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When nurturing is conditional: How NEET practitioners position the support they give to young people who are not in education, employment and training.

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When nurturing is conditional: How NEET practitioners position the support they give to young people who are not in education, employment and training.

This paper explores the perceptions of professionals working with young people who are NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) about their role in young people's trajectories. The issue of professionally and educationally inactive young people is a growing concern in Western economies and has been at the forefront of government agendas for the last 30 years. However, policies designed to re-engage young people position them as lacking in qualities sought by employers. Meanwhile, the educational provision dedicated to NEETs is often described as providing low-value qualifications, and practitioners who work with NEETs are considered to have a lower status than other teaching professionals. A mixed-methods study was conducted including six semi-structured interviews and an online survey completed by 25 professionals working with NEETs. The findings highlight that professionals working with NEETs are positioned in a contradictory role. On the one hand, they are tasked with delivering courses based on educational policies that place the responsibility for employment within the individual. On the other hand, they perceive NEET young people's circumstances as the result of structural inequalities. Practitioners seem to reconcile these contradictions by construing their own role as the provision of a safe space in which young people can develop.

Keywords: NEET practitioners; practitioners' roles; disengagement from education; employability schemes; aspirations.

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Introduction

The issue of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has been of concern for UK policy makers since the 1980s and continues to an urgent problem within European countries (House of Lords 2014). Whilst being NEET can have a detrimental long-term effect on individuals (Ralston et al. 2016), the education provision made for NEET has often been criticised for being low-quality (Simmons and Thompson 2011); meanwhile the professionals working with NEET young people are often considered to have lower-status than other teacher counterparts (Beck 2015). This study aimed to evaluate the views that practitioners working with NEET young people have of the work they do. The contradictions that appear in their accounts elicit questions about the provision itself and about a delivery model where payments depend on performance.

Defining NEET

The term NEET was coined in the UK and the reductions of NEET numbers has continued to be at the front of the political agenda of UK policy-makers since the 1980s. Until recently, the term NEET was used to designate young people aged between 16 to 18, who were out of education or unemployed, and additionally 19 to 24-year olds in the same position if they had learning difficulties or disabilities. However, the definition and scope of NEET has recently broadened to include all unemployed young people up

to 24 years old (Hutchinson, Beck, and Hooley 2015). Whilst unemployment for under 18s appears to have fallen progressively (around 3% in the 10 year period previous to 2013 for 16 years-old), the numbers have remained higher for those aged 19 to 24 (Maguire 2015a) . Figures from the Office for National Statistics (2018) provide estimates of the number of young people who claim that they will be actively seeking employment, and it is this that is used to classify whether they are economically active or inactive – not whether they are in receipt of benefits. Due to the lack of information available from different sources about destinations of those aged 16-18 years, however, the validity of official unemployment figures for this age group is questionable (Maguire 2015b), and the different measures used mean that comparison between groups is challenging.

Although NEET young people are relatively heterogeneous, young people at risk of becoming NEET are generally seen as having low educational achievement, and high levels of educational disaffection. Similarly, young people who become NEET are broadly affected in the same way, with damage to their long term educational prospects and their transitions into adulthood (Nudzor 2010).

The use of the term NEET is often criticised, partly due to the heterogeneity of the group. As Yates and Payne (2006) explain, there are problems associated with assuming that nearly 9% of the youth population have NEET status as their most salient common feature. A further criticism of the term stems from the fact that the majority of research has concentrated on the younger category, those aged 16 to 18, and it does not extend to the wider group, for which there is a lack of research in its composition and circumstances (Maguire 2015b). Despite such criticisms, the term is widely used and recognised by professionals working in this educational sector and has, for the purpose of clarity, been used throughout this study. At the same time, professionals working

with NEET carry out many different tasks in a wide variety of educational settings, and the term practitioners has been used to cover a wide range of jobs.

The NEET provision

Educational provision for NEET young people has undergone many changes as new government policies have come to the fore. One consistent factor, however, highlighted by Avis (2014), is that UK policy-makers have tended to construe workless youth as inherently having a problem to be sorted.

The low quality of the provision for those who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET is one of the main criticisms of the sector (Beck 2015). Provision is characterised by low-status training schemes, which offer low value in the labour-market (Simmons and Thompson 2011). From the 1980s, following the collapse of the youth labour market, the first training courses to be implemented started to target what was perceived as a problem within the individual: lack of motivation, skills or/and qualifications (Yates et al. 2011). Later, under the 1997-2010 Labour government, the issue was reconceptualised in the context of social exclusion, with policies that aimed to move individuals from benefits into employment by raising their skills (Hutchinson, Beck, and Hooley 2015). The courses delivered under these policies (E2E) framed lack of employability skills as the main impediment to work (Simmons 2009), and did not lead young people to jobs needing conceptual knowledge (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). With the advent of the 2010 Coalition government, E2E was replaced with Foundation Learning programmes. These aimed to increase accredited learning and catered to students with low attainment at GSCE (Smith and Wright 2015). Foundation Learning also came with a new funding structure: training providers were now funded according to achievements. This was found to provide “*perverse incentives created by funding and accountability mechanisms*” (Wolf 2011, 45), where young people were not gaining

meaningful qualifications or work experience and were “*churned*” in and out of training and employment (Wolf 2011).

Under the Coalition government many services were progressively cut under the need for fiscal austerity, yet young people’s services “*have borne the brunt of ‘austerity’ measures compared to older groups*” (Crisp and Powell 2017,1796) Hutchinson, Beck, and Hooley (2015) argue that cuts to services created a deliberate vacuum in services that allowed the introduction to commercial contracts, thus gearing policies towards the needs of employers and away from local authorities.

From the late 1980s a range of employment and training programmes have been delivered through private contractors on performance-based contracts. From 2008 the UK government aimed to develop a British “welfare market” in which prime contractors bid for funding and deliver services through their own sub-contractors (Finn 2010). Within the NEET sector, the Youth Contract (YC), from 2012, has been run with a devolved model using prime contractors (Maguire 2015b). This approach has been criticised because it can encourage providers develop their practices to maximise outcomes, and thus funding – resulting in selective recruitment of participants who are “easy to help”. Although this delivery system provides budgetary savings, there may also be a reduction in the quality of services provided (UKCES 2010). Maguire (2015b) argues that the YC failed both in terms of the number of people it supported and the number of sustained outcomes of long-term re-engagement that were generated.

The introduction of cuts to services under austerity programmes has not only led to reduced support for young people (Crisp and Powell 2017) but also in fewer young people accessing available services. Maguire (2015b) explains that cuts to local services, who map and track NEET young people, has translated into inaccurate data

regarding the status of young people and, as a consequence, there are young people who might remain “hidden” from the services that would provide support.

In the model of Study Programmes implemented in recent years (Ofsted 2014) providers are currently expected to ensure quality through a system of accountability, by which learners’ progression into apprenticeships, employment or training have become key elements of quality and, ultimately, funding (DfE 2016). Early evaluations of Study Programmes, however, suggested that neither progression nor meaningful work experience had been achieved across the board (Ofsted 2014).

The effectiveness of the provision for NEET young people, then, is questionable. Participation in employability programmes has been found to be a deterrent for employers and thus to have detrimental effects for job seekers (Simmons et al. 2014). Furthermore, longitudinal data across occupations for 20 years suggests that having been NEET has a “scarring” effect. Young people who were NEET in 1991, tended to occupy lower-status jobs than their peers 20 years later (Ralston et al 2016).

The improvement of employability skills is a common aim of courses for NEET young people. Ralston et al. (2016) argue, however, that NEET young people might suffer from a Matthew Effect by which disadvantage accumulates on those who are already disadvantaged. The completion of low-status courses, which offer qualifications not valued by employers (Wolf 2011), and which make young people less employable (Simmons et al. 2014), may contribute to this effect. Nonetheless, a meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental interventions with NEET young people, found that short, multi-component interventions can have a positive effect on employment and wages, although these effects are small and the study is limited due to lack of available data (Mawn et al. 2017).

McQuaid & Lindsay (2005) argue that UK labour policies have understood long-term unemployed individuals as “withering flowers” that lose employability skills as they remain unemployed, placing the responsibility for the unemployment within the individual. This goes alongside a shift in focus from seeing employment as a right of the individual, to seeing it as a responsibility of the individual towards society (Crisp and Powell 2017). This position can be observed within NEET policy literature where disengaged young people are sometimes framed by the cost they will incur to society. For example a 2010 Audit Commission report claims that “The entire 2008 group of young people NEET could cost over £13 billion to the public purse and £22 billion in opportunity costs” (Audit Commission 2010, 16). Avis (2014) argues that this position of NEET young people as a “lost generation” fits within the UK tradition of pathologizing the working classes, whilst education and waged labour have been seen as the way to incorporate them into society.

Spielhofer et al. (2009) highlight that factors associated with educational disengagement can be narrowed down to disadvantage. In this sense, it can be argued that NEET young people are likely to be so due to their socio-economic status, the circumstances of difficulty that surround their lives or an educational system that is not promoting social mobility. Yet programmes designed to re-engage and train young people, in assuming that unemployed youth are at fault for their own inactivity, also assume they have a lot of agency in overcoming their circumstances.

Strategies for re-engagement

If the provision made for NEET young people is characterised in the literature as having low value (Simmons and Thompson 2011), the practitioners themselves are often seen as having low status (Beck 2015). The relationships they establish with young people, however, are recognised as an important part of successful interventions

(Simmons and Smyth 2016). They play a fundamental part in supporting young people to activate their agency, although the work they do is also key in implementing policies of re-engagement that view worklessness as the fault of the individual.

Strathdee (2013) examined the approaches utilised by the estate to re-engage young people in New Zealand and elsewhere, describing them as motivational, punishing or bridging. Simmons and Smyth (2016) used these to analyse the experiences that NEET young people have of interacting with service providers.

Motivational approaches can be understood with the offer of different qualifications aimed to enhance young people's employability and vocational skills. However, employability courses can often be demotivational, partly due to the learning providers' projection of the type of work -insecure and with little opportunity for progression - that young people might be able to achieve (Beck 2015).

Punishing approaches involve forcing young people into work by worsening the consequences of not working. This assumes that young people are happy to have a life on benefits because they are better off than working (Strathdee 2013), so young people may be forced into employability courses under threat of losing their benefits (Simmonds and Smyth 2016). Crisp & Powell (2017) argued that UK policies aimed to increase employability skills (thus focused on labour supply) have been increasingly attached to *conditionality*. The unemployed must fulfil certain conditions, such as taking part in low-value courses, in order to be entitled to support. This system acts to create a reserve of employees that are forced to take on low-security, low-wage, flexible jobs by making the welfare system increasingly conditional (Peck and Theodore 2000).

Bridging approaches work with the assumption that young people are more likely to secure work through their social networks than in the open market (Strathdee 2013). Third parties can help young people bridge the deficit in their social capital by

acting as a link between them and employers and educational settings. Young people's understandings and perceptions of employment and education might reflect those of their parents, and thus their opportunities might be limited by misguided information on education and labour markets (Spielhofer et al. 2009). The success of any bridging approach will also be limited by the provider's own social network, whether at organisational level or personal level.

NEET practitioners

Beck (2015) points out that learning providers can limit young people's choices through their own background in education, work and training. Practitioners work with the aim to train young people to "their own expectations of low-paid, low-skilled work" (Beck 2015, 493), by portraying themselves, and their overcoming of their own backgrounds, as something that learners should aspire to achieve. However, it could also be argued that practitioners are aware of how being NEET will limit young people's future prospects, thus the "scarring" effect of being NEET (Ralston et al, 2016) could contribute to the perceptions of practitioners.

Workforce questionnaire data from private training providers, collected in 2014/2015, shows that around 75% of tutors were qualified below degree level, just 56% either have, or are working towards, a teaching qualification, whilst around 33% are qualified at level 3 or below (Scruton 2015). Furthermore, over 40% of the workforce earn salaries between £20,201 and £25,000 (ETF 2016); which falls below the national average of £27,600. Training Providers tend to offer a wide range of courses, including Apprenticeships, and NEET providers themselves might work with a range of clients. However, this data also shows that NEET practitioners, as a group, are just as heterogenous as the young people they support. For example, nearly a quarter of

teaching staff employed by training providers have qualifications at level 6 and above (ETF 2016).

E2E tutors interviewed in Thompson's (2010) study considered their professional values to derive from personal qualities rather than qualifications; a view also shared by their managers. In this study, tutors distinguished themselves from mainstream teachers in their ability to engage and empathise with vulnerable learners. These are qualities needed to deliver employability courses, however the nature of these courses might also explain the relative lower status of NEET practitioners. An ethnographic study on E2E programmes found that tutors were employed because of the "world of work" knowledge needed to deliver non-generic employability courses, instead of the qualifications required from other teaching professionals (Thompson 2011). Tutors often started their careers by "accident" or slippage in their careers (Thompson 2010). In a market-driven environment, this allows further education colleges and training providers to hire tutors who get paid less than their counterparts and work more intensively (Thompson 2011).

Nevertheless, ability to empathise with young people remains an important requirement for NEET practitioners, as the relationships between practitioners and young people are important in determining the success of interventions (Thompson 2010) and their jobs involve supporting young people in developing agency. Most young people move from education to work, on routes that are meant to bridge the two, potentially developing agency as they make choices moving from one context to the other. However, there are structural inequalities and limited opportunities that impose on their agency, or ability to consider the present and make plans (Heinz 2009). Beck (2015) proposes that practitioners fulfil a dual role: supporting young people to activate their agency by encouraging them to make choices whilst activating the structural

limitation to agency, for example, when encouraging realistic expectations of the labour market.

If practitioners hold expectations of learners according to their own backgrounds (Beck 2015), we might assume that those practitioners whose backgrounds are more similar to the NEET young people's, might also hold lower aspirations for their learners, in addition to limited social networks, thus limiting their own ability to implement bridging approaches. It could be argued that some practitioners' knowledge of the labour market and lack of experience in higher education might act as a limit to the expectations that they have of young people. However, considering the variability of qualification and recruitment routes found in practitioners, these low expectations could differ depending on the skill level, or educational level, of the practitioners.

This paper asks: What expectations do NEET practitioners have of young people and how might their own background influence these? How do practitioners position their role in supporting the development of young people's agency?

Methods

This study used mixed methods: an online questionnaire was distributed to professionals working with NEET young people, and six semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners who work with NEET young people. The research was conducted in line with the ethical procedures of the authors' home institution.

Online questionnaire

Participants

Participants were recruited via email sent to managers of several organisations such as colleges, charities and training providers. Twenty-five participants completed the questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 23 to 69 years old (mean age 39 years), and

there were 7 male and 17 female respondents (with one undisclosed gender). All were working with NEET young people at the time of responding. Participants worked in a variety of roles as tutors, administrators, managers and career advisors: the majority had responsibilities for recruitment, assessment, training, and career guidance.

Materials

The questionnaire was created and distributed using the BOS online survey tool (www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk). The survey had three parts: The first covered participants' personal characteristics, job roles and educational backgrounds; the second investigated participants' expectations of NEET young people's future achievements; and the third explored participants' reactions to motivational, punishing, and bridging approaches to engagement as described by Strathdee (2013). This part of the survey presented four separate questions: two required participants to consider the reasons why young people become NEET; and the other two asked participants to evaluate the effectiveness of different methods of engagement. Three response statements were generated for each question, each statement reflecting a specific view of or approach to working with young people: motivational, bridging or punishing. In each question, participants were asked to rank the statements in order of preference.

Analysis

Given the response rate (N=25), descriptive statistics only are presented for the survey.

Interviews

Participants

Six participants were interviewed between May and June 2017. The sampling was purposive: all participants were working as NEET practitioners in different roles and workplaces. Participants were recruited through contact with their managers.

Interviews covered three main themes: the practitioner's own background, their perceptions of how young people came to be NEET, and their perceptions of young people's future aspirations.

Participant profiles

Participant 1 attended a large comprehensive secondary school in a mid-size town in the South-West of England. Before completing his A-levels, he left school to pursue a career in professional sports which never took off. He then travelled the world for 10 years whilst working as an outdoor pursuits instructor. Returning to the UK, he enrolled in a local university to do an undergraduate degree in Psychology. He started working as a tutor for NEET young people in the E2E programme and then moved to working with a local youth charity. At the time of the interview he had been employed by the charity for 6 years, in which time he had progressed from tutor to manager. He held responsibility for recruitment of staff and learners, the running of several programmes and a drop-in centre for NEET young people in a busy city centre in the South West.

Participant 2 was born in a large town in the South West, she attended state and private schools in the UK and abroad, eventually graduating from university in French and Spanish. She completed teacher training several years after graduating. After 4 years of teaching, a family member, who was starting a small programme for NEET young people, asked her to join the company and become Curriculum Manager. At the

time of the interview she had been working there for 1 year, supporting other unqualified tutors in their delivery of the Study Skills programme.

Participant 3 attended a large state school in a major city in the South West of England. She completed an undergraduate degree in Psychology several years after leaving school, following which she worked as an assistant in mental health services, a job she left to complete an MA in Education. She then found employment at a large college as a support worker, working with NEET young people. At the time of the interview she had been working at a large college for 6 years as an outreach tutor delivering employability and personal development courses in the community for NEET young people and adults who are mandated by the Job Centre.

Participant 4 attended a large mainstream secondary school. She describes her schooling experience as very negative having been bullied due to a disability. Leaving school without any qualifications, she joined the Youth Training Scheme. She then worked in a succession of jobs as cleaner. After several years she found employment as a cleaner in a mental health care unit, where she was promoted and became a care assistant. Whilst working there she gained some work-based qualifications relating to care. At the time of the interview she had been working at a large college for 6 years as a support worker working with NEET young people.

Participant 5 grew up in a medium sized town in the South West. She attended a large mainstream secondary school and describes herself as not a bright student. Leaving school without qualifications, she tried attending college, but dropped out twice. From age 19 she worked as a care assistant and at 25 she went to university as a mature student. At the time of the interview she had been working as a youth worker for 5 years and was working towards a part-time distance learning MA in mental health. She supported NEET young people in a drop-in centre in a busy city in the South West.

Participant 6 grew up in a large city in the South West, where she attended mainstream education. Leaving school without qualifications, she moved in and out of employment for several years. After having children, she decided to attend university as a mature student. At the time of the interview, she had been working for a small training provider for 5 years, during which time she had been promoted to Centre Manager.

Analysis

Interview data was analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. A top-down approach was used to search for information related to the research questions; particularly strategies for engagement of young people, and issues of agency. Data was simultaneously analysed inductively, for themes that were not initially expected.

Results

Questionnaire

The 25 participants were working in a variety of settings (training providers, charity organisations and colleges), the majority as tutors or support workers. Participants' highest level of qualifications from formal education ranged from level 2 to level 7 in formal education, and 14 of them had completed higher education courses. Almost all (23 participants) had completed training since starting employment, achieving, mostly, qualifications at level 3 or 4, reflecting trends in the sector (ETF 2016). This is also reflected in the qualitative data, where access to training through work was also a commonality amongst interviewees.

Practitioners were asked to answer with an estimated percentage of the young people they worked with who would move onto different destinations. Practitioners estimated, on average, that 55.4% of learners would move onto another training

provider to complete qualifications at level 1, that 46.6% of learners would go on to either employment or level 2 qualifications, and 19% of learners would go on to level 3 qualifications. This suggests that practitioners expect the majority of learners will not progress, and will simply move across to similar provisions. “Churning” in and out of low level qualifications was one of the problems identified by Wolf (2011), and the low level of students expected by practitioners to make a real progression onto level 3 qualifications aligns with this trend.

Practitioners were asked to rank statements relating to the 3 different approaches to working with young people (motivational, bridging and punishing) from 1 (preferred statement) to 3 (least preferred statement) across 4 different questions. Punishing approaches were preferred when asked to give reasons for the young people’s disengagement and when asked to describe young people. However, punishing approaches were the least preferred when practitioners were asked to rank the success of different approaches in supporting young people into finding work, or re-engaging young people (see Tables 1 and 2). This points to an explicit use of punishing approaches to explain young people’s disengagement, but a dislike of the implementation of such approaches in practice - this trend was also evident in the qualitative data.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

Qualitative data

Four main themes were identified from the qualitative data (Figure 1). The first one, *young people’s lives*, describes how practitioners construe the experiences of

young people. These perceptions appear to sit in contradiction to the second theme: *punishing approaches*, which offers a differing view of young people. The provision of *safe space*, the third theme identified, refers to the notion that NEET provision offers a safe space for young people to heal, this safe space also functions as a resolution to the contradiction between the two previous themes. This space encompasses an approach that will nurture young people and allow them to move onto *mixed pathways*. These are educational pathways that reflect those that practitioners themselves undertook successfully.

Figure 1 about here.

Young People's Lives

Practitioners characterised young people's lives as negative, chaotic and unhappy. Although the heterogeneity that can be found within the group was generally acknowledged, young people were broadly described as leading lives that are marginalised and isolated as "*some of these young people literally have nobody*" (P3). Practitioners' accounts showed frustration and surprise at the difficulties endured by the young people, who were implicitly positioned as agentless in their circumstances. They portrayed young people who have suffered through an educational system that has damaged their confidence and self-esteem and who are also victims of situations of extreme difficulty.

Young people were seen as having little or no agency in the context of mainstream education. The structure of the educational system had failed to meet young people's needs, and school was looked upon as a source of demotivation. Participant 3 described how following mainstream education practices in the classroom was not effective in her own teaching as it discourages NEETs, due to their previous experiences:

“a lot of the guys here they have been told they're not going to achieve in mainstream, and they have that kind of mentality” (P3)

Ultimately, mainstream education has failed to engage and motivate young people so that *“they just feel like they are a failure”* (P2). Teachers, according to participants' accounts, were the main cause of this failure: partly because they had not been able to recognise the young people's behaviour as a cry for help; but also because they had failed to empathise with young people's situations.

Negative depictions of mainstream education appeared in practitioners' accounts of their own backgrounds, whether as young people themselves or as professionals. This similarity between practitioners and young people is key in understanding how practitioners positioned themselves as central to young people's wellbeing. Practitioners believed that this shared experience enabled them to engage and motivate young people, setting them apart from mainstream teachers. In this narrative, practitioners became the only professionals who can provide the necessary support to build on the self-esteem and confidence that young people lack – a confidence eroded by an uncaring educational system that has been ineffective in aiding young people to overcome their extreme circumstances.

In the practitioners' accounts some young people were portrayed as living in situations of extreme difficulty. All the practitioners interviewed recounted stories of young people who overcame such circumstances. These accounts were described in rich detail, and included issues such as drug use, prostitution, imprisonment, child abuse and bereavement. However, even though these stories appeared in all accounts, they were not the result of direct questions: participants were simply asked about a young person they were proud of. Young people were perceived as victims, but what was remarkable, according to practitioners, was their resilience and ability to overcome adversity. Young

people were admired for what would seem like very small, perhaps even insignificant, achievements in other situations. Under extreme circumstances these achievements were presented as great accomplishments, they were achievements like: “*attendance of 100%*” (P6) or even the young man who was “*walking to get to the centre every day*” (P3).

A juxtaposition appeared in the implicit positioning of young people as victims of external circumstances, and the explicit expectations placed on them to exercise agency to overcome these circumstances. For example, Participant 2, having given a detailed background story of a young woman who is a survivor of child abuse, went on to explain how proud she was of her part-time job in a bar where she “*she just cleans in the background*”. Ultimately, the young person was admired for “*the fact that she is just existing*”, because “*she's not just what she's achieving*”.

Two distinct and contradictory narratives of young people developed. On the one hand young people were construed as victims of adults in charge of them, whether it was adults who were perpetrators of abuse and neglect or simply teachers who couldn't empathise with them. On the other hand, there was another narrative of young people who had a lot of agency, who were choosing their inactivity, and who had to access low-skilled and low-paid employment in order to overcome the “*rough deal*” (P4) they had been given. This dichotomy between the two narratives became evident when practitioners discussed the reasons behind young people's unemployment – these were explanations that fully reflected the punishing approaches employed in successive NEET policies.

Punishing approaches

Strathdee (2013) argues that these approaches aim to re-engage the unemployed by worsening the repercussions of not working. As discussed earlier, in the UK this has been reflected in policies focused on the supply of labour, that aim to increase employability skills, and are increasingly attached to conditionality (Crisp & Powell 2017). These policies view unemployment as a choice of the individual, young people are framed in terms of their cost to society and their responsibility to become active and contribute. Practitioners, through their work with young people, are core to the implementation of such policies. Their accounts reflected views of young people who were agentic in their disengagement by actively choosing their unemployment, and this position was mirrored in the quantitative results. In interviews, it appeared alongside the narratives that discussed young people's resilience and agency in coping with adversity.

Young people were conceptualised as not having the skills, knowledge or attitude to make them desirable to an employer. Young people were simply "*by no means, ready to go into work*" (P3). However, this was seen as an area in which young people had full agency, for they mostly "*can't get bothered. When they wake up in the morning, they think: 'can I be bothered? Probably not'*" (P1).

It was the practitioners, and the courses they delivered, that were seen as having the ability to activate and direct this agency. Participant 3 described how training could help young people become "*better employees*", whilst Participant 6 explained the content of their employability courses:

"we try to go into depth with how you actually work in the workplace. So we have sort of communication skills: what's a good way of talking to your manager? because these guys just have no idea"(P6)

Not only were young people seen as needing to learn how to become good employees, they also had to overcome the benefits culture in which they had grown up, in which they had not had the opportunity to learn about work. They were simply

“following the example of their families and their environment” (P2). For practitioners, this was an important area of distinction: young people were seen to be living in worse circumstances than their own. For example, Participant 5 explained why she did not think of herself as having been NEET:

“there was a culture within my household that we were a working household, that we were a working-class family. So I would get a nudge if I really needed to be going out and getting myself a job” (P5).

The implication here was that NEET young people were not from *“working households”*, fitting instead into a construct of families living in benefits and being unemployed as a lifestyle choice. However, the natural follow-up policies of removing or cutting benefits to incentivise job-search activities were not perceived as positive when they affected young people. Practitioners were witness to a *“a lot of sad stories”* (P3), a position that was also reflected in the survey results where, despite a general preference for statements that position worklessness as a choice, removal of benefits was the least desirable option to re-engage young people.

This aversion for the practical elements of punishing approaches points to the dual narrative of young people as both victims and agents. Although they were implicitly positioned as victims of circumstances, they were explicitly construed as agentic in overcoming such difficulties, reflecting the punishing approaches that inspire NEET policies. Practitioners explained young people’s disengagement through the lens of punishing and conditional policies, but when these policies were implemented and could affect young people’s wellbeing, they were seen as unjust and ineffective: *“that’s only going to make things worse for a young person on a practical level”* (P5). The implementation of such policies was part of practitioners’ everyday roles, for example parents of young people who stopped attending courses would have had their benefits stopped, and long-term, unpaid work placements were a key element of the

employability courses practitioners delivered. Consequently, practitioners, and the jobs they do, are placed at the centre of this contradiction: either young people are victims and should be pitied and their achievements (however small) recognised, or they have chosen their situation and should be pushed to move on. Practitioners' accounts reconciled this contradiction by reframing their own job roles and describing the NEET provision as the creation of a *safe space*.

Safe space

Employability courses and the educational provision for NEET young people were conceptualised as the creation of a safe space in which young people could “*heal*” through “*a lot of emotional support*” (P5), and where young people could grow in confidence and self-esteem.

Practitioners placed themselves at the core of the process: it was their support and encouragement that would help young people “*heal*” through a “*holistic approach*” to working with young people. Where teachers had failed young people by not being able to empathise with their situations, practitioners had a different approach which recognised small but important achievements. For example, Participant 2 summarised an attitude towards achievement that appeared in most other accounts: “*even if they don't attain anything it doesn't matter*”, this was because their job was not “*just supporting them academically, like I said, it's a holistic growth.*” Attendance was seen as an expression of accomplishment in this holistic approach, with achievement seen as “*just sometimes being there, actually turning up*” (P3).

However, practitioners' jobs were subject to funding constraints, and, from a policy perspective, attendance is not an achievement in itself, but merely a pre-requisite for achievement. Funding constraints were a source of frustration. Practitioners reflected on the effects of cuts on services:

“...funding is a huge challenge... we are bridging massive amounts of gaps in provision that the statutory sector just don't want anymore”(P5).

Acknowledgement of how cuts to services has affected young people's circumstances only appeared in the accounts of those practitioners who had worked with young people for a long period of time and who had, possibly, experienced changes in provision. Participant 1 explained how a reduction of staff in housing units meant fewer young people were encouraged and supported to access support services. It could be argued that reduced services linked to austerity where the “new normal” for those practitioners who had started working with NEET young people more recently.

With the introduction of Study Programmes, funding became attached to the progression of students onto employment, further training, or education. In all the interviews, “*progression*” was seen as the main goal of provision and a key indicator of success. This created a problematic mismatch between the perceived problem (structural inequality, extreme difficulty and an uncaring educational system) and the required solution, which was imposed by funding, and was reduced to progression onto further education and work. It also constitutes a further example of how practitioners used the narrative of punishing approaches to explain young people's situation, but rejected the practical implementation of such policies. By reframing their own role as “healers” practitioners might have found a way out of this contradiction.

Though the provision of safe space, practitioners believed that young people could start to feel better, heal, improve on self-esteem and motivation and, eventually, move on. By placing themselves at the core of the process, practitioners were able to redefine their jobs away from punishing approaches. Their jobs were no longer just to deliver increasingly punitive work-based interventions that positioned young people negatively, instead their task was to “heal” though encouragement, help and support.

Ultimately, practitioners just wanted “*get a magic wand and make everything better for everyone*” (P4), and in doing so they would be supporting young people into re-engagement route to work.

Mixed pathways

NEET practitioner’s jobs might be viewed as requiring low-skills, being low-paid and having low-status (Beck 2015), but this was not reflected in their accounts. Common features amongst practitioners were high levels of job satisfaction and career progression: “*I can say I really, really love my job. Which is unusual, but it's true*”(P3). They saw themselves as having been successful, they had all advanced professionally since starting to work with NEET young people. This was partly reflected in the survey results, where more than two thirds of participants had achieved qualifications at level 3 or above since starting work.

Early negative experiences of mainstream education were not seen as an impediment to educational achievement: practitioners had successfully accessed education as adults. Adult education was seen as empowering and motivational, it was intertwined with employment and motivated by a desire to advanced professionally:

“Then I thought it was time to learn something so I went as a mature student to University”(P1).

Previous research indicates that adults might feel empowered to return to education and access higher education courses as a consequence of life experiences rather than their prior level of education (Shafi and Rose 2014). Practitioners’ accounts made clear links between their access to adult education and their job satisfaction and career progression. They were actively encouraging young people to access low-paid, low-status jobs for the near and, at least, medium term future:

“We will tell them you are going to have to work for minimum wage at least 5 years and that is the reality”(P1).

However, when this was framed against their own career pathways, it appeared that work and education were construed as part of the same intertwined path, thus encouraging young people onto employment might not necessarily be removing further formal education out of the equation. This offers, perhaps, an alternative explanation for the seemingly low expectations they have appeared to hold of young people. Their backgrounds were not simply limiting the expectations they had of young people, they were, perhaps, expecting young people to follow on a similar path to that which they followed, and that they view as successful.

Discussion

In this study, both the quantitative and qualitative data provided evidence that professionals working with NEET young people hold low expectations of what they might be able to achieve. Beck (2015) argues that this is linked to the practitioners' own backgrounds - they encourage young people to move onto the low-skilled, low-pay jobs they experienced themselves. Examination of practitioners' educational attainment sits in contrast to this, however. Workforce questionnaires point to a very heterogeneous group, with qualifications ranging from level 2 to level 7 (ETF 2016); this is reflected in the participants of this study, many of whom, based on their qualifications, would be able to access traditional teacher training routes. The low expectations that practitioners hold could be explained as an understanding of the problems associated with being NEET, with suggestions of the scarring effect of being NEET (Ralston et al. 2016). It could also be argued these low expectations fit within the bigger picture of NEET policy, reflected in the practitioners' contradictory narratives of young people.

A dichotomous narrative of young people appears: the reason for young people's circumstances is explained both because of structural issues and also as a consequence

of a choice made by the young people. Meanwhile these explicit views of young people who have chosen their inactivity reflect the narrative of punishing approaches and policies that aim to punish the workless back into employment. These are positions that have been increasingly present in UK policy, where the need to improve outcomes for young people has been framed in terms of cost and savings to the tax-payer (Audit Commission 2010) and where, in the context of austerity measures, support has become increasingly more conditional (Crisp and Powell 2017). Both qualitative and quantitative data point to punishing approaches being used to explain young people's unemployment and disengagement from the educational system. In the survey results, in answering the question "*how would you define NEET young people?*" the statement "*They need to develop work ethics as they haven't experienced it in their environment*" was chosen as the preferred explanation by more than 2/3 of participants. However, when these policies are implemented, for example with the removal of benefits, practitioners show a clear dislike for them. Measures such as enforced long-term work experience placements, which are a natural follow-up from punishing approaches, are met with distrust. Practitioners are placed in a conundrum: they implicitly perceive the problem as a systematic failure that has affected young people negatively, whilst they explicitly explain the problem in terms of the punishing policies they ought to implement, yet when these policies are implemented, they regard them as unjust and unfair. The concept of a safe space provides a reconciliation to this mismatch between the perceived problem and the solution.

Practitioners define their role, and the courses they deliver, as the provision of a safe space. A place for "*holistic growth*" and "*healing*", where young people can overcome the damage they've suffered, mainly from the educational system. In this conceptualisation, employability courses are not framed in terms of re-engagement

strategies, they transcend into a time for young people to “*heal*” by receiving “*emotional support*”. Furthermore, when a young person is ready to move on, either to work or further study, this is seen as the result of a successful intervention. Accessing minimum-wage work, or moving onto courses leading to further low-level qualifications, are an expression of success for the young people, for they have now “*grown holistically*” and “*healed*”. Within this discourse, mainstream education has eroded young people’s confidence and self-esteem and teachers have damaged young people and made them “*feel like a failure*”. High levels of educational disaffection is one of the few common features amongst NEET young people (Nudzor 2010), although perhaps it is also a common feeling amongst those who work with them too. If mainstream education is perceived with negativity, adult education, is, in contrast, seen as a highly positive and empowering route.

All interview participants had accessed either work-based qualifications or university courses as adults and through their employment, and almost all questionnaire respondents had achieved qualifications from level 3 to level 6 after starting work. This suggests that access to study as adults, and through employment, is widespread in the industry. From a study on E2E suppliers, Thompson (2011) found that tutors had been employed because of their “*world of work*” experience rather than their academic qualifications, and tutors also tend to start their careers by slippage (Thompson 2010). It may be, then, that employers recruit tutors because of their previous experience and later provide training to the required levels. The practitioners interviewed came from a variety of places of work (training providers, colleges and charity organisations), yet all showed high levels of job satisfaction and regarded their careers as having been successful despite early negative experiences of mainstream education. This provides an alternative explanation for the seemingly low expectations they hold of young people:

practitioners might be discouraging young people from taking traditional, mainstream routes which they view as ineffective and uncaring, instead they might be encouraging them to access education and training through employment as adults, which is a decision that can be construed as empowering (Shafi and Rose 2014). However, it might also be argued that practitioners could be responding to incentives provided by the funding structure of NEET provision.

Following the publication of the Wolf report (Wolf 2011) changes to the provision of training for NEET young people took place; moving from a payment by qualification system which was incentivising providers to deliver low-level qualifications (Wolf 2011) to a system that aims to incentivise, through its funding structure, the long-term outcomes of re-engagement onto employment, training or education (DfE 2016). “Progression” was extensively discussed by all practitioners when discussing young people, moreover, most practitioners discussed issues related to funding: they were aware of how funding works and what targets needed to be met, particularly those participants who hold managerial responsibilities. Despite their recognition of how funding constraints affect the work they carry out with young people, practitioners seemed largely unaware of how cuts carried out in the name of austerity impact upon the services available to young people. Where participants showed awareness of funding constraints, these were linked to their performance requirements of their own jobs. Nevertheless, their narratives reflected the current situation in provision for young people, even where austerity measures were not directly mentioned. In some cases practices that could be described as “gaming” the system (Wolf 2011) were disclosed, where practitioners were either working with repeatedly with the same young people, as a “new client” each time, or young people were circulated between training providers – so young people would be seen to have

“progressed”, and training providers had “new clients”, thus ensuring funding targets were met. Smith and Wright (2015) argue that the drive to measure the effectiveness of programmes through performance data has provided providers with incentives to “game” the system. NEET practitioners work for private companies, colleges or charity organisations, which, in a market-driven environment, are competing for public funding.

Within an educational model where payments are dependent on performance, young people are not simply students, service users or clients but rather they become the product the company trades on. Considering the importance of the relationships between practitioners and young people in the success of interventions, the impact that the system can have in how practitioners work with young people cannot be disregarded. Practitioners’ motivations cannot be simplified in terms of their background –they might be closely linked to their organisation’s aims, which, in turn, will be incentivised by funding rules and structures.

NEET young people find themselves outside of work, training or education for a variety of reasons, although disadvantage (Spielhofer et al. 2009) and educational disaffection (Nudzor 2010) might be a common thread amongst them. This study set out to explore the perceptions that professionals working with NEET young people have of them, and to understand the relationship between the seemingly low expectations they hold of young people and their own educational and employment backgrounds. The narratives they provided of young people are imbued by contradictions: these must be framed within an educational framework that, on the surface, aims to support disadvantaged young people to improve outcomes, but that, at its core, positions NEET young people in-line with explanations of poverty that view the individual as ultimately responsible for their own circumstances.

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Table 1. Part 3 questions, possible responses, and number of responses for each rank

Question/responses	Category of response	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3
Which statement best describes young people?				
They need to develop work ethics as they haven't experienced it in their environment	Punishing	17	2	6
They don't know enough people in the right places to help them move on in life	Bridging	3	12	10
They lack important employability skills that would help them find a job	Motivational	5	11	9
Which statement is the most likely reason for NEET young people's disengagement?				
They have a habit or history of not working	Punishing	13	5	7
In their family and social group, there aren't enough connections with employers	Bridging	6	10	9
They lack skills on CV writing, application forms or interviews	Motivational	6	10	9
Which strategy would be most successful in re-engaging young people?				
Stopping benefits and other payments depending on attendance	Punishing	4	7	14
Connecting learners to employers	Bridging	8	9	8
Teaching learners the skills that employers want in the workplace	Motivational	13	9	3
Which strategy would be most successful in supporting NEET young people in finding stable employment?				
Providing unpaid work experience	Punishing	11	8	6
Introducing learners to employers in their geographical area	Bridging	5	9	11
Developing employability skills	Motivational	9	8	8
Total number of responses per approach by rank	Punishing	45	22	33
	Motivational	33	38	29
	Bridging	22	40	38

Table 2. Mean Rank per type of approach

Question	Type of approach mean rank		
	Punishing	Motivational	Bridging
Reason for young people's disengagement	1.80	1.96	2.24
Success of strategy in re-engaging young people	1.76	2.12	2.12
Success of strategy in supporting young people in finding stable employment	2.40	1.60	2.00
Descriptions of young people	1.56	2.16	2.28
Mean ranking for aggregated responses:	<i>1.88</i>	<i>1.96</i>	<i>2.16</i>

Figure 1: Themes generated from qualitative data

