues that this should not be confused with determinism, where subjects are passively and inevitably shaped according to one set of discursive practices. The power of neo-liberal regimes should not be underestimated in the practices of education, because ‘hyper-individualism’, as Davies (2010: 54) puts it, is a product of the discursive power that forms the conditions of subjectivity.

We consider that entrepreneurial discourses are always under reconstruction and never fixed and finite. The young people referred to here are conditioned by and dependent on the prevailing norms related to this discourse and, at the same time, they are continually learning to act in these power relations, as well as to utilize them.

Avoiding ‘a lost generation’: focusing on the individual

The promotion of entrepreneurship has... become a central problem for policy makers for at least two reasons; one being the impact of the ‘functioning of market economies’ and the other the idea of entrepreneurs as ‘agents of change, growth and innovation’. Entrepreneurship has become what most nations would call a socially desirable action and thus a target for planned social change. A central question is, how this... desirable action can be promoted. (Dreisler et al., 2003: 383)

Our analysis examines these rationalities in order to determine how this discourse can be, and is being, promoted, both at the institutional level of managing youth transitions and at the level of subjectification. In political documents, the idea of the entrepreneur citizen is presented as necessary for both the individual and society:

An advancing society is founded on entrepreneurial activity. Psychological, physical and social welfare is underpinned by individuals’ own activity, their responsibility for their own action and care for their fellow beings. Economic welfare entails strong and competitive entrepreneurship. (Ministry of Education, 2009: 12)

The focus on individuality is used to validate entrepreneurialism in the practices of education. Mononen-Batista Costa interviewed one of the key actors in the field of entrepreneurial education in Finland, who works in a large association providing entrepreneurial education:

Mononen-Batista Costa: Some criticism has been levelled at entrepreneurial education – that it is blind when it comes to social differences, such as gender and ethnicity, and that it ignores them and presents the world as if we all were equal agents in free markets.
Interviewee: This is why we need to get into the school, to the early grades, where we can reach 100% of the age group... I would like children to have the possibilities of understanding their own skills, abilities and opportunities earlier. That is what it is about. And I want to give it to all of them. We can have an effect on making children active agents. It is important to offer that to everybody, before the categorizing happens. After comprehensive school, 400 young people drop out, who knows where, you can’t reach them. One excluded young person costs society 87,000 euros per year, and it takes 10 years to get him/her back into the circle, and that makes a million.

The role of entrepreneurial education was presented as a preventive means and in accordance with the idea of individualization: if, in the early grades, a student already understands his or her own skills and abilities, the potentiality ‘behind’ their societal background can be revealed, and marginalization can be avoided (Mononen-Batista Costa, forthcoming). As an interviewed teacher of a residential school for students with emotional or behavioural problems stated, entrepreneurial education is the best thing they can offer their students, who are not the ones who would go to study after comprehensive school. For them, as for my boys, the best thing would be to start their own businesses so they could find something good to do, instead of making trouble. Like a moped repair shop or something. So they could find something legal to do.

When the entrepreneur is presented as ‘an agent of change, who breaks boundaries, brings new models of action, acts holistically, tolerates insecurity and builds his/her own future’ (Kyrö, 1997: 227), teachers who have students with difficulties in adapting to school life have found this discourse attractive, promising and emancipating, as the following quote summarizes:

Entrepreneurial pedagogy is interested in how individuals’ potentiality can be fostered. The starting point is... especially the importance of attitude and personality and the spirit of enterprise. The objective is... to become enterprising citizens who are ready and able to discover their own strengths and in this way succeed in life. (Luukkainen and Toivola, 1998: iv)

Learning has become a personal responsibility: one must be able to be developed and trained. As noted earlier, economic and market values have started to define the reasoning and justification of political measures for young people by forming discursive practices in which social cohesion, inclusion and human well-being are understood to result from one’s participation in work life. This naive and simplified ‘truth’ manages to ignore the societal structures and positionings that also play a crucial role, by forming the possibilities of one’s agency and subjectivity through directing attention to the individual. In addition, education is not just about gaining employment, but also about subjectivity formation, which defines who we are and how we are valued. Equally, the availability of learning opportunities as such, detached from other societal conditions, does not necessarily lead to employment or inclusion, but nevertheless promotes individualization (Blackmore, 2006). Unemployment can be reduced to being seen and treated as a personal failure, with the ‘cure’ being continuous education. Institutions and governments become less responsible, while project workers act more like coaches or facilitators. In the current situation, in which the relationship between education and working life is being redefined, there is indeed a need for flexible and adaptable individuals (Filander, 2007).

Constant self-improving

Brunila: How do you see your future in terms of working life?
Martti: Well... I do believe it is possible to be employed, but I need more education.

Brunila: Are you interested in getting more education?

Martti: Oh yes. I want to learn as much as possible. I know I need skills in how to bring out my talent; talent is important and you need to develop it too. Now it seems a bit difficult though. I need to work with myself and learn what my talent is.

Brunila: How do you see your future in terms of working life?

Jukka: I think that I have to develop myself. And all the time, even during my free time, I try to learn more.

Project-based activities legitimate themselves by considering the problems young adults face, such as unemployment or a lack of education, as personal failures. Consequently, as the two young men above (the names are pseudonyms) show, youth unemployment issues lead to an individual-based approach, which suggests that the problems young adults face are to be found in the young adults themselves. The young people we interviewed seemed to believe that they simply had to try harder, work with themselves and learn continuously. The entrepreneurial discourse works in this way:

[Neo-]liberalism emerges, not only as a means of governing the state, the economy, and civil society, but also as a means of governing in these domains via the rational, autonomous, responsible behaviours and dispositions of a free, prudent, active subject: a subject which we can identify as the Entrepreneurial Self. (Kelly, 2006: 18)

The interviews with the young people exhibited characteristics such as activeness, the need to set and achieve objectives, self-confidence and having an internal locus of control. The young adults showed that, in project-based education, they had learned to display these so-called ideal entrepreneurial characteristics:

Riku: When I have acquired some form of education, I know all those opportunities are open to me. I think I have the characteristics that are needed... I now know how to market myself, I am active and I can also adapt myself to new situations... isn’t that what is wanted? I am also very motivated.

Mari: I’ve been told that I’m the boss. If I want to negotiate, it’s in the mirror in front of me... But it doesn’t bother me what I’m doing. It’s my own thing, not somebody else’s. I want to live by doing the things I like.

These young people were well aware of the demands that were directed at them. This can be seen in the two extracts above. Subjectification in general defines a cultural script about appropriate responses to events, and a set of associated practices through which people make sense of themselves and others. Another consequence of subjectification is learning to derive satisfaction from mastering one’s own submission to the subjectivity constructed in the discourse (see also Davies, 1998), as in the young woman’s extract below:

Brunila: In what kind of job do you see yourself in the future?

Tiina: I want to get satisfaction from what I can do and I want to be good at what I do. I have to learn to be as good as possible.

Project-based entrepreneurial education shapes young adults through the process of their subjectification, and they use the terms of this process as their own. As Davies writes, the question of subjectification concerns:

How is one kind of subjecthood or another made possible? How does one set of possibilities become normalised such that the subject cannot imagine itself otherwise? And most important,
how can the human subject evolve beyond the current sets of actions and reactions? (Davies, 2010: 55)

These measures seek to construct a particular form of personhood that we can describe as the entrepreneurial self, as well as a form of personhood that sees individuals as being responsible for their own conduct in the business of life – as an enterprise, as a project and as a work in progress (Kelly, 2006). Davies sums it up as follows:

The individualised subject…thus feels impelled to maximise his or her own advantage within the threatening and constraining order of things…the heightened individual of capitalism must become a chameleon, able to appear to be whatever a particular workplace wants, able to change into whatever way the workplace deems will maximise its productivity, ready and willing to move on to a new individualised subject…of neoliberalism. (Davies, 2010: 65)

As Pekka, a young entrepreneur, stated, after running his own business for two years, what he does now has little to do with his original business plan. He soon understood that he needed to do ‘what sells’, and learned to calculate how to use his business in such a way that he could pay only the required minimum taxes and avoid paying other fees, such as insurance premiums:

*Mononen-Batista Costa:* It has been said that, by being an entrepreneur, you can realize and satisfy yourself.

*Pekka:* In this model of society it can be true. But there are other ways also. I was happy when I was a normal employee. For me, this business is just a tool to cope with this system, in the bureaucracy. It is a tool that allows me to be taken seriously in certain circles, and that they understand that I’m seriously trying to achieve something.

Pekka and Mari, who became entrepreneurs as a result of measures of the Finnish Employment Office, both saw their own situation as part of a bigger political strategy, and reflected on their position in a broader employment policy context. As Mari put it, referring to public discussions concerning unemployment rates and measures to ‘cook the statistics’: ‘I’m not in the unemployment statistics anymore. I am an entrepreneur [*laughs*].’ Still, they seemed to be neither concerned nor frustrated about the fact that they had become entrepreneurs not only because they wanted to, but also because they were the objects of an employment policy that, at this historical moment, requires that someone with their labour status becomes an entrepreneur. They had both made a choice to start their own business. However, as Bansel writes:

‘Choice’…is not understood as a single rational act, but as discourse and practice located within a network of multiple and relational discursive practices….A discourse of choice, for example, adheres to a discourse of freedom in such a way that choice is valorized as a personal and social good, and as a mode of taking one’s place within a democracy (providing of course the ‘right’ choices are made). Discourses of choice and freedom are, in this way, conflated within a market economy as freedom of choice. (Bansel, 2007: 284)

**Managing the consequences**

The project-based education of young adults has to a large degree begun to educate and coach unemployed adults towards starting a business. Pekka and Mari had both been labelled as
‘long-term unemployed’. At the time of the first interview, they had both started up their own businesses. They told the same story about how they ended up being entrepreneurs:

*Pekka:* I was without a job for many years [laughs], and then in the labour office they directed me to this entrepreneurial education.

*Mononen-Batista Costa:* How did that happen?

*Pekka:* Well... because I was unemployed and got a labour market subsidy, and there is only a certain time that you can receive it... Then, something has to happen. You need to start to work or become an entrepreneur. The status of being unemployed has to change. I would have lost the labour market subsidy at some point if I hadn’t become self-employed. You see?

*Mari:* I was told there that there is this kind of education, and I need to apply. Yes, I was ordered. You just can’t stay unemployed.

Young unemployed people have been directed by the Employment Office to take part in these projects in order to avoid losing their social benefits. Sometimes unemployed young adults have been forced to take a course in entrepreneurship and then become young entrepreneurs. Refusing to do so, and consequently going without economic support, is not really an option (Brunila and Mononen-Batista Costa, 2010).

*Mononen-Batista Costa:* How does it feel now that you are an entrepreneur?

*Pekka:* Well, I am afraid. That on mornings I get up and I’m afraid I can’t do this.

Pekka spoke about the bills and taxes he could not afford to pay. He did not yet understand how the ‘entrepreneur system’, as he called it, worked, and felt that he was ‘lost’. Mari also brought up the ‘paperwork hell’ that she was exposed to. Some of the project workers we interviewed were also critical when it came to the entrepreneurial aims:

*Project worker:* We start by studying what learning is and how to recognize one’s own learning styles; we also conduct tests for learning, because they should learn to work independently. The aim here is to reach the level of self-direction, because we don’t offer fixed models to anyone anymore.

*Brunila:* What do you mean by self-directed learning?

*Project worker:* Well, in terms of the project’s aims, it means that they learn to solve problems independently. And learn to take responsibility for their learning.

*Brunila:* What do you think about these aims?

*Project worker:* Well, they are part of the project’s aims, so...

In the above-mentioned project, the young adults were introduced to entrepreneurialism through various visiting lecturers and by the promotion of a working culture that emphasized self-responsibility. Nevertheless, the project worker seemed hesitant when she described the activities of the project. She referred to its aims several times and was seemingly puzzled by them: ‘Project after project, but what about these young people? Does anyone think about them? Who cares about them when the project is over?’

The other project worker, who had worked with young people in educational projects for several years and in several educational organizations, was more openly critical of the projects. She questioned short-term activities in general, but also said that, nowadays, they were the only way to help these young people because the various ministries were not particularly interested in young people except in the form of short-term publicly funded projects. She also mentioned that, for some of the young people, this was the second or even third project they had participated in.
This is hardly surprising because young people’s transitions have become more unpredictable, differentiated and complex (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Walther, 2006). So-called yo-yo transitions are no longer the exception but the rule among many young people in Finland, who repeatedly move back and forth between education, training, employment and unemployment (Kovácha and Kučerova, 2009; Lundahl, 2011). Other project workers also mentioned strictly regulated and predetermined goals, market orientation, a constant lack of resources and repeated reporting to the project’s organizer. All of the project workers seemed to have accepted this situation because they felt that these projects guaranteed them at least some possibilities of continuing to work with young adults. Some of the project workers also mentioned that the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as other educational authorities in Finland, seemed to be interested in providing only short-term projects to these young adults.

Pekka, who had been directed to start his own business by the Finnish Employment Office, stated that, in his area of business (music), it is not easy to make a living. His firm was becoming too expensive for him, and he had to calculate when it was useful for him to use it. He said that some of his friends, who are also entrepreneurs in the same area, had succeeded in productizing and selling some music. But the firms had got ‘under their skin’: ‘They do not participate in music projects the way they used to, because they have to think all the time if it is good for the business. They need to calculate all their actions through the firm’.

**Conclusion**

The discourse of entrepreneurialism represents constant change and incomplete, always-in-process learning. Forms of power appear to regulate both the project workers and young adults. Project activities that comprise entrepreneurial education require both project workers and young adults to conform to a tightly prescribed vocabulary. The subjectivity produced by entrepreneurial education is hard to resist when it is promoted as a salvation for both the individual and society, offering all the skills and abilities that we urgently need in the current moment. It works by detailed governmental techniques that operate along the notions of possibilities and fear (Davies, 2010). The question is: Do you dare not obey?

The entrepreneurial discourse represents power that shapes and retools people to fit in with its needs without using force or domination, but rather by enabling them to believe what is good for them. Flexibility and self-responsibility might create a limited possibility to speak and be heard, and the individual-based techniques ensure that one learns to both locate one’s mistakes and blame oneself. Yet, although the young adults and project workers seemed to be very much involved with these projects, they also felt that their possibilities for resistance were limited.

Our starting point was the idea of language as something that produces reality and sustains power relations. We argued that what is said regarding the entrepreneurial discourse and ideals is not neutral: we learn to see ourselves through the discourses that are available to us. The young people referred to here were conditioned by and dependent on the prevailing norms related to the entrepreneurial discourse, and at the same time were continuously learning how to act in these power relations, as well as utilize them.

These young persons were able to think and speak about themselves in the ‘right’ way – the way they were expected to act in the entrepreneurial discourse. Their stories contained common elements: they exhibited an urge to study, train, try harder and find their own strengths, as well as opportunities. This is, indeed, the ideal individual subjectivity produced by the entrepreneurial discourse. The vocabulary of the entrepreneurial discourse has
worked by linking political rhetoric and regulatory programmes to the ‘self-steering’ capacities of the subjects themselves. Within this discourse, the educational activities related to young adults are informed by the view that the problem which needs to be addressed is some type of personal deficit. When this personal deficit is overcome by being preoccupied with oneself and by working harder, one is able to become more enterprising and take control of one’s life. For unemployed and uneducated young adults, the entrepreneurial discourse offers skills in how to present oneself in accordance with entrepreneurial ideals. Therefore, the ideal entrepreneurial subjectivity puts young people in a difficult position, where insecurity is inevitable and where flexibility may either be a help or a hindrance along the way. They are expected to become obedient to the powers of expertise and to fulfil the needs of entrepreneurial ideals. As Foucault writes:

In neo-liberalism – and it does not hide this; it proclaims it – there is a theory of Homo economicus, but he is not at all a partner of exchange (as in classical economic theory). Homo economicus is an entrepreneur… an entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings. (Foucault, 2008: 226)

The singular, self-contained human individual and his or her fundamental position in neo-liberal education politics should be deconstructed, although it is not easy for critical voices to be heard, especially if one feels that one is being critical alone. We argue that the entrepreneurial discourse in education calls for a more critical appraisal, not least from the perspectives of resistance and rebellion. This is why we should analyse the practices on a conceptual level that allows us to use other discourses and ways to understand what is currently happening.

**Note**


**References**


