
Young men not in education, employment or training: a critical perspective

Danny Connelly

The term NEET was coined in 1996 by a British Home Office official to describe 16-18 year olds outside education and work, driven in part by the disqualification of most 'under 18s' from many state benefits, including unemployment benefit, in the late 1980s. Thus, the use of the term 'unemployed' to describe such individuals became technically inaccurate, at least in official circles. Initially 'status zero', an epithet based on careers service records, was then used as an alternative classification, although this clearly carried negative connotations and the somewhat awkward phrase 'not in education, employment or training' was then devised as a supposedly more neutral alternative. Arguably, though, the rise of the term NEET is also part of a broader shift in political discourse whereby various social and economic phenomena have, over time, been recast as deriving largely from individual failings rather than the structural inequalities in which they are based. Either way, perhaps unsurprisingly, the term NEET soon also became stigmatised, although its use has expanded over the years and it is now commonly used to describe those under the age of 25 who are not in education or employment. In some nations, NEET is applied to 'young people' up to the age of 29 - and, in some cases, up to 35! There are, of course, numerous problems associated with all this but, whilst the NEET category always contained a broad range of individuals in a variety of objective and subjective circumstances, arguably its application to such a wide age range means that NEET has become a chaotic concept devoid of much explanatory power.

Either way, over two decades after the term was first created, NEET young people continue to be stereotyped as the epitome of failure. Such

discourses usually point to a lack of aspiration and/or skills, moral turpitude, or various other forms of personal or educational deficiency. There is a lack of critical awareness, at least in official circles, about the processes of social and economic dispossession and enforced marginality that many young people have experienced, especially those from working-class backgrounds. The reality is that NEET, despite official discourses to the contrary, is predominantly an issue of social class, and only by connecting NEET young people to broader historical and socio-economic change can their position be understood.

Collapse

Arguably, the roots of NEET as a policy discourse can be traced back to the collapse of Britain's traditional industrial infrastructure from the early 1970s onwards, although the election of Mrs Thatcher at the end of that decade accelerated the demise of much of the UK's manufacturing base. Thatcherism brought a sharp ideological shift and an abandoning of the social-democratic policies which had characterised the so-called post-war consensus. This was replaced by social and economic neoliberalism anchored in discourses of competition and choice, privatisation, and quasi-markets which led, in turn, to rapid deindustrialisation and economic restructuring - accompanied by mass unemployment across much of Britain, especially among young people. Arguably, all this was part of a deliberate strategy of neutralising working-class power, and an attempt to curtail the threat to capital accumulation posed by

trade union power and the redistribution of wealth associated with the welfare state.

Many traditional working-class jobs, especially in manufacturing industry, have, over time, been largely replaced by part-time, temporary and casualised service sector employment. Much of this work is filled by increasing numbers of older women, migrants, semi-retirees, redundant workers 'trading down' and so on, primarily to the detriment of young working-class men, but also many young women too. It would be fair then to say that there is no longer a coherent youth labour market today, rather an identifiable 'secondary' labour market characterised by poor quality, low-paid and insecure employment, in which working-class adults and young people compete for similar forms of poor work, interspersed with various forms of 'employability' training which purport to equip them for the rigours of employment but which rarely help them find secure work (Simmons, et al. 2014). Working-class youth have therefore been systematically marginalised - their employment and communities effectively shattered by processes of social and economic restructuring.

For many young people, transitions from youth into adulthood are now increasingly protracted, delayed and disordered, and sometimes suspended almost indefinitely (Allen and Ainley, 2010). Established processes of social reproduction have been disturbed and obscured as traditional class structures and the certainties associated with them have been all but destroyed by the neoliberal project which has come to dominate Western societies such as the UK. Yet despite this, social class still influences many young people's orientations towards work and life, as choice and ambition are still heavily influenced and constrained by class. Individualisation does not necessarily equate to emancipation, although structural inequalities have largely been recast in terms of the individual's ability to respond to the disadvantages facing them. Research from the north of England shows how the interaction of class, space and place can serve to perpetuate and reproduce poverty and inequality by closing down opportunity and limiting possibilities for escaping such conditions, entrapping young people in economic marginality (see Shildrick, et al. 2012; Simmons, et al. 2014; Connelly, 2018).

The role of education in all this is both complex and problematic, although successive governments have promoted the notion that increased participation in post-compulsory education and training will help resolve the predicament in which many young people now find themselves. Youth unemployment has effectively been recast as a problem of educational participation - shifting the blame onto the individual through discourses about a

lack of skill or other deficits which supposedly make many young people unemployable. In reality, most young people nowadays are in fact overqualified and underemployed, particularly when compared to previous generations (Ainley and Allen, 2010). Yet, despite this, employability training programmes are promoted as *the* solution to youth unemployment.

Youth training courses are, however, nothing new, and can be traced back to the Youth Opportunities Programme, the Youth Training Scheme, and similar initiatives aimed at unemployed young people during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Simmons, et al (2014) argue that many training courses today are effectively warehousing many young people and concealing unemployment rates, without offering much labour market advantage. My own research (Connelly, 2018) has found that many young people reject employability programmes because they perceive them to be repetitive, condescending, and frankly a waste of time. All the young men who took part in my research claimed they are already 'work ready' and want stable employment, to earn money, and to ultimately construct a dignified life based upon a secure economic identity. The harsh reality, though, is that NEET young people often 'churn' repeatedly between various poor training schemes, transient, temporary, poor-quality work, and then, back to NEET status - and arguably this is due to lack of meaningful labour market opportunities as much as any personal or individual shortcomings.

Failures

My research also explored why those who took part in the study became NEET and many participants pointed to an educational career characterised by failure as a major contributory factor. Education is viewed in official discourse as a progressive force which can combat social exclusion, promote economic competitiveness, and drive social mobility. Education can, however, also serve to perpetuate and in some cases exacerbate inequality and reinforce the marginalisation of working-class youth. Educational inequality results in an unequal distribution of educational and economic rewards, and therefore is reproductive of social inequality, in both education and elsewhere.

During the course of my research, it became apparent to me that working-class educational disadvantage is two-fold. On one hand, the participants' disadvantages associated with their home life (both cultural and material) made it difficult for them to focus and achieve in education. On the other hand, their working-class culture not only put them at a disadvantage but also simultaneously reproduced the class inequalities that persist in

formal education. My research with NEET young men found that many of them feel extremely disconnected from education and training, because it doesn't 'fit' with their cultural identities and investments (dress, style, speech, *et cetera*), which are, in many ways, embodiments of their class. Participants in my research often discussed how education was not for 'people like us', explaining how they felt they didn't 'fit in' with education's dominant middle-class culture. This, in turn, led to internal dilemmas and battles between their primary working-class social identity and dominant neoliberal discourses of aspiration and social mobility. Stahl (2015) discusses how it has become increasingly difficult and complicated for working-class youth to combine academic success with a traditional and respectable working-class identity - exploring what it is to be an upwardly mobile neoliberal subject, and simultaneously authentically working-class.

My research findings suggest that many young working-class men reject or disengage with education in a counter-narrative to neoliberal discourses, by choosing to stay loyal to their working-class cultural identity. This seems to make more sense than to try to aspire to a class and culture that is almost alien to them, and could leave them open to vulnerability. More often than not, they reject and disengage with education. Loyalty to their cultural identity takes precedence over any socially-mobile aspirations because it's an established source of value within a local context. In Britain's consumerist, status-based culture, we often see the marketisation of unattainable lavish lifestyles, particularly with the rise of social media, which often leaves working-class youth feeling ashamed and devalued. So maintaining and protecting their working-class identity is crucial in maintaining a source of value for themselves through the local value system of their culture, which encompasses various social practices and tastes that provide safety with a sense of collective solidarity. Paradoxically, though, such practices can also serve to reinforce their marginalisation, as working-class culture and identity has been progressively demonised, devalued and problematised by neoliberalism.

Stereotypes

Despite populist stereotypes about the causes of poverty and unemployment, research suggests that many NEET young people actually have quite traditional values and aspirations for a job, a home and family life - although many of them do have low expectations - or, in other words, they see their future as bleak. There is nevertheless little evidence

of an identifiable underclass, at least culturally, although it is clear that certain individuals and groups have experienced far-reaching processes of 'economic marginalisation' which have, in some cases, led to feelings of anger, frustration and alienation (Simmons, et al. 2014; Connelly, 2018).

Meanwhile, NEET as a discourse holds marginalised young people accountable for their own predicament, often with moralistic connotations and derogatory overtones. Simmons, et al (2014) assert that being NEET is predominantly a social class issue related to structural inequality, in the form of living in deprived neighbourhoods, coming from a poor family background and having low educational attainment; and such matters have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the dynamics of neoliberal policy. Simmons and colleagues argue that individual agency is important, but also that life chances are shaped by the broader social structures in which young people live. My research supports this line of argument. It finds that choices are not made within a vacuum - the decisions which young working-class men make are often a cultural adaptation to the strains of structural inequality, and a lack of meaningful labour market opportunities for working-class youth, both in education and in the workplace.

References

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