

Finland: School-to-Work Group Method

Enabling structured critical exploration of labour market entry through employer engagement to enhance transitions into work and psychological well-being

The School-to-Work Group Method was introduced to Finnish vocational upper secondary schools in 2002. In the context of high youth unemployment, the programme was an adaptation of the US Michigan Prevention Research Center JOBS Search Program which had been demonstrated, through a series of randomised control trials to reduce worklessness and enhance psychological well-being among unemployed adults (Vuori, 2015_[229]). In the Finnish context, the programme was designed to prepare young people to first find and then stay in attractive employment. Designed as a twenty hour programme delivered over five days of four hour sessions in the final year of secondary education, the course is jointly taught by a vocational school teacher and a representative of the local public employment service (PES). Working to a standardised curriculum, young people are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of work and desires for employment through individual research, collaborative working with student peers and practical exercises related to the process of finding employment and socialisation into a new organisation. The relevance of the programme is made clear through the involvement of the employment and engagements with local employers who are interviewed by students. Students are taught how to make use of social networks to secure information about employment, how to approach employers directly, how to complete job applications and resumé, present themselves at interview, identify marketable skills and to understand and respond to expectations of workplace social behaviour. They are taught to 'think like an employer' and to reflect on the challenges and barriers which they can expect to encounter in their search for attractive work (Koivisto, 2010_[230]). Overall, the programme seeks to develop job search self-efficacy in young people: their degree of confidence in their ability to perform essential job-search activities well, such as securing job leads and successful interviewing (Vuori, 2015_[229]).

A randomised control trial followed 334 students from the final year of secondary education into their first year of employment. Divided into an intervention and control group, students in the former group took part in the full School-to-Work Group Method while their control-group peers only received narrow advice on applying for a job. Results showed significant benefits accruing to participants on the Group Method programme. Ten months after leaving secondary school, compared to peers in control groups, programme participants were much more likely to be in employment and in a job that was linked to their educational qualifications and aligned with their career ambitions (Koivisto, 2007_[231]) (Koivisto, 2015_[232]).

An important element of the programme is designed to help young people develop capacity to deal with obstacles and barriers encountered in the labour market and so maintain good mental health. Participants are helped to identify possible setbacks and generate solutions to barriers through problem-solving techniques. The programme is explicitly designed to help inoculate young people against setbacks and the longitudinal study finds that young people at greatest risk of mental health problems while still in school fared better psychologically than control-group peers in finding and adapting to employment (Koivisto, 2007_[231]). After its launch in the early 2000s, the programme was delivered extensively across Finland until the mid-2010s when it became subsumed within wider educational and career guidance reforms aimed at enhancing the preparedness of young Finns for employment and higher education.

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