

Conference “Transitions, career learning and career management skills. Multi-disciplinary and critical perspectives”, October 19-20, 2017, Stockholm University

Type of contribution: Paper

Title: Young People’s First Encounters with Work-life: Finnish Ninth Graders’ Experiences of Short Job Placements and Summer Jobs

Paper’s relation to the conference theme:

We focus on young people’s experiences of job placements as part of the career guidance instruction in Finnish comprehensive schools. The job placements may have consequences for young people’s later educational and career choices, but very little research is available on this topic. The analysis stems from an ongoing longitudinal qualitative research project “Youth in time” charting young people’s life transitions around Finland.

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Keywords: job placements, career guidance, qualitative research, gender, youth research

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

This paper focuses on Finnish young people’s first experiences of work-life, particularly of the short job placements which take place in the last two years of comprehensive school. The context of our analysis is the late modern society where young people are held more individually responsible for their life choices, although the consequences of these choices are increasingly more difficult to anticipate. (Bauman 2000).

Young people face increasing uncertainty in relation to working life, and their future options. Many comprehensive school students think that they have not received enough guidance in making choices regarding education and career, and particularly young women are hesitant about their future careers (T-Media 2015). The job placements of students will be even more important in the Finnish schooling system in the future, as the vocational schooling system is being reformed. According to the reform, young people will be expected to receive a substantial part of their education within workplaces, although the implications of this arrangement are still under discussion.

The Finnish labour market is highly gender segregated (European Commission 2009; Smyth & Steinmetz 2008), and the reasons for this are widely debated. The gender segregation does not seem to be diminishing (see f.ex. Teräsaho - Keski-Petäjä 2017). We utilize a critical gender research perspective combined with a youth research framework in order to analyze young people’s gendered meaning-making in relation to working-life and future careers.

The program whereby students in the last grades of comprehensive school in Finland do short job placements was started in the late 1970’s, and nowadays it has become an established part of career guidance practice. Most young people of their cohort participate in this program yearly. The students are placed in work places on two occasions, for one week in the 8th grade, and another two weeks’ period in the 9th grade. They can work in private companies or public sector work places, and their job tasks vary. The young people are not paid for their placements; it is part of their schooling. The system aims to

support creating close ties between companies and schools, as well as to provide important sites for out-of-school learning for young people. However, there is very little research on these job placements, and their meanings for young people. It seems that there has not been any systematic knowledge gathering about the merits and problems linked to job placements from the students' perspective. We are trying to fill this gap by providing scientific knowledge concerning the issue.

Our research questions are threefold: firstly, we focus on how young people have acquired their job placements – ranging from active seeking to a desired workplace even in another town, to those taking any placement the career guidance teacher offers them; secondly, we look at what kind of meanings young people give to their experiences of job placements; and thirdly, we ask if and how their experiences are modified by gender, mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish, other) and/or geographical location.

Our objectives are to create new knowledge about the job placement system from young people's perspective, and critically discuss the possibilities and problems related to them, as well as their possible consequences for young people's later decisions about their education and professional career.

Methods

The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 125 Finnish young people, born in the year 2000. The young people come from eight different schools and ten study groups, and they represent a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, mother tongues, and live in different environments ranging from suburbs in larger cities to small communities in the countryside. The sites have been chosen theoretically to reveal differences in the life conditions and possibilities of young people living in different parts of Finland.

The interviews have been conducted in five research sites around Finland, and they have covered a variety of themes, including everyday life, education, work-life experiences and future plans. Some of the interviews have been conducted in small groups or pairs, others as individual interviews. The interviews are part of the "Youth in time" research project, which is a longitudinal research project coordinated by the Finnish Youth Research Network, in cooperation with researchers from the Universities of Eastern Finland and Helsinki. The study [has] started in 2015, when the interviewees were about to finish their comprehensive school, and our goal is to follow the young people's life paths during the next ten years.

The analysis combines elements from content analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis and discourse analysis to provide a deep-going look into young people's experiences of work-life. We pay particular attention to the gendered aspects of young people's experiences, as well as their socio-economic background, their mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish or other languages), and geographical differences.

Expected outcomes /results

The expected results will reveal in an interesting way how young people frame their first experiences of working-life, and how their experiences are modified by their family background, gender, mother tongue and geographical location. In their job placements some of the young people receive important experiences that are valuable for them in their future careers, while others may find their job placements boring, useless or even worse, they may have been harassed or bullied. Some will gain interesting experiences from a professional field where their own gender is in minority, while others have sought their placements in more traditional gender-specific arenas, which may only solidify their gendered choices. Young people in different parts of the country have very different resources at their disposal in finding job placements, and in some sites the choices are very limited. Young people also use the job placements as welcome departures from the school routines, and seek to strengthen their friendship ties and/or family ties during the placements in various ways.

We aim to explore possible challenges with the job placement system of comprehensive school students in Finland. We suggest some recommendations towards improving the system in order to make it more fruitful for students planning their future educational choices and careers.

Intent of publication

There is an intention to publish this article in a scientific journal; possibly first in a Finnish journal and later in an international journal.

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