



Fostering aspirations among youth outside education and employment – A qualitative study on coaching professionals' perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Youth
Youth unemployment
NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training)
Capability approach
Aspirations
Vocational rehabilitation
Transformative social policy

ABSTRACT

Young people who are not engaged in education or employment represent a heterogeneous population facing a range of complex and multifaceted challenges. Interventions targeting this group are commonly framed within the context of active labour market policies. However, a growing body of research underscores the need for more comprehensive and individually tailored support approaches. This paper examines a coaching intervention Nuotti, which is a vocational rehabilitation service for young people not in employment, education, or training. Our study adopts a professional perspective and draws on individual interview data from 17 Nuotti coaches. Using the capability approach as an analytical framework, we demonstrate how individual coaching fosters the capabilities for voice and aspiration. Coaches help youth envision their futures, foster self-perception, manage daily life, maintain mental well-being, and connect with support networks. Based on the results, we argue that Nuotti coaching reflects elements of transformative social policy by empowering youth to pursue futures they value.

1. Introduction

In this article, we study a transformative social policy practice, Nuotti coaching, a vocational rehabilitation service targeted at youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET). NEET youth refers to a diverse group of young people whose transition from adolescence to adulthood has not been a straightforward path from school to employment (Hutchinson et al., 2016). While NEET is a widely recognised term, it is also subject to criticism. NEET youth includes not only individuals facing challenging life situations, such as mental health issues, but also those who are still exploring their path in life without experiencing major difficulties. (Yates & Payne, 2006; Eurofound, 2016.)

Young people entering the labour market are frequently characterised as an at-risk population due to their limited or emerging attachment to employment. In general, interventions on NEET youth are implemented as active labour market policies (ALMP). However, ALMPs have been criticised for prioritising short-term job outcomes over long-term career development and for failing to address the individual challenges young people face. (Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016.) Increasingly, research highlights the importance of individualised support services tailored to the diverse needs of young people (Mawn et al., 2017;

Maguire et al., 2022). Key strategies identified include psychosocial support (Noble-Carr et al., 2014; Ripamonti, 2023), youth-driven aims (Paterson-Young et al., 2024) and personalised support networks (Frøyland, 2024). Researchers have also emphasised the need for multifaceted and integrated support structures to address the complex challenges faced by youth outside education and employment (Maguire et al., 2022; Stea et al., 2024).

Nuotti coaching approaches youth outside of education and employment in a comprehensive way, emphasising goal orientation, development of self-confidence, and tailored support strategies (Kela, 2025). With these aims, Nuotti coaching strives to maintain institutional contact with youth who are outside education and employment and to improve their employability qualities. In addition, it creates pathways and guides the young people in their transition to education and employment. In fact, these are the main strategies on NEET youth adopted across societies (Hutchinson et al., 2016; also see Maguire et al., 2022).

The present study addresses the broader question of how young people who are outside education and employment can be supported through personalised coaching interventions. This article has two primary aims: first, to examine the qualities or life domains that coaches

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2026.108985>

Received 9 October 2025; Received in revised form 3 March 2026; Accepted 19 April 2026

Available online 20 April 2026

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prioritise when working with young people and second, to identify the capabilities they aim to develop. The analysis draws on interview data that illuminate the key aspects of coaching practice. In the individual interviews (17), Nuotti coaches provided their insights on addressing the diverse support needs of young people and reflected the range of capabilities that they actively promoted through the coaching process.

Utilising the capability approach, we scrutinised how the coaches increased the capabilities of youth during the intervention. This contributes to the growing body of literature using the capability approach in studying youth unemployment interventions (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Egdell & Graham, 2017; Robertson, 2018; Su & Wong, 2022; Yakova et al., 2025). This study provides insights into individualised responses to NEET trajectories, emphasising youth-centredness and expanding the scope of realistic and valued opportunities for labour market participation.

1.1. Capability to aspire and transformative social policy

To understand aspiring as a capability, we apply the capability approach (Hart, 2016; Flechtner, 2017; Bonvin & Laruffa, 2024). It is grounded in a normative commitment to individual freedom—the ability to choose the beings and doings one values in life. Furthermore, the capability approach focuses on the *real freedom* people have to make choices they value rather than focusing only on the outcomes, such as rapid employment to any job (Sen, 1999; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016). As the capability approach is a flexible framework (Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022), it has been employed across diverse contexts and for multiple purposes (Robeyns, 2017). In the context of employment services, e.g., vocational rehabilitation, it provides insight into policies and interventions targeted at young people. It highlights young people's own choices and the capabilities and resources they need to find valued employment or study place or to strengthen their motivation. This perspective supports long-term sustainable outcomes over short-term targets such as rapid employment or quick enrolment in education (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Egdell & Graham, 2017).

Capability to aspire refers to an individual's own perspective on valuable, feasible choices in the future. This perspective is inherently rooted in past experiences and social interaction, defined by societal and cultural influences (Appadurai, 2004; Hart, 2016.) The functioning of aspiration depends on both the freedom to aspire and the capability to achieve those aspirations. Therefore, it requires other capabilities, resources, and enabling conditions to be realised. At the same time, the capability to aspire shapes the choices the individual perceives available, preceding and initialising the development of other capabilities. (Hart, 2016; Flechtner, 2017.)

Individual aspirations are a key element of transformative social policy, a concept used to describe social policies that seek to transform societal structures and institutions instead of merely offering assistance (see Mkandawire, 2007; Chaves-Avila & Gallego-Bono, 2020). Our understanding of transformative social policy is in line with that of Bonvin and Laruffa (2024): Unlike adaptive approaches, where individuals adjust to the perceived demands of political and economic conditions, transformative social policies are rooted in the enhancement of individuals' voice and aspirations, promoting their participation in the socioeconomic sphere. Indeed, transformative social policies emphasise a change in social policies from technocratic tools reducing inequality, exclusion, or poverty to democratic objects empowering individuals to envision and realise a future they truly value. At the micro level, this shift means that instead of viewing the beneficiaries of social policies as merely receivers obliging to the expectations assigned to them, they are seen as judges of social policy interventions—empowered to voice out their aspirations and help shape both the goals and implementation of services (Bonvin, 2009; Egdell & McQuaid 2016; Bonvin & Laruffa, 2024).

In our view, Nuotti coaching incorporates elements of transformative social policy. The transformative approach enables the incorporation of

youth-centredness and empowerment by giving young people a voice, fostering their aspirations, and providing conditions that support the pursuit of those aspirations. Enhancing capacities, skills, and readiness to work or study works towards the beneficiaries' goals instead of merely adding to the probability of employment (Orton, 2011). In this paper, we scrutinise the micro level of transformative social policy, i.e., how Nuotti coaches support young people's aspirations and how the work on skills and various areas of life enables the pursuit of those aspirations.

1.2. Study context

In Finland, where this study was conducted, the Social Insurance Institution (Kela) provides various rehabilitation interventions, as defined by law. The scrutinised rehabilitation intervention, Nuotti coaching, is targeted at young people aged 16–29 who are not in education or employment and whose functional ability has weakened significantly (Kela, 2024a).

Nuotti coaching is grounded in a legislative reform from 2019, which aimed at reducing the barriers preventing young people from accessing vocational rehabilitation. (Finnish government, 2018; Kela, 2024a). Earlier legislative attempts to improve accessibility had proven insufficient, and the key recommendation was to remove the requirement for a diagnosis or doctor's statement (Tuusa & Ala-Kauhaluoma, 2014; Finnish Government., 2018). In response, Kela developed a new service model and eligibility criteria through a development project, forming the foundation for the statutory Nuotti coaching service. The implementation of both the development project and the subsequent statutory service has been examined in earlier studies. (Tiittinen & Ritvos, 2023; Finnish Government., 2018; Koivisto et al., 2023; Miettinen et al., 2019; Ukkola & Seppänen-Järvelä, 2023).

The rationale behind lowering the threshold for access to vocational rehabilitation was to prevent exclusion by providing NEET youth with activating services at an earlier stage (Finnish government, 2018). In Finland, NEET youth are typically targeted by activating labour market policies that aim to develop professional or soft skills and rely on welfare conditionality, whereby access to benefits is linked to obligations such as active job search or participation in public employment services (PES). (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Haikkola, 2021.) Long-term unemployed young people may be directed to more intensive forms of support, such as multi-professional service assessments, rehabilitative work activities, or vocational rehabilitation.

Unlike traditional vocational rehabilitation, Nuotti coaching does not require a medical diagnosis or a doctor's statement. Instead, eligibility is based on a person's NEET status and reduced functional ability. (Finnish government, 2018; Kela, 2024a). Emphasis on NEET status means that a young person is eligible for Nuotti coaching if they are not employed, progressing in their studies or receiving sufficient support from their educational institution, participating in another employment-promoting service, taking a voluntary gap year, or otherwise have a clear plan forward. (Kela, 2024b).

Nuotti coaching focuses on helping young people to plan and develop a future direction and strengthening their functional ability. Furthermore, it emphasises goal orientation, development of self-confidence, and tailored support strategies. Although Nuotti coaching aims to guide young people towards education or the labour market, securing an immediate job or study place is not the primary focus. (Kela, 2024a; 2025) This youth-centred orientation towards future direction rather than employability challenges the traditional ALMP assumptions (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2024).

Nuotti coaching is implemented by local rehabilitation service providers in accordance with a service description (Kela, 2024a) defining the main features of the coaching. While specific professional standards are required, no particular coaching certifications are mandatory (see, Ives, 2008; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). A Nuotti coach is required to have at least 2 years of experience in working with young people. In

addition, a coach must hold one of the following qualifications: psychologist, occupational therapist, nurse or public health nurse, social worker, Bachelor of Social Services, rehabilitation counsellor, community educator, Master's degree in youth work or youth studies, or Master's degree in education (excluding early childhood education)(Kela, 2024a).

Nuotti coaching takes place over a period of five months and consists of 20 meetings. In some cases, Nuotti coaching can be extended for a second five-month period also consisting of 20 meetings. The coaching is tailored to each young person's goals related to employment, vocational future, or education. (Kela, 2024a.).

Coaching has become increasingly prominent in social work and healthcare (Hayes et al., 2008; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Burroughs et al., 2017). Nuotti shares the common characteristics of coaching: the approach focuses on individual growth and empowering coachees to identify and achieve their own goals by leveraging their own resources and insights. Coaching is closely related to practices such as counseling and mentoring. However, coaching lacks a universally accepted definition, and its precise meaning remains a topic of debate in the literature (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Nuotti coaching resembles practices such as social work, career coaching, and outreach youth work, but is distinguished by its role as a vocational rehabilitation service focused on supporting functional ability to enable a return to education or employment.

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Data collection

This study has been approved by the Ethics committee of the Social Insurance Institution of Finland. The data comprise 17 individual interviews with Nuotti coaches, conducted online (Skype) or via telephone. While this method differs from traditional in-person interviews, it offers greater flexibility in terms of time and location, enabling a broader and more diverse recruitment of professionals. Furthermore, these modes of communication reflect everyday digital interactions familiar to professionals, such as meetings facilitated by platforms like Microsoft Teams. (Holt, 2010; Drabble et al., 2016; Lobe et al., 2022).

The interviews consisted of two parts. The first part included a general discussion on the coaches' work and how they implement Nuotti coaching. In the second part, we used vignettes, i.e., short descriptions of fictional people and their situations. (Hughes & Huby, 2002; 2004; Törrönen, 2018; Tremblay et al., 2022). The vignettes were used as clues in the research setting (Törrönen, 2018), and the coaches were asked open-ended questions, such as 'What comes to mind from this case?' and 'How would you proceed if this was your client?' to describe how they would act in each fictional situation.

The vignettes were compiled drawing upon earlier studies, real-life stories from various media outlets, source material (e.g., instructions and descriptions for implementing Nuotti coaching), and help from Kela's vocational rehabilitation experts and benefit administrators. In addition, the first author conducted two pilot interviews incorporating the vignettes. These interviews led to minor adjustments to the supporting questions in the interview guide and helped refine the overall flow of vignette use.

The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. The duration of the recording was 985 min, and the transcriptions consisted of 135 pages (Verdana 8, no spacing).

Interviewees (Table 1) were recruited using a contact list of all service providers delivering Nuotti coaching supplied by Kela. An email invitation was distributed to all contacts. Furthermore, the researchers attended two of the service providers' monthly meetings to remind potential participants about the study and to promote participation. The invitation was open, and everyone who signed up was interviewed.

Table 1

Background information of the interviewed coaches.

Experience with Nuotti coaching (years) ^a	Number of coaches
1–2	6
3–4	7
5–6	4
Background education	
Bachelor of Social Services	10
Bachelor of Health Care, Psychiatric Nursing	3
Bachelor of Health Care, Nursing	2
Other Bachelor's or Master's level education	2
Area^b	
Helsinki-Uusimaa (capital city region)	2
Southern Finland	6
Western Finland	3
Northern and Eastern Finland	7

^a Experience was rounded to the nearest full year.

^b Coaches could report one or more regions.

2.2. Data analysis

The data were analysed using the six phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation with the dataset, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Data were analysed using ATLAS.ti 25 software.

The familiarisation phase began with the first author reading the data and reviewing the audiotapes. All interviews were conducted by the first author, which further supported familiarisation. In the coding phase, the first author systematically marked the first integral segments in the data, i.e., what the interviewed coaches aimed to promote, prioritise, and address during the coaching process. A specific focus was on the skills, life domains, and other aspects of the young people's lives the coaches sought to improve. Drafts and memos of emerging codes and potential patterns were maintained.

The first author identified a preliminary narrative emphasising the importance of supporting and scrutinising the young person's wishes as well as working on encouragement, self-understanding, mental health, daily life skills, and dealing with networks. The authors, then, discussed the preliminary ideas and potential theoretical frameworks, eventually adopting the capability approach as the guiding concept and focusing on which capabilities the coaches' work promotes. Next, the first author preceded to refine and name the themes and started comparing the preliminary themes. At this point, it became clear that future orientation and aspirations were present across all themes, leading us to the fifth phase of the analysis: identifying the overall story and naming capability to aspire as the overarching theme. When writing the analysis, we aligned the themes to reflect the overarching theme and interpreted the results based on literature on capability to aspire and transformative social policy.

3. Results

As a result of the analytical process, we identified five themes: voicing aspirations, positive self-perception, daily life control, mental wellness, and support networks. All five themes are related to helping young people aspire and supporting them in the pursuit of their aspirations. However, the coaches work around the themes revealed the two sides of Nuotti coaching: In the first two themes, the aim was to empower young people to voice their aspirations and support them in forming a positive self-image and outlook on their opportunities. In contrast, the latter three themes focused on ensuring the young people had the necessary conditions in terms of health and life management to realise those aspirations. Next, we will describe the results in greater detail.

Voicing aspirations. The coaches' main priority was to focus on the young people's future objectives, plans, and goals. They encouraged the

young people to voice their perspective through discussions about hopes and personal strengths, career aptitude tests, or vision boards. The young people sometimes had several goals, some related to vocational aims and others to other areas of life, e.g., daily life or mental health. The coaches also helped the young people to evaluate the feasibility of their goals, i.e., to reflect the goals against their health or skills. The goals directed the themes and the substance of coaching.

-- we're equals in that situation, wondering what would be an important thing for the young person in that moment, what they'd like to focus on and I also bring out that the young person themselves has the chance to affect the outcome of the coaching --. It's also kind of an important factor there, when you think about how the coaching will take shape, 'cause often it might've been that the young people have been in different services since they were minors and haven't been able to decide for themselves at all. (Coach 7).

In this quotation, the coach described how they promote the young person's choices. However, they also point out that young people should have some vocational ideas and that they do not want to make decisions for the client. The coach goes on to explain that the clients have usually gone through several services without a chance to influence the aims of those services. Their description reflects what is common in the work of Nuotti coaches: They want to empower young people to make their own decisions, while fostering commitment to coaching and goals.

However, many young people needed further support clarifying their wishes. Some did not know what they wanted; others struggled to even imagine a future direction due to their situation. The coaches then tried to find and refine a future direction with the young person, setting both realistic short-term goals for the coaching period as well as more future-oriented objectives past the coaching. Furthermore, the coaches wanted to foster a lasting motivation from the young persons' perspective. One coach described how they seek to connect a young person's nascent future ideas to a long-lasting change.

The sparks of motivation --, that's what we use to achieve that long-lasting change. --like a path exercise, --the young person starts walking along it one step at a time. So, like, what in that first step, okay, it's in this moment. Now you're, you have a little vision of what's to come, but like what things should maybe change? -- and it's maybe a couple of years from now, and what does life feel like then. -- even though it's a vision-, this kind of exercise, so they have the emotional state, like hey, I've now accomplished this, I've got it now. (Coach 16).

In this quotation, the coach aims to get the young person to reflect on their situation and what needs to change in order for them to pursue their future goals. They emphasise the importance of envisioning attainable objectives and use the exercise to foster a sense of achievement and motivation. While the specific methods varied depending on individual clients and coaches, the key aim was to broaden the view on future possibilities or getting clarity on what to pursue. Indeed, the coaches did not only help young people to set concrete goals, they also wanted to strengthen future optimism. The work on goals and future was about providing the young people with opportunities to influence the substance of the coaching and to increase their ability to imagine the future.

Positive self-perception. In Nuotti coaching, young people's self-perception was an essential theme, and the coaches fostered it in two ways: They helped the young people overcome their experiences of failure or hopelessness and encouraged them to see themselves through their strengths and positive qualities. The coaches reported that their clients often felt like they failed ideal transitions or felt stuck. Furthermore, the young people believed they had lost their chances or wasted their time, whether due to choosing the wrong educational path, leaving school, or experiencing unemployment. In the next quotation, the coach emphasises the importance of not dismissing the feeling of disappointment and rather trying to overcome it by focusing on gained benefits and how to capitalise them.

-- In a way I'd try to strengthen it [optimism] or like it's clearly a genuine experience, the disappointment after dropping out, but that too I'd like to, through mapping and just listing things, like what have they already

completed there and how to utilise that in the next degree. (Coach 17).

The coaches' aim was to foster hope, resilience, and persistence by helping the young people recognise that adversities are a part of life and reminding them of what they had already accomplished in earlier studies and that trying again is always an option. In addition, the coaches also helped the young people to imagine their path back to education or employment using a process with smaller steps adjusted to their situation and capacity to study or work. According to the coaches, achieving smaller steps leads to a feeling of competence. The coaches also described how young people often compare themselves to their peers, societal expectations, and to idealised transition paths. This comparison can lead to a negative self-narrative, which the coaches work to break by focusing on positive qualities.

--We can talk about preparing for setbacks and different highlights in life and such exceptions, like how to discover that the strengths do exist and how to utilise them and how to maybe see some perceived negative qualities as positive, how they've utilised in some life situations --. (Coach 14).

Here, the coach describes how they prepare the young people to face adversities and how they can recognise positive qualities and view themselves through them. Indeed, the coaches aimed to support the young people in adopting identity-promoting strengths, own hopes, and positive qualities to view themselves as capable of progress. The coaches emphasised that the feeling of being stuck, missing self-confidence, fear of failure, and other negative beliefs are barriers stopping the clients from trying again, seeking support, or pursuing their goals. The coaches focused on the young people's self-perception to help them see themselves as capable of pursuing the opportunities available to them.

Daily life control. The coaches explained how a lack of practical life skills can prevent a young person from moving forward. The young people in Nuotti coaching faced varying challenges, and the coaches provided multifaceted support. For example, they helped the young people get identity documents, taught them how to pay bills and turn chores into routine, and provided information on substance use, nutrition, and sleep. In addition to practical day-to-day help, the coaches provided guidance on the bureaucratic nature of real-world conditions by explaining, for example, where and how to contact officials, what certifications are required in working life, and why people are expected to have a bank account. However, teaching basic life skills was not the coaches' aim: They wanted to equip the young people with autonomy and sustainable conditions that enable the pursuit of vocational goals. In the following quotation, a coach explains how some clients' 'comfort zone' can actually be restricting.

It may look like the everyday rhythm is all good, but then you kind of find challenges in the other everyday functions--. You start expanding the comfort zone, and then you're like up the creek, like I can't and so on. -- So in a way a lot of things that don't work come to light, when you're expected to be a societal inhabitant and so on. (Coach 10).

The coach points out that at first glance, some young people can appear to have their daily life in order, but when they are pushed to participate in society, their situation unfolds. They emphasise expanding the young person's comfort zone in order to make them able to change the stalled situation and build their independence. This is a shared idea among the coaches – they aim to improve the young people's ability to take on the responsibilities of daily life on their own. In addition, the coaches emphasised having control over one's own life, or 'holding the strings', as one of the coaches put it:

-- like hey can we call [the debt counsellor] and ask. And then often times the young person is very pleased that things become clear and there's clarity, -- the young person knows and there's the sense of control like okay so this is how things move forward. Like the sense of control from, like hey I can influence things, hey I can find out, I know how to find out, I know what's going on in my life, I can kind of get a hold of the strings, so that's maybe the coaching approach, that somehow the young person gets a hold of the strings. (Coach 2).

While it is important to improve one's financial situation, the coach underlined fostering the sense of control over merely resolving the

financial issues. The coach connected the sense of control to the end result and coaching itself, which reflects the multi-fold work on other daily life skills as well. While the young people need help with life skills, the coaches' aim is to help them develop a sense of autonomy and the ability to manage their lives. Furthermore, the coaches' work on daily life reached beyond completing daily errands; it was about strengthening a young person's sense of control and being able to influence their situation.

Mental wellness. Young people's well-being and mental health were among the major life areas the coaches focused on. Mainly, the coaches helped the young people access health services. However, in cases where services were unavailable or slow to respond, the coaches provided direct help that supported the young people's well-being and pursuit of personal goals. This direct help varied from discussions about the client's energy and coping in daily life to exposure therapy. One of the coaches described the exposure therapy as follows:

— For example, I had one young person, who had a huge barrier to go anywhere, as they didn't dare to take the bus. So we had a goal to make it happen, and we started with that goal, that we're going to be in this bus for one stop, and that's where it started to slowly work out. And then, when they were able to take the bus, well, well, soon enough they were taking part in rehabilitative work activity. Such a small thing, but it can be really significant. (Coach 6).

Here, the coach described how a relatively small but concrete step can open possibilities for a young person with social anxiety to enter working life. Exposing the client to a social situation by taking the bus made a difference: The client was able to travel and tolerate a social situation well enough to participate in a rehabilitative service, further enabling their possibilities to participate in activities.

The coaches also explained that many of the young people participating in Nuotti coaching show symptoms linked to neuropsychiatric disorders. These symptoms include difficulties in focusing on tasks or social interaction. Depending on the client's wishes, most of the coaches encouraged or helped the young people to get official diagnoses. However, as getting a diagnosis might take longer than the coaching itself, the coaches also discussed neuropsychiatric disorders in general: what the symptoms are, what does it mean for a young person, and what would a diagnosis mean.

Or often I might also ask like do you have some hopes about it, like would you like to find out. For some, it might just be that they kinda want, that they want to understand ADHD and we can talk about it. But then when you might have those characteristics, but is it then enough for a diagnosis, like do we wanna sort it out in healthcare. (Coach 16).

Discussions about neuropsychiatric diagnoses reflect the recurring narrative found in the coaches' efforts to try and find the underlying causes for challenges in transitions or coping in daily life. The coaches asked their clients what they think are the reasons behind the feelings of anxiety, stress, or low energy. In addition, they tried to discuss about life factors that could sustain, support, or restore mental well-being. In other words, the coaches sought to help the young people by providing them with knowledge and reflective skills necessary to identifying the reasons behind mental distress and the resources and conditions that support mental well-being.

Support networks. In the interviews, the coaches pointed out that health, social, educational, and employment services were often bureaucratic, under-resourced, and difficult to access. Therefore, they established support networks for their clients and ensured access to appropriate services, benefits, or care. For example, if a young person needed help with obtaining a medical diagnosis, the coaches supported them in getting in contact with healthcare services, or if a client had a clear career goal, the coaches would contact employment services or schools to work on a plan. Furthermore, the coaches explained the Finnish service system to the young people and gave them advice on how to navigate it. This included teaching the clients about the services they are entitled to and how the services could benefit them as well as helping them understand the service language.

The coaches made sure that the young people had a support network also after Nuotti coaching. They highlighted the importance of support networks and progression plans, stating they were the most important factors to carry on with after coaching. The coaches wanted to equip the young people with a clear understanding of available support networks and what those networks enable. Next, a coach describes how they start building a support network towards the end of Nuotti coaching.

And maybe even more commonly and typically, towards the end of the coaching at the latest, you make sure the young person gets enough support and that they are aware of how the vocational plan goes on once Nuotti coaching ends. (Coach 2).

This coach highlighted that the young person should be aware of the support network and their plan after the coaching. In addition, the coach explained that their work is about connecting the young person to the support network not only through service access but also through a vocational plan. This way, the coach aims to create continuity in the support structures.

While access to services is essential, it alone does not inherently ensure the utilisation of those services. According to the coaches, some young people have had negative experiences in the past, and their trust in services needs fostering.

For example, many are pretty anti-medication, —, and then some might even be anti-therapy. Then others want to go to therapy really bad but they can't get in. (Coach 14).

Indeed, the attitude towards support networks varied depending on the individual. The coaches actively assisted their clients in navigating the service system to ensure the clients were aware of the available services, understood the functions of the services, and had access to services they wanted to utilise.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Nuotti coaching is an intervention targeted at youth outside education and employment. In this article, we examined the qualities and life domains that the Nuotti coaches prioritised during the intervention and the ways they sought to promote their clients' capabilities. The results revealed the specific goals the professionals focused on when supporting the young people's aspirations and the types of support required to help the young people to pursue their goals. The findings highlighted the conditions that the professionals consider necessary for youth not engaged in education or employment to be able to work towards their vocational goals.

As a result of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021), we identified five themes that were the main targets in the coaches' work: voicing aspirations, positive self-perception, daily life control, mental wellness, and support networks. Similar life domains, skills, or qualities, including creating support networks and their collaboration (Rodríguez-Soler & Verd, 2023; Frøyland et al., 2025), mental health (Mawn et al., 2017; Sveinsdottir et al., 2020; Berry et al., 2024), self-esteem and self-efficacy (Seddon et al., 2013; Bertotti et al., 2025), resilience (Assmann et al., 2021), and promoting young people's own agency or goals (Rikala, 2019; Paterson-Young et al., 2024) have been reported as possible targets, aspects, or effective outcomes also in other studies on policies targeted at NEET youth. Therefore, our results contribute to earlier literature emphasising the importance of these factors.

However, the overarching narrative promoting the young people's own choices as well as the resources and abilities to act on those choices was particularly compelling. This finding led us to adopt the capability approach to guide our analysis. Within the first two themes, the coaches' work is connected to increasing the client's agency in planning their future and promoting the capabilities for voice and to aspire. The latter three themes mainly focus on enabling the pursuit of aspirations. Next, we will discuss these results in more detail.

Our results show that in their work with youth outside education and employment, the coaches promoted *capability for voice, fostered capability to aspire, and provided tools to realise these aspirations*. In promoting

capability for voice, the coaches focused on the young people's own goal setting and future orientation, while in fostering capability to aspire, they supported their clients' ability to imagine and to feel capable of pursuing their own path. Applying the capability approach allowed us to analyse how the professionals empowered individuals to pursue their goals and make choices they value (Sen, 1999; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Bonvin & Laruffa, 2024).

The coaches provided their clients with the means to voice their wishes and thereby influence the core of the coaching, which promoted capability for voice. Furthermore, the coaches made sure the client's voice was heard by tailoring the coaching and support networks to align with each client's goals, thereby equipping the clients with their own plan guiding the coaching process but also extending to other relevant services (Bonvin, 2009). In addition, work on future orientation strengthened the feeling of being able to progress, widening the view on future choices.

The coaches noticed that many of the young people felt they had missed their chance and compared themselves to their peers or ideal transitions, leading to lowered aspirations (Nussbaum, 2001; Robertson & Edgell, 2018; Paterson-Young et al., 2024). To counter these perceptions, the coaches promoted positive self-perception and gave advice on setting realistic vocational goals by offering step-by-step support. The coaches aimed to strengthen the clients' self-image and future orientation to foster the capability to aspire and to pursue personally valued paths.

The coaches' work around daily life, mental wellness, and support networks promoted important capabilities, but their narrative also emphasised these three themes as tools to realise aspirations. For example, work on mental health could be someone's main goal during coaching, which promotes capability for (mental) health (see Nussbaum, 2003). However, the coaches usually emphasised that improving one's health was the first step towards participating in training or education. The emphasis was the same in the work on daily life: While fundamental daily life skills are intrinsic and valuable, the coaches viewed them as a base for vocational goals and fostering the feeling of competence and sense of control over one's life. Furthermore, the coaches' work on support networks focused on providing the tools and help the young people needed to achieve their goals. The coaches also underlined the importance of providing information on how different services work and how those services can help the young people achieve their goals or carry out their vocational plan. This approach ensures that the young people's perspectives are carried forward beyond the coaching, while they are also equipped to make informed decisions regarding services—further enhancing their ability to voice their aspirations.

Our results show the two sides of Nuotti coaching: the capabilities related to future orientation and the conditions required to realise those aspirations. Work on the first two themes, voicing aspirations and positive self-perception, focuses on the clients' wishes, motivations, and future goals, enhancing their capabilities for voice and to aspire. In contrast, the latter three identified themes, daily life control, mental wellness, and support networks, focus on improving the present conditions to enable the pursuit of future goals.

The coaches' work is about altering the subjective and objective opportunity sets (Flehtner, 2017), as 'just talk' and high aspirations will not transform into actual results. This highlights how comprehensive interventions can focus on aspirations while also including support in various life domains linked to well-being or effective outcomes for youth outside education and employment. In addition, our results add to existing literature drawing on the capability approach on interventions targeted at young people and underlining the importance of choices, valued functions, and aspirations. (Egdell & Graham, 2017; Su and Wong, 2022; Yakova et al., 2025; Paterson-Young et al., 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2025).

While vocational rehabilitation, in this case Nuotti coaching, can be interpreted as an active labour market policy, we argue, following Bonvin & Laruffa (2024), that focusing on young people's aspirations

and their own voice challenges the traditional logic of ALMPs.

Our findings underline the transformative potential of interventions aimed at youth outside education and employment. Promoting capability for voice and aspirations is expanding the horizon of possibilities for disadvantaged youth rather than limiting the choices to political or economic imperatives. It is noteworthy that youth participation in implementation marks a shift from top-down approaches centred on employment outcomes towards empowerment that challenges adaptive preferences and supports the pursuit of valued goals (Hart, 2016; Flehtner, 2017; Bonvin & Laruffa, 2024).

Transformative social policy practices can empower individuals to broaden their aspirations. However, without adequate support, high aspirations are at risk of becoming illusions, further reinforcing the narrative of personal failure while ignoring the structural constraints (Ray, 2006; Flehtner, 2017; Bonvin & Laruffa, 2024). This is especially critical for young people in the margins, where risks such as poverty, mental health issues, and social exclusion can diminish feasible aspirations and prolong transitions (Appadurai, 2004; Flehtner, 2017; Gariépy et al., 2022; Rahmani & Groot, 2023).

We recognise that individual coaching practices inherently focus on individual growth (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). However, the increasing number of young people outside education and employment is not an individually generated problem; instead, it rather reflects broader societal and structural challenges. It could also be argued that individual coaching services reflect neoliberal rationalities that promote self-responsibilisation, where individuals govern themselves to ensure their employability or productivity in the labour market (McNay, 2009; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). Therefore, we suggest that addressing these challenges requires structural solutions in addition to individual interventions. Furthermore, when individual interventions are needed, they should incorporate elements of transformative social policy to foreground individual voice and expand valued, feasible choices.

5. Strengths and limitations

While this paper provides new insight on interventions aimed at youth outside education and employment, it also comes with certain limitations. It is of utmost importance that youth services are studied from multiple perspectives. While the professional viewpoint has its strengths, it represents only one dimension of the phenomenon. We chose to interview Nuotti coaches because our aim was to understand the patterns, tools, and emphases that guided their implementation of a coaching intervention targeting young people outside education or employment in diverse situations. Therefore, the results reflect the perspective of professionals and do not represent the voices of the young people. Youth perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of different aspects of the coaching, and we recommend that future research include the viewpoints of young people.

We chose to utilise vignettes in the interviews, as they provide a way to explore how the coaches adapt their practices based on varying characteristics and situations. Asking the coaches to describe real clients in detail would have posed a risk of disclosing sensitive information (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Bain, 2024). The vignettes were used as interview stimuli to elicit the professionals' tacit knowledge, value, and beliefs, rather than abstract or generalised responses (Hughes & Huby, 2002; Spalding & Phillips, 2007; Sanfelici, 2021; Bain, 2024). The chosen method enriched the data by grounding the responses in realistic scenarios, while maintaining client confidentiality. However, this approach also carries certain disadvantages. Firstly, the researchers' choices in designing the vignettes unavoidably limited the scope of the data, as vignettes cannot encompass all possible situations. Secondly, and more importantly, there is a risk of desirability or normative bias. Because the interviewees were asked to respond to hypothetical situations rather than describe actions taken with actual clients, their accounts may reflect how they believe they should act in line with professional norms, organisational guidelines, or policy expectations. As

a result, there is a risk that the findings present an idealised version of practice, potentially underplaying tensions, constraints, or contradictions inherent in delivering a statutory intervention.

For example, Nuotti coaching's service description emphasises youth-driven goals and building appropriate support networks. Because our data are based on hypothetical accounts rather than actual goal-setting or network-building interactions, the coaches may overstate how youth-driven these processes are. Similarly, descriptions of support networks may reflect ideal procedures, while real practice is shaped by resource constraints and service availability.

Youth transitions, aspirations, and voice are phenomena extending beyond specific settings. Therefore, our findings contribute to research on how youth-centred interventions, such as Nuotti coaching, are applied across diverse conditions and how professionals support the transitions through comprehensive, individualised approaches. Our findings illustrate broader trends in youth-centred intervention practices.

6 Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Microsoft Copilot in order to assist with language editing. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Ethics approval statement

The study has been approved by the Ethics committee of the Social Insurance Institution of Finland.

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.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the professionals of Nuotti coaching for their participation in the interviews. We thank several experts from Kela: Emilia Norlamo for her assistance with the language and stylistic editing of the manuscript and Virpi Liukkonen, Marjaana Pajunen, and Kirsi Suoraniemi for sharing their knowledge on Nuotti coaching.

The study was financed by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland. The funder had no role in the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the results, or the decision to publish.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2026.108985>.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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