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# **MA Children and Young People (Health & Well-being)**

***Being NEET: A review of the  
literature surrounding young people  
not in education, employment or  
training.***

*Student number: 1503073*

***ECEG7002Q***

*Yr Athrofa: Education and Humanities*

**DECLARATION FORM**



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**Name of the Programme of Study: MA Children and Young People (Health & Well-being)**

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**DECLARATION**

**I certify that the whole of this work is the result of my individual effort, and that all sources have been acknowledged.**

Signed ..... *A.M. Wolsey*

Date .....21/04/2022.....

**DECLARATION**

**I am satisfied that this work is the result of the Student's effort.**

Signed ..... (Lecturer)

Date .....

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to thank God firstly, for strengthening my faith, giving me passion for this subject, and leading me to pursue this postgraduate qualification. His strength and grace to me would have made writing this dissertation completely impossible for me.

My wonderful husband, Phil, for always believing in me and encouraging me to press ahead through the darkest times, particularly this piece of work, during the pandemic, when I was homeschooling two children and just having given birth to my third child. The going got tough!

My three beautiful children, Lily, Poppy and Solomon - thank you for understanding that mummy needed to get this done, for making me laugh and smile, and for making my life worthwhile.

Dr Darrel Williams, the best tutor, for his constant encouragement, and a man with a vast array of not only theoretical and academic knowledge, but an oracle of industry experience and knowledge too. Without your help, support and insight, I could not have written this dissertation.

The young people, NEET and otherwise, everywhere. This piece is for you. I hope it serves to help not only professionals, but society as a whole, understand your experiences better. I hope that more doors of opportunity open up for you. You deserve better. Thank you for the privilege of writing about you and your lives. Each and every one of you matters immensely.

To everyone who believed I could. Here it is, I did it.

## **ABSTRACT**

Being NEET is a problem for our society, and our economy, and it statistically has long term scarring effects on young people, their families, and the community they live in.

Research shows us that for young people, being out of work or education for more than one year can have very detrimental effects not only on them as individuals, but on their families and communities too. Economically speaking, by the time 2024 comes around, based on the current trajectory, there will be an enormous skills gap, with far more highly skilled jobs than there will be people who can fill the posts.

Disadvantaged young people are disproportionately more likely to end up NEET than their better-off peers, and they're more likely to stay NEET for a considerable amount of time. They are what is known as "doubly disadvantaged", because they are 50% more likely to end up out of work, and they are also far more likely to have lower qualification outcomes.

Another startling fact that research has shown us about disadvantaged young people is that even if they do manage to catch up educationally, and manage to gain equivalence in qualifications as their better-off peers, they are still left behind for the better jobs in early adulthood.

A potential three part strategy to this issue could be:

- 1) Prevention - this is absolutely key, and it is easier than fixing the NEET problem retrospectively.
- 2) Speed - getting young people back into work and education which is a right fit for them, as quickly as possible. The transition between education and the workplace can be traumatic, and is often trivialised, and we know from much research that more young people than ever are unprepared for the workplace - they have the technical skills often enough, but lack what is called "soft skills" .
- 3) Better specialised and in depth support and mentoring.

Relevance between theoretical, classroom based and often abstract concepts need to be connected to the outside, real life, real world experiences for young people to see why it is useful. Disengagement happens when young people do not see school subjects as relevant. This is why reform for the curriculum and education system, particularly secondary education, is vital, with the introduction of a better careers service, and more personalised careers matching between young people's existing skills and the workplace. New, exciting and innovative careers are often out of reach for young people because they do not know that these careers exist, and school needs to catch up with these new industries so that they can better prepare young people for these careers. If young people can see why they are learning something, they are far more likely to engage with it and stay the course.

**ACRONYM**

EO	Education Otherwise
LA	Local Authority
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will be considering and reviewing the current research surrounding the topic of young people not in education employment or training (NEET). The term NEET was coined around twenty five years ago by a civil servant at the Home Office due to the resistance and negativity around the term originally used for this group; Status Zero, (O'Reilly et al., 2018). The focus of this dissertation will pay particular attention to the situation in the United Kingdom, whilst also not disregarding the different policies regarding the issue in the four nations. The scope of NEET policy has the potential to be somewhat different in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland when compared with Wales. The author will review the evidence, and will explore the NEET issue, the social effects of being NEET, the NEET label and it's potential to affect a person's well-being, The dissertation will also discuss what initiatives and strategies exist in the UK, particularly in the Welsh context. The age group in which the NEET issue will be reviewed will be sixteen to twenty five, as there is a range of research across this age range, the study will also consider the age group 16-18. Between 2011 and 2017, this particular age group of NEET young people had been decreasing, but over the last two years, between 2018, the incidence of NEET 16-18 year olds has increased (Welsh Government, 2020). The author will also review any gaps in the literature and make appropriate recommendations.

The NEET issue, and the impact it has on young people, communities and wider society is a vitally important topic to discuss, and it is considered to be a social problem due to its impact on lives but also costs to the economy. Being NEET has adverse effects on life outcomes and health and well-being, with those being NEET at a greater risk of poor outcomes not only economically, but also with regards to their health and well-being (Public Health England, 2014). Conversely, although young people today present with more qualifications than ever before, research has found that even if young people do manage to find paid work, these jobs tend to be low income and low skilled employment opportunities. (OECD, 2016, Lorinc et al., 2019).



‘Work hard in school, get a good job’ is the rhetoric pumped out by the education system. Jim Callaghan in his speech to Ruskin College, Oxford in 1976 identified issues and gaps between those leaving education and skills gaps in the workplace, with particular attention paid to faults in the system which did not take into account learners’ personalities and the importance of needing to allow individual personalities to flourish, as well as girls not continuing in the sciences (Callaghan, 1976). It is still evident to this day that the STEM industries are male dominated, with only 15% of STEM graduates being female (STEM Graduates, 2018). Forty five years after Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin, the same issues are still at play. What a slow turning ship the education system is!

It is clear that this adage is outdated, because the data shows that being qualified does not necessarily lead to high paid jobs and is potentially an archaic argument for education being the ticket out of poverty and into economic success as the data clearly shows. This is particularly true in the past year, with a substantial drop in the percentage of graduates who managed to secure employment. Just 18% of graduates secured employment last year after leaving university, compared with typically 60% in previous years, (Milkround, 2020). Granted, this was during 2020, but the research took place in a time slightly prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, and so it would be difficult to use Covid as the sole reason for this drop in employment rates for graduates, however, the Covid pandemic does factor in the drop.

There are many connotations associated with the term NEET, and many of these are potentially negative such as poor employment outcomes and greater likelihood of poorer health and well-being (Scottish Government, 2015).

This dissertation will explore the impact the NEET label has on individuals’ well-being, and whether this also has an effect on outcomes, particularly as research has shown that periods of unemployment in earlier life can increase the likelihood of unemployment later on in life, (Umkehrer, 2015, Schmillen and Umkehrer, 2013).

This evidence highlights the fact that being NEET can have a substantial and negative effect on a young person’s life. It is evident that simply giving the unemployed young person a job is not the simple solution to the problem. What can be done to prevent someone from becoming NEET? Perhaps it is necessary to look in depth at their

personal lives because there may be more important issues than simply an employability problem.

For example, if someone is living in a cold house, without enough food and basic necessities, or with domestic abuse, finding a job might be the last thing on someone's mind. This could be likened to Maslow's hierarchy of needs when someone can only move up toward becoming self actualised when all their basic needs are met first (Maslow, 1943). It is a simple but sometimes forgotten model. Depending on the person's circumstances, and the amount of pressure they are under, priorities can evolve and change over time, and expectations can get higher or lower. If someone is not having basic needs met, their expectations will generally be much lower. They cannot think about hobbies and holidays if the gas and electricity will run out on the meter by the weekend. The NEET issue is multi-layered. Human motivation is complex, and it will take more than a grant funded employability scheme or workshop to solve some of these issues. It requires a holistic answer to a larger social problem. It is fair to say that in order for an individual to grow, develop and thrive, there needs to be the right conditions and environment for that growth to happen. Much like a plant needs certain conditions in order to grow into fruitfulness, if a young person's environment and conditions are not conducive to personal growth, they will experience difficulties in thriving. Disadvantaged young people are far more likely to be living and existing in conditions which do not encourage personal growth and effectiveness.

The dissertation will also discuss the potential causes of becoming NEET, and whether there are certain socioeconomic or social demographic factors that contribute towards a young person leaving school and ultimately ending up not in education, employment or training and why this could be. Recent statistics show that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are 50% more likely to become NEET than their more affluent peers, (UK Government, 2019, Weale, 2019). Currently, youth employment rates are at their lowest ever (ONS, 2021), and so the issue is alarming and needs attention. The government figures for unemployed young people in the UK are at their highest ever on record, and have only been released as of September 2021. It could be strongly suggested then that in the majority of situations, it is not the young person's fault that they are in fact NEET; they could merely be a victim of their

socioeconomic background. It can hardly be the fault of a young person that they happened to be born into a certain social strata or geographic community. Many poorer young people are at a social disadvantage as well; social exclusion from not being able

to afford certain clothes, shoes, accessories or hobbies. It could also be stated that even if a young person from a poorer background did get a job, how could they afford the transport? There are many structural inequalities playing out in the NEET discussion; and as has already been stated, simply giving the young person a job does not cure the NEET problem all in one go. There are many other mitigating factors to consider. This assignment will attempt to discuss these factors.

The term NEET was first used in a report by the Social Exclusion Unit as a replacement for the previously used term 'status zero'. Arguably, the term NEET is just another buzzword concerning young people who allegedly need some life focus and to contribute to society and to the economy. The term does not have an agreed definition in the UK, and it has been suggested the term has replaced the previous phrase 'youth unemployment' in all literature concerning young people out of work (Gonon et al., 2008).

In a way, the term NEET could be regarded in a more positive light than that of status zero. Status zero implies that someone has no status at all; they are an invisible and irrelevant part of society. Indeed, Furlong and Woodman write that the term NEET replaced status zero as the term due to the negative label of having 'no status', (Furlong and Woodman, 2014). The term NEET is a rather catch-all term, as it groups together many societal groups and does not take certain factors into account, for example disability, race, access to certain privileges which are now deemed necessities of modern living (for example, having the internet or transport) or social strata. It would be ignorant to assume that a reduction in the number of NEET young people is necessarily accompanied by reduced vulnerabilities, and as such, the term NEET is problematic, ill-considered, and only partially effective at describing the situation in which many young people find themselves. This essentially trivialises their experiences, and often this labelling is problematic in that it can potentially create stereotypes, which would in turn lead to xenophobic attitudes; as Furlong

states, the term NEET emphasises transitions which are problematic and places an emphasis on being voluntaristic, which is often misleading (Furlong, 2006).

This dissertation will also focus on the connections between disadvantage and qualifications, and why poverty has such a profound effect on education. There is a definitive link between poverty and aspirations, and ultimately academic achievement and outcomes.

## **2. Mental health and being NEET.**

Research from 2016 by Goldman-Mellor et al, sought to explore self perception and mental health in a cohort of British eighteen year old young people who were not in education, employment or training. The study background focused on 2,232 twins who were born between 1994 and 1995. The authors took as their research subjects the twins from the E-Risk Longitudinal study, which followed the twins and their families in follow ups over a twenty year period. The study was carried out by several researchers and it is claimed that the study participants are representative of UK families. The aim of the study was to examine how genetic and environmental factors potentially contribute to behaviours, mental health, and health problems right the way through from childhood to adulthood, (E-Risk, 2016).

The researchers from the E-Risk study collaborated on several pieces of research which came out of the initial E-Risk study, including the twins' relationships at school, social inequality and mental health of children, and also on the number of twins who ended up NEET by age eighteen (E-Risk, 2016).

The key points from their research are that young people who are NEET are a highly stigmatised group within the UK, that they are at risk of adversity in the long term both economically and socially, and this results in costly interventions and strategies from the government. They also argue that their findings prove that most NEET young people greatly endeavour to find employment, and show a commitment to searching for job opportunities, but conversely feel that their low skill levels hamper their efforts and as a result the young people feel discouraged about their future opportunities in employment. Lastly, another key finding from the research is the claim that NEET young people are dealing with a greater incidence of mental health issues than their non-NEET peers (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016).

The study also claims that society as a whole views NEET young people in a negative light, whilst also acknowledging that little is actually known about how NEET young people view themselves (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016). It could be argued then that it is vitally important for researchers, and also for the government who construct and implement NEET policy initiatives, to understand how NEET young people think and

feel. Interestingly, there is very little research about this. It is a wonder how policy makers can design such policies without first conducting extensive consultation processes first, with particular focus on young people's self perception. The reason this is hugely important is because as Goldman-Mellor et al rightly claim within their research, the age at which young people leave compulsory education, and potentially end up NEET, is also the age at which psychiatric problems peak in life, or become apparent. This is backed up by Kessler et al (2007), psychiatric researchers who looked at the epidemiological onset of mental health disorders and also by Parekh (2018), who states that mental health 50% of mental health disorders are usually apparent by age fourteen and that mental health issues rarely appear out of the blue, and seventy five percent of mental health issues are apparent by age twenty four (Parekh, 2018).

Arguably then, the big life changing event of leaving school could coincide with the onset of a mental health disorder for many young people. These two issues, coupled with a negative social label of being 'NEET', and it is a potential recipe for disaster. The researchers concur that understanding mental health alongside the NEET status is crucial in ascertaining whether or not NEET young people have more than their share of substance abuse problems, and whether or not services are there to support them during this difficult transition period, (Goldman-Mellor et al, 2016).

The voice of the NEET young person seems absent from the majority of the major research and this is often problematic when trying to build a picture and assess the whole picture.

The benefit of this study is that the researchers have followed and studied these young people from early childhood, and it is therefore possible for the researchers to effectively assess whether the children from lower income families represented in this study were at an increased risk of becoming NEET, in line with UK Government statistics from 2019. There are benefits to conducting longitudinal research, mainly

that it is generally regarded as being a more robust way of looking at data, given that it is done over a time period which gives researchers a greater opportunity for scrutinising it. However, there are some weaknesses with the research. The researchers do admit that their work has relied upon self-reporting, which is difficult to measure, as this is likely to yield results which are subjective. They did not investigate whether the NEET label was a causal factor in the young people having mental health problems, but it did give

the researchers a snapshot into what service provision is necessary and also for policymakers to understand the difficulties and vulnerabilities NEET young people often present with. This, however, at best provides only a snapshot rather than a comprehensive insight. It is also vital that young people who are NEET are also not lumbered with another damaging label of being mentally ill. Whilst it is important to note that this may help to give them access to treatment, practitioners need to be careful not to label young people, as this can then lead to stereotyping, and perhaps even at the extreme end of the spectrum, to xenophobia.

Throughout their research, Goldman-Mellor et al were careful to state that they were not exploring whether being NEET ultimately resulted in a mental health issue, however, they are keen to stress that it is their goal to ensure that any young person who is NEET, and also has a co-existing mental health issue, receives the right support. Perhaps a more tailored and person-centred form of support. As stated previously in this assignment, it is simply not enough to give the unemployed young people a job in the hope it will fix a societal ill; there are more often than not preexisting and mitigating issues which the NEET young person is experiencing. Being NEET is just a superficial part of the issue. Perhaps being NEET is a symptom of other underlying issues and causes. The issues that NEET young people often face are multifaceted, and can be complex and difficult, and deeper than a simple case of lack of employability skills.

The E-Risk study is limited, as is the research conducted by Goldman-Mellor et al; it provides a small snapshot into the world of NEET young people, as it is limited to only eighteen year olds. The author also takes issue with the use of twins; and also the fact these twins were from England and Wales only; with the claim that this group

represented the whole of the UK. It is fair to suggest that this does not fully speak for, or adequately represent the families and young people of Northern Ireland or Scotland; with their own unique cultural and social identities, as well as differing demographics, social strata and economies. The use of twins, and those from England and Wales only, is not a true and fair representation of the UK population. Not only this, but there were several sweeping generalisations made in this study, and again, with reference to the participants, and whom they were supposedly representing. Goldman-Mellors et al claimed that their study cohort included teenage mothers, who

they stated were a group that they overselected to take part to replace those deemed high risk, through non-response or who were lost selectively to the register. They also claimed that they underselected older mothers who had used fertility treatments and assisted reproduction techniques to conceive, because, as they claim, they wanted to avoid an excess number of highly educated older mothers. This is clearly, highly stereotypical, and also discriminative, and makes sweeping generalisations to the extent where they claim teenage mothers are riskier than non teenage mothers, and older women who have used IVF are well educated. Both of these are assumptions based on supposed societal norms, and the research gave no justification for those conclusions. This discourse could be considered as highly discriminatory and in a manner of speaking, rather ignorant and potentially dangerous in that it could perpetuate negative stereotypes.

The researchers also state that their main research objective was to draw attention to the mental health needs and the lives of NEET young people. They also stated that through their findings, they have identified three key areas which do draw attention to the objectives they have outlined. Firstly, they claim that NEET young people who felt that they lacked skills were probably correct. Secondly, mental health issues do in fact hinder the ability of young people to cope effectively with challenges, develop confidence, and also take advantage of training and educational opportunities. Thirdly, their research highlighted that individuals who were under eighteen years old with mental health issues should be clearly identified so that enhanced educational provision should be provided to those at risk of economic disengagement in the future.



There are a number of weaknesses with their research. As previously discussed, this research at times displays a discriminative tone, and makes some bold sweeping generalisations with regards to using teenage and older mothers. There was also the issue of accurate representation; by not including any participants from Scotland or Northern Ireland, it really could be argued that this research does not give an accurate representation at all. Arguably, in order to accurately represent all four UK nations, all nations should have some representation in the research.

Whilst the researchers acknowledge the need and importance for earlier strategic interventions and services which are targeted towards young people who present with mental health problems, they do make any suggestions or recommendations as to what

these interventions could be. They state that there is a need, without providing insight into what they recommend to fill the needs gap.

As previously stated, the use of twins might also be an issue. The author calls into question whether the use of twins is representative of norms due to the fact that they are more likely to experience mental health issues than single born individuals (Hilker et al., 2017). This research in some ways makes assumptions which are not reflective of real life in every case. Arguably then, the use of twins is more likely to show mental health issues, which is a bias that should have been accounted for when Golman-Mellor et al decided to base their research on the E-Risk study, and should be acknowledged.

The methods used by the researchers were interviews which involved the participants self-reporting. This involves a great deal of trust on the researcher's part. There is no accurate way here of determining how truthful and honest the participants were, and the research itself does not give any examples of the types of questions that the researchers asked the participants. Alongside this is also the absence of any direct quotes or responses given by the participants themselves. Although there is no way to verify direct quotes, for them it would have been beneficial to read direct responses for the added insight this would give the reader into the self perception issue. In many ways, the lack of any personalised, grass roots sort of information such as direct quotes, case studies, or details about individuals (ofcourse, ethically approved and

with identities not divulged) feels somewhat clinical, and is at odds with the ethos of the research; to understand the self perception and mental health of NEET young people. It is the author's recommendation that direct quotes be added, or some description of the participants' reactions to questions, their emotions and feelings and also their personal views, rather than third hand information passed on by the researchers, should have been included in this research paper. Self perception is a personal issue, and a personalised touch would have bolstered their arguments further and would also have facilitated a better and more empathic response to the research by connecting the data to real people and their real experiences.

Another issue with this research paper is that the authors claim that NEET young people whom they interviewed were correct in believing they had low skill levels.

This

is almost tragic; and they do not provide any framework as to how they have come to such a conclusion. Again, this is another discriminatory and potentially damaging stereotype. Whilst that might very well be true; the NEET young people interviewed may indeed have a low skills set, the authors should have also provided the assessment tools used to come to this conclusion. It is all very well to make an assumption, it is quite another matter to back this up. They did not make a case for this statement within their research, and as a result, this calls into question the integrity of the research itself.

With all that said, the research does provide some helpful insights into NEET young people and their mental health issues, and the fact that being NEET does increase the likelihood of having mental health issues. Arguably, perhaps it could also be true that being NEET could cause someone to develop mental health issues. The stress and anxiety, and potentially depression which could arise from being jobless, with a low educational attainment (or perhaps not; someone may have a postgraduate qualification and lack employment), might result in someone feeling that they have low self worth and self esteem all of this creates a perfect storm for mental health issues. Particularly if the home life is also deprived and the person lacks basic provisions such as adequate food and heating.

In addition to the above study, which was prior to the Covid pandemic, The Prince's Trust study into the mental health condition of NEET young people during the Coronavirus pandemic also makes for rather startling reading. One quarter of those surveyed between the ages of 16 and 25 felt that they were unable to cope with life since the pandemic began, 50% said that their mental health had worsened since the beginning of the pandemic. One quarter said that they felt more unsure than ever before about their work in the future, and a further quarter also sadly stated that they felt the pandemic had destroyed their hopes of finding work. Conversely, in a related survey question, 78% said that they felt that more hopeful for the years ahead, and in answer to a separate question in the survey, 60% said they felt that the competition for jobs was so hard that they did not think they had any hopes of finding employment (The Prince's Trust, 2021).

The truth is then that young people who are also NEET are a vulnerable group, who are already likely struggling with feelings of low self-worth, self-esteem, and perhaps feel overwhelmed by the task of finding a job, and also, in the event that they successfully find employment, whether or not that job is a right fit for them.

### **3. The influence of lifestyle choices.**

Lifestyle choices are a set of behaviours in which people engage in that have an effect on their lives and also have influence over people's health, (Contoyannis and Jones, 2004). There could be a link between lifestyle choices and the incidence of becoming NEET. Some have argued that the recent recession, and in particular the Covid pandemic, has had a negative impact on the opportunities afforded to young people in the labour market and choices made by young people. It is evident that choices and decisions early on have an impact on future outcomes.(Coppola and O'Higgins, 2016). This is also true in recent times with the Covid pandemic Graduates of university are finding it increasingly difficult to secure employment or further industry and work-related experience. 8% of graduates overall had managed to secure an internship, and 63% found that the current Coronavirus pandemic had impacted on their positions, with 37% (over one third) having their roles completely terminated. Over 90% believe that the Covid pandemic has affected their job and internship searching, (Milkround, 2020). In reference to the Coppola and Higgins research of 2016, perhaps NEET young people make different and even riskier decisions than their more affluent peers. The reasons for this need further research and attention. Is it

simply a matter of lack of availability of different choices, or is it a matter of poorer judgments and a more fatalistic approach to the future.

Arguably, the idea that the recession and the pandemic has negatively impacted youth employment opportunities does have some merit, and could afford some explanation into how and why the current job market has been unfavourable towards young people. The recession hit the job market, which in turn meant that there were less employment opportunities. What opportunities were available, there were more candidates, and potentially this could have led to more qualified and experienced individuals applying for perhaps more low skilled jobs; jobs that otherwise would have been taken by school leavers or students looking for extra income. More competition, with higher qualified competitors, means that school leavers missed out on work.

There could also be issues surrounding the lifestyle choices some young people make. Perhaps an “act today and think about it tomorrow” attitude. This is echoed in a chapter of Coppola and Higgin’s book on this very issue. It could be noted that an individual’s lifestyle choices have an effect on opportunities and outcomes. Certainly, the authors state that whilst alcohol consumption and smoking are used as anxiety reducing tools,

They also found through their research that in young men particularly, their alcohol consumption increased both in cases where their income decreased, but also when their income dropped (Coppola et al, 2016). What this shows is that alcohol can be used as a way of celebrating or revelling in a positive outcome, but it can also be used to perhaps self medicate and as a buffer the negative effects that a low income can have on mental and emotional well-being.

There is an argument to be made for whether lifestyle choices affect employment outcomes and opportunities or whether those lifestyle choices are being made due to lack of opportunity. This latter statement does correlate with the evidence from

Coppola et al's (2016) research. The empirical evidence also concludes that lifestyle choices and the behaviours associated with those choices can have influences on health. This could also impact on NEET youths' ability to gain employment.

Their models also showed that unhealthy workers tended to also have 'unhealthy' incomes; meaning that they typically earned less than perhaps healthier workers who did not indulge in drinking and smoking. Their research also showed that workers with an excessively high BMI had equally negative work output and wages, (Coppola et al, 2016). The modelling showed that there was also tension between the use of cigarettes and alcohol on health, and the short term anxiety reducing effects that using them gave the research subjects.

The findings of the research that the research provides are both insightful and helpful for practitioners wanting to support NEET young people. It could also be problematic for a variety of reasons. It presents a rather simplistic viewpoint, and generally showcases information which most people would presume about NEET young people.

It could also serve to fuel a rather stereotypical and often discriminative discourse about NEET youths, whilst also not giving substantial variable differences in circumstances. There does seem to be blanket statements, and could be deemed as superlative in nature. There needs to be a higher level of discussion surrounding individual circumstances. There are many variables with regards to how, and why individuals end up NEET, and as proven by this research paper, alcohol for example is used at both ends of the employability spectrum. There was little discussion of the middle group of NEET young people.

There was some mention of utilising certain substances such as alcohol and cigarettes as a means to relieve stress, and the researchers noted that the use of such measures would increase or decrease depending on whether income increased or decreased. This is interesting because it does shed some light on the stereotype that whilst out of work youth may excessively drink, there is also potentially an aggravating factor, such as an income drop. This does imply that there is a sad reality to the potentially risky drinking that NEET youths could do. There is also a discussion to be had around how motivations determine and drive human behaviour and action.

For example, it could be argued that there might be a societal perception that NEET youths are lazy, and even delinquent. It has been a personal experience of the author to have overheard conversations regarding this very topic amongst some older people, and even the recommendation that some go and do national service. This is a narrow view

and perhaps an unfair generalisation of NEET youths. This is potentially a dangerous label, in that it could perpetuate stereotyping and xenophobia, thus exacerbating the marginalisation that NEET young people might already be experiencing.

This research would have benefited from transcripts of interviews with NEET young people which presents the variable situations that face them. It could have provided a far more enriching insight into this subject. The published research also contained substantial amounts of mathematical equations for the modelling used to try and measure the link between consumer choice, consumption, and other factors such as health and choices. The author found this paper to be rather complicated at times, and

perhaps there was some tension between the qualitative statements presented in the research, followed up with heavy quantitative mathematical modelling equations. Whilst it is excellent in many ways to have such a detailed form of analysis, arguably people are more than equations, and people's emotions and individual lived experiences cannot simply be measured in algebraic equations. There seemed to be almost an inconsistency and at times in conflict with the research base. The researchers also confirm this by stating that the modelling they used could not explain certain human issues, for example, certain addictions. It is therefore reasonable to perhaps argue that the use of such equations to measure human behaviours could be rather simplistic, no matter how complicated, elaborate and impressive they might look.

A further study conducted by Tanton et al (2021) more recently looked at the physical, mental and also sexual health of NEET young people, compared to young people who are employed, and young people who are students. The study participants

were grouped as follows: 20% women and 15% of men were identified as being NEET, 32% of women and 36% of men were classed as workers, and of those who were students, 49% were men and 48% were women. The study results concluded that those in the NEET group were more likely to smoke and the males more likely to use drugs as well as smoke. The sexual health of all groups was relatively similar, although alarmingly the NEET group were more likely to have condomless sex, and as a result the unplanned pregnancy rate in the NEET group was higher than the other groups. Risky behaviours were demonstrated more often across the male individuals who were NEET in all domains, and among NEET women, poor outcomes were evidenced across all mental,

physical and sexual health domains. The researchers concluded that there were increased clusters of poor health outcomes for NEET women, and harmful health behaviours for NEET men. Their research is unique because it also highlights risky sexual behaviours amongst NEET young people, as well as physical health and mental health as well (Tanton et al., 2021).

Data of this nature is a rare find indeed. The author did not find further detailed analysis of the sexual behaviours of NEET young people.

Perhaps it is sadly true of the stereotype that is built around the NEET label; that those stereotypes are often based on part truths. Nevertheless, although there is some truth to the risky behaviours, the substance abuse and the unplanned pregnancies, these figures are not absolutes; what this means is that although they do occur in greater frequency amongst the NEET group than other groups, it is important not to generalise and use this data to further marginalise NEET young people.

What could happen if the stereotype and judgement towards NEET young people is perpetuated is that the young people themselves become so disheartened that they give up, or they experience even lower self esteem, self worth, and increased mental health issues. This could then result in an exacerbation of the risky behaviours discussed in this chapter.



#### **4. Qualifications, disadvantage, and the labour market.**

Surely, getting good qualifications means someone will end up with a good, well-paid job? Surely, if someone is disadvantaged, all that is needed is that the poverty gap is closed? Maybe this view is rather simplistic, because there are many layers and variables to the NEET issue. To understand the challenges which many NEET young people face, it is important to look at other factors around the job market, including whether qualifications and coming from a disadvantaged background affect NEET young people's prospects further. The role of qualifications, or lack thereof might also play a significant role in whether or not a young person ends up NEET. However, research does present a more complex reality than this. Data has shown that simply having qualifications alone, does not necessarily put a NEET young person further up the career prospects ladder. This might be a rather surprising insight; NEET young

people often need more than just a job. Particularly if other, complicated life problems are occurring simultaneously. Finding employment might be the last thing on a young person's mind when they might be living in a home with domestic abuse for example. What happens also in the transition between education and the labour market; there might be young people falling between the proverbial cracks in the pavement when it comes to what support is available to them.

A study carried out by Espinoza et al (2019) on NEET young people in the UK found some stark realities. Generally speaking, disadvantaged young people have worse qualification outcomes than their more affluent (or better off) peers. The researchers also found that disadvantaged young people are fifty percent more likely to end up NEET than their peers from better off backgrounds. Arguably, what needs to happen is that the playing field needs to become more level and equitable, however, it is not that simple, and surprisingly (or rather perhaps unsurprisingly given the complexity of certain vulnerabilities NEETs can be faced with) is that even if the disadvantaged groups were to catch up and gain the same qualifications as their better-off peers, they would still face disadvantage in the education and job markets, with many former NEETs from disadvantaged backgrounds unable to secure employment in early adulthood, even with the same qualifications as their more affluent peers. What is not

entirely clear is why they are still left behind. Perhaps being NEET can cause residual scarring effects which carry through from adolescence into adulthood, and the related negative residual effects of disadvantage and the label that comes with it, does not only affect individuals and their families, but whole communities (Espinoza et al, 2019).

In essence, they are doubly disadvantaged; likened to the “damned if they do, and damned if they don't” saying. This seems wholly unfair, but looking further at the data, and perhaps scrutinising it might help to explain why this gap still exists, even when the qualifications gap is closed. It has been widely known that NEET young people often have low qualifications, coupled with a disadvantaged background (Espinoza et al, 2019, Gadsby, 2019).

Perhaps it would be helpful to discuss and explore the following: what exactly defines “disadvantage”, and how worse off financially and economically are those described as disadvantaged (in other terms, how much better off is “better off”), and what happens in that transition between school, or education and the workplace by comparison between those deemed better-off, and those deemed disadvantaged. It would be helpful to identify what perhaps is missing, and where the equity needs to be supplemented. What is often apparent, and problematic for the social researcher conducting secondary research, is that there is often no breakdown in the statistics or data. For example, the above statistic shows that those who are disadvantaged are fifty percent more likely to end up NEET than their more affluent peers; what is it that has disadvantaged them? How exactly did they become disadvantaged? Is there a big difference in income between those who are disadvantaged and those who are not? Is it a matter of poor economic backgrounds leading to poor life choices? Or is this that statistically they are more likely to have poor life outcomes because they lack certain opportunities and advantages that their peers do not. A breakdown in statistics and data would help the researcher to see the human being in it all. The voice of the NEET person could be lost in all the research, policy, and politics.

The voice of the young people living through the NEET experience, so to speak, should arguably have a voice in all of the policy making. After all, to make a policy about a group of people, or a problem they might be facing, their opinions, thoughts, feelings and experience should be taken into account; if not, at best the policy is hollow,

and a mere reflection of the lived experience of the NEET young person. At worst, a far off and unrealistic attempt by those in local and national government at trying to solve the problem. The best people to really talk about the experience are the people who are going through that experience.

Howard Williamson met the “Milltown Boys” in 1973. This group of young men were what could be described as a bunch of loose-knit teenagers from a rough and disadvantaged council estate. From his research, he quickly came to realise that these boys routinely broke the law, and made very little effort to actually attend school. Five years on from meeting them, Williamson wrote the book “Five Years”, which was a

memoir about his experiences of meeting them. “Five Years” was published in 1981. Following on from this, Williamson stayed in contact with some of those boys, and during the late 1990s, he often wondered what had become of them. These were, as Williamson termed it, the first generation of “status zero” young people. Of course today they are known as NEET. Williamson went on to interview the boys in 2000, as they turned forty years old, which became “The Milltown Boys Revisited”, published in 2004. Twenty years on from this, Williamson interviewed them again at age 60, which was published in 2021 as “The Milltown Boys at Sixty”.

Through following this group of young teenagers, through to adulthood and then eventually into late adulthood, Williamson noted several very important and interesting points about their lives, and there are similarities between them that ring true for today’s NEET young people: the boys seldom had positive support in their lives. Williamson does question whether the boys would have listened to positive support had they had any, but aside from that, they did lack this positive support, and therefore they had to forge their own way in life, pretty much alone. They were not, as some might think, knocked between pillar and post in some kind of random misfortune. They did express agency in many surprising ways, and they knew how to play the system so to speak. They kept a level of control by doing this. For the most part, the boys never looked too far forward into the future, or too far back into the past. Arguably this could be some kind of survival tactic. They did have a fatalistic sense of purpose; why have regrets when the past cannot be changed, and why make plans when they might backfire? Williamson also noted that in order to make any sense of their public lives, careful and

detailed attention had to be given to their personal lives, relationships, health and so forth, in order to understand what motivated them to behave or act the way they did. Making snap conclusions and judgements about a NEET young person’s life should therefore be avoided; it is a far more complicated picture than just some jobless, lazy layabout youth who needs to keep themselves busy and contribute like a “good citizen”. As Williamson himself said, the world would view these boys, and would classify them as druggies, dropouts and delinquents, but he has also known them as

fathers, friends, and family men, and he wants the wider world to see them in that light too (Williamson, 2000).

By the time Williamson had caught up with the boys in 2000, of the original sixty seven boys who were part of the study, seven were dead. None of them died from natural causes. The medical and health issues between them were a mixture of both acute, and chronic issues, ranging from severe psychiatric problems such as schizophrenia to broken bones. It would be fair to say that many of the injuries were predominantly from lifestyle choices like drunken brawls and sport. The vast majority of the boys smoked in large quantities, and Williamson states that they pretty much chainsmoked whilst out drinking (Williamson, 2000). Drug use varied between occasional use of hard drugs, and frequent use of soft drugs, although the majority of the boys did not use drugs by the time they reached forty, however, they all smoked large quantities of cigarettes and drank heavily.

By the time the boys had reached forty, many of them had had several relationships, and they had children by many different women. Some were very concerned that their children would go on to take the same pathways that they had, and several of them wanted to ensure that this did not happen for their children. It would be fair to state the disadvantage of growing up in Milltown, which at the time of Williamson's 2000 fieldwork was considered the biggest council estate in Europe, had a profound effect on their lives, and certainly meant that the boy's lagged behind their more affluent peers in terms of quality of opportunities, but also of outcomes too.

After Williamson's initial study of the boys' lives in the seventies, he grouped the boys into three separate categories: one third of the boys had left behind their lives of offending, and the behaviours and lifestyle that accompany such choices. These boys had managed to find regular work, and had built stable relationships, whilst also becoming fathers to two or even three children. Some of those in this group who lived in social or council housing had bought their homes under the Right to Buy scheme, and had managed also to reduce their alcohol consumption and even curtail their usage of illegal substances.

Conversely, at the opposite end of the spectrum were those who had lifestyles which were immersed and embedded in criminal activities, they did not hold down

legitimate jobs, and they had had several relationships which had produced several children. This third also lived in council or social housing, and lived in a way which was risky.

The remaining third was somewhere between the two groups, and had behaviours, circumstances and characteristics from both groups, (Williamson, 2021).

What can be seen from Williamson's fieldwork and study over the life course of the Milltown Boys is that disadvantage can dramatically affect life outcomes, not always, but in the majority of cases. Disadvantage means that those who are experiencing it are faced with unfavourable circumstances (Dictionary.com, 2021). They often lack equality of opportunity, the absence of advantage, and are usually faced with deprivation. Deprivation could be the lack of financial means to buy better food, medicines, pay the rent and bills, or even heat the home adequately. It could also be the lack of a loving and supportive environment in which children and young people need to thrive.

Arguably, the Milltown Boys came from a background of disadvantage and deprivation based on what the dictionary defines disadvantage to be.

Certainly, the data and statistics demonstrate a link between children growing up in deprivation and poorer life outcomes in adulthood, and the UK Government has defined a clear pathway between childhood deprivation, lower qualification attainment and quality, and a reduction in employment opportunities in adulthood. Some of the effects of disadvantage and deprivation include a greater likelihood that men will end up in prison, and women that they will become lone parents (ONS, 2020). This pathway clearly demonstrates a vicious cycle of deprivation, disadvantage, and poorer life outcomes. The ONS study references above acknowledge that the correlation between poverty and low educational attainment is a complex issue, and geography can

play a large part in it all. Multiple factors can influence poverty and educational attainment outcomes, which this dissertation has shown is a large part of the NEET problem; but why exactly does being poor or coming from a deprived and underprivileged background mean that someone might end up having low

qualifications, and therefore becoming NEET? Why exactly is it that poverty seems to be the barrier to education?

Certainly, the ONS data supports what Williamson found through conducting his fieldwork on the status-zero Milltown Boys; disadvantage clearly affects a person's life course.

Perhaps looking at childhood predictors can help to build a picture of how and why this tends to be the pathway. It is known that individuals with a low personal level of education are nearly five times more likely to be in poverty than those who have high levels of education (ONS, 2016). In particular, children who grow up in a home where no one works, or where no one is able to hold down regular and legitimate employment by age fourteen, were more likely to be in poverty than those who had a working adult living in the home (ONS, 2016). What is interesting from the ONS study from 2016 is that childhood factors like the overall financial situation of the household when they were fourteen are no longer significant or reliable predictors of current poverty levels. What the study also shows is that the overall household income during a person's childhood years is the main predictor of educational attainment, and it is educational attainment that also affects a person's employment opportunities. If the cycle could be summed up in six words, it would be the following: poverty, deprivation, disadvantage, low education, NEET.

## **5. Skills for the workplace and work experience education**

It would be rather ignorant to assume that the answer to the NEET problem is to just hand the young person a job, and be done with it. The NEET issue is a multi faceted,

complex and multi layered matter, and requires the practitioner to look closely at the lives of the young people who fall under the NEET label. Is it the goal of education to drive the nation's children through the education system, for them to be churned out like some sort of robots, in order for them to be respectable, contributing citizens. Work to live, and live to work?

Previously, the author of this dissertation worked alongside a cardiac nurse who after her nursing career entered the health innovation and life sciences sector. Their line of work was in the life sciences industry, and they worked with many prestigious companies, such as Pfizer and Bayer. Part of their work was to interview employers of local life sciences and health innovation and technology companies, and ask them what skills and qualities they felt school leavers needed to work in their company. The responses given indicated that although employers wanted to take on school leavers, some even said that qualifications did not necessarily matter too much; they did not know how to market their opportunities or how to get the word out to school leavers. This is because some employers felt that what the education sector offered did not adequately prepare young people for the workplace. What also transpired from those interviews was that employers were wanting to provide their own, industry specific qualifications to school leavers rather than what they would leave school with. An example of one company in a Carmarthenshire town, whose work included laboratory work and testing was willing to take on school leavers. The intention of this health sciences and innovation company was to train up their own staff from an entry level position. Another company, based in SA1, Swansea, had offices all around the world, but chose to have their headquarters in Swansea. They also wanted to be able to provide specific health innovation sector training to their interns and entry level staff; because the technical skills and training needed for the role could not be found outside of the sector in many instances. Many of these companies were desperate for school leavers to take on, but did not know where or how to source them. It is also fair to point out that school leavers would not know how and where to access these companies, and

may even be daunted by the prospect of applying to them. There seemed to be a no man's land between the life sciences companies and those leaving education. A chasm existed between leaving school, and access to innovative, exciting, and new roles.



The companies also stated that although they wanted to take on school leavers, or those leaving college, they felt that the quality of learners was not of the required standard. To explain further, they stated that although many of them displayed some practical and technical abilities, they lacked soft skills. What this suggests is that the gap between school and the workplace is wide, and that perhaps school is not an adequate preparation time for the workplace, or the employability skills needed, and as such, the information gathered from those interviews heavily suggests that this could also perpetuate the NEET issue by creating a more adverse environment in addition to what young people are already at odds with finding their place in the world and the workplace.

Looking at contemporary experiences of school and how much employability skills are embedded into the curriculum could also help to build a picture of what exactly young people are getting in terms of workplace preparation. The author's own experience in employability education was around four sessions with a Careers Wales advisor, where incorrect advice was given about the pathways into certain careers, and a two week work experience placement making tea and coffee in an office. Hardly a recipe for an inspirational or even aspirational experience. Another young person the author knew well visited the Careers Wales advisor and did a questionnaire about their strengths, qualities and abilities. The young person left with a print out of how to become a podiatrist; they actually went into the session wanting to be a lorry driver. As anecdotal as these experiences are, they are rather concerningly prevalent and very common. The system seems to be failing young people, and the methods of assessing career suitability need to be brought into the twenty-first century, up to speed with modern technology. Surely, more needs to be done to help and support young people to find their places in the world. They need more than an hour's lesson once a term on how to write a CV, and as such current provision could be deemed inadequate. Careers advice needs to be innovative, the world of careers has changed dramatically, and more needs to be done to help young people navigate this new innovative world. This support needs to materialise in the form of helping young people to see how their school subjects

correlate to the world outside of school and to the workplace. Often this can be confusing and disjointed. Many times during the author's working life the words "but

why do I need to learn this” echo around the room from young people. Granted, many never use algebra, pythagoras or trigonometry again after school, but many need to learn household budgeting, interest rates, how to write a cheque, how to stay out of debt and manage money, and how to pay bills. These are important skills, and often school subjects lack relevance to young people. Where the subjects lack relevance, they remain abstract concepts, and as such, a nonchalant, and even contemptuous attitude can develop where a young learner asks the question, “why am I bothering to learn this? It is owed to young people to do more in this regard. They deserve better. Real life experiences and real life workshops as complimentary additional learning to what happens in the classroom, and more relevance between subjects and the wider world to help young people make that connection might be more beneficial to young people than what has been on offer previously. To improve what current provision exists in employability and careers advice and education, a more personalised and individualised matchmaking platform or service which will help to build a unique profile of the young person, and their skills qualities and personality traits, which will then help practitioners to guide young people towards a career that they are suited too,. This strengths-based approach could lead to lower NEET rates, and improved health and well-being, and social outcomes for young people.

Cameron (2020) writes that children and young people in school should be supported to grasp problem solving and critical thinking, and whether that could be learned through the humanities or the sciences is down to preference. It should however be embedded into the curriculum. To assist with this, alongside the classroom based learning that takes place, what could also bolster the development of these skills even further would be offering a wide range of work experience opportunities, in order for them to connect the skills to the real world and real life situations in which these skills will be essential. On top of this, practitioners who work with children and young people should facilitate an environment in which the skills that the learners already possess should be drawn out and built upon. It is the author’s opinion here that the focus should not be on what the young person lacks, but rather, focus on what their strengths are, and help them navigate which sector they would be best placed. Practitioners do need to start viewing

young people as having skills, not lacking them. This shift in paradigms and perceptions would go a long way in changing perceptions from that of a deficit perspective, to a more positive outlook. It needs more than simply asking the young person what their favourite subject is and telling them to pursue it. It is far more complex than that, and young people are worth that effort.

Cameron (2020) goes further with the extra support in that she states that young people need to know how different sectors work and operate, and how to communicate, adapt to new environments and build networks is a large part of the workplace. These skills would help to build new professional contacts in the workplace, and help with team building. Every employee has individual strengths and talents and it is these individual qualities that help to shape businesses and companies. For young people to excel in the workplace, they need immersion in different workplace environments, so that they can have the opportunity to harness different skills, and even figure out what their skills are. This would not only benefit them as individuals, it would build a stronger workforce, and this in turn can only be of lasting value and benefit to companies and businesses. For the workplace to be enjoyable to the young person, they need to feel as if they are part of it, that they are relevant, that they have worth. They need self confidence and experience, and that connection between education and workplace skills needs to become more relevant to them, not some distant concept. When young people are valued as the unique individuals that they are, it is only then that they will enjoy the workplace, feel confident, build on the essential qualities, skills and abilities they need to excel. For them to excel should be the primary goal, not to make the data look better for policy makers. Young people need to be inspired to pursue and excel in their own unique career path. This will take more than anything that an employability skills lesson, CV writing class, or two weeks making tea for the office staff could ever do.

Further research conducted by the Local Government Association in 2017 identified a rather worrying trend in the job market and skills gap issue. From their modelling and research, they predict that if things go the way they are, based on the current trajectory, by 2024 the skills gap will become so wide that there will be 4.2 million more jobs requiring high skills than there will be people skilled and qualified enough

to do them. In other terms, it means that there will be a surplus of 6.2 million workers deemed low

skill and qualification, with a further 1.9 million workers with what would be deemed as intermediate skills. This potential crisis will mean that a substantial and costly amount of economic growth will be lost; some £90 billion (LGA, 2017).

The skills gap issue also presents itself amongst the graduate job hunters too, not just the low-skilled and low qualified young people. According to the Prince's Trust (2021), there has been a tougher competition for jobs since the pandemic began in particular. Milkround (2020) identified that around two thirds (or 66%) of individuals aged under twenty six would not have been able to secure employment without being able to demonstrate prior work related experience. This clearly shows how much employers value not just the technical abilities and knowledge but work and industry related skills as well. However, it would be fair to say that this could be problematic; without a job, someone cannot get experience, and without experience, someone cannot get a job. Something must give somewhere. Perhaps internships, volunteering or work experience might have an important role to play here.

What seemed to be absent in the majority of the literature was the voice of the NEET young people themselves. It is evident that the researchers conducting the studies and fieldwork wanted to portray an accurate picture of the lives of NEET young people, however, it lacked some true authenticity, and may have even come across as rather sterile and clinical. To observe the lives of NEET young people and their challenges and difficulties is incredibly important and vital, but to omit their opinions and voices from the research in which they play a huge role is at best, an oversight, and at worst, ignorant. To be person-centred, it must be acknowledged by those conducting the research that the only true experts of the life in which the NEET person is living is the young person themselves who is going through that experience in which they find themselves not in education, employment, or training.

It would be fair to say that the voice of the NEET young person is not completely absent from all the literature. Williamson in his research on the Milltown boys included some direct speech from the boys themselves, and also attempted to realistically portray in his work the true experiences of the boys. The Prince's Trust research was also a

loose and diluted form of the NEET voice; albeit through a survey, which arguably does not give much room for open dialogue and discussion, and could be rather narrow in terms of how the respondents could answer. The issue with surveys can be that they are restricted to certain answers only. It is the author's opinion that it is most helpful to have the unbridled, unrestricted open dialogue of the research subjects themselves in order for the research to truly reflect the heart of the issue and of the people and persons involved in the research. Semi-structured interviews are usually very effective at extracting rich data; particularly the kind of data that truly highlights the voice of the NEET young person. Flick (2011) suggests that the beauty of semi structured interviews is that there is the strength and structure there if needed, but the interviewer or researcher can follow new leads and new lines of enquiry as and when they arise. More of that would have been helpful in building a better picture of the grass roots experiences of those who are identified as NEET. The complicated, variable, and intricate details of their personal lives would help practitioners to formulate a better and more individualised plan of support for them. This would also aid those in local and central government to ensure that policies and funding which mirror the needs of NEETs are truly reflective of what they need; not what the government thinks that they need.

This is also relevant to the next point; better support from childhood. As discussed earlier in chapter four, children who grow up in disadvantaged and deprived homes and communities are far more likely to end up NEET than their more affluent peers, by a long shot so to speak. It is arguably unfair that a child, through no fault of their own other than to have the misfortune of being born into a deprived circumstance, should then further be disadvantaged by their postcode and the choices made by others around them. Perhaps it is not even the choices of their parents, as they too are

also likely to have been brought up deprived and disadvantaged. The cyclical nature of disadvantage strikes at the chords of social injustice chimes that cannot and should not be ignored. Income inequality has been rising during the past ten years, and it is true that the richer are indeed getting richer, whilst the poor are getting even poorer, (ONS, 2021).

Perhaps it would seem like a pipe dream to state that social inequality, and income inequality could and should be eradicated, but if efforts to achieve this are discontinued based on the unlikelihood that absolute equality might never be achieved, then that would be a most tragic viewpoint to hold indeed. Movements and efforts along a trajectory to end social inequality are never wasted, and the more effort that is put into eradicating social and income inequality, the better it will be for children's futures. They will stand a better chance at not growing up poor, and the chain will be broken. That is not to say that everyone who grows up deprived will stay deprived as adults, but more does need to be done to end inequality in our society. Perhaps different taxation laws, upping minimum wage, better childcare help for mothers who need to work. The author is not a politician, but surely, something can be done to further end child poverty, which in turn will lead to better outcomes for young adults. Strategies to help improve engagement in education could also help to move young people from poverty.

As explored earlier in this dissertation, linking classroom and theoretical concepts and subjects to the real life and real world living and working environments will help young people in school to understand why they are learning something. This could lower rates of disengagement, particularly if learners are encouraged to pursue a topic they are interested in and have particular strengths in. This should be encouraged. The focus on education and in particular work and employability skills education needs to shift its focus from a deficit perspective, to a more strengths-based approach. The question which should be asked is "how can education supplement what this learner knows already, and what are their unique strengths?" rather than "what are they not

good at, what are their weaknesses?”. Even this shift in mindset will alter the natural course that employability education will take, and this positive outlook which is based on a young person’s unique character and strengths will alter the atmosphere in the education sector. Perhaps the current school system is setting young people up to fail in some ways in that it is geared more for academic individuals rather than practical ones, and it is these ones that may fall through the cracks. This is why it is vital that theoretical learning is linked to real world and real life experiences. Making it relevant to them will then make it ‘useful’ to them. It could be fair to suggest that the current education system almost pits learners against one another.

Relevance is also key to ensuring the development of soft skills improves. Linking this to useful knowledge, the right conditions to develop soft skills need to also go hand in hand with making subjects relevant to young people. Educators and practitioners working with young people can not only engage young people’s interest and enthusiasm by making it relevant, but also trust young people with situations and environments where they can use and practice these soft skills. Again, some may argue that opportunities like this are already being given, but perhaps the points are being missed. Relevance is key; young people will engage if they feel it is relevant to them personally, interesting, and also most importantly, if they feel valued, heard, and listened to. Young people need a sense of purpose, because navigating the turbulent teenage years where the formative character of adulthood is being formed is a difficult transition time between childhood and adulthood. They need support, not to be overloaded with extras because if they feel overwhelmed, disengagement happens because achievement looks unattainable and the path to get there looks unsustainable.

Mention has already been made in this dissertation about the current careers services in schools, and some anecdotal experiences have been provided as examples, but it is arguably vitally important that reform comes to the current way in which young people whittle down career choices. There are innovative and new careers emerging and school and colleges have not caught up. There are courses in universities that are new and exciting, particularly in the life sciences sector, and yet the school syllabus is the same as twenty years ago! The same books are being studied in the curriculum

today as twenty years ago. Things must evolve to reflect the changing dynamics of new careers. Schools may not have any idea that these careers exist. The cardiac nurse referenced earlier in this dissertation certainly saw through her work that there were gaps between industry and schools. Young people were not applying for the jobs because they did not know they existed, and even if they did, school teachers did not even know the life sciences sector (just a small example of one industry) existed. The nurse mentioned went into two local comprehensive schools and conducted presentations on the life sciences sector and the exciting careers that were available, the teacher's feedback stated that they had no idea those careers existed. There are over three hundred life sciences companies in Wales that often do not ask for qualifications as they are willing to train

up young people. One company said they liked the cheeky class clown type because they found that they made the best sales representatives. These companies often say they cannot fill the positions. School needs reform, so that it is up to date with the real world, and new, exciting and innovative careers for young people. How can schools possibly direct young people towards the relevant university course or job if they have no idea certain university courses and jobs exist? More needs to be done in linking these different sectors. Young people are being done a great disservice due to the lack of partnership working between education and employment sectors, and as discussed, particularly in the example of the life sciences sector.

The answer may or may not be more policies; but often policies seem to lack. As aspirational and excellent as the intention of those making the policies, they often seem out of touch with the real people, and their real life experiences. Voices need to be heard, and these policies and strategies need to reflect the lives and voices of those they are supposed to help.



## **6. Case Study**

Josh is an eighteen year old man from a former south Wales mining village. Like many other post-industrial towns of the same nature, the void left by industry has meant that poverty and deprivation has taken over. The lack of job opportunities and transport to bigger cities has meant that these mining villages and towns have almost been entirely forgotten.

Josh lives at home with his mum, Helen. Helen is a single mum who brought Josh up on her own, and she works two jobs; one as a dinner lady in a local primary school, and the other job as a cleaner in the evenings for the local GP surgery. Josh's mum works hard, and has always worked to try and provide Josh with the shoes, clothes and essentials he needs. She has relied upon her job for an income, with the top up from Universal Credit (formerly Working Tax Credit) and Child Benefit. Even though Helen has brought home two wages, she and Josh are still struggling financially with the cost of living having increased. Child benefit has now ended for Josh as he has turned eighteen.

Josh left school after completing his GCSE examinations (there was no sixth form at his comprehensive school) and had various jobs including working in a car wash, and mowing grass. Josh wanted to be an electrician, and whilst at school he felt that it was very boring, and irrelevant; and he often struggled with his homework, particularly maths, where he felt learning pythagoras and trigonometry was somewhat irrelevant. Although he tried very hard, he left school with minimal GCSEs, and achieved a grade D for maths, and D for English language. This meant that Josh could not do the level 3 electrician course, until he had passed the level 2, and re-sat his GCSEs. Josh was happy with this at first, but after some time at the college, he felt he was lacking the support from his tutors, and although Josh put in the additional work needed for the extra lessons to pass both his GCSE maths and English, he did not manage to increase his grades.

This left Josh feeling disillusioned, and low. He felt that he lacked support from his college, and when he visited his personal tutor, he felt dismissed when she said “well Josh, you will just have to try harder next time”. The tutor did not ask about Josh’s personal life, how his mum works two jobs and the lack of support from a father. Josh became depressed, and as a result, he left college before he had completed his course, too discouraged to stay. He felt that if he had tried so hard and failed this time, why bother trying again. The day he left college, the tutor did not follow up with a call to see how Josh was, and no extra support was offered.

Josh visited his local Job Centre, and decided to sign on to Universal Credit whilst he looked for a job, but as a young person with little prior work experience, and with low qualifications, he had great difficulty finding a job. He applied for several jobs, cleaning, pot washing at a local pub, and even found a temporary job washing cars, but when the company made a loss one month with heavy rain and little trade, he was laid off.

Josh still feels very low, and struggles with feelings of despair, despondency and loneliness. He feels like a failure. He wanted to be an electrician, and the pathways to this job seemed more distant than ever before. He also feels very demoralised and humiliated at having to go through the motions of attending the job centre and queuing up. Occasionally he sees his former college peers walking past as he is standing outside waiting for the building to open.

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Josh's story could go in different directions at this juncture, and it is hoped that this case study highlights a realistic, current, and sadly reflective account of the real lives of many young people today who become NEET. Perhaps it will also enable people who read this dissertation to put the data into context; that is after all, why it is included. The data reveals a great deal, but a true story shows the data being outworked through an individual's life experience, and that a new understanding of the NEET lived experience might help people build a new understanding.

Josh could make several different decisions at this point. He could choose to continue on Universal Credit and look for work. This could lead him down a path where he continues to experience feelings of low self worth, low self-esteem, hopelessness, despair and despondency. This could result in him having mental health issues (although it would be fair to suggest that he seems to already be at this point) which could worsen with the stresses and strains of job hunting and the social exclusion he might already be feeling. He is likely to continue only to be offered low paid work. He is also highly likely to continue finding unfulfilling work, which in turn will likely lead to further despondency and boredom. He could also potentially drift into a lifestyle of crime, particularly as he might be vulnerable and may need to feel a sense of belonging and young NEET young people are at an increased risk of entering into a lifestyle of crime. This is echoed in Williamson's work with the Milltown boys, and also Vernon (2006) points to the fact that traditionally, NEET young people are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Josh is also at risk of entering into crime for financial reasons, and perhaps for a sense of excitement. Whatever the

reason, the risk of Josh going down unfavourable paths is high. The data regarding risky behaviours has already been shared in this dissertation, and also the fact that because Josh is at a low point, he may even turn to drink and drugs in order to help alleviate some of the stresses associated with the NEET lifestyle.

On a more positive note, Josh could also choose to find an apprenticeship. This may potentially be the best option of all. Not only will Josh be able to train in his chosen profession, but he will have the support of an employer, be earning a wage, and also be able to link the classroom based theoretical teaching and learning, to his real life experience in the workplace. This will mean that he will see the link between theory and practice, keeping it relevant for Josh will increase the likelihood that he continues to study and train. Hopefully Josh could also have an understanding mentor in the workplace who will support him to fulfil his aspiration of becoming an electrician.

## **7. Conclusion**

It was most interesting and illuminating to study and analyse the literature around NEET young people. Whilst it is true to say that it confirmed many of the preconceptions the author, and perhaps even society at large has about NEET young people, it also threw some curveballs in the way of some unexpected sad truths that hopefully have shed light on the humanhood of NEET young people. It is hoped that through the highlighting and disseminating of some of the important issues facing young people, including lifestyle choices and mental health difficulties and struggles, that people will look past the label. It is hoped that this dissertation will have provided a compassionate view of NEET young people, although some critiquing of lifestyle choices and behaviours was necessary.

The recommendations given in this dissertation are by no means exhaustive, and it is the author's belief that there is definite room for more research and reform on the issues discussed in this dissertation. There were undoubtedly many more issues not

brought to light in this dissertation that could be discussed. Young mothers who are NEET; this group seemed to be lumped with the unemployed, but arguably motherhood is an important and often overlooked role. Exploration of this group could make for further research. There does seem to be a percentage of between 10 and 11% that are consistently NEET, despite certain interventions and strategies being implemented. Perhaps the question that needs to be asked is, if the strategies were working, would this percentage fall? It would again be useful to get the voices of the NEET young people themselves. A holistic issue needs a holistic solution, particularly as the NEET issue is complex, multifaceted and covers many areas of a young person's life.

Reading Williamson's work with the Milltown boys over several decades was not only eye opening, informative, and useful to see the attitudes of the boys themselves and how they played the game so to speak, but it was also tragic. Some of those boys were trapped in a lifestyle of illegitimate work, drinking, and drugs. Some managed to break free and forge a new path. Sadly, as Williamson stated in 2021, most of them forged paths without any support, but surprisingly they were not thrown from pillar to post, but acted with agency in surprising ways (Williamson, 2021). Perhaps the young people

who are NEET at the time of writing this dissertation also act in these ways, and perhaps they too have little support. It is known from the research presented in this dissertation that they often live life with riskier behaviours, much like the Milltown boys. This could be a fatalistic way to live, just like the Millton boys; not looking too far back, because the past cannot be changed, whilst also not looking too far ahead into the future, because disappointments happen. The inclusion of Josh's case study also highlights the fact that behind the data and stats and research are people; men and women who are faced with challenges. It is true that some NEET young people do not want to seek education, employment or training, and some who even might seek out a life of illegitimate work and crime, but the opposite is also true. Most NEET young people want to work and have opportunities, and with the right support, mentoring and being given a chance, they can thrive, and it is hoped they will.

It is hoped that this dissertation has justified, and even raised awareness of NEET young people and their struggles. It is hoped that people who read this dissertation might take on a new viewpoint of empathy and understanding for them, rather than pigeonhole them, trivialise their struggles, or even dismiss them entirely; especially if they are dismissed as lazy. No doubt there are lazy people in all walks of life, but NEET young people for the most part, have not had the privileges and opportunities that most people have had. Hopefully, this dissertation might serve as a small window into how hard it really is for NEET young people, and how they can be better supported.

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