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# Research article

## **Towards a new paradigm in learning**

A synthesis of non-formal, formal, and informal learning processes

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## Abstract

### Towards a new paradigm in learning

*A synthesis of non-formal, formal and informal learning processes*

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Research in education suggests that the most important factors for preventing young people to leave school are to contribute and strengthen their positive commitment for learning. Statistics of young people who does not complete upper secondary school within the scheduled plan, has been too high for many years throughout Europe. The *purpose* of this article has been to offer insights into the potential benefits of non-formal learning methods in VET schools, with a purpose of preventing dropping out of school at the upper secondary/vocational school level. A second aim has been to introduce new perspectives of combining *formal (FL)*, *informal (IFL)*, and *non-formal learning (NFL)*, approaches in schools. The study examines experiences with FL, IFL and NFL in various forms. Data has been collected by individual interviews, group interviews with learners and a focus group interview with both trainers, teachers, learners, school managers and other stakeholders.

Our findings are based on *interview processes* with 35 persons who in various ways are connected to an education and learning context. Based on their stories, reflections and dialogue, we can present their experiences, thoughts, views, visions and recommendation for how we should create a nurturing balance between the three learning forms; FL, IFL and NFL. The message from the informants in this process could in short be interpreted like this:

*“Good education for everybody could be more successfully achieved by offering the young generation of learners a holistic learning approach where both formal, informal and non-formal education are equally woven into the future curricula and syllabi of education.”*

**Keywords:** Good education, formal (FL), informal (IFL) and non-formal (NFL) learning/education. Vocational education and teaching (VET). Qualification, socialisation, subjectivation.

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# Towards a new paradigm in learning

## *A synthesis of non-formal, formal, and informal learning processes*

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This article is a part of the evaluation of an *Erasmus +* project. The project: “Clue to Inclusion”, was approved by the EU commission in September 2018 for a period of 14 months. The purpose of the project was to bring research-based knowledge into this field, to be able to reveal the potentialities of a holistic educational mindset in which we combine formal, informal, and non-formal learning methods, which can lead to a stronger focus on non-formal learning methods in upper secondary/vocational school. By achieving this, we can lower the risk for students dropping out of school. *Subjectivation* has not had a major role in education in modern times. By several of the informants of this article, subjectivation is viewed as a vital part of education; therefore *subjectivation*, *qualification*, and *socialisation* should be lifted up as three equal parted dimensions in education. Good education can, according to the study results, be described as a synthesis of these three learning functions equally practiced through formal, non-formal and informal learning activities.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Learning concepts

This article is based on a research study of the phenomena of formal, informal and non-formal learning. The context is the various learning possibilities young individuals experience within the *Erasmus +* project “Clue to Inclusion” (2018-2019). Formal education and learning are traditionally designed as compulsory education that is publicly organised and structured. It is contiguous over time and governed by learning processes that involves students, teachers and institutions. Young people’s experiences in school are based on the FE/FL system, which emphasises teaching basic knowledge, such as reading, writing, math, natural science, and language, where the learning activities are essentially taught and lectured behind four walls in a classroom.

Informal learning refers to the everyday experiences we encounter, which continuously stimulate some kind of learning outcome. This form of education/learning is neither structured nor planned; rather, it typically occurs spontaneously without any rigid curriculum, where the context is daily experiences in the environment.

Non-formal education/learning is a combination between the two aforementioned forms and take in generally takes place outside of the formal educational system but has the explicit goal to generate learning. Non-formal education (NFE) is intentional from the learner's point of view. It is perceived as experiential education/learning or learning by reflection, learning by doing, by being interested in something, by being a producer or a performer, or by solving problems and by participating as a co-designer of our own lifeworld.

Figure 1: The similarities and differences between formal, informal and non-formal education:

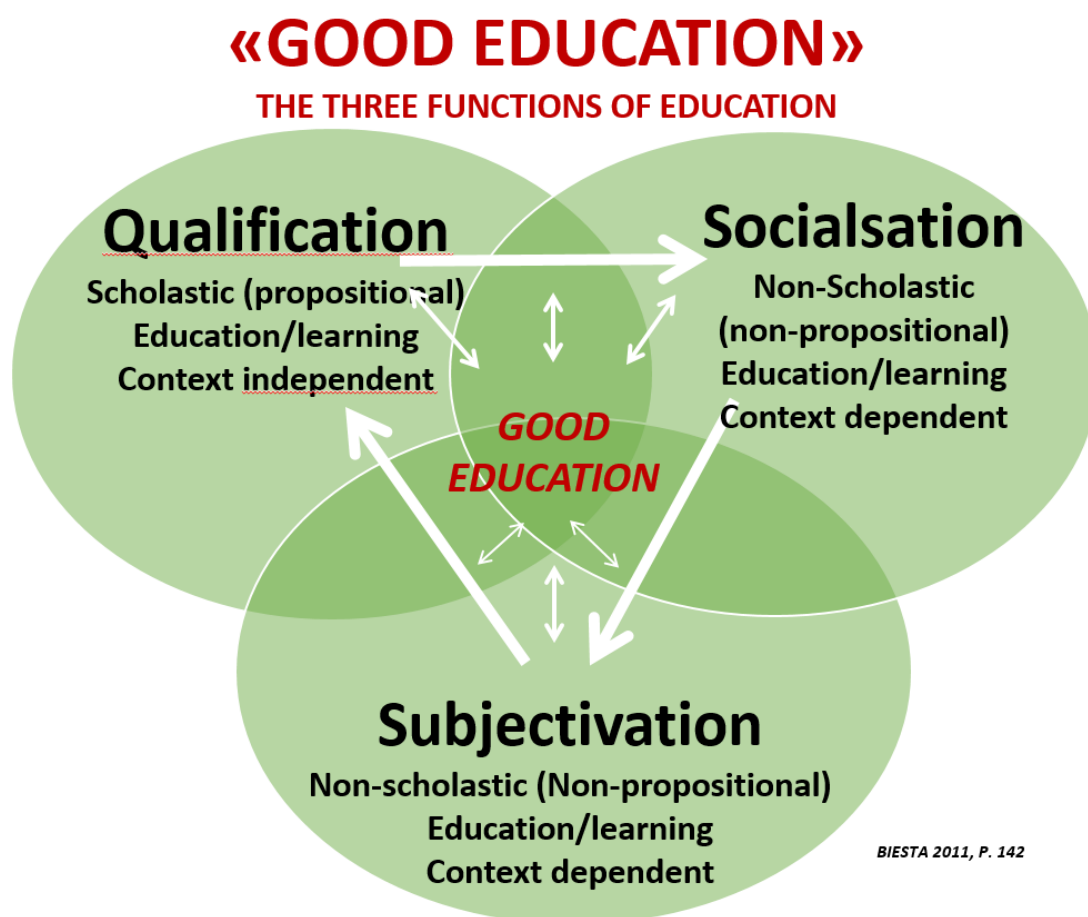
Formal education/forming/learning	Non-formal education/forming/learning	Informal education/forming/learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Propositional (scholastic) knowledge</li> <li>*Context independent</li> <li>*Intentionally organised</li> <li>*Abstract, general, objective, technical, analytic, and rational knowledge tradition</li> <li>*Teacher managed</li> <li>*Theoretically in its form</li> <li>*Qualification oriented</li> <li>*Deductive approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Non-propositional (non-scholastic) knowledge.</li> <li>*Contextual/context-dependent knowledge, value rational, tacit, dynamic, embodied, action-oriented knowledge tradition.</li> <li>*Profession-specific knowledge; skill-based, subjective knowledge; Practical knowledge, knowledge as a <i>capability</i>, experiential, skill oriented, intuitive, emotional, entrepreneurial activity-based and proficient, internalised knowledge</li> <li>*Inductive, abductive (entrepreneurial) approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Non-scholastic (non-propositional knowledge)</li> <li>*Contextual/context-dependent knowledge</li> <li>*Experiential knowledge</li> <li>*Daily activity reflected, tacit</li> <li>*Values, attitudes, ethics,</li> <li>*Relations(family, network</li> <li>*Societal norms and rules.</li> <li>*Socialisation, subjectivation</li> <li>*Inductive, abductive (entrepreneurial) approach</li> </ul>

The dichotomy between formal and non-formal learning and education is still as present as it has been since the industrial revolution. Recent research, included this case-study, has revealed that motivation among students in upper secondary/vocational schools is decreasing year by year. Today, we are witnessing a reduction in enthusiasm and curiosity about what the school can offer, as well as a reduction in students' hope and faith that they can be able to master the learning requirements of the school. Some reasons seem to be that the students have neither become more active, because schools are not emphasising *student active work forms* enough, nor been properly introduced to *individual adapted learning methods*, because traditional schools do not have this capacity or options sufficiently present and implemented in their agenda (OECD 2011).

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## 2. Selected references to theory

A better balance between formal, non-formal and informal learning and education could provide students with educational and learning experiences, helping them to develop into individuals with in-depth and broad knowledge. This includes social, practical, and personal knowledge about society, their working life, and themselves as the “unique” selves they would like to be (Biesta 2014, p170). The point of education is, according to Biesta more about “how we can grow to become an active and responsible subject. Additionally, education is derived from forming and is the foundation of human affiliation. Learning is the part of education covered by activity and/or dynamic processes. We should consider the event of *becoming someone* (born), coming into the world as the first step of education.



When born, humans are linked to the purpose of education, which, according to Biesta, has three functions in society, *qualification, socialisation and subjectivation*. They overlap each other and are mutual interdependent.

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*Qualification* is developing knowledge and strengthening one's abilities to be able to work to cover general and special needs in society.

*Socialisation* is about becoming cultural selves (Ofstad 2013, p 44 – 53), whose mission is to continue the existing social, political, and cultural forms that society is identified with.

*Subjectivation* is about the influence education has on a person, or more precisely; education's contribution to developing the learners' ability for human freedom. Subjectivation is about how those, who are in education, are becoming more autonomous and independent in their thinking and action (Biesta 2011, p 33). It is also about how teachers should be able to contribute to building learners' *answerability*<sup>1</sup> to vital questions, about issues they meet in their lifeworld processes and how they as supervisors are able to develop their *pedagogical tact*<sup>2</sup> and further enable their students to handle various pedagogical meetings in their daily lives (Van Manen 1991, Luckman 1990).

The following research questions emerged during the process:

1. *How can formal, informal and non-formal learning be implemented as equally valued concepts in education as an approach for preventing students dropping out of school at the upper secondary/vocational school level.*
2. *How can we compose an education model in which qualification, socialisation and subjectivation together, form a holistic education strategy adapted to both formal, informal and non-formal learning?*

### 3. Methods

This research process was conducted as a *qualitative study*. The main researcher was included in the project group and participated in most of the physical meetings and virtual meetings with the partners. In doing this, the researcher had two roles; an active role as a qualitative researcher doing the interviews and a more passive role as more of an observer or monitor of the partner group. The objectives of this study were to gather *contextual research* to develop a new understanding of how formal, informal and non-formal learning processes can intervene (Eaton 2010). A paradigmatic case design was applied to explore and describe the

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<sup>1</sup> **Answerability** – is practical knowledge. Human answerability is a vital part of our lifeworld, but it is not successfully developed in a good way without our own thoughtfulness. To develop answerability, we need in one hand support, well-considered challenges, expectations, pedagogical tact and upbringing. Based on this we develop our answerability through forming. In the answerability process, we develop the practical usable knowledge we need to be able to relate to the world, answer its challenges, be participate in the things that happen and perceive and act in life (Lindseth 2015, p. 59)

<sup>2</sup> **Pedagogical tact** - mindful orientations that permits us to act thoughtfully with young people. Although the concept of pedagogical tact has primarily been applied to the particular context of education (Van Manen 1991), the fundamental ideas of the concept can be considered equally relevant for studying interactions between youngsters and supervisors in other societal contexts.

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complex phenomena of performing in formal, informal and non-formal learning processes (Flyvbjerg 2009, p 96). This case study was conducted using three different qualitative approaches this case study is built upon; *single interviews*, *group interviews* and a *focus group interview*. The case comprises as one study from which all three analysis units are looked upon as a whole. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (Ref. nr. 366195 – 22.03.2019).

### 3.1 Participants and interventions

The participants in the single interviews as well as those in the group interviews, and focus group interview, were selected by persons being responsible for the partnerships. The interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed in English. In the interview with the Spanish informants, we used an interpreter, who translated from Spanish to English and vice versa. The individual interviews and the group interviews were conducted within the timeframe of thirty to seventy minutes and the focus group interview lasted 2,5 hours. All of the participants signed a letter of consent, confirming their willingness to share their views in an open setting and to be quoted. The process was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)

The first qualitative step in the project involved semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009) with five individuals in the Spanish Partnership<sup>3</sup>. The informants were young people in their twenties, “early school leavers” trying to make up for previous education losses, and at the time, participants in a continuing education project. Some of them were studying to be certified as tour-guides in their geographical area and others to assist in public operations.

The first *group interview* (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, Postholm 2010 p. 72-73) was conducted with Finnish students<sup>4</sup> who were in vocational education as youth-workers. They were all between 18 and 25 years of age. This interview was completed in a meeting room at the Salpaus school in Lahti, Finland. We discussed the strengths and weaknesses of vocational training, how they alternate between the three learning concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning; and possible ways to maintain the students’ motivation to learn throughout their three years of education, thus, prevent them from dropping out.

The second group interviews consisted of 13 Norwegian students<sup>5</sup>, divided into three small groups (5-4-4 participants respectively). They had all in common that they had participated in an EVS<sup>6</sup> training circle in a European country. The partner countries in this EVS project were

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<sup>3</sup> **The Spanish students** (5) were linked to AC Amica de la Biblioteca de la Fonteta and Ajutament de Silla, Valencia region, Spain.

<sup>4</sup> **The Finnish student group** was linked to Salpaus Upper Secondary school in Lahti Finland.

<sup>5</sup> **The Norwegian student groups** (3/13) were linked to Årstad Upper Secondary I Bergen Norway

<sup>6</sup> **EVS – European Voluntary service.** A partnership between two or more promoting organizations. These organizations are responsible for recruiting volunteers for their various kinds of work projects in EU countries.



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Romania, The Netherlands and Spain. The members in these three groups who were between 17 and 24, discussed the strengths and the weaknesses of the EVS – concept they had participated in. The interviews were completed in a meeting room at Årstad Upper Secondary school, Bergen, Norway.

A *Focus group* (FG) is a group in which people meet to interact and discuss a theme on which the researcher wishes to develop further knowledge of. The participants belonging to a focus group have been invited because they have experience from, knowledge of, and/or skills in a subject of interest. In a focus group, one can find several people with a variety of backgrounds. In this case the informants had experience from both education, learning and work environments. The focus group process was organised and completed at Studio Moio<sup>7</sup>, a self-financed social enterprise in the Netherlands, a Leiden-based (Maher 2019, Knodel 1993). We invited 11 people, 5 females and 6 males from 17 years – up to the late 50s, who were, students, social innovators, managers and other stakeholders working with non-formal learning concepts in the Netherlands and Norway. Most of the participants were meeting each other for the first time. They discussed the future challenges in keeping young people motivated to invest in education, and as well as how the school system can be enabled to provide every student with positive and motivating learning experiences to make the students able to bring out their personal potential.

### **3.2 Procedures of collecting and analyzing data**

The stories and perspectives of the informants were highlighted to let their voices be heard, and the pictures of their lifeworld shared as authentic. Based on this, we analysed and interpreted the information to create a stimulus for challenging and developing the existing theory of education and even create possibilities for building new theory. The intention of developing thematic research questions was to be able to determine the central issues of this research and further, to be concrete when reviewing and discussing the outcomes of the research.

The data from the interviews have been anonymised.

To construct a case that provides insight in the complexity in both width and depth, of *non-formal learning* as a learning concept of its own – and together with the two other learning concepts of *formal* and *informal learning*, we were challenged to narrow the case down. The discussion is limited to five vital thematic questions or categories. The first step is to understand why young people are leaving school. Second, we need to know what kind of learning concepts are best suited to prevent early school dropouts in upper secondary schools/vocational schools (Bowers, 2013). We then aim to gain insight into what kinds of

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<sup>7</sup> **The Dutch group** were students, teachers, supervisors from Studio Moio (6) and project personnel from Norway (3) – representing the management of Årstad USS/VS, Norway, PM of Clue to Inclusion, Hordaland County Council Norway and The Dutch partner Bloom Foundation. The group was led by the researcher from Nordland Research Institute, Norway.

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learning concepts can give individuals significant and memorable learning experiences and how to ensure the quality of those experiences. Furthermore, it is of vital importance to know what kind of overall challenges education is facing in today's society. Finally, we ensure what choices do we have concerning non - formal learning as an individual learning approach in addition to formal learning or together as a unified formal, informal and non-formal perspective as a synthesis of the future learning context.

## 4. Findings

The first four thematic issues are related to the first research question. The fifth thematic issue is related to the second research question and is saved for the conclusion remarks.

### 4.1 Why students leave school

The purpose of conducting the five individual interviews with students who had previously dropped out of school, was to map some of the reasons why students leave upper secondary schools/vocational schools before they have completed their education. Spain has the highest drop-out rate in the EU. One in three Spaniards between 18 and 24 years, leaves school before finishing secondary education, compared to the European mean of one in five (Bolivar 2015).

In Ajuntament de Silla, Valencia, we interviewed a group of five young *school leavers*. Today, they are part of an *on-the-job-training project* organised by the municipality. The learners experienced increasing motivational problems with compulsory education, and these problems accelerated during the first year of upper secondary/ vocational school. Dropping out of school was the end of a long process through which leaving school became the best option (Finn, 1989, Haaveraaen & Skarpaas, 2013). The informants described this process as being trapped in a system in which they experienced a *lack of motivation*, which was cultivated over the years of efforts catching up with all of the information, sorting it out and trying hard to turn it into useful knowledge. *Lack of relevance* in their learning approach also became a challenge, because it was only occasionally suited to well-known, closely linked learning contexts. Some of them mentioned additionally *personal and learning problems, family problems* and *lack of sufficient support* as additional reasons for leaving school. Others mentioned that they were not notified and received no encouraging feedback from teachers, because they were not taken seriously or given room for personal guidance. In the classroom context, there was no room for practical projects, creative thinking or reflection<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> **Minds-on** – means inspired, encouraged to think, reflect on what's been said – and place it in context (Wieman 2011)

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#### 4.2.1 Informant – male 26 years:

*“When you are practical-minded and oriented and find no room for handling practical issues in your daily activities at school, are rarely engaged in active work forms, and usually end up with lessons where you passively receive information, you’ll get worn out over time. The closest we got to **active learning** activities were, discussions and group work within the school environment. We were experiencing minimal interest in what was going on in the community or society outside of school. I left school to find me a practical job and to earn money.”*

#### 4.2.2 Informant – a female 25 years:

*“I left during my second year in upper secondary school because I was bored and lost my motivation. I had some learning problems and did not get any support to overcome them. I could not see any point in continuing! There was a lot of chaos in the classroom due to some student’s lack of respect for the teachers. Much of the teacher’s time was used to solve problems and that was not nice at all. It has to be said: Spanish teachers need to change their attitude from being negative to positive and being respectful, supportive, empathic, and motivating. When I left, I had been looking forward to that moment for several months. I did not fit the system and the system did not fit me. I wanted to do practical work and mean something to someone. I am good at doing practical work, so I think that non-formal learning in school could have motivated me to continue my school career. My motivation to leave school was to find a job...doing practical work. My work career was, however, quite motley and wasn’t stabilised before I got support from the municipality to be a part of this “on-the-job-training-project”. I am now working in the municipality service unit. I am not thinking of going back to school, because I appreciate being a part of the non-formal learning environment organised by the municipality”.*

#### 4.2.3 Education and learning – whose responsibility?

The purpose of our group interview with students at Salpaus upper secondary/vocational school in Lahti, Finland was to learn to know what kind of education/learning approach seems to work in preventing students from dropping out of upper secondary/vocational schools. Secondary education in Finland is known for its flexibility, with teachers who have a high degree of autonomy and are well respected as professionals who have done research, take an analyse-based approach to education and learning and have an interactive relation to their students.

The six youth worker students at Salpaus who participated in the interview session, were quite satisfied with the educational options at their school. They emphasised that they had an education and learning concept close to what is optimal for a student in upper secondary/vocational education. According to them, the most important aspects of a good learning regime are the *flexibility of the curriculum and syllabi*. Additionally, to *formal learning* approaches, their educational value added were *practical non-formal learning activities*, including in versatile *on-the-job-training* organised in learning environments both at home and abroad between the school and public or private offices/businesses. These learning

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concepts are based on practical work operations. Additionally, the schools offer *peer education*, in which students are trained to be involved as supportive friends or receive support from peers or act as co-educators in *teamwork* operations on creative projects. All of these educational actions include both formal and informal learning processes. Additionally, they are considering using the European Voluntary Service (EVS), as a training opportunity. The students are also organising international voluntary working camps in Finland to be responsible for a national voluntary cultural festival (SAKU STARS). The idea of the camps is to empower young people through non-formal learning activities. As Campus instructors' students are dedicated to a specific, unique role somewhere between student and teacher. Other school staff give them special missions, for instance with networking, coordinating and cooperation issues. Their role is similar to that of a school youth worker, using non-formal learning methods. In social skills training programmes for vocational graduates aiming is the goal is mainly to enhance their social skills and life management skills through empowerment and increased self- esteem. The participants are trained and supported throughout the process, and they use learning diaries and video blogs to share their learning. The aim is to get this integrated into a future formal curriculum.

#### **4.2.4 Informant – male 25 years:**

*"I left school during education to be a craftsman – in stonework. I got a job, but I found out that it was not a stone worker I wanted to be. Had several work experiences after that, not very stable. I tested myself as a bartender, as a chef, but none of these were my thing; therefore, I started at this youth worker study at Salpaus. I have been searching for finding a proper position in life, something with purpose, which is meaningful, and I like doing this. I think I have found my future professional position. I will be a community worker, working with youth, and together with them developing the society. I will get more knowledge within communication technology and specialise in social media, gaming and other digital activities. This is at the very centre of what young people are preoccupied by these days and is possible within the flexible Finnish education system. I would like to be known as a youth influencer, working together with young people developing their democratic mindset. Additionally, I'd like to be engaged in finding out how gaming can be a part of the non-formal learning system in school, and by doing that, include gaming to be something interesting and useful for the future young generation and hopefully become a part of future educational programmes."*

The educational concept with the most impact in this informant's daily educational strive, is the *Personal Competence Development Plan* (PCDP) which was introduced in 2018 as an important tool in education. The PCDP is a strategic educational plan drawn up for each student. It is drawn up by a teacher or a guidance counsellor together with the student and, when applicable, representatives of working life. The plan charts and recognises the skills the student has previous acquired and outlines what kinds of competences the student needs and how they will be acquired in different learning environments. Previous learning is recognised and only the lacking skills are acquired. The plan also includes information on the necessary supportive measures. The students develop a strong ownership to their own plans as well as the educational process.

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#### 4.2.5 Inside classrooms or out in the open

The purpose of these group interviews was to determine whether students who are struggling with motivational problems in school can be encouraged by using by the European Voluntary Service (EVS) arrangements as a motivating learning factor. The EVS is a European community programme that allows a young person (17–30 years) to become a volunteer in another European country for a specified period, for work, language and culture training experiences.

Årstad upper secondary/vocational school, Bergen, Norway.

During the spring of 2019, the students were EVS volunteers in three different countries; Spain, Romania and the Netherlands. The students were quite fascinated by how the EVS could function as a high-quality learning instrument for young people in vocational learning. The EVS volunteer practice is according to these students as close as one can get to multi non-formal learning practice. All the different learning approaches were used during the practice period and they stated that it was an exceptional nice/ interesting experience, even though there were many things that could have been better organised and planned. They learned a lot about the countries in which they were practicing, including the people, cultures and cultural differences, but they mainly learned about themselves in a foreign environment (Norquist and Leffler 2017). They learned how to work in teams and how to live in close proximity as a group over a longer period, how to take the lead, how to organise work, how to handle crisis, and how to cooperate and interact, despite language differences.

#### 4.2.6 Informant – female 21 years

*“We participated in an EVS project that led us to Târgu Frumos Iași, in Romania, where we were staying and were well received by host families the first week. The language challenges were quite big, so the last week all the Norwegian students stayed together in a local hotel. We visited during these two weeks, local schools and participated in different activities. The Romanians were exceptionally nice to us, and we met a lot of teachers who really were engaged in their work. We also visited a special school with 380 pupils, and they had different kinds of diagnoses, such as autism, Downs syndrome, mentally retarded and we experienced very strongly the cultural differences between our two societies in the way we approach these groups. It was a very interesting, exciting and soul setting experience – and memories for life. I learnt a lot of myself, especially how I was able to handle experiences I hadn’t dealt with previously. Invaluable new knowledge!! This experience has made me a better youth worker.”*

The group noted that an important critical success factor of the EVS concept, was the involvement of the Red Cross (RC), who participated through two young adult RC managers to assist the students during the two weeks EVS period. The RC managers, both participating both in the planning, were continuously present the students’ stay in their host countries and during the following up evaluation back home. Personal self-development factors were

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essential during the process. The students had all of their inherent abilities and capabilities tested. They learned to emphasise the things that were important, not to be hung up in trifles, to fight and avoid prejudices and become more open minded, to be more self-aware and to handle being outside their comfort-zone.

#### **4.2.7 Real life learning – learning by forming your *lifeworld*.**

The purpose of the focus group interview was to map some of the most vital innovative features we should find in the organisation of future education, to meet the global challenges with optimal force. The focus group interview was completed at Studio Moio<sup>9</sup> – Leiden, The Netherlands. The thematic approach was to be in dialogue about what the content of *good education* could be. The term *good education* means based on the context; everything from education to teaching, upbringing, to become to be active and responsible human beings in the society.

The focus group summarised the following message:

Students in the traditional learning systems are not used to asking questions – they are more preoccupied by answers – the right answers, “the blueprints”. Most of vocational schools are preparatory schools and are concerned about school learning; about supplying the student with knowledge and disseminating of knowledge by giving them the right answers to vital questions. Teachers themselves are responsible for this dissemination, and the student is rarely co-responsible for anything beyond listening and understanding what has been said. Young people need to be challenged and to be trained to ask vital questions about themselves, and their surroundings, do their own research, be curious and let out their creativity. Furthermore, they must be challenged to nurture their innovative and entrepreneurial mindset and inspiration. Young people need to be given the opportunity to ask questions, such as – “Who am I?”, “Why am I here?”, “Why do I live?”, “What can I make out of it?” and “What do I dream to do?”

In schools, students are too often met by the attitude that existential questions take too much time. Distanced from any of the contextual frames the students have to be prepared, to produce, to be good workers to achieve, and to recognize that they need to do what they are

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<sup>9</sup> “Moio” means “education link to society”. Studio Moio is an ExpertLab for social innovation with impact. It is also a laboratory for educational innovation. In their apprenticeship company they challenge young people to be the inventors, researchers and entrepreneurs of the world of today and tomorrow. Studio Moio works with young people for whom current education offers too little room for development. They are those who, for whatever reason, get stuck in the education system, who are brilliant in thinking where innovation is needed. The goal of Studio Moio, founded by Nathalie Lecina, is to re-motivate young people from vocational education or on the verge of dropping out. With a simple motto – that every person has a value – Studio Moio matches their unique values and abilities to a societal issue that needs a solution. These young people, drawing on their own experiences, bring a completely fresh perspective to solving these issues and in the process help both themselves and those they create solutions for <https://tedxamsterdam.nl/?p=3548> TEDx AmsterdamED 2016 Award Ceremony).

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told. They are in danger of losing the opportunity to be co-directors of their own selves in regard to self-esteem, self-awareness and self-image. In school, they should be motivated to be their own personal giants, vital human beings, and active partners of the community – where they appear as *me*. They should be expressed as *unique people* with all of their potential, talents, doubts, and assumptions and establish a presence and by doing that, emerge as the best learners they are able to be. That should be everybody's goal.

We need holistic education based on formal, non-formal and informal learning approaches. Education should have a broad learning perspective with: practical, aesthetical and ethical subjects, where students are emphasise subjectivation and socialisation as well as qualification. There are many dropouts who are so-called “*innovative learners*” (innovators), choosing careers based on their own interests. They are following their own interests and talents; challenging themselves, their surroundings, and their entrepreneurial and innovative mindset and sometimes, when successful, they become entrepreneurs, establishing their own businesses. By doing this, they are contributing to society.

“*Traditional learners*” are, according to the focus group members, preservers of the traditional system. The challenge is to make the traditional system more untraditional, more innovative, creativity-based and entrepreneurial to meet all of the learning needs of young people. For most youth the traditional educational system is a good system. Approximately 70 - 75% of all students handles it, and some appreciates it. The other; 25 – 30% do not succeed in the same way and a large portion of them are dropping out, have fewer opportunities, and have a difficult time finding the right educational alternatives. The challenge is to develop a learning system that is more differentiated, flexible and broad-based, where young people can be offered educational environments that provide positive learning experiences and encourage them to emerge as themselves. When doing that, people will positively contribute to the educational system/learning society with all of their resources.

During the focus group interview the participants were also concerned with important features in education in the next 20-30 years towards 2050. Do we want to continue in the same educational direction that we have gone the last 30 - 40 years, since the late eighties up until today, or do we want to make changes? If so, what changes?

Is it about helping young people to discover the relevance of knowledge? Is it about inspiring young people to find the purpose of education, focusing on how students can feel valuable, understand why they need to learn, why they need education, and give them ownership to their own education and learning processes? Shouldn't students be challenged to think about what is their purpose in life, how to *be of value* and think about what they most of all, *want to work with* by mapping their *interest-based motivating activities*? The participants in the focus group agreed upon that we need a new direction in education. In future education,



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learning and teaching we need to:

- adopt a holistic view of on education and develop learning concepts that include formal, informal, and non-formal learning methods.
- use the surrounding community as learning areas and make the learning concepts more relevant, meaningful, co-creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial.
- focus on the potential of every individual in school and together with them, design their future education path within a frame of positive expectations
- nurture students' passion for their "life-projects" through facilitating and co-evaluating the steps they are taking during their learning processes
- focus on the fact that it is a lot of learning in *learning by doing* (trying and failing) and, by doing that ,we will build up the students' *answerability* (capacity)

There is a much more to learn from open questions than only bounded questions with only one "right" answer. How can we ask questions and discuss them together – not always be preoccupied by finding the "blueprint" answer? In each question there are potentially many new and unknown answer options. We need to be open to learning and new ways of seeing and solving things. The best answer will emerge at the end. Questions help us step outside the box and build up answerability. Answerability requires experiential learning environments and rich activities. Questions are easily raised in these types of learning environments. Questions followed by reflection seems to be most effective in the building of personal answerability.

## **5. Discussions and implications**

The first research question was:

*How can formal, informal and non-formal learning be implemented as equally valued concepts in education as an approach for preventing early school leaving among students at the upper secondary/vocational school level?*

Part 5 mainly comprises a discussion and reflection to answer this question.

### **5.1 Leaving school or seeking opportunities?**

Traditional formal learning was for these students, not creating any learning spirit or motivation. Classroom teaching, monologs, and filling students with information that they had forgotten before the lesson ended, were usually the routine of a day. This approach to learning did neither challenged their learning potentials, nor created any enthusiasm for learning. They chose to leave school to seek for jobs outside school or search for places to learn by being challenged in non- formal learning environments.



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Most young attend upper secondary/vocational schools after completing their compulsory education in primary school but, after five years, only between 70 – 80% of them complete schooling with obtained qualification (OECD 2018). The American psychologist Jeremy Finn takes a holistic view when explaining the “leaving school” issue. He explains leaving school as a result of a lack of motivation, low interest and engagement in school subjects, low affiliation, low self-esteem and lack of real participation in the learning processes. The causes of dropping out are, according to Finn (1989) connected to both individual and institutional factors. He also underlines that the act of leaving school is the *end result of a process* which has occurred over time. This was further confirmed by the informants of the present study. The motivational issues they had, had been going on for several years and grew until they became a problematic and, in the end, culminated in *the act of leaving* as the only way to cope with those personal, educational and motivational challenges. Finn, in his article “*Withdrawing from school*” claims that *general problem behavior, high absence from school and leaving school*, are factors that are mutual interdependent. These factors also affect the individual student, where absence from classes and school routines can be the outcomes of an early pattern in the school leaving process.

Learners at risk can be detected early on based on the learner’s low academic commitment, low goal achievement, difficulty participating in the classroom environment and consequently high absence from school. Such an experience in school can be challenging for the learners to change for the learners, especially if these tendencies are not addressed early in their educational careers. This is precisely why it is crucial to understand a learner’s education as *one* development process. Additionally, the informants highlighted the lack of individual adaption to the learning process; in other words – they lacked a learning process more suited to their personal learning potentials and needs. They pointed out that if the education process were more *motivating*, more filled with *non-formal, practical learning* activities, with room for *creative, innovative, entrepreneurial* reflection and action, and, furthermore, with room for *positive encouraging feedback, pedagogical tact* and *personal guidance*; they may not have left school. Leaving school can, however, lead those who have left into positive alternative learning situations more suited to their interests, experiences and learning capacity than traditional schools. This type of learning will mainly be filled with non-formal learning experiences, but with strong elements of qualifying, socializing and self- subjective learning activities which can be looked at as supplementary and more suitable learning experience for them for the time being, than ordinary school education.

## **5.2 Education and learning – a shared responsibility.**

We were presented with a combined formal (FL), informal (IFL) and non-formal educational (NFL) concept in which the student, teacher, and organisation had a common strategy where they had clearly discussed important questions such as: “What is the purpose of education?” and “What is the best way to achieve this purpose?” The purpose of youth worker vocational

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education is to provide a good educational environment for youth worker students. The way they do this is to offer the students a diverse education where they are participating in deciding the premises of their studies. The students know the purpose of their work. In this environment they alternate between both formal, informal, and non-formal learning methods based on a holistic approach to learning. Students work together with the teachers and the school environment to bring out the best in each other, and, by doing that, they also contribute to the education of quality youth-workers, that can make a difference in the childhood environment in Finland.

Students who have completed their basic education choose their upper secondary pathway – general or VET – based on their own interests, skills, and success in previous studies. Both pathways are equal in value and provide access to further studies. The same options are also open to adults wanting to reskill or upskill. Vocational education and training are not limited to the technical sector but cover all sectors of working life (Education in Finland 2019).

The education of youth-workers includes learning facilities, structures, activities, options, and possibilities that challenge the students' studies in a positive way. The educational activities are well organised and includes all three learning approaches. The students attend school and receive *on-the-job-training* outside school. They work in public or private institutions and organisation, either as an apprentice or according to a training agreement between the school and the workplace. Students are engaged in both *ordinary work* issues and in *voluntary work*. They work in *teams* – and are offered to be trained *peers* – so that they can be there for the other team members and others who need assistance. This strengthens their sense of acceptance, which affects their sense of self. They also use the *teams* as a frame for project work and their projects include various non-formal activities, such as training camps, and assisting in organising and arranging national/international voluntary conferences and culture events.

Inside school, they work as *campus instructors*, practicing youth-work within school on behalf of teachers or school management, when their assistance is needed for the benefit of other students. This is a concept in which school staff supply youth worker students with special tasks for instance in cooperation, networking and coordination missions on the school grounds. Their role is similar to the role of Peers. The *curricula and syllabi* in Finnish vocational schools are *flexible*, and the students can to a certain degree compose learning concepts that fit their work of interests. Students are assessed and credited for previously acquired competences and only acquire the lacking competences during their studies. All of this is detailed in a *Personal Competence Development Plan* (PCDP)<sup>10</sup>. Students are co-contributors in documenting their knowledge by participating in the planning, assessment, and documentation of knowledge, during their studies. They are quite satisfied with the ownership

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<sup>10</sup> Personal Competence Development plan (PCDP) was obligatory in Finnish VET schools in 2018 (Finnish VET in a Nutshell, 2019)

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feeling they experienced by being a vital participating actor in their own educational processes. According to the Finnish students, this boosts their motivation to fulfil their studies.

### **5.3 The importance of cross-cultural non-formal learning arenas.**

The European Commission supports the European Voluntary Service (EVS) for young people due to its enormous benefits for the young people who participate. These benefits are both concrete – such as improving the volunteer’s language skills – and less tangible, for example developing the volunteer’s sense of self-worth and self-confidence. The EVS is a learning experience, through which many learning opportunities, both non-formal and informal, are created and recognised (Discover EVS 2019).

The EVS is, according to the informants, a quite remarkable concept with many learning experiences created in a complex non-formal learning context. The students firmly agreed that the EVS must be utilised as a learning concept in schools. The EVS opened their eyes to non-formal learning as a way to increase the variety in education. Despite a lack of quality in planning, as well as various negative experiences that the students were confronted with, there was no question as to whether this is a learning concept to implement in schools. Additionally, the EVS programme was an eye-opener on how non-formal learning concepts could, to a large extent, be implemented in schools, as well as in the neighborhood and community in which the school is located. This tribute to the opportunities the students had discovered by experiencing non-formal learning, can be strategically utilised in study planning for the purpose of being implemented in the school’s future curricula and syllabi.

The EVS students from Bergen spent half a year preparing and planning the EVS training cycle. They had a memorable experience, but, above all they discovered how important good planning is. They also learned that planning is difficult, and they discovered quite immediately that it is nearly impossible to plan when one is mutually bound to one’s partners and their ability to plan. They learned about language difficulties, as well as language possibilities. Some of them underlined that it is quite fantastic to experience how body language can make a difference in communication. They were simultaneously prepared and not prepared. The most vital experience was how they managed to handle being in transition when they were away, as well as to demonstrate adaptability in situations they had not experienced before. They experienced how to practice language, how to handle patience/impatience, how to stay close to their group and to use their instincts in unpredictable situations. Based on the debriefing process after they returned home, they could summarise many vital factors they will make use of in future preparing processes. Based on these new experiences, the students now argued for strengthening the use of non-formal learning approaches in their youth-worker education. They also provided arguments for implementing more non-formal learning approaches for more vocational training in their school. The students were considering the

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EVS training cycle to be a fantastic opportunity to achieve all of the strategic learning goals in an effective and rewarding way. A closer link between formal and non-formal learning structures should create space for a non-formal learning culture in schools. The students seek new opportunities by implementing non-formal learning structures into their daily learning programmes. This can open up possibilities to invest in thematic projects like community research projects, and leisure activity programs in and outside of school.

### **5.3.1 How to emerge as an editor of your life?**

The focus group dialogue revealed an attitude favoring a pro-holistic approach to learning, where young people who struggles in ordinary schools, can be followed up and motivated, in a pedagogical tactful way (Van Manen 1991) by teachers, school managers, and supervisors, inside or outside schools, as valuable persons. Students need to be inspired to seek a learning position and emphasise learning by observing and asking questions, learning by searching for answers and learning by doing. We could introduce learning by interaction, learning by co-operation, learning by dialogue and supervision, and learning by investigations and doing research. Furthermore, we could organise learning by trying and failing, learning by discovering and testing their autodidactic talents and their innovative entrepreneurial mindset, learning by being autonomous and learning by mapping their fields of interest. The focus group promoted a downsizing of formal learning in education and an up sizing of non-formal and informal learning, such that they are equal and mutually interdependent in the design of a holistic educational approach for the future.

Non- formal learning, however, offers productive and practical learning, based on learning by doing things in a practical sense in a real context, and to teaches learners how to utilise their personal potentials at learning arenas that allows them to free their talents.

Furthermore, students learn how they, based on these experiences, can use their interest-based potential, master their self-learning capacity, empower themselves to be their own agents of change and disruption, search for the best answers to their questions, and, consequently foster “answerability” and motivations in life. These elements of the educational process are collectively vital in forming a holistic learning paradigm for the future. This is the essence of *good education*.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

Most of the countries have been going through periods of reform in public education, for both economic and cultural reasons. The challenge, however, is that many governments seems to meet the future by keeping the same formal education concept as in the past; built around *qualification* as the main approach to education. By doing that, they are in danger of alienating the sizable one-third of the young population that require learning conditions beyond the formal learning environment of the traditional school system.

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The message from those who participated in this case-study process, underpins that “good education” for everybody can be more successfully achieved by offering the young generation of learners a holistic learning approach, in which both formal, informal and non-formal education are equally woven into the future curricula and syllabi of education. The traditional approach to learning in today’s society is formal education and learning, in which we are dependable on, being taught and guided in our way to fulfil our learning outcomes (*qualification*). Informal learning can be explained as the encultural and individual learning processes (Ofstad 2013, p 45) by which individuals learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire the daily experiences, values, norms, attitudes, skills and competences that frame their personal forming process (*socialisation*). Non-formal learning offers productive and practical learning, based on learning by doing things in a practical sense and how to utilising their personal knowledge potentials at learning arenas, which allows them to free their talents. Furthermore, students learn how they, based on these experiences, can strengthen the action-based knowledge integrated in the person him/herself and anchored in his/her body. They develop knowledge capacity in knowing “what is wise to do”, how to assess, learn about and feel their unarticulated tacit knowledge; and learn what contributes to the best result within the area of daily action (*subjectivation*). These three elements of the education process are collectively vital to forming a holistic learning paradigm for the future. This is, according to the study, the essence of good education.

The dichotomy between formal and non-formal learning and education is still large and seems to be one of the most secluded and neglected discourses within education. Recent research (OECD 2018) included in this case- study, has showed us that motivation among students in upper secondary/vocational schools is decreasing year by year. We are, today witnessing a gradual reduction in enthusiasm and curiosity about what the school can offer, as well as a reduction in hope and faith, a kind of resignation among these students in which they exhibit strong doubts as to whether they will be able to succeed in education. Some reasons seem to rest in the fact that the students have neither become more active, because schools are not emphasising *student active work forms* enough, nor properly introduced to *individual adapted learning methods*, because traditional schools do not have this capacity or options sufficiently present and implemented in their agenda. In our present time something is happening. Based on feedback we received in this particularly case-study, as well as the views we found in the desktop research linked to this study (which additionally included public documents and plans for the field of education), we could be tempted to conclude that a “Copernican turn”<sup>11</sup> in the view on education of today, could be welcomed. This case study has certainly captured signals from several educational environments that is clearly in favor of a paradigm shift to a school, equally built on formal, informal and non-formal education.

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<sup>11</sup> **A Copernican turn** – as a reference to Immanuel Kant’s *paradigm shift* - abandons the study of (unknowable) reality-in-itself in favor of inquiry into the world-of-appearances and the innate structures of the mind that determine the nature of experience.

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For the sake of future generations, it seems to be necessary to come up with a joint effort to make innovations in the school system. The significant group of young people that need learning conditions beyond the traditional, have to be offered *good learning experiences* inside and outside school. They should be stimulated to utilise their *practical, entrepreneurial and skill-oriented mindset*, and to search for opportunities and make them work. Doing this, they could be prepared to face the interdependent culture that is taking shape, especially among youth, on a global basis. Whether we look at pedagogical, societal or economic issues in education, a global paradigm seems to emerge, which shares values that are more similar between nation states than those found within. This emerging external environment has its own complex and divergent structures, system, and behaviours (Luczkiw 2007, p. 45). Admitting this, we have a great opportunity to develop a practical and action-based learning system that could give young people the golden key to their future as holistic innovative learners and as creative individuals and workers.

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