

# Non-academic, lazy and not employable: Exploring stereotypes of NEETs in England

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## About the author

**Dr Beth Suttill** completed her PhD at the University of Leicester, UK in 2017. It focused on the self-identities of young people on a course for those who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Prior to this she worked on a research project which explored the learning transitions of students taking the Access to Higher Education diploma (a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university). Beth is now a Senior Teaching Associate in Management and Organisation Studies at Lancaster University. Her current research interests are based around youth transitions, unemployment, and identity.

## Abstract

For most young people being not in education, employment, or training (NEET) is transitory. However, the term NEET is often used to refer to young people who may go on to become socially excluded as adults. Although NEET represents a heterogeneous group, they tend to be stereotyped by policymakers and society as 'other', whether being labelled as disadvantaged or 'on the margins'. The present study gives NEET young people a voice and the ability to challenge these stereotypes. Ethnographic research was undertaken at a centre for NEET young people in central England, to hear from those with experiences of being NEET themselves. The research demonstrates that these young people highlighted their individual deficiencies when discussing their unemployment. They were influenced by the stereotypes associated with being young and unemployed, trying to distance themselves from these by emphasising their 'student' status. They were keen to show that they were 'doing something with their lives' despite the barriers they faced. They were 'ordinary' young people, like others in their age group but had differing experiences of unemployment and education, and were facing different challenges in their lives, making it difficult to treat them as a homogenous category.

*Keywords:* NEET, unemployment, stereotypes, young people, ethnographic research

## Introduction

During the 2008–2013 recession NEET young people were viewed as one of the most vulnerable groups, leading to fears and warnings over the creation of a 'lost generation' (Wearden, 2010) and questions about a 'generation at risk' (International Labour

Organization, ILO, 2013). Similar concerns are now being raised due to the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The most recent statistics suggest that 797,000 young people (aged 16 to 24 years) in the UK were NEET in October to December 2020. This accounts for around 11.6 per cent of the 16–24-year-old population (Office for National Statistics, ONS, 2021). Within the EU, 12.6 per cent of the population aged 15–29 years are NEET (Eurofound, 2020).

Existing research has criticised the term NEET and its use as a service intervention label (Furlong, 2006; Hutchinson, Beck & Hooley, 2016; Yates & Payne, 2006), challenging negative connotations and homogeneity associated with the term. Despite this, few studies have asked those who are NEET how they define themselves and their situation. Other than the negative perceptions associated with NEET, little is known about how these young people see themselves (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Instead, research has tried to categorise certain groups who are in this situation; looking at the size, composition, and characteristics of the group, and attempting to outline possible ‘triggers’ of NEET status (Eurofound, 2012; Nudzor, 2010; Yates & Payne, 2006).

Hearing from young people themselves allows those who are associated with the category of NEET to be better understood, giving insight into the support these young people need. Parry (2020) discussed the importance of breaking down unhelpful stereotypes to support young people’s transition to the workplace, acknowledging the difficult situation they face within the labour market and myths around ‘millennials’ being lazy, entitled snowflakes. Research can play a role in challenging some of the more entrenched and inaccurate assumptions about young people that infiltrate political discourse and public opinion (France, 2007, p.165 cited in Simmons & Thompson, 2011).

### **NEET as a policy category**

The term NEET is a constructed category. In the 1980s, as part of the UK government’s response to a record rise in youth unemployment, changes were made to the official status of the young unemployed (Yates, Harris, Sabates & Staff, 2011). Due to these changes, the unemployed young person essentially ceased to exist; those under 18 years were denied recognition as unemployed workers as they no longer appeared on the official register of those who were ‘unemployed and seeking work’. In a speech given at the 1989 Conservative Party conference, referring to the withdrawal of social security benefits for those aged 16 and 17 years, the British Prime Minister of the time Margaret Thatcher declared that “at 16 [years] unemployment should not be an option” (Griffin, 2013, p.63). This led to a group of ‘undefined’ young people who were out of work but

were not classed as unemployed. Researchers and government officials attempted to look for a new way of labelling those experiencing 'difficult transitions' to work. The term NEET was coined by a senior Home Office official in 1996 (Thompson, 2011). In 1997 the tackling of youth unemployment under the new label 'NEET' became a key youth policy for the new Labour government as part of a wider initiative against social exclusion. It has since remained a major focus of research and policy interest.

According to policy in the UK, a person identified as NEET is either unemployed or economically inactive and is either looking for work or is inactive for reasons other than being a student or carer at home (Delebarre, 2016). Since its conception, the category has expanded. Initially NEET was defined as "those 16–18-year-olds who neither participate in education or training nor have a job" (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p.15). Now the term covers those aged between 16 and 24 years, reflecting growing concerns over graduate unemployment and labour market engagement of other young people over the age of 18 years (Simmons, Russell & Thompson, 2014).

The category is determined by a process of exclusion; if individuals are 'not in education', 'not in employment' and 'not in training' based on the Labour Force Survey (2015). The number of NEET young people is estimated by deducting those in education, employment or training from the total 16- to 24-year-old population. The term NEET is a label of deficit of a group outside the norm. The category supports a totalising discourse that seeks to normalise participation in education and training (Smith & Wright, 2015). The NEET individual is 'othered' making policy intervention desirable and necessary.

The NEET category continues to dominate UK youth policy, being the subject of intensive debate amongst policymakers, media and other social commentators (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). It has also started to be used more widely beyond the UK context. In 2010 NEETs were specifically referred to for the first time in European policy discussions. Within this context it is used to refer to young people aged 15 to 29 years, with the aim of broadening the understanding of "the vulnerable status of young people and to better monitor their problematic access to the labour market" (Eurofound, 2020). Yet the term lacks clarity and is problematic. Yates and Payne (2006, p.329) claim that it "defines young people by what they are not and subsumes under a negatively-perceived label a heterogeneous mix of young people whose varied situations and difficulties are not conceptualised." Young people are grouped together because of their current status, but have different experiences and characteristics, and are facing different challenges. Uncertainty remains over who NEETs are and how they should be defined (France, 2016). The NEET categorisation can be viewed as more inclusive and complex than measuring

youth unemployment; providing evidence of the diverse ways young people are vulnerable and keeping disadvantaged young people on the political agenda (Furlong, 2006). The category covers those who are available for work and seeking employment and those who are not, drawing in a range of individuals who would not traditionally have been regarded as unemployed. It is misleading to assume that the most vulnerable or marginalised groups comprise the majority of the NEET group, even though policy interventions tend to focus on these groups (Maguire, 2015a). Research by Eurofound identified five main subcategories of NEET which included a mix of 'vulnerable' and 'non-vulnerable' young people: a) the conventionally unemployed; b) the unavailable; c) the disengaged; d) the opportunity seekers; and e) the voluntary NEETs (Eurofound, 2012, p.24). However, the policy category is often reduced to the issue of unemployment with the reduction in numbers of NEET young people used as a performance target for youth services (Yates et al., 2011).

Understanding the young people who are placed into the NEET category is important, as how the interaction between young people and the world around them is viewed dictates the nature of intervention which is favoured in any type of youth orientated programme or institution, and the social goals which should be met through such intervention (Wyn & White, 1998). The practices in which young people engage and the meaning they construct therefore cannot be viewed in isolation from broader discourses and practices, and must be interpreted in relation to the discourses constructed by policymakers, researchers, and the media (Simmons et al., 2014). Language and ideas used by organizations can structure the ways that young people see themselves and the social world.

## **Stereotypes of NEET young people**

The impact of negative stereotyping matters to the lives of individuals, including the individuals within this study, as it can lead to stigmatisation, demonisation, and exclusion. Goffman (1968) argues that stigmatising groups is one way in which society controls their behaviour. The government establishes normal-abnormal categories and people are expected to stay within the boundaries of normality (Tyler, 2013). Stigma can therefore be seen as a relationship of devaluation in which an individual is disqualified from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1968). Political rhetoric, policy documents and news media can create stigmatising depictions of marginal populations and groups.

Through stereotyping, NEET young people can come to be seen in certain ways. Simmons and Thompson (2011, p.117) argue that the discourse surrounding NEET "tends to highlight the situation of young people who conform to its stereotypes, constructing

them as more typical than they really are". The negative connotations of NEET status in policy documents and the media "have come to stigmatise and marginalise young people" (Thompson, 2011, p.792).

Many employers not recruiting recent school leavers report deficiencies in 'soft skills', such as time management and self-motivation, as reasons for rejecting young applicants (UKCES, 2011 cited in Simmons et al., 2014, p.100). Employers complain that young people lack the right attitudes and personal qualities, and work experience (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). Media portrayals of young people who are NEET highlight worries that young people are 'unfit' for work; they lack grit, aspiration and the 'right skills' (Adonis, 2013; Cohen, 2013). Young people are therefore not viewed as 'work ready', with employers having to bear the 'risk' of taking on workers who are likely to be a burden rather than an asset (Simmons et al., 2014).

Being NEET is also associated with being lower attaining and as 'practical' rather than 'academic'. Those with low levels of education are three times more likely to be NEET compared to those with tertiary education (Eurofound, 2012) and those who are "disaffected with schooling in the form of exclusion, truancy or bullying" are also found to be at an increased risk of being NEET (Maguire & Rennison, 2005, p.196). A report by the Fabian Society (Brooks, 2014) suggests that the defining characteristic of most 18-year-old NEET young people is low qualifications, especially in English and Mathematics. They therefore tend to be treated as a homogenous group who would benefit from basic skills and work-related learning. The focus is on enhancing skills (e.g., literacy and numeracy) associated with 'employability,' referring to "a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment" (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p.5). They are seen as requiring an alternative to the academic curriculum which failed them at school.

Whether they are viewed as 'unemployable' or non-academic, being NEET is attributed to young people themselves, constructed in terms of their alleged deficits such as lack of skills and motivation or being viewed as delinquent and dysfunctional (Yates et al., 2011). This focus on the individual has led to an often-unrelenting negative discourse that constructs NEET young people as 'other' (Russell, Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Being NEET tends to be seen as a 'problem' with young people (MacDonald, 2011) and they are viewed as needing help. David (2014) argues that much of the literature aiming to address the NEET issue has been written by local government authorities, educational institutions and central government bodies viewing NEET as a problem; with the young

people either being viewed as victims or as individuals who are incapable of changing their circumstances.

Concerns about young people outside education and employment are often motivated by notions of youth as in trouble or at risk of social exclusion. Yet these worries lie alongside concerns about idle and troublesome youth. Simmons and Thompson (2011) suggest that there is a 'dual narrative' in NEET policy where these young people are simultaneously regarded as *in trouble* and *as trouble*. They are a source of trouble in need of control, or victims of trouble in need of protection. These are people who require help to prevent negative consequences now and later in their lives, yet they are also viewed as people who engage in criminal or anti-social activity. As well as low educational attainment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy and care needs, the NEET label has been associated with gang membership, early criminalisation, drug culture and dependency, and prostitution (David, 2014). It has been claimed in government reports (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) that those who are NEET are more likely to offend and be anti-social.

Stereotypes and stigmatisation have been acknowledged in previous studies of NEET young people. Thompson, Russell and Simmons (2014) suggest that political and media discourses around benefits, unemployment and early parenthood were seen to shape the lived experiences of the NEET young people in their research. Several participants were also concerned about stigmatisation brought about by stereotypes. Furthermore, Miller, McAuliffe, Riaz and Deuchar (2015) found that the young people in their study felt situated on the margins of their communities due to the way they were perceived and treated. Age, gender, and the local area in which they lived were all seen to impact upon how they believed they were perceived, with incidents of labelling and stereotyping mentioned frequently.

The assumptions and stereotypes linked to being NEET are inadequate in understanding the lives of these young people. The Children, Schools and Families Committee report (2010) in the UK acknowledged the imperfection of the term; "its use as a noun to refer to a young person can be pejorative and stigmatising". However, the category continues to be used within the development of policy and programmes. Therefore, it is important to understand the individual experiences of young people, exploring how they view their status, how they label themselves and how stereotypes and assumptions related to the NEET category have impacted upon them. It is essential to look at the young people who are associated with this category as individuals and acknowledge their different

experiences. This can help to generate a better understanding of these young people, through which the relevance of NEET as a policy category can be explored.

This research focuses upon how a group of young people on a course for those who are NEET see their own lives. It explores some of the misconceptions and underlying assumptions about those who are NEET, offering different conceptions of them by looking at how they describe themselves. It is important to focus on who they are, rather than rendering them as invisible within a homogenous population of "uneducable and unemployable" (Simmons & Thompson, 2013, p.7). Discourses can shape experiences, and the negative discourses associated with this group could be having a negative impact upon young people who are classed as NEET. This paper will go on to discuss the methods used to uncover the participants experiences, before exploring the findings of the research.

## Method

As the aim of the research was to focus on young people's understandings of themselves and their experiences a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the understandings and perceptions of individuals, and how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives; looking at how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others (Berg, 2009). An ethnographic approach was used to gain an understanding of the individual experiences of the participants; attempting to capture the meanings they created through immersion in their world. According to Montgomery (2006) an ethnographic approach can illustrate and illuminate young people's lives and is one of the best ways of getting information about them. It enables a preference for adapting the focus to what proves available and interesting, rather than imposing an outsider's sense of what is going on; it can be viewed as a 'method of discovery' (Gilbert, 2008).

A specific case was chosen to illuminate the experiences of young people who have spent time being NEET. The chosen organization, a centre for NEET young people run by a charity in central England, allowed me to gain insights other organizations would not be able to provide (Siggelkow, 2007). At this centre young people can gain qualifications in Mathematics, English, Information Communication Technology (ICT), and Digital Arts and Media. They also do one week of work experience and get help with job searching and interview skills in their 'employability' sessions. The students are encouraged to go on to further education or to get a job. This centre was found by

talking to a contact who works with institutions running programmes for NEET young people in central England; and they responded to an email asking for participants.

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Leicester ethics committee. All participants gave informed consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms. To further protect anonymity, the centre where the research took place, and the location, are not referred to by name.

While at the centre, I volunteered as a classroom assistant and worked with two groups of young people between 16 and 24 years of age. One of the groups comprised of 17 members (nine female, eight male), while the other was made up of 10 people (seven female, three male). These were the first two groups to start at the centre and therefore the sample was one of convenience (as they were the only young people I had access to). Due to the ethnographic approach of the study, the sampling was less focused on the people to select for the research, than on the selection of a site for observation (Angrosino, 2007). Sampling proceeded from the relevance of the participants' experiences of being NEET, rather than their representativeness in relation to the NEET population. At the time of the research the young people were not NEET, as they were in training, but they had experienced periods out of education, employment, and training.

I spent two days a week at the centre over a period of four months from January to May 2014. I left when the research came to a natural end with the groups finishing their course. The ethnography was overt, with both the young people and staff at the centre aware that I was a researcher. I carried out observations of classroom sessions, chatted with the young people, and had access to the materials they created in their lessons. I kept a research diary in which I wrote about my observations, conversations, and reflections, generating much data from detailed field notes. I did not ask specific demographic questions, as I wanted the young people to define themselves in their own terms. Therefore, some of the participants ages are not listed as this never came up during my observations and discussions.

In addition, I also collected written accounts to find out about the participants' experiences of unemployment. This activity included an element of photo elicitation. I asked participants to look at images used to illustrate news stories about NEET young people. These images reflected the following description by Brooks (2014, p.17) who asks the reader to close their eyes and imagine two young people who are NEET: *"Many readers will have imagined a pair of male teenagers leaning on an estate wall or standing on a*

*street corner. They are probably wearing hoodies, tracksuit bottoms and trainers. There might be a tower block, chain link fence or a battered playground in the background, under a grey sky or neon lights.*” I did not tell the participants what the images were about and asked them to write down their first impressions of what they saw. They then chose one image and wrote a story about what they thought was happening in that picture. For the second part of the activity the participants created their own newspaper articles which discussed their experiences of unemployment. This offered a different way to capture the narratives of the participants, giving them a chance to tell their stories in their own words. These texts allowed me to generate a more detailed and in depth understanding of the young people, providing a fuller picture of their experiences. Using different ways of collecting data reduced opportunity for bias that may have resulted from pure observation (Angrosino, 2007).

## Analyses

The research explored how the young people described themselves, how they related to the term NEET, how they viewed their current situation, and what their aspirations were for the future. Data was coded and analysed thematically. I searched for patterns in the data compressing it into several themes. Open codes were derived from the data that describe, name, or classify the object under study, or a certain aspect of it. Single words and short sequences of words were used to attach codes to the data line by line. The initial codes were looked at for similarities and differences and grouped together to generate themes. The codes themselves included both constructed codes, taken from the literature, and in vivo codes, taken from the expressions of the participants (Flick, 2009). The individual participants were identified by numbers during analyses, before being given pseudonyms. The findings presented in this paper are focused on the following themes identified in the research: Experience of unemployment, Experience of education and training, and Self-portrayal and reaction to stereotypes.

## Findings

This study found that these young people identified individual deficiencies when discussing potential reasons for their unemployment, which impacted upon their confidence and self-esteem. Yet, this was alongside an acknowledgement that they faced other barriers. They were viewed generally as disengaged learners; however often wider issues had impacted upon their ability to engage with education. A focus on gaining certain qualifications led to frustration and a churn between different

training providers. The participants were viewed as young people (or 'youths'), and were negotiating stereotypes associated with this, alongside those linked with being unemployed. Many of them used the category of 'student' to combat their association with these stereotypes. These findings will be further outlined and discussed in more depth below.

## Experience of unemployment

The participants described their experiences before joining the course; one had been kicked out of college, and a few were 'on the dole' (on unemployment benefits) and 'feeling lost'. Unemployment felt like a personal failure for some of them and there was a focus on their individual shortcomings, with the most common reasons for being unemployed viewed as a lack of work experience and of qualifications. This can be observed in John's (18 years-old) self-description below:

*"A young boy now aged 18 has been out of education for the past year...he now has no education or training to get a job so that he feels he has let his self down and he has failed his family."*

Low confidence and self-esteem were common. When asked to describe herself Bella (20 years-old) wrote the word 'self-conscious'. These feelings were exacerbated by a failure to find employment; *"Having to go out, look for work, going to interviews and not getting a job puts your confidence down, making you lose motivation of looking for work, makes you feel like you want to give up"* (Tim, 19 years-old). Participants spoke about being unmotivated, feeling down, and feeling dreadful when you keep getting rejection letters. Fear and lack of motivation were discussed as barriers by some participants.

One of the aims of the staff at the centre was to build the confidence of the young people, and a number of the students did feel like this had been achieved. Reflecting on their time at the centre on the last day Olivia stated, *"they have helped me loads with my confidence and stuff"* (Field notes, 01/05/2014). However, for some this confidence was tied to the context of the centre and this sense of self-esteem diminished once they left the course. For example, Charlotte (23 years-old) clearly grew in confidence during the programme. She claimed that before she attended, she did not talk to anybody and did not ask for help, but now she *"talked a bit more"* (Field notes, 16/04/2014). The tutors noticed that she had become a lot more vocal and had more confidence. However, this newly found confidence was linked to how comfortable she felt around the other staff and students. When Charlotte attended a different course, she reverted to being disengaged and quiet.

In addition to individual barriers related to qualifications and confidence, wider issues were also acknowledged. This study found that some of these young people felt discriminated against. One participant claimed they were 'unemployable' due to their age:

*"Many teens in local areas where there are lots of jobs going are ready for work, some qualified and some not. Just because of how old they are and the price of insurance cost to companies means they are exempt from employability and therefore bracketed as an 'unemployable' age range".*

There was a feeling amongst some in the study that employers were not giving young people an opportunity.

Other barriers highlighted were associated with the economic pressures the young people faced, with lack of money, issues with transport, no internet access and instability (including lack of a secure place to live). They needed money to get a job but needed a job to get money. Issues related to physical and mental health were also identified. Amongst the two groups there were students with depression and anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, body dysmorphia, cerebral palsy and epilepsy. In addition to this, the impact of the recession on the job market was discussed; *"there is not enough availability of jobs because quite a lot of people try applying for the one job."* (Gabby).

Being unemployed was generally constructed as a negative situation; *"It makes me feel down when I don't have a job"* (Tania). Nathan suggested that *"unemployed young people feel they have nothing to live for"*. Being out of work was related to having no social life, not meeting new people, being lonely, and being homeless. Feelings of boredom were common:

*"Unemployment for me wasn't good at all. Although I tried doing stuff around the house and friends' houses, I got so bored. I tried keeping up with hobbies like football, and painting, but there's only so much you can do. I always used to try and do something to keep me occupied."* (Liam)

Other negative consequences of being unemployed were listed as having no money, having no experience, losing motivation, having no routine and lacking independence: *"Being out of work is a horrible feeling, not having no money in your pocket, not able to treat yourself or others. Everyone loves money."* (Tim, 19 years-old)

However, one of the young people suggested that being unemployed and 'on benefits' was not a problem:

*"I am not bothered about having a job or not, as you don't need a job to be happy... You don't need money to (make a living) have a healthy lifestyle. The way you live your life and the people around you is what makes you happy. When someone else is providing for you, you don't need to provide."* (Ian, 19 years-old)

Other participants were conflicted. Nathan struggled with the idea of whether being unemployed and on benefits was a good or bad thing; "*this country does not make it easy to choose*". He described how he would like to be in full-time employment someday and he knows that he cannot live on benefits for the rest of his life. However, he felt he could do so much more with his time while he was unemployed and being on benefits meant he could get everything like medicine for free. Being unemployed was therefore not always viewed as problematic.

### Experience of education and training

Alongside experiences of unemployment, the participants also discussed their education and training. Many of them had negative experiences of previous education. Some told stories of struggle and disrupted learning due to health or behavioural issues, or changes in living arrangements or circumstances. One participant had been in a serious car accident which affected his final year of school, while another had been kicked out due to anger issues. Bella (20 years-old) was not allowed to finish her college course when she got pregnant, even though she had been willing to take the work home. Others did not enjoy school or felt that they had not been supported.

Amongst the young people who struggled in education, it was not a simple story of them being non-academic and choosing to be disengaged. There were wider issues in their lives that impacted on and affected their ability to engage. In addition to this, disengagement for some young people was only related to specific subjects which they struggled with and therefore lacked confidence in. During their time at the centre Mathematics was particularly problematic for some of the participants; "*I hate Maths. I want to throttle Maths.*" (Olivia, Field notes 28/04/2014)

Some of the young people in the study did see themselves as academic, describing themselves as 'smart' or 'nerdy'. Bonnie suggested that she was 'literate', John (18 years-old) liked Maths, while Matt was good at coding and enjoyed doing puzzles and Sudoku. Some at the centre suggested they were there to work and learn. They got annoyed if it seemed like they were having their time 'wasted' in lessons; they wanted to be productive. A few of the participants complained that some in the centre were there for the wrong reasons or messed around too much. For example, some of the students did not want to work in a group with one of the participants as they thought that she was there "*just so that she had something to do during the day*" (Field note, 05/03/2014). Similarly, during the morning session a couple of the students were talking about those who were absent; "*If they cannot be bothered to come in, they should not be on the course.*" (Field notes, 02/04/2014)

Despite having differing attitudes towards education, training courses were seen as important as they enabled the participants to gain skills and qualifications which would help them into work. There was a focus on getting qualifications in Mathematics and English; subjects which were seen as essential to getting a job or going on to further education. Due to this, a process of churn between different training providers was apparent among the participants as they strived to get these qualifications through a series of short-term programmes. Altogether the students mentioned five other providers which one or more of them had engagement with. Most of these courses were based around functional skills (i.e., Mathematics and English), work experience and confidence building, offering something similar to the current programme the participants were on.

Frustration was evident amongst some of the participants that they were just being moved from one course to the next; *"I have had some help from school and [from a specific youth service] but so far all I have been able to do is college courses"* (Gabby). Demi (24 years-old) described how she has been at 'college' (by this she meant engaged in education with different providers) for six years and was hoping that this current course could guarantee her a job (Field notes, 12/2/2014). Due to the frustration of being unable to find a job, participants questioned the education and training they had done; *"for me, I've gone through school, college and training, all for what? I've had no job; come out of the training I've had and sometimes I think 'What is the point?'"* (Nathan)

### Self-portrayal and reaction to stereotypes

As well as their experience of education, training and unemployment, participants demonstrated an awareness of stereotypes linked with being young and unemployed, however this did not expand to labelling themselves as NEET. When asked what the acronym NEET stood for none of the participants knew. The young people all thought that the 'T' stood for something to do with teens or teenagers: *"not employed...not even employable teens."* (Field notes, 10/03/2014)

The category seems to be associated with 'youths' however the participants had different understandings of themselves in relation to the notion of being a 'youth' or an adult. Leanne (16 years-old) who was the youngest on the course got offended by people calling her a kid:

Ian: *"You are 16. You are not an adult"*

Leanne: *"I can still go swimming for free, but I have to pay full fare on the bus."*

(Field notes, 03/02/2014)

Some of those over 18 years old saw themselves as adults. When asked to describe themselves some of the most common personality traits listed were mature and responsible, however one of the students listed immaturity as a barrier to gaining employment. Ian (19 years-old) argued that at 20 you are an adult. While Bella (20 years-old) suggested *"when you are 20 you are not a teenager but not quite an adult."* (Field notes, 30/04/2014)

The role of the media and negative stereotypes associated with young people was acknowledged by the participants. Simon argued that young people in general are stereotyped even though there are lots of positive things which they do such as community work. He described how he went on a scheme where they went camping for two weeks before carrying out community projects. (Field notes, 7/4/2014)

Alongside being 'youths', the participants were also negotiating stereotypes associated with being unemployed. Being 'on benefits' was linked with feelings of shame and embarrassment; *"sometimes I feel embarrassed to tell people I don't work because I don't like relying on others"* (Nina, 18 years-old). Some of the participants suggested that they were claiming money they did not deserve, with one of the young people describing how she felt like she was 'stealing' from the *"people who go out all day and work for this money."* (Katy, 19 years-old)

The participants felt that they would be judged by others for being unemployed:

*"Telling someone that you sign on (to unemployment benefits) and them judging you saying that you're a dole dosser (someone taking unemployment benefit and doing nothing) ...the feeling is horrid"* (Tim, 19 years-old).

Some of them suggested that their age made the situation worse, with society seen to be 'looking down' on them:

*"When I'd get off the bus, I'd walk the 10-minute walk to the Job Centre where I'd hand in my booklet and get told by the women on the desk to sit down and wait for my name to be called. I can see the disgust in her eyes 'that girl's only 18 and has no job."* (Katy, 19 years-old)

*"I feel that as an unemployed youth I am looked down upon...A lot of people completely removed from the situation have a lot to say and do about the subject. That is a problem."* (Bonnie)

They therefore felt they needed to show that they did want to work, and they had been looking for work:

*"I tried almost every way of getting at least some money with no success, I tried applying/getting a job...it is bothering me massively as to where I was starting to hate myself and everyone around me."* (Neil)

Participants demonstrated that they were trying to get a job and their current situation was not down to laziness or lack of effort. Some of the students focused on how many job applications they had put in to highlight how hard they were working; *"I have Job Centre today I've applied for 15 jobs but still no reply"* (Katy, 19 years-old). Similarly, Olivia suggested that she had handed out over 30 CVs (referring to a curriculum vitae document used when applying for jobs) but had not heard anything back yet.

To further distance themselves from stereotypes around unemployment, while they were on the course the participants constructed their identities around being 'students'; *"I go to a charity-based education centre, thus pushing me out of the NEET bracket"* (the use of the term NEET by this young person came after they had been introduced to the term by me). The staff at the centre referred to them as students and the young people would even update their social network to let people know that they were *'at college'*. (Field notes, 5/3/2014)

The findings demonstrate that the participants were impacted by stereotypes linked to NEET young people, as well as wider discourses around 'youths' and unemployment. However, for many young people, NEET is only a temporary status. Being unemployed was not central to who the participants in this research were; their employment or educational status was not a main aspect of their identities. They defined themselves through their personal characteristics, their relationships with others and their interests and hobbies. While some young people did see themselves as 'different' this was not related to them being unemployed or disadvantaged, it was based on them viewing their interests as being at odds with, or outside of, what is seen as 'popular' or 'mainstream'. It was not seen as a negative thing but was linked to the idea of being 'unique'.

Overall, the research outlines the experiences of these young people in relation to both their education and unemployment, as well as their reactions to stereotypes related to being young and unemployed. The implications of these findings in relation to some of the NEET stereotypes outlined previously will be discussed below to demonstrate the potential impact and issues with the misconceptions and assumptions associated with the category.

## Discussion

The main stereotypes identified in this research were associated with NEET young people being 'not employable', non-academic and lazy. The implications of these labels for those who are associated with the category, and the usefulness of these stereotypes in helping

us to understand those who are NEET will be outlined in this discussion, alongside an acknowledgement of the limitations of the research and potential applications.

## Young and unemployable

Similar to previous studies, this study found that young people do not describe themselves as NEET, nor do they identify with the concept, placing the category firmly within the discourse of policymakers (Rose, Daiches & Potier, 2012; Yates & Payne, 2006). However, stereotypes and generalisations linked to the category did have an impact upon them. Lack of qualifications, work experience and low confidence were seen by most as reasons for them being unemployed. The findings are consistent with prior research that shows how NEET young people feel hampered by their low skill levels (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016), and they often attribute their status to individualised factors (Simmons & Thompson, 2011).

Alongside this discussion of individual deficiencies linked to unemployment, there was also an acknowledgement of other barriers which these ‘not even employable teens’ faced. Like previous studies of NEET young people, there was some discussion of age discrimination by employers (Pemberton, 2008) and age being felt to be a cause for prejudice among young people (Miller et al., 2015). A local report on employment skills and training supported the participants' views, suggesting that employers were not creative in encouraging the employment of young people through a failure to provide apprenticeships and support their progression (Economic Development Transport and Tourism Scrutiny Commission, 2015). Other barriers were associated with a lack of money, reflecting the feelings of young people in Russell's (2016) study who expressed frustration regarding their financial situation, and issues related to physical and mental health. Goldman-Mellor et al., (2016) argue that NEET is an economic and mental health issue, rather than a motivational one. However, the focus on the individual deficiencies within policy and programmes aimed at NEET young people means that other barriers young people are facing may not be taken into account.

Interventions aimed at NEET young people can sometimes focus on achieving a change in status, rather than sustaining this change. While the aim of courses based around ‘employability’ are to increase the confidence of those they work with, focusing on individual reasons for unemployment can contradict this aim as young people concentrate on what is wrong with them, rather than on their strengths and abilities. In addition to this, while confidence may be boosted in the short-term, if students struggle once they leave the programme, they will continue to blame themselves, negating this

impact on self-esteem. This became apparent among some of the young people in this research. Soft skills and self-esteem cannot be taught directly but need to be developed through positive learning experiences and relationship building (Beck, 2015).

## **Non-academic and disengaged**

As well as the focus on individual deficiencies, NEET young people are often viewed as a homogenous group of learners, who are non-academic and different to other young people (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). However, this research demonstrates that the assumptions made about these young people being disengaged does not take into account their wider lives and experiences. Disengagement appears to be represented as a choice rather than something which can be forced onto young people. In addition to this, disengagement for some of the participants was related to certain subjects. The problematic relationship of some of the students with Mathematics does not make these young people different to other learners. Previous research has demonstrated that students experience Mathematics as difficult, abstract, boring and irrelevant (Osborne et al., 1997 cited in Hodgen, Küchemann, Brown & Coe, 2010, p.155). Stereotyping those who are NEET as non-academic and disengaged therefore does not help to understand the experiences of these young people.

The rejection of conventional academic educational approaches in programmes for NEET young people is based on the assumption that all NEET youths have negative experiences of education, however this is not the case (Beck, 2015). Whilst the majority of the participants in this research did have negative experiences, some did not. They were a varied and diverse group, with different experiences and abilities, similar to the young people in the work of Simmons and Thompson (2011).

As well as courses generally being aimed at the non-academic and disengaged, there is also a lack of focus on the quality of programmes. Young people can take part in a plethora of training programmes which tend to be offered by providers outside of mainstream educational institutions. These are usually aimed at enhancing employability, however, often make little to no difference in moving them towards meaningful employment (Miller et al., 2015). Churn between different training providers was evident in this study and has previously been highlighted in the research of Thompson et al. (2014) who found the young people in their study became trapped in a cycle of 'inadequate provision'. The frustration demonstrated by some of the participants was similar to the young people in the work of Simmons et al. (2014) who were becoming dispirited due to repeated participation in training courses. Being in education or training

can be disaffecting if people get disillusioned with the programme they are on, or if they find that it does not lead to anything (Russell, 2016).

### Lazy, unemployed 'youths'

Alongside problematic assumptions about NEET young people being non-academic, the view of the participants as 'youths', which was evident amongst the practitioners on the programme, suggests that there is a lack of understanding of the much wider and older age group that have come to be associated with the NEET category (Maguire, 2015b). This is also reflected in media representations of NEET young people which tend to portray images of hooded young people on housing estates.

As well as being 'youths', the participants in this research were also negotiating structures that positioned them as unemployed, lazy and dependent on benefits (Russell, 2016). They highlighted strategies, such as dropping off CVs to employers, to demonstrate that they did not want to remain unemployed. Simmons et al., (2014) argue that in some cases these 'unsolicited applications' of dropping CVs off at employers' premises serve a partly symbolic function to demonstrate that the young person is doing something to find work. The participants generally did not attempt to challenge stereotypes around being young and unemployed, instead trying to distance themselves from them, particularly through labelling themselves as 'students'. Their association with the notion of being a student allowed them to 'become somebody' (Beck, 2015). Being in a learning situation constituted being 'somewhere' rather than 'nowhere'.

Due to this categorising of diverse people into one status, there is a contradiction within the literature, with NEET being viewed as a problem group of young people from poor backgrounds, or as a normal phase which a lot of young people experience. While one of the young people identified herself and the others on the course as '*disadvantaged*', the research highlights how they are 'ordinary young people with interests like others their age'. Viewing this group as NEET does not help to understand them or their lives. For most NEET is only a temporary status. The things which matter to young people themselves, such as their interests and relationships, should be acknowledged. NEET is not a central element of their self-identities and therefore focusing on other aspects of their lives will help to demonstrate what they have, rather than what they are seen to lack (Phillips, 2010).

## Limitations

There are limitations to the data that was collected. The period of my research was limited by the length of the programme and I lost contact with the participants once they left the centre. I was therefore unable to track their progress or to go back to them with the themes which emerged from the ethnography and explore some of the issues further. My research only provides a snapshot of the lives of these young people during their time on the course. I have also not managed to capture the full heterogeneity of the category. As they were taking part on a course, they had chosen to engage with education and training, and therefore they were not NEET at the time of the research. The way they defined themselves and their situation was influenced by the centre they were attending. They were able to describe themselves as students. In addition to this, the generalisability, and the ability to summarise and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of studies within one setting has been questioned. Yet, while the findings of this study relate to the specific context within which the research was conducted, it may have wider implications.

## Practical applications

The potential practical applications of this research relate to the support those who are classified as NEET may require. The findings suggest that there is a need for diverse, quality programmes and courses for young people, and that they would benefit from individualised, longer-term support. The focus of policy tends to be on access to and participation in education and training, however the quality of this provision matters. Courses need to be developed which outline clear progression opportunities and meaningful destinations. What is 'meaningful' will vary. The category covers a diverse group. There is therefore an argument for a more individualised focus, and a range of different courses (which go beyond a focus on employability and functional skills).

Focusing on education or work-based progression can be too narrow for certain young people who are experiencing a range of problems. There is a need for an approach to understanding young people and targeting intensive support that takes into account characteristics, situations and difficulties they actually experience, rather than an overriding focus on their NEET or EET status (Yates & Payne, 2006). A young person's NEET status may not be the most salient or useful thing to know, and a focus on this may divert attention from other more immediate risks which might exist in their lives. Learning and employment may not feature prominently on their list of immediate priorities. They may need to overcome other problems before being ready to move into

education, training, or work. There needs to be a wider focus and an acknowledgement that young people can make progress in different ways.

The focus on 'inclusion' in education, employment, or training can also lead to a lack of acknowledgement of the value of care work, voluntary work, friendships, and other spheres of inclusion (Axford, 2008 cited in Rose et al., 2012, p.258–259). A focus on 'soft outcomes' (e.g., building confidence and self-esteem) is discouraged by the setting of NEET reduction targets. There is a case for setting these 'softer' targets. Creating more positive alternative discourses based around wider notions of progress and success could help to challenge the discourse of deficiency currently evident in policy and provision.

There should therefore be a focus on developing longer-term, more specific and specialist support, for example the development of individually focused programmes that value the contribution of young people to society. Longer programmes would offer more consistency and longer-term social and emotional support. The approach taken should be concerned with meeting the needs of young people in a purposeful manner and should not be principally concerned with reducing jobless figures for short-term political reasons.

## Conclusion

It can be argued that NEET young people have been stereotyped, with the blame being placed on the individual rather than looking at wider social issues and other aspects of their lives. Policy and practice remain focused on the value of education and training, and the assumptions made about young people could be adding to the barriers they face by generating negative stereotypes. This research went beyond the stereotypes, to explore how a group of young people with experience of being NEET define themselves and their situation.

The research highlights how they are 'ordinary' young people. However, they have been labelled in policy as different and set apart due to the course they are attending and their experiences of being out of education, employment and training. They are viewed as different types of learners and as disengaged and deficient, with a need to overcome individual barriers to become 'employable'. The participants did not reject stereotypes related to being young and unemployed but attempted to distance themselves from these. They also acknowledged some of the wider barriers they were facing such as the impact of their age, economic factors and mental and physical health issues. The focus of short-term training programmes is on qualifications and work experience, meaning there is

little opportunity to focus on these wider issues. The emphasis on individual deficiencies limits the impact of policy and initiatives aimed at NEET young people. There is a need to look more widely at young people's lives and take into account the structural, as well as the individual, barriers.

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