‘A very NEET construction’ – social change or engineering?

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Abstract

The problem of youth unemployment and engagement with post compulsory education is a common concern in developed countries. Neoliberal discourse proposes that the purpose of education is economic and ‘unproductive’ youths are seen as a problem to be solved. This report argues that the group referred to as NEET is a socio-political construct founded on a deficit discourse and leading to the problematisation of a group whose issues and needs vary greatly. It examines some of the reasons for this situation in terms of power and structure / agency and draws conclusions as to the efficacy of some strategies for intervention or re-engagement.

Introduction

In the last few decades the English education system has been subjected to Government ‘policy’ which at times may be argued to go beyond the traditional remit of ‘schooling’. Education policy has long combined considerations of schooling with a welfare agenda (Finch, 1984) and could be argued to have been used as a vehicle by successive governments to attempt, through change initiatives, a form of social engineering to address what Ball refers to as “the problem of social order, social authority and stability” (Ball, 1994, p.5). This may be particularly apparent in regards to those who fail to meet the expectations of policymakers in terms of their compliance and conformity for further / higher education or employment.

I will consider the phenomena of the group known as ‘NEET’ (Not in Education Employment or Training) which has developed as an internationally important policy issue over the last 20 years (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). This group may be portrayed as problematic, with a ‘deficit’ discourse perhaps attaining dominance (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2011), where the blame for social exclusion and joblessness is placed on the young people themselves or on the education system. Society and politicians ‘construct’ groups of ‘deficit or difference’ (Finch, 1984) like these, based on their dominant perceptions and beliefs and then project them as ‘problems’, but, it may be argued that the lives of those young people have been “profoundly affected by the conditions arising from social, political and economic change over a period of more than thirty years” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.1).

What is seen as 'problematic' in society may be constructed based on ideology and values held by policymakers, strongly related to issues like 'ethnicity' or 'class', and thus will vary between political parties and administrations. Some may appear to give far more explicit credence to the idea of social mobility and the use of education as a means to better one's chances in life, while others may see education as a way to prepare economic agents for their role in joining the national effort to compete in a global market. Education may be portrayed as a vital ingredient in the process of achieving 'social mobility' and ensuring employability and it would not be illogical to construct policies to support this. This may be driven by a genuine and transparent desire to improve the lot of the poor or socially deprived but could also be seen as a means to ensure the reproduction of social inequality and to try and refocus accountability for social problems away from politicians and onto education professionals.

The use of the education system as a means to deliver change initiatives / social policies to address these 'problems', developing 'Human Capital' in an increasingly market-modelled system (Ball, 1999; Tomlinson, 2005), while simultaneously attempting to have a socially democratic / just system; offers quite a challenge and particularly during periods of substantial and rapid reform as we are currently seeing. There is also the added dimension that the 'failure' of our system (Finch, 1984; Tomlinson, 2005), has been promoted through political and media discourse as a cause of some of the issues it is supposed to be helping to solve.

Within this paper, I intend to explore the socially constructed 'problem' of the NEET group and how this has been addressed. Is the 'reality' of the problem of NEET as simple as policy discourse may suggest or more subtle and varied – is the group homogenous and are 'one size fits all' approaches suitable? I intend to draw on a range of ideas but particularly the work of Ball, Bourdieu, Foucault and Giddens and will consider the role power, structure and agency play in these processes.

I recognise the complexity of the term 'policy' (Ball, 1994) and will be using the term to describe 'intended policy' – whether as text or discourse; as enacted by the Department for Education and passed on to the various stakeholders within the field of schooling for implementation as 'practice'.

Policy and Power

> "Schools in the UK are currently faced with a reform package which includes not only a new national curriculum but also changes in school governance, management and funding, in the roles of local authorities, in student testing and school inspections, in pedagogy and classroom organisation...and in teacher training and teachers' conditions of work and employment"
>
> (Ball, 1994, p.11)

The quote above is almost 20 years old and yet seems immediately recognisable and relevant. Reforms may be rooted in the dominant ideology of the time and it has been argued that we have been continuing down a path of neo-liberal marketisation, driven by a globalised economy (Ball, 2007; Tomlinson, 2005) and a belief that that the primary (if not only) function of education is an economic one. Within this ideology it is believed that:

> "the individual must take responsibility for creating and maintaining themselves as socially and economically useful agents if they are to avoid social exclusion."
>
> (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.32)

This belief may then lead to a situation where: "what might be better interpreted as social and economic problems of society are interpreted as having individual level causes" (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2011) and social 'structural' causes may be ignored or denied. This may result in a 'policy denial' of the possibility that some may chose to employ agency to actively reject responsibility and accept the consequences that society then loads on to them, almost as if non-conformity is unthinkable. However, for some, social exclusion may already be an individual's perceived reality and rejecting responsibility may hold no fear and may not even be seen as a deliberate act of agency by the individual.

Policy can be seen as an "economy of Power" (Ball, 1994, p.10) and therefore acts a site of intensely contested discourse within the fields of education and politics. Although the statement above is reflecting an era of Conservative policy, it reflects a neo-liberal discourse which may still have been recognisable under the New Labour ideology (Hill, 1999). Any contestation within discourse may, at times, seem less between political parties and more

between professionals / academics and press / politicians and current arguments relating to selection, academisation, examinations, funding, curriculum, pedagogy and the roles and responsibilities of education professionals are wide, varied and highly nuanced. This may reflect a lack of trust from policymakers in both the ideas and practices of those required to implement government policy, "the managerial models and techniques which are being used to redesign teaching practices draw upon the low trust, Fordist mode of regulation and control (Fox, 1974)." (Ball, 1999, p.202). This distrust and the active undermining of the professions is a recurrent feature of the last 20 years (Tomlinson, 2005).

Those in a position to use political and legislative power to change our education system may be prone to influence by their own educational experiences, despite societal change within the intervening years. Such influences may find themselves reflected in policymaking as they are able to gather 'credibility and legitimacy' through:

> "narratives of plausibility, including the shared personal narratives 'of significant classes, strata, social categories or groups that have been affected by the development of the post-war economic and political order"
>
> (Ball, 2007, p.1)

Foucault "argues for the imbrication of power with knowledge" (Mills, 1997, p.19), so if the dominant discourse on education policy is shaped by those whose "version of events is sanctioned" (ibid), perhaps sharing a 'class habitus' (Bourdieu in Grenfell, 2008), then whoever is in the position to formulate policy is able to put their ideological stamp on the education system of their time.

> "the content and structure of education express the power of dominant groups to determine the value society attributes to different forms of knowledge, and to distribute such knowledge in ways that serve to maintain their position."
>
> (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.3)

Is it possible that dominant discourse and ideology, undertaken within the individual's social community and practices, may construct the policymaker's view of the world in such a way

as to allow limited acceptance of alternative lifestyles and points of view, extending to a lack of empathy with and understanding of groups or classes who don't resonate within that 'narrative of plausability' or who fail to accept the 'sanctioned' knowledge and conform? If so, there may be a tendency to trivialise or even ignore social factors which result in groups behaving in ways which are different to the social expectations of the policymaker. They, then, are in a position to instigate the construction, in discourse and policy, of groups of 'difference' and structures with which to attempt to 'control' them. In so doing, they may be able to use the system to achieve wider political ends, ultimately 'engineering' and reproducing their preferred social reality over those alternatives and attaining the formation or restoration of their ideal culture (Ball, 1994).

Preventing non-conformism requires social control – directing action / agency, and this may be achieved through explicit 'structures'. These structures exist in many forms from the three dimensional bricks and mortar of the institutions that house the practice of education to the 'structuring' language inherent in the policies, legislation and discourse of practice. Giddens (1979) suggested that: "Structure thus is not to be conceptualised as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production" (Giddens, 1979, p.70), however I would argue that structure can offer strong motivation not to act in certain ways (codes of conduct, sanctions policies) and as educational structures have been argued to favour middle-class children (Ball, 2003) those who do not come from the 'normative' background of the dominant social group may struggle to 'integrate' into that system (Giddens, 1979) – thus a barrier to action is formed. This may happen even though "all social actors, no matter how lowly, have some penetration of the social forms which oppress them" (Giddens, 1979, p.72).

Ensuring conformity is not just an issue for individual actors – but systems, too. Ball has argued that neo-liberal reform has been characterised by the introduction of 'managerialism' and 'performativity' (Ball, 2007) within education, a process approaching, perhaps, a conclusion by the current rapid expansion of the Academy and free schools programme, the massive reduction in local authority power and the explicit use of targets and inspection to control the behaviour of schools and to give "competitive advantage in the modern economy" (Blair 1998 in Tomlinson, 2005, p.220). These reforms introduce

what Foucault may describe as a 'Panopticon' within the system, bringing "the effects of Power to the most minute and distant elements" (Foucault, 1984, p.207). Such an approach may "increase both the docility and the utility of all the elements of the system" (ibid) allowing those with political power to ensure that they are able to both build and 'control' the market by controlling the system and through it the individual actors – an important requirement when competing as a nation economy on the global stage.

Schooling and Social Policy

Understanding why social change initiatives may be enacted through education policy requires an understanding of the broader 'use' of the Education system in England. Prevailing discourse generates "subject positions, social relations and opportunities within policy" (Ball, 2007, p.3) and while the current relations and opportunity are focused around economic factors this has not always been the case. Nineteenth century education discourse was intrinsically linked with concerns over the use of child labour and the establishment of compulsory schooling was seen as a way to address it, albeit via a period of 'half time' schooling (Finch, 1984). From this stems the argument that welfare elements are 'embodied' within our system and that education has always "been an integral part of social policy" (Finch, 1984, p.66). This view is supported through more recent policy history, where David Blunkett identified "developing social inclusion" as a key education policy area in 1999 (Hill, 1999)

Finch goes on to argue that the provision of free school meals and health support are evidence that the system went beyond the "narrowly educational" (Finch, 1984) and that:

> "concern for the wider well-being of children (not merely for their intellectual development) in a sense is fundamental for an education system which is not just universal but also compulsory in nature"
>
> (Finch, 1984, p.66)

While I agree that our system offers this more pastoral element alongside the academic I would challenge the view that it is 'fundamental' to a compulsory system. It is possible to imagine the scenario of compulsory schooling focused entirely on learning and where

provision of other services is done via community centres and the health service. It may be that the political motivation for such provision within the English system is entirely linked to economic efficiency with the school being the sole site of convergence of large groups of children, making large scale health and other initiatives more cost effective. Schools have been asked to support policies and initiatives to target sport participation, healthy eating, sex education, sexual health provision, relationships, careers, community service and employability to name but a few. Schools, although seen as a useful one-stop conduit to deliver these services, being a site for both "surveillance and treatment" (Finch, 1984, p.76) due to their 'universal coverage', remained accountable simply for the educational outcomes of their students. These are all areas which would have been the responsibility of other Government departments such as health or employment and, while other agencies or departments held responsibility and presumably accepted accountability, they perhaps viewed the education system simply as a vehicle for delivery of their initiatives (Finch, 1984).

Many of these initiatives and policies could be classified as "Changes in education designed to produce social change outside the educational system" (Finch, 1984, p.115) one 'type' of social engineering, although this wasn't universally welcomed with the Black Papers stating "schools are for schooling not social engineering) (ibid). Some have been implemented by the external agencies themselves (eg: HpVA vaccinations) and others have been built into educational provision, formally and legally required in maintained schools by the National Curriculum (eg: Personal Social Health and Economic Education PSHEE).

Despite the current 'marketisation' of education in England, I would argue that it continues to retain this welfare underpinning even during the current intense period of reform. We have not returned to a time when parents had to pay for their children's' schooling (unless they choose to do so) and yet it remains compulsory. Free school meals and health services remain part of the system and the current administration claim to have increased the resources for those considered more in need with the introduction of the Pupil Premium. This is an additional element of funding for which the School / Academy is explicitly accountable, and which is monitored by the DfE (Department for Education) and OfSTED (Office for Standards in Education) (DfE, 2012b).

Accountability for some elements of the 'welfare' agenda have also now shifted to schools. I would suggest that this means that some thorny political issues, such as employability, are increasingly concatenated with school performance rather than a government's ability to generate jobs and I will explore this further, later. The link to employment (or the lack of it) has also continued to be a driving factor in increasing the age of participation to 18 and the rationale has been promoted as an economic one:

> "We want to give all young people the opportunity to develop skills and qualifications that will open doors to future employment, help them make the most of their potential, and earn more over their lifetime."
>
> (DfE, 2012a)

It is arguably politically helpful to have a policy which allows the incumbent government to demonstrate a significant reduction in unemployment (even if it is through a statistical method) figures by removing all 16 and 17 year olds from the figures. Additionally, should a 16 - 18 year old choose not to attend the now 'compulsory' post 16 education or training, it ceases to be an employment concern and becomes an educational attendance one with schools / colleges held accountable.

Problematising Youth and constructing NEETs

It is important to understand that the group known as "NEET" is a policy construct. It is not a group of difference as, say, an ethnic or class based group may be, it is a classification applicable to anyone who is not in education, employment or training after the age of 16 and was adopted as an alternative expression to 'youth unemployment' in the mid-1990s (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2011). It has also become a term that has developed negative connotations and may tend to define young people "by what they are not" (Yates & Payne, 2006, p.329)

The genesis of the NEET group lies in the "concerted drive to achieve secondary education

for all in England in the postwar period" (Cowan, McCulloch & Woodin, 2011, p.378) and the significantly changing face of youth employment as traditional industry collapsed across the UK (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). This loss of traditional transitional points for communities of young people into the mines or factories resulted in a fundamental change in the social experiences that had previously 'structured' the lives of generations within those communities.

In my view, the whole process of socialisation and gradual preparation for employment may have been based around the structures of the community and communities tended to be defined by their Industry. The use of language, daily routines (factory sirens, etc) and even recreational facilities such as public houses and working men's' clubs, were part of the fabric of existence. To 'not' become socialised within those structures and relations may have left adolescents excluded and transition to the culture of the employer difficult. Even the potential for social mobility beyond the factory or mine may have been 'structured' with access to managerial posts dependant on Grammar school education.

A Marxist perspective may argue that such structures are 'class relations' and essentially constrain the individual to a pre-determined path: "These relations are the basis on which the society is constructed and reproduces itself over time" (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2010, p.9) and that the relations exist independently of individual choice. While this may be true, the individual still 'has' a choice. They can exercise their 'agency' and choose to leave that society and exclude themselves or to not conform to the traditional expectations by following their own route, such as emigration or by adopting an alternative lifestyle such as criminality.

They *can* refuse to be constrained by the structures they experience, difficult as it may be. I would argue in agreement with Foucault and Giddens, that they hold 'power', that agency and power are linked and that: "a person or party who wields power *could* 'have acted otherwise'" (Giddens, 1979, p.91). I do, however, hold some sympathy for Archer, a critic of 'Structuration theory', who argued for 'anti-dualist' ontology; that there are "no social realities without people, that these realities manifest themselves in the behaviour of people" (Parker, 2000, p.72). Allowing for agency to take action beyond the constraints of a specific system does not disallow the possibility that the action is taking place within a

different system, constrained by different structures – ie: a decision not to take up post-compulsory education despite the structures put in place by the state (NEET policy, benefit control, etc) may be an act of agency within a class / social system defined by the local community or even youth culture.

Having lost the traditional transition to work routes, reduced employment prospects saw greater numbers take up post compulsory education (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Significant issues with 'youth unemployment' then led to the establishment of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) who created training and educational opportunities for those unable to find work in the increasingly difficult economic circumstances. The language of the policy (Manpower Services) may suggest that this was seen very much as an employment issue, rather than one related to 'schooling'. Many of the opportunities offered were criticised for being of poor quality and some argue they were simply a way to manage and disguise youth unemployment (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Finch describes these opportunities as 'palliative' in that they are receiving something (education) "in lieu" of what they need (employment) and that this will "reduce the likelihood that social conflict will ensue.." with "unemployed school-leavers" generating political unrest (Finch, 1984).

Social control, then, may be one factor but another may be more political. High unemployment and the spectre of feckless youth do not lead to positive press and increased political capital. Refocusing the attention away from employment policy and onto education gives a scapegoat upon which to blame the problem. In this case the rationale was promoted as being that if young people were unable to gain employment it was because they hadn't been properly prepared for it by the education system – ie: 'they are unemployable' not 'there are no jobs'. Finch describes this as "an exercise in redefining the problem of youth unemployment" (Finch, 1984, p.163) and if the electorate are willing to accept the argument then there may be political capital to be made by appearing to 'address' it.

In 1972 the Tory Government enacted ROSLA (Raising of the School Leaving Age) lifting the age of compulsory secondary education to 16 (Cowan, McCulloch & Woodin, 2011). This immediately allowed them to lose the 14-16 year olds from the unemployment figures, but the process wasn't painless with great demands on the system in terms of appropriately

trained staff and additional building space – there was also concern that the curriculum simply wasn't appropriate for many of the 14 year olds compelled to stay on at school (ibid).

This process is currently being repeated in England with the 'Raising of the Participation Age' (DfE, 2013) seeing the age of compulsory education or training rise to 18 from 2015. The weak economy which has seen a dearth of employment opportunities for under 18s and a tendency for employers to look for better qualified or experienced adults in preference, whether for the money they can save on training or for the life experience and skills that they bring. This runs parallel to a period of credential inflation where there is a "mismatch between qualification levels and the availability of employment requiring such credentials" (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.29)

NEETs or JWT (Job without training) individuals may come from a range of backgrounds, ethnicities and genders and have very different reasons for being in that category although there is a reasonable level of agreement about common 'risk' factors (see appendix A). Yates and Payne (2006) also identify three key groups from previous research:

- Those in "temporary transitional states that involve a period of being NEET" (eg: waiting for an apprenticeship to start)
- Young people "who make a conscious decision to be NEET for a time to look after their children"
- Young people "who are NEET and who also exhibit a number of complications"

(Yates & Payne, 2006, p.334)

One significant correlation is that of low attainment with almost 80% of NEET classified individuals falling below the 'expected' level of 5 A*-C grades in 2008 (Simmons & Thompson, 2011). Such judgements are based on the attainment of 'good' GCSE qualifications which act as a baseline for progression on to further education and training. This does not, however, provide evidence of universal low ability or poor educational provision. An individual who is suffering from a medical issue which prevents them from attending school is at high risk of becoming NEET, not because they are lacking ability, but because it is difficult to successfully complete a GCSE course if you are not there to do so. Other reasons range from doing Voluntary work or being a young carer to pregnancy and

illness. NfER define this variety as three sub-categories of NEET – 'Open to Learning', 'Sustained' and 'Undecided' NEETs (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012). This complexity or variety leads to a situation where it is "difficult to know anything about NEET young people as a group because their circumstances are too disparate" (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.6).

Where such complexity exists, there may be a tendency to reductionism. In the case of the NEET group there may have been a tendency to reduce them to the lowest denominator with fears that "these young people are out of control" (Wilkinson in Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.65). The policy perspective has been very much one of a deficit issue with NEET being portrayed as "a negative situation, conceptually connected to a locus of disadvantage" (Yates & Payne, 2006, p.330). This has also been reflected in the media in a number of ways. The Daily Mail described them as a "Tribe" (Reporter, 2012) perhaps trying to portray a cohesive but primitive, possibly even savage group. This is combined with pejorative language when discussing the cost to the taxpayer – "The figures are a combination of unemployment **benefits**, **handouts** to mothers, the costs of clearing up **crime** and their **failure** to pay taxes." (Clark & Greenhill, 2009) and labelling them as "Drifters" (Clark, 2006) and "drop-outs" (Cox, 2005) terms which imply a lack of responsibility and conformity. Such categorisation is dangerous in that the category "reifies and constructs the very problem it seeks to address." (Lawy, Quinn & Diment, 2009, p.748) which risks the scenario of some individuals exercising agency and choosing to become NEET as it may, in their perception, offer them social capital within their own social group. Perhaps they receive kudos for rejecting social expectations or directives from bodies of authority (schools, government agencies) or, as Quinn et al suggest of white 'working class' males in such areas, entering Higher Education may have be perceived as "sacrificing traditional aspects of working class cool" (Quinn et al., 2006, p.741)

This bleak portrayal is indicative of the discourse of the right wing media and the opposition at the time, portraying society's problems as a function of a failing education system, rather than of a lack of employment prospects stemming from the destruction of traditional school to work transition routes: "By contrast, most EU countries have seen numbers of ill-educated and untrained young people fall" (Doughty, 2011). In Foucault's terms Discourse

"may seem of little account... but the prohibitions to which it is subject reveal soon enough its links with desire and power" (Foucault 1974 in Ball, 1994, p.22) and in this case the discourse of failure allowed both a political scapegoat and an excuse to reform education along neo-liberal, market based models, reducing the influence and size of the state. Given the diversity of causes of NEET, evidence for such claims must be limited, but such negative discourse may serve a mainly political purpose in its attempt to structure a hegemonic perception of what NEET is and to do so in a way which actively works against the education system and incumbent administration. Ball refers to this as 'Discourses of derision' where progressive, comprehensive education is blamed for the failings in society and a "decline in standards", where teachers are dangerous, politically motivated ideologues and the whole results in social disorder "crisis and chaos" (Ball, 2006, p.28). This strategy was well established in the 1970s and 80s and could be argued to have continued under New Labour and been re-adopted by the Coalition Government today.

It is argued that schools may be responsible for some individuals becoming NEET due to their "poor academic and social skills that promote a general disconnection with the school culture" (Nudzor, 2010, p.15), which may lead to poor progress, disengagement and possibly exclusion. However, while shortcomings are often portrayed as deficits while they should, perhaps be viewed more in the light of 'difference':

> "the argument that schools are at fault in the production of working class 'failure' does not always lead to the conclusion that working class pupils have to be enabled to compete better within the existing system"
>
> (Finch, 1984, p.108)

While being NEET is not exclusively linked to working class backgrounds by any means, there is a strong correlation (Nudzor, 2010) and the impact of a system which essentially reinforces and reproduces middle-class advantage should not be underestimated (Ball, 2003). Some of the common features of secondary schools in England (homework, uniforms, discipline policies, authoritarian teachers, home – school agreements) are structures which reflect the needs and preferences of the middle-class, as well as appeal to educational restorationists (Ball, 1994), such as traditional conservative voters and the right

wing press. For an individual who does not bear the advantages of a middle-class upbringing such structures may actually act as a barrier to achievement within such a system. As Ball comments of the New Labour policy agenda:

> "The explicit commitment to tackling exclusion does not seem to be matched by efforts to maximise inclusion. What I mean by that is that the excluding effects of educational processes themselves remain unaddressed."
>
> (Ball, 1999, p.197)

Not so 'NEET'

The main responsibility for change initiatives related to NEET has fallen to local authorities and the Connexions service (Yates & Payne, 2006) although the financial support for that service has deteriorated rapidly under the coalition government (Reed, 2011). Schools previously played a key role in helping identify and support those 'at risk' of becoming NEET with an aim to intervening – known as 'NEET prevention'.

Targets were set for Connexions which focused on reducing the percentage of those identified as NEET but, target –led behaviour may have focused attention mostly on those who might most easily be moved into employment or training, perhaps neglecting the more acute cases of need (Yates & Payne, 2006). Connexions advisors saw a tension between such targets and the "soft outcomes relating to personal development" that they needed to achieve with individuals (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.98). I would argue that 'targets' are an institutional structure reifying expectation and reward/sanction – sometimes financial – and are (arguably) used by governments to control the behaviour of public bodies / individuals. This fits neatly into the desired culture of performativity, which allows the government to "retain considerable steerage over the goals and processes of the education system" (Ball, 1994, p.10) or, Connexions service, in this case.

NfER (2012) identify two key strategies for tackling the 'NEET' issue at a practical level, "Preventative approaches" and "Reintegration approaches" (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012) although, perhaps contrary to media and policy discourse, they stress the structural causes of NEET status and argue that their status is not a result of 'deficits' in the individuals and that practitioners may only have a "mitigating effect" on NEET status (ibid).

Preventative approaches combine what I refer to as ‘counter-structures’ (structures put in place to counter the effects of the dominant or institutional structures) such as customised curriculum, work experience and access to information, advice and guidance / one-to-one support. There is also stress on the need for “positive relationships with adult role models” and “parental involvement and support” (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p.24). Essentially the purpose of the ‘counter-structures’ would be to either remove NEETs from the cycle of reproduction of the normative structures – moving through a different route; or to support them in adapting to the normative structures in a way which allows them to access the field of reproduction.

I would argue that preventative strategies combine ‘structure’ (courses, qualifications, etc) put in place by the ‘authority’ but also require buy-in from the individual. Buy-in, in this case, could be viewed as a demonstration of the intent of the NEET individual to utilise agency in accepting the support and undertaking the activities setup within the structures. This may sound straight forward, but many potential NEET individuals may have already developed negative experiences in the education sector and may have had significant additional ‘barriers’ to overcome. Combined with the effects of educational and economic poverty, this may have resulted in lower resilience and ‘buy-in’ may be far from assured. Positively accepting support may also be seen as culturally questionable within the NEET peer group or the social community they inhabit and significant determination may have been required to accept ‘negative’ social capital. It may be that this is more likely to be the case where the NEET group feel they had exercised power in the process or structures themselves: “Young people were consulted about these strategies and influenced decisions made about the shape and content of programmes.” (OfSTED, 2010)

For those for whom the process remains unsuccessful, it may be possible to view it as a deliberate act of agency where the individuals choose to exclude themselves. In Gidden’s view this may demonstrate a higher level of knowledge of the social system, which is attempting structure them, than for those who conform and, rather than coming from a deficient understanding, “it is because they know a great deal about the school and the other contexts in which they move that they act as they do” (Giddens, 1984, p.291). What

drives their motivation to reject the pressure to conform would be specific to each individual.

The success of quality one-to-one support from connexions or other mentors is also identified by OfSTED where the specialist support teams were able to "concentrate on specific potentially vulnerable groups, such as care leavers or teenage parents, and to help these young people to resolve their problems." This was identified as being most successful where the support was maintained "through to longer-term adult employment" (OfSTED, 2010, p.5). Nelson and O'Donnell (2012) go further in stating:

> "For those at greatest risk of becoming NEET, support should ideally continue after they leave school and progress into further learning or employment to ensure their continued engagement"
>
> (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p.23)

If we accept that a common issue with NEET individuals is the predominance of lower socio-economic status (Simmons & Thompson, 2011) and the challenge of succeeding in a 'Middle class' system without the trappings of a middle class upbringing (eg: well educated, supportive, even 'pushy' parents) then it is possible to view this as a compensatory structure which provides some of the 'parenting' benefits for the NEET students that a middle class individual may get by default. As has been highlighted already, not all NEETs were from working class backgrounds and in the case of 'middle class' NEETs the support perhaps compensates for some other deficiency eg; drug use, alcoholism, family breakdown.

Re-integration approaches included a range of bespoke 'informal' and 'alternative' training and volunteering programmes, combining employment training with life skills and basic literacies. These were successful where they intervened early and offered a "personalised and flexible approach" (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p.29). Once again, allowing the subjects to exercise power through co-designing their bespoke packages of learning, contributed to success (ibid). Some of the alternative courses used were 'Entry to employment' type activities or qualifications. I would argue the prime purpose of such courses was to keep potential NEETs engaged in education, providing them with access to learning outcomes that they could achieve. This in turn may have supported their personal motivation and incentive to progress further.

Although these strategies may facilitate the engagement of the NEET individual, a criticism may be that the approaches used may not be valued by the potential employers / society at large with their status being limited. Using Bernstein's terms, an example of this is how vocational programmes employ 'horizontal discourses' where "skills seen as transferable are extracted from their original vocational contexts" (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.108) limiting their "effectiveness" and "range of application" (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.109), rather than the 'vertical discourses' associated with "high-status learning, including traditional academic subjects" (ibid).

Alison Wolf was highly critical of such programmes in her review of vocational training (Wolf, 2011) suggesting that many programmes failed to lead to progression to higher level courses and that they "accrue little labour market value" (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.176). This shows the tension between two different policy objectives, one trying to re-engage individuals who have complex issues and a need for personalised support, and the other focused on education as an engine of economic success. The subsequent acceptance of Wolf's recommendations to reduce the availability of such programmes and the reduction of the Connexion service suggest to me that successful models of intervention for NEET students have been sacrificed on the ideological alter of austerity and neo-liberal reform since the coalition came to power. This would naturally lead to an expectation of increasing numbers of NEETs as the support system is reduced but this will, I expect, be offset by the Raising of the Participation Age.

Conclusions

At the start of this piece I wanted to explore how and why political power might lead to the creation of groups of difference, such as the group labelled as NEETs. Although it is very hard to determine intent and always best to assume that what happens in politics does so for the best of reasons, I think it is clear to me that these groups are created and there are consequences (not always positive) for those affected. I was also interested in whether this might also lead to attempts to constrain agency through social structures – in a way engineering society into the desired political outcome and 'controlling' the populace. I also wanted to review how individuals labelled as part of such a group might employ agency to either conform or to actively reject the social expectations placed upon them.

Groups like the NEET group are 'constructed' by others, where policy or discourse identifies a way in which those included do not conform to the policymakers' or society's expectations, perhaps challenging a traditional or culturally accepted social model and adapting to the dominant 'structures' that exist. Other examples of generalised groups constructed through discourse may be "Benefit cheats" and "Immigrants" who, through dominant discourse in the media, are presented as having a common set of values and behaviours, when the reality may be very different. The NEET group is a strong example of this as the group is actually disparate and contains individuals from a range of backgrounds, facing different levels of need and who present a wide variety of reasons for not being in education, employment or training. There are some factors which are common in young people identified as NEET and these are links to socioeconomic deprivation and lower attainment in secondary education. While those factors do not act as predictors that an individual will be NEET, they can be considered as risk factors.

The NEET group as a whole have suffered from a deficit-model of discourse with the media and politicians suggesting that their situation is of their own making rather than acknowledging the changing employment landscape, credential inflation and the difficulty young people face in progressing from education to work, particularly in times of austerity when older, more experienced and qualified individuals are in the market. The discourse in the media suggests such young people are feckless, possibly criminal and workshy and, increasingly, have suggested that it is the result of a failing educational system. This argument supports the ongoing discourse of failure that has been used as justification for wholesale changes to the structures and systems of publically-funded education in England for the past 30 years. I would argue that it also offers a 'scapegoat' for politicians hoping that high youth unemployment and the state of the economy don't become electoral chains. If it is possible to blame the education system and the media support it, it is possible to turn an employment minefield into an education crusade. It is curious to me that commentators haven't challenged this dominant discourse and suggested that if the Education system is quite such a disaster then why would we want to legislate for youth to remain there until they turn 18?! This makes more sense when it is seen as a strategy for managing youth unemployment rather than improving education. The requirement to stay

on to 18 removes a large number of individuals from the unemployment figures and does away with the need to fund NEET strategies at 16. In addition, the management of such individuals becomes a school / college attendance issue rather than an employment one and accountability moves away from politicians.

As far as supporting those who are identified as NEET is concerned, there are many strategies but the approaches which seem to show most positive impact are the provision of long term one-to-one support and the inclusion of NEET individuals in the planning and design of intervention and prevention strategies. In this case it may be that support from Connexions personal advisors acts as a form of surrogate parenting providing, for those who struggled to thrive in the middle-class dominated secondary education system, access to the knowledge and support others may have received from their families. For others it may simply be that such support offers a scaffold with which to climb over barriers to learning and success, such as drug or alcohol abuse. The second point is a key one, I believe. It is possible that many of these young people feel (helped by the media discourse) that they have failed within an education system structured to favour the reproduction of the values and beliefs of the middle class and may feel completely disempowered. Allowing them to exercise agency in a way which treats them as unique individuals, values their ideas and demonstrates that they can employ ‘power’ in a positive way may give a sense of achievement as well as increasing aspiration to ‘better’ their circumstances.

Word Count: 6880

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Appendix A

Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI)

The Connexions/14-19 Development Team, alongside the Schools' Applications Support team, have developed a tool to assist secondary schools to identify students at risk of becoming NEET once they leave compulsory education. This tool (RONI) uses the following risk factors for which the data can be easily obtained from SIMS:

- % attendance (less than 85%)
- English as an additional language (EAL)
- Exclusions (Permanent or Fixed Term 10 or more sessions)
- Free School meals (FSM)
- Attainment results at Key Stage 1 (below Level 2), Key Stage 2 (below Level 3), & Key Stage 3 (below Level 5) for maths, reading and writing. U at Key Stage 4 (across all subjects)
- Looked after children (LAC)
- Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- Traveller
- Medical Conditions (if it affects learning / attendance)

www.southend.gov.uk/download/3572/**risk** of **neet** indicator *17/2/2013*

Appendix B

My chosen journal for this piece is one which has already published pieces on NEET as a youth issue and is willing to publish work focused on the transition from school to work (see below) **:**

Journal of Youth Studies

http://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?journalCode=cjys20&page=instructions

Editor: Andy Furlong

Peer Reviewed

"Journal of Youth Studies is focused upon young people within a range of contexts, such as education, the labour market and the family, and highlights key research themes such as the construction of identity, the use of leisure time, involvement in crime, consumption and political behaviour. The journal particularly encourages the submission of articles which highlight interconnections between the different spheres of young people's lives (such the transition from school to work) and articles which offer a critical perspective on social policies which affect young people.

Manuscript preparation

General guidelines

- Papers are accepted only in English. Any consistent spelling style may be used.
- Please use single quotation marks, except where 'a quotation is "within" a quotation'.
- A typical article will be between 5000 and 7000 words, and will not exceed 8000 words, inclusive of tables/references/figure captions/footnotes/endnotes. Papers that greatly exceed this will be critically reviewed with respect to length. Authors should include a word count with their manuscript.
- Manuscripts should be compiled in the following order: title page; abstract; keywords; main text; acknowledgments; appendixes (as appropriate); references; table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figure caption(s) (as a list).
- Footnotes to the text should be kept to a minimum.
- Abstracts of 200 words are required for all papers submitted.
- Each paper should have up to 6 keywords .

- Search engine optimization (SEO) is a means of making your article more visible to anyone who might be looking for it. Please consult our guidance here .
- All the authors of a paper should include their full names, affiliations, postal addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses on the cover page of the manuscript. One author should be identified as the corresponding author. The affiliations of all named co-authors should be the affiliation where the research was conducted. If any of the named co-authors moves affiliation during the peer review process, the new affiliation can be given as a footnote. Please note that no changes to affiliation can be made after the article is accepted.
- Biographical notes on contributors are not required for this journal.
- For all manuscripts non-discriminatory language is mandatory. Sexist or racist terms should not be used.
- In empirical reports the breakdown of the research sample (e.g. class, race, ethnicity, sex, age and disability) should be clearly stated and acknowledged in the discussion. Authors should define their choice of terms clearly.
- Authors must adhere to SI units . Units are not italicised.
- When using a word which is or is asserted to be a proprietary term or trade mark, authors must use the symbol ® or TM.
- Contributors should bear in mind that they are addressing an international audience. Jargon should be avoided where possible.

Style guidelines

- Description of the Journal's article style , Quick guide
- Description of the Journal's reference style , Quick guide If you have any questions about references or formatting your article, please contact authorqueries@tandf.co.uk (please mention the journal title in your email).
- Word templates are available for this journal. If you are not able to use the template via the links or if you have any other template queries, please contact authortemplate@tandf.co.uk

Figures

- It is in the author's interest to provide the highest quality figure format possible.
- Please be sure that all imported scanned material is scanned at the appropriate resolution: 1200 dpi for line art, 600 dpi for grayscale and 300 dpi for colour.
- Figures must be saved separate to text. Please do not embed figures in the paper file.
- Files should be saved as one of the following formats: TIFF (tagged image file format), PostScript or EPS (encapsulated PostScript), and should contain all the necessary font information and the source file of the application (e.g. CorelDraw/Mac, CorelDraw/PC).
- All figures must be numbered in the order in which they appear in the paper (e.g. Figure 1, Figure 2). In multi-part figures, each part should be labelled (e.g. Figure 1(a), Figure 1(b)).

- Figure captions must be saved separately, as part of the file containing the complete text of the paper, and numbered correspondingly.
- The filename for a graphic should be descriptive of the graphic, e.g. Figure1, Figure2a."