Inclusion of vulnerable youth in school or work – How can individually tailored professional support contribute?

Kjetil Frøyland [*]

Work Research Institute, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Researchers and policymakers are worried about the marginalisation of vulnerable youth who drop out of school and work, as a long range of policies and measures developed in many countries have not solved the problem. Several studies suggest individually tailored support as a vital measure, but the details of how such support contributes to inclusion remain unclear. This article explores how individually tailored support can contribute to the inclusion of vulnerable youth in school or work as well as its limitations. Qualitative data from four support processes were drawn from a Norwegian pilot project aimed at the inclusion of vulnerable youth in schools or work. While none of the youth fully completed school or found sustainable work during the observation period, several minor or temporary achievements – often 'soft' outcomes such as trustful relationships or better management of emotions – were reached. These achievements were experienced as vital and important to the youth, their families and to other support organisations involved. Using the capability approach as a lens, I found that individually tailored professional support contributes to bringing forward internal and external resources and transforming these resources into possibilities and capabilities. These contributions take place as ongoing processes. Further transformation of capabilities into achieved functionings, such as stable work, school completion and often other 'hard' outcomes, seems to be more difficult.

1. Introduction

Several Western countries have high youth unemployment, and researchers and policymakers are worried about the increasing marginalisation of vulnerable youth (Baskerville, 2021; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; MacIntyre, 2014; Mascherini et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2020). In this paper, I define vulnerable youth as youth aged 15–25 who are at risk of or have already dropped out of school or have difficulties finding and keeping a job. Olsen et al. (2016) estimated that in Nordic countries, between 6 and 12 per cent of people aged 16–24 years were at risk of long-term exclusion. The reasons for such marginalisation can be linked to various factors at the individual, institutional and structural levels (Frøyland et al., 2020).

To address these challenges, a broad array of initiatives and measures have been developed in Western countries at various levels. On an individual level, these include training courses and personal support, while at an institutional level, measures such as the establishment of dedicated teams or support services specifically designed for youth have been implemented. At the structural level, initiatives like national youth

guarantees have been introduced (Frøyland et al., 2022). However, the marginalisation of young people still seems to be a significant challenge that lacks good solutions. These challenges have a particularly large impact on young people who are especially vulnerable because of problems related to substance abuse, health, crime, social circumstances, functional impairment or other problematic issues (Hardoy et al., 2017; Hauss, 2014).

On the individual level, several studies have highlighted the availability of competent and tailored support for the inclusion of vulnerable youth. We find examples from Europe (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Frøyland, 2016; Frøyland et al., 2022; Johansson & Höjer, 2012), from Australia/New Zealand (Munford & Sanders, 2015a, 2015b; Noble-Carr et al., 2015) and from the USA/Canada (Henderson et al., 2017; Osgood et al., 2010; Xie et al., 2014). These studies show that vulnerable youth may need support for a broad spectrum of issues, and several authors point to close individual follow-up as a key success factor (Frøyland, 2016; Xie et al., 2014). Individual follow-up can comprise several support qualities. Noble-Carr (2015) underlines the importance of caring relationships, participation in their communities, achieving a sense of

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* Address: Kjetil Frøyland, Work Research Institute, P.O. Box 4 St. Olavs Plass, NO-0130 Oslo, Norway.
   E-mail address: kjetil.froyland@oslomet.no.

belonging, competence and hope as critical domains. Literature on support models such as Assertive Community Treatment (ACT), which provides outreach, simultaneous and holistic services to people with severe mental disorders or substance abuse problems, suggests that active engagement means spending plenty of time 'hooking up' with the person and through this process building alliances, creating trust and then slowly starting to work systematically with what the person is struggling with (Camacho-Rubio et al., 2022; Ruud, 2014; Aakerholt, 2013).

Also, qualities at the institutional and structural levels have been studied. Ryan et al. (2019) for instance, argued that young people's perceptions of support are strongly correlated with school engagement: 'What is important is that a young person feels personally supported'. They investigated in particular the role of perceived support from teachers, parents and friends. Jones et al. (2018) similarly highlighted the importance of youth having supportive adults in their lives and included professional staff who could advocate for youth. They further underscored the need to better connect vulnerable youth to existing resources within their communities and build on youths' strengths and protective factors to improve educational outcomes. With particular relevance for inclusion in work, Taylor (2011) underlined the need to build strong natural support networks and access work opportunities that accommodate their life situations. Sanders et al. (2020) found that early exposure to workplaces, opportunities to develop employment skills and access to ongoing support from at least one positive adult in particular are key factors for programmes supporting the employment transitions of vulnerable youth. According to Sanders et al. (2020), the process for vulnerable youth to find work is complex and subject to the influence of a range of factors. They further claimed that professionals have important roles to play here in providing ongoing support throughout the process of job seeking and in advocating for enabling, rather than punitive, policies (Sanders et al., 2020, p. 11).

While several studies thus highlight the role of professional support for the inclusion of vulnerable youth, the details of such professional support in terms of limitations and challenges, as well as vital qualities and promotors of success, remain unclear. Studies often link success to individually tailored follow-ups without defining in a concrete manner what individual support and success really is. For instance, they may refer to general and vague concepts such as 'the development of safe and trusting relationships', 'early intervention' and 'sufficient collaboration' among involved stakeholders (Frøyland et al., 2022).

This paper explores in depth the role and potential of professional support as facilitators of the sustainable inclusion of vulnerable youth in work or school. My major research question is: How can individual tailored support contribute to the inclusion of vulnerable youth in school or work, and what are its limitations?

To explore this question, I drew qualitative data from an intervention based on supported employment implemented in a high school in the southern part of Norway. The paper analyses in detail the support processes of four young people from this region, looking specifically for a) the qualities and content of the support provided and b) the outcomes of different kinds and on different levels in each of the support processes. In this paper, I consider each of these support processes, along with all involved actors, as a single case. This paper forms part of a research project about the prevention of sick leave and marginalization in young adults/NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The article is structured as follows:

First, I provide some background about the Norwegian context and the youth-pilot intervention. Second, I introduce a theoretical perspective that will be employed in the analysis. Third, I detail the data and methods used. Fourth, I present the primary results and examine the strengths and limitations of individually tailored support. Fifth, I discuss the support provided in light of the theoretical perspective. Lastly, I draw conclusions.

2. Background

High school in Norway follows 10 years of primary education and spans three years, accommodating students aged 16 to 19 years old. Almost all Norwegian teenagers enroll in high school, which offers two primary paths: vocational and study specialization (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2021). Despite numerous attempts to address the issue, the high school dropout rate has remained high for many years. Currently, about one in five students do not complete high school within five years, with the dropout rate being highest among vocational study programs (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2021). To support students facing additional challenges, high schools have established their own student services. These include a school nurse, advisors, an educational-psychological service, and a follow-up service. The latter aims to identify and assist students who drop out or do not attend, helping them return to school. Despite being crucial to many young people, the follow-up service often lacks the capacity and expertise to efficiently aid students facing more significant challenges. The intervention discussed in this article was developed by a team of local youth workers in collaboration with the local high school and public employment services, specifically targeting students facing such challenges.

The intervention started as a project in a high school with approximately 800 students. It took place from 2014 to 2017 and then became a regular measure in the region from 2018 onwards (Frøyland et al., 2020). The support model of the project was based on the individual follow-up model in Supported Employment/Education (SE), which still is a novel and rare approach in the context of high school in Norway. SE can show good results when it comes to transition issues and inclusion in the labour market for vulnerable groups (Axe et al., 2020; Bond et al., 2016; Frøyland, 2016; Luciano et al., 2014; Morton et al., 2020; Sveinsdottir et al., 2020). Bond et al. (2001) defined SE as an 'approach to helping people with disabilities participate as much as possible in the competitive labour market, working in jobs they prefer with the level of professional help they need' (Bond et al., 2001, p. 313). SE seeks competitive employment through rapid job searches and individualised support from job coaches or employment specialists. Rather than merely providing information about jobseekers to employers and about vacancies to jobless people (Ingold & Valizade, 2017), the employment specialists collaborate closely with employers and provide them with support to contribute to the inclusion of disabled workers (EUSE, 2014, pp. 31–33). Supported education represents a similar approach, however, focusing on inclusion in schools and thus collaborating with schools and teachers instead of employers (Mueser & Cook, 2012; Rinaudo & Ennals, 2012).

The situation for many of the young people before they joined the project was high absenteeism, lack of assessment of subjects at school and danger of losing their school place (Frøyland et al., 2020). Typical challenges were experiences of defeat, low self-esteem, stressful social heritage and stigma. Attendance problems and drug or mental challenges recurred frequently. Some of the young people were ill. Some had trouble getting up in the morning. Several lived alone, and some had unstable living conditions. Several of them had parents with similar challenges.

A team of four 'youth pilots', each providing individual tailored support to 10–15 students having difficulties participating in school, was established as part of the local school services (Frøyland et al., 2020). The youth pilots were experienced and engaged grownups with mixed backgrounds from areas such as teaching, training, employment services, industry, youth services and health services. They had their offices at the local high school but spent much time 'on the road' visiting other local schools, workplaces, support organisations and the local youth.

The young people were usually referred to the pilot services by teachers or school advisors (Frøyland et al., 2020). In most cases, the purpose of the follow-up was for the young person to complete high school or parts of it. In some cases, the goal was formulated as adapting

or adjusting the school situation for the individual. For some of the youngest, the goal was to find the right school choice. For some of the participants, the follow-up was aimed at carrying out work practices or apprenticeships.

The pilots provided close follow-up of young people in the transition between primary and high school through building trust and facilitating coping (Frøyland et al., 2020). This meant that the pilots might meet with the youth several times a week and even several times a day during challenging periods. SMS, text messages and pictures were also common ways to communicate. The youth might send an SMS to the pilot when they have a difficult day. The youth pilots also answered SMS and phone calls from the youth in the evenings/weekends when they were able. The youth pilots might inform the parents about what their child was doing, for example, by sending pictures of moments of mastery. The youth pilots might accompany the youth to health investigations or in meetings with various employment services, schools or other agencies. The youth pilots might find work practices for these youth and accompany them there. They might also take the youth to local activities in their leisure time to facilitate social inclusion.

Together with the young people, the youth pilots explored the individual's interests, strengths and needs for assistance when it came to education or work (Frøyland et al., 2020). A major focus in the intervention was school participation, and the pilot services used work practice/training in regular workplaces as part of the assistance to a large proportion of the students. Internally, the pilots might assist with the facilitation of teaching at the schools and, to some extent, in the classroom situation. The pilots also monitored young people closely at workplaces in collaboration with their employers. In some cases, the pilot even worked together with the youth in the workplace ('job coaching') for a short period. A major effort in the project was to use ordinary work as a means of mastering and completing more school, hoping for increased inclusion in work in the long term.

The youth pilots often acted as the spokesmen of the youth, and they took the role of coordinators of the support, establishing resource groups with representatives from collaborating services (Frøyland et al., 2020). They collaborated closely with the follow-up service in the local high school, the teachers and other support agencies that were relevant to the individual young person at different times. For instance, they coordinated support and efforts from the local welfare and employment administration (NAV), the health services, the county municipality and the municipalities in the region, and constituted a comprehensive offer to the young people who needed it.

The youth pilots could offer continuous support to each individual over several years, spanning from the final years of primary school through high school and further into work or other forms of education. As such, this type of measure proved more sustainable than most interventions aimed at youths. However, when young people relocated to other municipalities, the support often ceased due to jurisdictional constraints with other support services becoming responsible. Notwithstanding, some form of contact between the youth and the pilot services could still be maintained if the youth desired, particularly during holidays when they often returned to their hometown for a period.

2.1. Theoretical perspective

To gain a deeper and also more concrete understanding of the contribution, outcomes and overall impact of the individually tailored support described above, as well as the limitations of such assistance, I have chosen to adopt the capability approach (CA) as an analytical lens for assessment of the qualitative data. According to CA, *resources* can be transformed into *capabilities* (possibilities) and further into '*functionings*' (achievements) with the help of internal '*conversion factors*', such as the skills or intelligence of the individual, or external 'conversion factors', such as social factors embedded in public policies, social norms, social hierarchies or environmental factors (Robeyns, 2016). CA claims that

the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities (Robeyns, 2016). Capabilities here refer to an individual's real opportunities to do and be what they value. Amartya Sen, the founder of CA, called such beings and doings 'functionings' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95; Sen, 1999). 'Functionings' can include 'working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community, being respected, and so forth' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95). Based on a CA-perspective, the term 'successful outcome' could refer not only to a final result, such as permanent employment or fully completed school, but also to the improvement of capabilities and achievements.

3. Data, analysis and methodology

The qualitative data used in this paper has been collected from four particular cases recruited from two different local high schools. As part of each case I have interviewed four youth and 3–4 collaborative support givers. Given my objective to thoroughly examine the support and experiences by conducting interviews with multiple informants in each case, I chose to focus on a limited number of four cases. Among the informants were teachers and advisers in school, youth pilots, representatives from mental health services and other important collaborators (such as parents). I interviewed them at two different times, T1 and T2 (two years later). The four cases were selected and the youth were asked to participate by the youth pilots of the local intervention. The youth pilots also collected written consent from the youth. Written information about the research project and the consent form were provided by the researcher. I asked the youth pilots to find cases with both boys and girls who had severe but also quite typical challenges for the local target group. To capture some of the real challenges with such follow-up and avoid the selection of merely success stories, I told the youth pilots that some of the cases could look promising while not too easy and that others might look difficult and challenging.

The selected data contains a total of 27 individual interviews covering these four cases: 18 at T1 and 9 at T2. Since several support providers who were interviewed at T1 had retired or were no longer part of the support team at T2, they were not available for interviews at T2. Table 1 below provides an overview of the informants.

Comment: To ensure anonymity, I have not linked the informants to any specific case.

Data were collected using multiple case study designs (Yin, 2014) and mainly consisted of transcribed, semi-structured qualitative interviews. The interview guides were developed on the basis of a research report from the local project (Frøyland et al., 2022) as well as on previous research on the inclusion of vulnerable youth, as addressed in the

Table 1
Informants.

No.	Informant	T1	T2
1	Adviser at school	X	
2	Child welfare services	X	
3	Special school department leader	X	
4	Family services	X	
5	Father	X	X
6	Foster mother	X	X
7	Junior high school inspector	X	
8	Landlord	X	
9	Teacher	X	
10	High school team leader	X	X
11	Youth A	X	
12	Youth B	X	X
13	Youth C	X	
14	Youth D	X	X
15	Youth pilot 1	X	X
16	Youth pilot 2	X	X
17	Youth pilot 3	X	X
18	Youth pilot 4	X	X
		18	9

introduction section. I wanted to collect rich information by interviewing the informants about the needs and challenges of vulnerable youth, their situation, the local context, monitoring methods, the coordination of services and the experience of school and job inclusion. To better understand the role of individual tailored support for the inclusion of vulnerable youth in school or work, the interview protocols were analyzed in order to:

(1) describe what kind of support intervention team workers and their collaborating partners provided as part of the school and job inclusion process for vulnerable youth;

(2) To identify particular support that seemed to have contributed to improved schooling or job inclusion capabilities among vulnerable youth;

(3) assess how the intervention support contributed (as conversion factors) to the transformation of resources into capabilities and capabilities further into 'functionings' (outcomes or achievements).

I coded the text in a manual manner marking the relevant information with different colours and numbering in order to link the information to the selected topics. Since there were only four cases, I found no need to use a digital coding tool such as nvivo. I read the interview protocols several times and developed matrices to display the relevant data from the four cases. While partly following an inductive and data-driven approach, trying to extract any kind of information relevant for inclusion in school or work from the data (Gibbs, 2007; Yin, 2014), I also partly followed a concept-driven approach by looking specifically for information on some pre-defined topics listed in Table 2. While the first four topics were selected to establish a detailed picture of the situation for the youth, the last four (resources, capabilities, achieved functionings and conversion factors) are vital concepts in the CA, included to shed light on information relevant for understanding the support processes as seen from a CA-perspective. Thus, I searched the data for information on the following topics:

I carried out a theme-oriented, cross-case analysis, which resembles a variable-oriented, cross-case analysis but with more focus on themes than on variables (Thagaard, 1999). A theme-oriented approach pays more attention to details and complexity in specific cases than variable-oriented approaches, where generality is often given precedence over complexity (Miles et al., 2014, p. 102; Ragin, 1987, p. 54). To understand how individual tailored support could contribute to inclusion, I wanted precisely the details and complexity of the support work as well as of the experiences of the involved youth, their families and the support givers. I structured my research strategy around the premise that adopting a 'bottom-up' approach and closely attending to the intricate details of rich experiences could yield novel insights and address the existing gaps within the research field. I aimed to complement the often broad and general findings of quantitative approaches, which, in my opinion, may lack the depth and specificity required

3.1. Ethical considerations

To be able to collect relevant information when conducting

qualitative interviews on sensitive issues and doing so in a respectful way, it is vital that the researcher also adopts a sensitive approach (Thagaard, 1999). I therefore arranged the interview guides in a way that gave time for sufficient 'warm up' and sufficient time to close the conversation after the potential sensitive parts. A major challenge in research, such as this covering rather sensitive issues for a limited number of cases, also lies in the danger of presenting the research in an identifiable and unsensitive manner. I analysed each case separately, displaying relevant information chronologically. However, to secure sufficient anonymity, I have mixed data from the four cases in the following presentation. For the same reason, I will not provide detailed information about the collaborators and support givers in each of the cases, the exact time of the interviews or the exact age or gender of the youths.

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data approved the research on 31 October 2018 (reference nr. 967296). All interviews were carried out between 2018 and 2022. In addition to the situation at T1 and T2, I gathered information about the starting point of the support from the youth pilot services (T0) and the two years between T1 and T2. All youths were interviewed at the local high school at T1. Four or five informants from each case participated. At T2, two years later, they were contacted via telephone. Only two of the youths decided to take part in the second interview; however, for each case, two or three informants participated at T2. At T1, all the youth had given their written consent for themselves and their support givers being interviewed at two different times (T1 and T2).

4. Results

None of the four youths involved managed during the study to fully complete school or find permanent work. Table 3 below shows some major details in the situation for each of the cases at T0, T1 and T2. The youth were 15–18 years old at T0 and 18–21 years old at T2.

From being Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) or close to dropping out and isolation at T0, they were all active in school and/or work at T1, experiencing progress and better quality of life. While two of them were students (full-time) at T2, one was NEET and the last one was about to start a work practice. The overall impression from the data is that the situation for all four youths improved from T0 to T1. At T2 we can see a setback for at least one or two of the youths. For all of them, the situation at T2 seemed rather fragile.

Before I discuss the qualities as well as the soft and hard outcomes of the tailored support, I will elaborate in more detail about what happened from T0 to T2:

T0: The Situation at the Start of Support.

At T0, all of them received support from several supporters and described problematic experiences and substantial challenges, such as:

- Experiences of bullying, (sexual) abuse, violence and threats at school or at home
- High levels of conflict at home

Table 2
Topics for analysis.

Situation	Current status on work, school, living, hobbies, health, etc.
Challenges	Current problems, difficulties, etc.
Motivation and aims	Wants, interests, plans, urges, ambitions – what contributes to motivation?
Support – Collaborators	Support, network – Who is involved? What do they do?
Resources	Internal and external
Capabilities	Mastery, abilities, competence, skills, possibilities, etc.
Achieved functionings	What has youth achieved, carried out, completed, etc.?
Conversion factors	What has contributed to convert resources into capabilities and functionings?

Table 3
Situation at T0, T1 and T2.

Case	T0	T1	T2
A	NEET	Special school one day a week, regular high school 3 days a week, work one day	Student in ordinary high school, but so far without apprenticeship
B	Student in high school	Student in high school	In work practice but dropped out of school
C	NEET	High school 3 days a week, work one day	NEET
D	Absent from high school, about to drop out	Student at high school, and in work practice	Student in high school for challenged youth

- No motivation for school, problems with theoretical subjects, absence or dropout
- Low self-confidence
- Social anxiety, difficult social relations, fear of people, trouble finding and keeping friends
- Easily give up if challenges appear or respond to challenges through anger
- Alcohol and drug problems, overdoses, suicide attempts and self-harming
- Psychological and other challenges such as migraine, ADD, depression, PTSD (post–traumatic stress disorder)
- Shifting motivation and emotions from being heavily depressed to being encouraged
- Lack of trust in support agencies

The youth pilots had different ways of establishing contact and starting collaborations with the youths. One of them wanted to quit school. The youth pilot, however, suggested that the youth take out sick leave from school instead so that the absence was valid. During this period of absence from school, they started building relationships and making plans.

For one of the others, the youth pilot came to the home of the youth, sat by the bed for 30 min some mornings and after some days managed to build a relationship that resulted in the youth coming with the youth pilot to school. The youth pilot could sit with the youth in the classroom as well. They looked at pictures of possible jobs, set a goal and made a plan based on the words of the youth: the aim was to qualify for a technical programme in the high school in the coming fall.

A similar approach was described for a third youth. The youth pilot visited this youth at home and provided help to go to school. One of the parents described the support this way:

> They got C out of bed and at school in the morning. And they talked to C at school and kept in touch with C, on the phone about eight or nine times a week, I think… they helped C and supported C in every conceivable and unimaginable way, but it was—God, there has been little willingness to cooperate. First, C is tired of school, tired of everything. But 'the youth pilot' picks C up one day a week. And C actually appreciates that, and I feel that C has very good contact with her. C… probably trusts her more than me. (Parent)

The example above illustrates how the youth pilots spent time with the youths, learned about their challenges and interests, and provided help to solve their difficulties. A trustful working relationship was therefore established, and this was something the young people seemed to appreciate, according to informants.

T1: Much Had Improved – but Still Challenges.

At T1, which varied from a few months to a year after T0, the situation had changed greatly for all of them. From being NEET, one youth went to a special school one day a week, regular junior high school three days a week and worked in a local garage one day a week. This youth met at school each day and no longer skipped school anymore. One of the other youths who were about to drop out of school was also helped by establishing a special solution with three days of school and one day of work each week:

> When I entered high school, I first applied for construction. But, I soon found out that was not quite my thing. And then I would apply for a switch to sales and service, I think it's called. But then that class was full, and then it became a bit chaotic and cumbersome. But then they helped me get the arrangement I have now, that I only go to school for three days. Then only for the general subjects: math and English and Norwegian and science. It was… I had a little desire to give up when it was like that… I did not get into the subject I wanted because it was full. But then they found that arrangement, and then I think it went well. (Youth)

The youth pilot picked this youth up at home one day a week and drove the youth to school. They talked in the car, making the transport into a meeting. They solved a lot in the car, according to the youth pilot: 'It is easier for vulnerable youth to talk there'. The youth pilot described this youth as intelligent and clever.

At T1, some of the youths had received help to move to better living conditions or to better organise their living situations. At the youth pilot's first visit to one of the youth's homes:

> … there was rubbish and everything in the living room.…..so I quickly went in and collaborated with both the landlords there on making a laundry list and a list for purchasing food, and all this should be on their cupboard doors. They also had to start talking to each other about how to share tasks and responsibilities. I told them that it was common when you rent from someone that they can pay for paint and such if you want to renovate a bit. Because then it becomes a little more cosy around you, it becomes nicer and you have a better life. We have been through all things like this. (Youth pilot)

In this way, the youth pilot helped these young people organise their living situations, arranged for the landlord to transport them to school each morning and provided support through frequent communication on SMS, phone, in the car or in meetings. They helped improve living conditions, possibly leading to improved quality of life. The involved youth said this led to better performance at school:

> The grades are higher. Because they were at the very bottom in middle school. Now I am actually up in several subjects. Although I am still at the bottom in math and science, I have struggled with that for quite some time now. But I work more upwards. I do. And I get more encouragement to do better, to work harder, from the youth pilot'. He tells me I work hard. And that I'm good enough just the way I do it, and that I'm good enough just the way I am and come up with such good feedback. Encourages me. And tells me I'm good at something. It helps. Very actually. (Youth)

As we can see from the quote, the experienced outcome of the support was not only meeting at school and performing better, but also that the youth pilot encouraged this youth and provided positive feedback, which this youth felt as helpful.

At T1, one of the youths had started in a small class with fewer than 10 students, all with challenges. The aim was to find a job in which they could thrive and work two days a week. This youth said the life situation was already better. The youth had stopped the self-harming and now managed to go to school.

At T1, the youth pilots had frequent contact with all the youths. It seemed to vary from 2 to 3 times a week to several times each day: 'To have frequent contact. That is important! Then, you become a part of their life', one of the youth pilots said. A major impression of the data is that the youth pilots collaborated closely with the youth at this time. They designed individualised and tailored plans and systems for follow-up.

T1–T2: Two Years of Achievements and Setbacks.

The two years from T1 to T2 seem, in all of the four cases, to have been a mix of activities, achievements and setbacks both at school and work and privately, as well as emotionally. One youth completed junior high school and the first year of high school. Another completed 1st year of high school, completed general subjects 2nd year, and then dropped out of school. One was offered apprenticeship but declined since motivation had changed. Many activities had been carried out, such as:

- Numerous encounters between youth and youth pilot: 'motivational talks'
- Several meetings with 'resource groups', including the parents, psychological services, advisers and teachers in addition to the youth pilot and the youth
- Work training/work practice/summer jobs of different kinds and lengths, some successful and others less successful
- Applied at schools/subjects and started as students at local schools or in other municipalities

For some of the youthsm, happenings in their private life seem to have had a major influence on their ability in this period to go to school or work, such as abuse, threats, violence, health issues and sickness. Mastery of life had been difficult, and private incidents or health issues had hindered the youth from starting work. Ongoing challenges and incidents had, for some, led to the need to move in with other people or home to their parents, who often had problems themselves.

In addition to the youth pilots, representatives from other organisations, such as schools and health services, had also been supportive. For instance, one teacher was very active and provided close follow-up to one of the youths, as well as coordinating several other services. This teacher even helped the youth complete the subjects by using her own leisure time together with the youth. The teacher described her own role as an organiser, keeping the other services active. She looked after the youth, as well as the teachers on other subjects, so that they provided tailored support. She also contacted the youth pilot services so that they could do their jobs properly. A local support team was established.

All these youth met extra challenges when Covid–19 struck and everything 'stopped up'. Treatment at mental health services was stopped. Work practices were cancelled since workplaces shut down. The youths were not allowed to meet at work when they caught a cold. The youths were not allowed to meet at school, and the youth pilots were not allowed to meet with the youths in person. To help them connect to the school programmes on the internet and support their homework, the youth pilots still met with the youth, one of them outside on the balcony. According to the youth pilot, this was the only way to support this youth, as it was difficult to reach this youth on the phone.

T2: Fragility – but Still Hope.

Given that there were fewer informants at T2, my understanding of the youths' situations at that time is somewhat limited. Three of the youths had moved to different municipalities by T2, leading to the termination of support from the pilot services, as these services were only mandated to operate in the area where the youth originally resided. One of these youths was in their second year of high school at T2. Having just completed work practice, this youth was in the process of applying for an apprenticeship. According to one informant, this youth received no support at all. The data does not clarify whether the youth was managing well independently or if they actually required support. The youth lived alone and had completed all school subjects so far, except for one where their grades were insufficient. Another youth had dropped out of school in a different municipality and was back at home idle, merely waiting for school to resume in the upcoming fall of 2021. A third youth was a full-time student in a high school specially designed for youth with challenges. The youth pilot had intended to visit this youth in their new school but was prevented from doing so due to Covid-19 restrictions. The pilot stated she would reinstate the follow-up if the youth returned to their hometown.

Only one of these four youths still received support from the youth pilot at T2. This youth had recently started in work training in a store but had hardly been there due to health issues and Covid-19. The youth pilot was in contact several times a week in periods and more rarely in other periods. At one point, the support relation nearly ended:

I have followed B up all the time, because I still have a hope, I will not give up until B has found a company where B wants to take either a training contract or an apprenticeship contract. I do not give up before – Because everyone else gives up here, but then B has no one. So I cannot do it yet. But it got to the point where I had to ask B the question. Because there was a period where B did not answer, neither by phone nor SMS, and then I simply had to send an SMS telling B that I interpreted it so that you do not want my follow-up or help anymore. And then B immediately replied that B wanted help. So that's part of the reason I'm still on, then. (Youth pilot)

For these youths, many of the challenges appeared to persist from T1 to T2. However, the data also highlighted minor and major achievements in all cases. In the following section, I will elaborate further on these accomplishments and examine how the support received by the youths may have contributed to their progress.

5. Further elaboration of qualities and limitations of individually tailored support

Both the youth pilots and other support givers played vital roles in helping these youth during the studied period. The data shows that individual support from the youth pilot services can help young people who have either dropped out of school or are in danger of doing so to increased attendance at school, increased completion of school, more work experience, and more mastery and motivation. However, the data also show that young people who have received assistance may later fall back into undesirable situations. An experience is that working with this target group is demanding and could require follow-up for a long period of time, i.e. several years.

One major focus of the support thus has been on 'hard' factors such as major or minor improvements on the way to school completion, for example, related to attendance, getting or improving grades or completion of separate subjects. However, the support has contributed also to improvements related to 'soft' qualities such as encouragement, better self-esteem, better life quality or better mastering of everyday life. One main experience is that the youth pilots have spent time exercising basic care for many of the youths in addition to the school- or work-oriented follow-up. Before I further elaborate on the support directed at work inclusion or school participation, I will explore the meanings of such 'soft' qualities of the support in more detail.

5.1. Holistic and trustful support – Building a working relationship

The data describe a holistic kind of support covering several areas and issues, as suggested by Henderson et al. (2017). The support is flexible and topics in focus change in line with the shifting needs or challenges of the individual youth. The ability to 'see the person' and address experienced problems was highlighted by informants as important for establishing a trustful and working relationship between the youth and the youth pilot. A parent of one of the youths had the impression that the youth pilots were good at 'seeing' the individual and finding solutions to the experienced problem:

… they take youth seriously, see the people, if I may say so. Not just seeing rules and it should be such-and-such, and it should not be such-and-such, but that they take the situation for the situation. When C needed help with homework when it was home school (due to Covid–19), the pilot showed up. When C needed to be driven to school, she showed up. When C was tired of school, she helped him get a job, so C did not have to go to school every day so that C could have a break from school. So, it was not just that 'you have to go to school, because otherwise you will not get a job afterwards', but that they took into account the person in the situation they were in or the feelings they had. (Parent)

The quote shows that a vital quality of support is found in the ability to pay attention to the feelings of the youth and to provide help on the issues that the youth experienced as difficult. The followingnext quote describes how the youth pilots facilitated high-quality communication with the youth, according to one of the youths:

They know how to talk to young people who are struggling. That they should not be loud and such but calm and careful with what they ask for, to begin with. Like they pay attention. They take a lot of consideration. That they somehow do not ask you out like that, but somehow ask you a little, and… Like, they let you open…they kind of let young people open up by themselves; they do not force it. And they spend time on it… (Youth)

The quote above also illustrates how the youth pilots respectfully helped the youth to open up about their struggles, which in turn may lead to action to solve possible challenges.

Several interviews showed that the youth pilots acted as motivators. One of the youths highlighted the importance of trust in facilitating

communication and fostering motivation:

She is also very good at motivating. Like just talking to me and coming up with suggestions for change and stuff like that. Then she has taken me out and eaten from time to time when we have had a meeting… It has helped me a little. Like that, I'm looking forward to meeting her and such, and that it's easier to get me to talk somehow. And I feel very confident in her, because she says nothing further unless I approve….unless it's a danger to myself. And that has not been the case with others I have been in contact with. I have been struggling very with trust in people: I have had bad experience with nurses and other counsellors, but I can trust her… (Youth)

The youth pilot could serve as an intermediary when the youth struggled to meet and communicate with others, articulating the challenges in the youth's own words. As one youth pointed out, a crucial result of the support was learning how to remain calm and relaxed:

It's weird, after she (the youth pilot) came in, I've gotten better, and things have become easier to handle….I manage to go to school; I manage to clear my mind sometimes. So, I can actually walk around without a big mess inside my head. And that I actually manage to be more calm and relaxed when I walk around. Instead of being like that before, I was scared and strained all the time. I'm still scared and such, but not to the same degree as before. When I talk to her, I do not have to walk around, thinking about it all alone, carrying it all alone. Because she helps me sort my thoughts a little better than what I can do myself… (Youth)

Also, other informants described improvements in the youth related to dealing with emotional challenges as a vital outcome. One youth described the outcome of the support as a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes addressing both practical tasks, education and feelings:

He helps me stay in school, he helps in general in the flat, which makes it better to go to school, he keeps the focus on… my school environment and how I feel. And somehow it cheers me up and makes me feel better so that I feel like going to school more… I have, like, constant contact with him on the telephone. He also attends some meetings. He also occasionally comes up to the flat to help. Then we always go through what has been done and what is to be done, and how it is now… And how has it been in meetings. As I see it, the pilot services have info about my past. And work life. And the lodgings (laughs). Then, they have knowledge about the school, and I feel. So, they kind of have it all in one, really. (Youth)

The youth quoted above also put into words some of the deeper meanings of the support provided: Encouragement leading to better feelings may in turn lead to presence at school. Furthermore, a vital 'soft' outcome of the support also seems to be that the youth pilots – communicating to the youths in a decent and encouraging way – help them to reflect and develop:

B has grown a lot in the last six months….B is starting to reflect a little. B asks questions… because the pilot is so good and calm, and asks B decent and simple questions, and sees B… yes, a bit like psychology, and sets in motion some thoughts that make B begin to mature and reflect. B has some good points. So, me and the pilot, it is… They catch them, they get them at school, they… I know when I am busy teaching that B is in safe hands. (Adviser)

One vital quality of individual support, thus, was the ability to build safe and strong relationships with youth. The youth pilots were experienced as good at seeing the particular youth and the experienced challenges and also seemed to have the ability to build trust and help the youth open up about their challenges. These abilities seemed to be vital for both the youth and their families, as they helped the youth master their challenges better and lead to better feelings and the experience of improved quality of life.

5.2. Inclusion at work

A different quality of support was related to work inclusion. The use of regular workplaces – often without ordinary employment being the short-term goal – was a major focus. The youth pilots facilitated and contributed to work practice and work inclusion in several ways for all of these youths. For instance, they arranged job tastes for the youths to get an impression of different kinds of jobs:

Sometimes we are out driving and talking; we have also been on different company visits. We have looked around a little. She said she might consider working in a shop. We have also been on some company visits there, visited a few different types… In some, we just go in and act as we should shop and just walk around and look. We also talk about what we see and what may be difficult in such workplaces. Other places we ask to visit, and then we call in advance and ask for a tour. (Youth pilot)

The youths were in this way introduced to dialogues about work and started exploring possibilities together with the youth pilots. It was in one of these workplaces that one of them got a part-time job. They visited this particular workplace because the work tasks seemed to be a good match to the interests of the youth that they had discovered during the initial phase. This work relationship lasted through the last year of primary school and well into high school. The employer eventually offered the youth an apprenticeship contract. The youth was described as clever and well performing. However, the youth declined and changed to a different line of study. At that time, this youth was motivated to do something else.

To increase the chance of success in terms of employment/work experience, the youth pilots described it as important to prepare both the youth and relevant employers before they started working, for instance, on how to facilitate and follow up at the workplace:

D has been very afraid of failing… So we have talked about it: that D should get a written plan of what D should do. And that D must learn one thing at a time. That new things should not be introduced until D knows one thing. Also, the store manager should give D praise from time to time. D struggles to remember such immediate things, i.e. the short-term memory. So practical facilitation in relation to that is important. We have also agreed on what I should tell the employer. (Youth pilot)

Sometimes, the youth pilots spent their first days of work with the youth in the workplace. Even though the employer referred to above seemed to be well suited for receiving the youth, according to the youth pilot, the work practice only lasted for a month or so. A lack of mastery, bragging and follow-up was mentioned by involved informants as possible reasons. As such, work practices did not always last long. Sometimes, the youth did not master the tasks and environment despite thorough preparations. Reasons might be a lack of support at the workplace or from the youth pilot or other external support agencies. It was not always work tasks that represented the major challenge. Sometimes, social inclusion in a company was more difficult and important:

The fact that the youth is socially included, that is probably one of the most important things in relation to the youth thriving, because then they will often go to work..(…)… the attendance problem is in a way gone if you find a company that sees the youth and invites this youth to the social. So, it is really the most important thing that the young people feel seen and gain some confidence and are able to talk to the other employees and be part of the team in a way. That there is one or more colleagues with whom you can cooperate a little, who speak generously and who see the challenges of the youth, but do not let it be an obstacle. (Youth pilot)

The youth pilots visited relevant workplaces together with the youth, talked to the managers, organised work practices and summer jobs, as well as paid part-time employment and apprenticeships. They planned and prepared both the youth and the employers thoroughly. They

organised customised arrangements in collaboration with employers in the workplace for the youth to master the job.

5.3. Inclusion at school

A major focus in support was inclusion in schools. In these four cases, we saw several attempts to establish tailored schooling. An adviser at a local school said that since the support from the pilot services started, the youth were more present at school and the adviser knew that someone looked after them. The youth pilots assisted teachers and students themselves in mastering school and acting as part of the class. For instance, at T1, one of them met every day at school; however, the school situation was well adjusted to meet the needs of the youth. This youth went to a special school one day a week in which mainly practical work was performed. Adjustments were made in the regular school; one of the teachers said that if met in the wrong way, problem behaviour might escalate. The pedagogic–psychological services provided follow-up. The father, the youth pilot and the inspector of the school collaborated in picking the youth up before school.

For one of the other youths, a major topic was how to better include this youth in the school situation:

I also discuss with the teacher: How do you do it in classroom teaching, the physical structure? it is actually more important than you think…how desks and chairs are arranged… because I pick up a good deal through my conversations, especially when we drive… and once I caught that this youth feels outside when entering the classroom. Because the youth often comes among the latter, and they have been seated in the shape of a horseshoe, such a tradition up there probably. Because there is not enough space, there are also some chairs on the side. And then the youth often ends up in that chair outside the horseshoe. And that the youth has felt that it is those who are not 'part of the gang' then, who ends up there. So, then I asked the teacher, is it possible to arrange it differently? (Youth pilot)

The youth pilot also put efforts into supporting the youths to have success in the particular subjects in school: 'As long as the youth is a school student, is it to get to school, to assess which subjects are difficult, which ones can I spend a little less time on, and still manage'. Building a good relationship with the teacher was seen as equally important as building a relationship with the youth:

Getting the school and the class teacher sort of…that he should understand the youth's life situation and the youth, I spend a lot of time on that. Just as important as building a relationship with the youth is the relationship I get with the teacher, right… There are many exclusionary mechanisms in the school: for instance, 'we have to expel him from school, he does not come, there is no one who can assess him!'. So, I try to be a little ahead of things so that the teachers can get an understanding that, okay, there are certain challenges for D right now. Sending D a strict text message, maybe it's not the time for that right now? That I can talk to the teacher… and when D comes back to school, that the teacher knows how to meet D. (Youth pilot)

The youth pilot helped the teacher understand the situation of vulnerable youth so that they could respond to the student in a constructive way. One youth pilot said that it could also be important to inform the other students about the youth in an appropriate way:

D wants him (the teacher) to say something about it to the other students, so that they also can understand that it is no wonder D was absent because it had been a little difficult. And D was very concerned about whether I had talked to the teacher. D asked me, have you talked to him? Would he do it like that? (Youth pilot)

To facilitate social inclusion, the youth pilots also addressed the other students in this way. To have an impact on the school situation and make the teacher listen to the advice of the youth pilot, the data further

suggest that the youth pilots need certain qualifications. A school adviser described the youth pilots as people who know the school system very well and who take care of challenged students when they leave high school:

..he is very well known and reflective in this field and he has so many contacts, at the same time as he has knowledge of how the school system works. So I'm very happy, and I think that's a necessity for those who work with these issues. I have been working in the school system for 30 years, and…it has become much better with this measure. I remember I was sceptical because …(…)… when we finished the youth at school, we thought, OK, we now send them out in everyday life, and where do they end up? And at least for those students, we can now relax a bit because we know there are someone who looks after them. Just that. (Adviser)

As this quote shows, this adviser found the youth pilot services to be a very helpful measure that also had an impact on her job by relieving her from worries and concerns. This experience is also common in data from interviews with other support givers. One outcome of the support, thus, was also that it had an effect on collaborating actors' work situation both practically and emotionally.

6. Discussion – Individual tailored support – What does it contribute to?

Among the qualities the young people, as well as their parents and other support givers appreciated, were availability and competence in listening, building trust and relationships and the ability to understand the youth. Several informants underlined that the youth pilot spent time on these issues and that they did not give up. Such individual support seems to have much in common with the approach of ACT (Ruud, 2014; Aakerholt, 2013), through spending time 'hooking up' with the person, building alliances, creating trust and then slowly starting to cooperate with the youth. According to Aakerholt, providing practical help, activating networks, relieving relatives, etc., can be a good approach for building alliances and creating engagement. This is also a quality I found in the data.

Vital concepts of the CA are resources and the transformation of them into capabilities (possibilities) and further to 'functionings' (achievements). The data showed several achieved functionings, such as successful work practices, completion of subjects at school, increased presence at school or a better living situation, at least in periods. I also saw other 'soft' outcomes, such as improved self-esteem, hope and optimism in the youth. In certain periods of support, they seemed to master their emotional challenges in a better way than previously, although they also seemed to experience setbacks. Several informants described improvements in how to deal with challenges through reflection and discussion instead of anger and anxiety. However, the support provided was not always successful or sufficient when it came to 'hard' outcomes; the youth might 'fall out' again.

The support provided seemed to help vulnerable youth address their challenges, manage their emotions more constructively, and find and develop their interests and resources. The youth pilots also contributed by involving other supporting organisations and thus establishing resource networks such as suggested by Taylor (2011). The pilots were themselves extra resources and a safety net when the youth fell out of school or support and became NEETs. In this way, the support provided by the youth pilots added resources to each case in several ways. The support provided seemed to connect the involved support givers and provide the youth with support 'in between' the other involved services. One vital outcome was that the pilot services brought quality, totality and continuity to the inclusion and support processes as seen and experienced from a youth's point of view.

Theis support contributed to the development of capabilities in several ways, for instance, by finding work practices and job possibilities. They also supported the youth at work by meeting there together with the youth and sometimes by working together with them. The

support of the youth pilots also helped develop tailored schooling, for instance, by designing combinations of work and school that were achievable for the youth. One major impression was that a vital quality of the support was the ability to design individually tailored school programmes in which work was a part.

While the youth pilots did not focus solely on employment in the same way as employment specialists of IPS (Bond et al., 2016; Frøyland, 2016; Sveinsdottir et al., 2020), the support clearly shows skills and approaches associated with and described in the literature of supported employment (EUSE, 2010). For instance, the youth pilots collaborated closely with the employers and provided them with support to contribute to the inclusion of vulnerable youth. The support described in the data also seems to resemble the kind of support associated with Supported Education (Mueser & Cook, 2012). For instance, the youth pilots collaborated closely with teachers and schools and provided them with support to contribute to higher attendance and improved education.

The deeper meaning and outcome of this support seems based on my data to be improvement of life quality both practically and emotionally, which in turn seems to have lead to 'hard' outcome such as more presence at school or completion of subjects, but also 'soft' outcome such as social inclusion and development and maturing as a human being. One 'soft' quality of support was the ability and time to assist teachers and others to better meet and understand vulnerable individuals. These findings fit well with Baskerville's conclusion that truant youth need support to stay in class and that they 'want to feel welcome; visible, respected, treated with kindness, and talked to' (Baskerville, 2021, p. 846). My data, thus, suggest that support from professional support givers, such as the youth pilots, helping teachers to understand and find adequate approaches towards vulnerable youth, can contribute to inclusion in school and perhaps also to improved education.

Seen through the lens of CA (Robeyns, 2016), thus, I have found several both 'hard' and 'soft' contributions from the youth pilot service when it comes to establishing and facilitating resources and transforming resources to capabilities/possibilities. Support seems to be vital in the conversion of resources to capabilities and sometimes further to achieved functionings. As such, I also found weaknesses in and limitations of the support. The support sometimes seemed – at least in the time frame of this study – to be insufficient; in particular, the 'hard' achievements were often short term or unstable.

7. Conclusion

While none of the cases would show success in statistical terms of permanent work or full school completion, it is clear that they reached several minor goals or 'victories' along the way. These often temporary achievements were appreciated by collaborating partners and families. I found that the youth pilot services seemed to function as a facilitator of ongoing processes of production of possibilities (capabilities) for the vulnerable youth to test out, while at the same time serving as a flexible and steady relationship with the youth through their struggles. While the outcome at the end was not necessarily permanent employment or full completion of high school (achieved functionings), the youths had maintained a relationship to support services for a longer period in which more possibilities had emerged. It also seemed clear that the support provided covered a gap in the support system in its facilitation of long-term support to youth, where the local schools, child welfare services, mental health agencies, employment services, and others gave up or did not have the sufficient means to be present.

The support addressed in this paper proved more sustainable than most other services, extending from the final years of primary school through high school and, if needed and desired, further into employment. However, the support discontinued if the youth relocated to a different area or no longer wished to receive assistance. The youths were welcome to reestablish contact with the youth pilots if they desired. Alternatively, they would need to seek support from public or private services available in their new neighborhoods.

However, while such long-term support and close follow-up as provided in the four cases may seem to contribute positively to the individual involved, there is also a danger that the continuation of the support may create a dependency on the services that could hinder self-reliance and individual coping. The data do not provide clear answers to how this potential ambivalence of the support should be solved. I believe that this is a challenge that must be dealt with in each support process to find the right balance of support and individual responsibility and independence.

Apart from this ambivalence, the individual support described in this paper seemed to create 'places of possibility' for the vulnerable youth involved, where 'young people are afforded the tools and resources necessary to imagine alternative realities', as suggested by Goessling and Wager (2021). The results also support findings from other studies that highlight the importance of vulnerable youth having supportive adults in their lives and personal staff who can advocate for them (Jones et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2020). The examples above also show that respectful and empowering approaches seem to contribute positively to the capacity of vulnerable youth to achieve better levels of well-being, as highlighted by Sanders and Munford (2014).

The support of the youth pilots seemed, in this way, to be an important external conversion factor through establishing secure relationships (often 'soft' outcome) and through facilitation of capabilities and possibilities for the youth to test out and consider. However, the process of converting capabilities into some kind of achieved functionings, such as stable work, apprenticeship or school completion (often 'hard' outcome) seems based on the data as more of a challenge. As such, it is also likely that the quality of the support provided, despite all the positive feedback, has the potential for improvement.

7.1. Limitations and further research

There are several limitations to this study. The data stem from only four cases, which leads to little or no statistical generalizability. However, I will argue in favour of an analytical generalizability related to the relevance of the experienced challenges and approaches to solve them, as these have a lot in common with other cases in the report documenting the local intervention in full (Frøyland et al., 2020). A different limitation is related to the fact that there were fewer informants at T2 than at T1; for instance, only two of the youths involved participated at this time. Furthermore, there is also a danger of bias both in service users (youth and their family) towards the persons supporting them, as well as among the service users who may have personal interest in finding meaningfulness in the support they are providing. These informants therefore may describe the support in an overly positive way.

While qualitative studies on the individual microlevel in this way illustrate how individual tailored support can contribute to the production of 'soft' outcome such as more inclusion opportunities and increased capability for vulnerable youth, macrolevel quantitative studies are required to investigate whether such increased levels of capability also lead to higher levels of achieved functionings and 'hard' effects, such as better school completion rates or employment. A task for future research is to better combine micro- and macro studies – preferably longitudinal – capturing the development on both important intermediate elements, such as the presence of conversion factors and increased production of possibilities, and results in terms of more or less stable achievements, such as work and school completion.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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