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*Published in:*  
Journal of Youth Studies

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1080/13676261.2018.1510175](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1510175)

*Publication date:*  
2019

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Gørlich, A. (2019). Distance and mastery: poetic inquiry of young people's subjectification processes. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22(3), 401-419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1510175>

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# **Distance and mastery: poetic inquiry of young people's subjectification processes**

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## **Distance and mastery: poetic inquiry of young people's subjectification processes**

An increasing number of young people under 30 do not complete upper secondary education and have difficulty gaining foothold on the labour market. Hence, there is great interest, politically as well as academically, in finding out 'what works' in terms of helping young people. At the same time, however, there is also a lack of research that examines the processes these young people are involved in and the context that has an effect on these. By applying the method of poetic inquiry, this article examines subjectification processes that have education as the focal point. Poetic inquiry provides an opportunity to explore and construct 'evocative' and 'polyvocal' analyses of the young people's subjectification processes in the current employment policy context. The analyses demonstrate how different forms of 'distance' occur and how the young people simultaneously are trying to master these.

Keywords: NEET; marginalised youth; subjectification, poetic inquiry

### **Education as a solution**

In Denmark, the proportion of young people who do not have an education or a job is one of the lowest in the EU. However, analyses from the Economic Council of the Labour Movement (AE-Rådet, 2015a) show that 16% of school leavers will not have completed upper secondary education 10 years after leaving 9th grade. In addition, it seems that this tendency begins in primary school, as 16% of young people do not pass the 9th grade school leaving exam (AE-Rådet, 2015b). Therefore, an increasing number of young people leave secondary school without the formal qualifications demanded by upper secondary education. Parallel to the challenges young people face in the transition processes through the educational system, is a politically defined demand for educational completion.

The EU political strategy for combating youth unemployment generally has education as the solution (European Commission 2010; The Council of the European Union

2013). Hence, in Denmark state financed initiatives are implemented to ensure that young Danes under 30 mainly are offered educational measures (Danish Ministry of Employment, 2013). They are subjected to an ‘*education requirement*’; their ‘*readiness for education*’ is evaluated; they receive so-called ‘*education benefit*’; and their ‘*motivation for education*’ must be increased. Education is considered the main solution to unemployment. However, continuous international research question this approach (MacDonald 2011; Furlong 2015; Ainley & Allen 2010). Instead of developing measures that focus for example on labour market opportunities, the tendency to individualise (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) the issue of youth unemployment runs through Europe (Simmons et al 2014; Fergusson 2013; Antonucci et al 2014) making the individual young person responsible for her ability to be active, flexible and employable (Antonucci & Hamilton 2014). The question is how the young people handle this.

In this paper, the aim is to explore how the young people react to and process the political, social and cultural conditions that make education more or less inevitable. The analyses are embedded in an ontology in which individuals are seen as subjects who come into being through mutual processing between people, society and culture (Wertsch, 1991; Søndergaard, 1996). I find the theoretical and analytical tool for this in the concept of subjectification processes which, according to Davies (2006), take place in relational, complex and subtle processes and are shaped by simultaneous movements of ‘domination and submission’ - mastery and subjugation. By applying poetic inquiry as a methodological tool, the aim is to analyse subjectification by examining what the complexity of structural, institutional and discursive circumstances and conditions ‘does’ to the young people and how they interact with those.

## **Subjectification processes**

The term 'subjectification' is taken from social constructionist (Davies & Harré, 1990; Gergen, 1997; Søndergaard, 1996) and poststructuralist thinking (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990, 1993). It asserts that identities and selves are constructed in mutual processes between the individual and the society (Søndergaard, 1996). Søndergaard suggests that negotiating surrounding conditions are central to subjectivity (Søndergaard, 1996; p. 38). These negotiations occur through subject positions and subject positioning (Davies and Harré 1990) that capture procedural, changing and continuous development of multiple selves. Therefore, one develops not *one* self, but multiple selves, which are tied to the discursive practices and positioning opportunities which are presented to the subject. Davies and Harré's concept of positioning is, thus, based on the idea that subjects' experiences of their social identities, the social world and possible positions are constructed from the discursive categories available to them.

Subject positions are understood as discursive repertoire located within specific rights structures - how one describes oneself and one's opportunities for action. What is central to this analysis is that discourses and discursive practices are examined according to a Foucauldian understanding of power, where power relations are considered as fundamental to the social body and they cannot be established, produced or consolidated without discourses (Foucault, 1980, 93). Individuals engage in processes where they are simultaneously subjected to and exercise power: "*the individual who has been appointed by power is at the same time power's helper*" (Ibid, p. 98). Butler (1995) takes this understanding of power further and describes subjectification processes as simultaneous processes of domination and submission. Davies (2006) asserts that in order to understand subjectification processes, one has to understand the duality that we are "*both acted upon and we act*" (Davies 2006, p. 428).

As we shall see, the young people without an education or a job are in a specific situation whereby their space for action is affected, while at the same time they are actors within their discursive repertoire.

Therefore, when I examine young people's subjectification processes, I also examine how societal conditions co-produce these processes. Central to the analysis is the construction of evocative and polyvocal analytical texts. In this context, evocative is to be understood as 'producing mood or emotions'. In other words, texts which, through the poetic use of language, evoke emotional reactions in the reader and allow for several voices to be heard simultaneously (Davies, 2000; Richardson, 1993; Gergen & Gergen, 2012).

### **Poetic inquiry**

Poetic inquiry (Prendergast *et al.*, 2009) is considered to develop analytical constructions that involve the researcher and reader through the activation of the senses and emotions internationally (see e.g. Gergen & Gergen, 2012; Prendergast, 2009; Richardson, 1997). Traditionally, distinction is made between science, which uses *reflection* as a tool for knowledge, and art, which uses the *senses* as a tool (Søndergaard 1996). In qualitative empirical poetic work analysis entails both reflection and sensory perception in order to create new forms of insight. Applying linguistic and literary tools to the empirical material allows for an exploration of the young people's stories, which are then presented as emotionally evocative texts.

The article is, therefore, part of a more general trend in the social sciences that bears witness to a need for 'methodological imagination' (Jacobsen et al., 2014), i.e. a shift from methods that make stringent measurements to those that capture the subjective and affective aspects of the lives studied. Literary and other artistic tools are increasingly becoming legitimate to use in social science research. Such tools involve a

shift from interpretation and meaning towards an understanding of the different layers of existence; a way of getting in touch with the world (Brinkmann, 2014). This adds a degree of sensitivity to the research.

### ***Evocative and polyvocal analyses***

As a research method, poetic inquiry is part of a post-structural research approach. Central to the analytical method is the idea that data are presented in poetic form, thereby making the emotional context explicit and creating a dialogue between the research participant and the reader (Richardson 1993, 1996, 1997). Poetic inquiry uses form, rhythm, repetition, pauses and symbols and engages the reader's body, while creating a process in which self-constructions, transformation, non-connections and contradictions stand out (Richardson, 1993). This produces analyses that encompass nuances, ambiguities and contradictions, which the researcher presents through poetic, evocative and polyvocal texts.

The use of poetic inquiry involves an epistemological position, in which the researcher is more visible than is the case for traditional qualitative work. My position, however, is inspired by a relational epistemology (Gergen 2015, 2009), in which the analyses are produced in relational webs consisting of the young participants, the researcher, the theoretical perspectives and the reader. In this way, more 'voices' are heard at the same time. Inspired by an analysis by Prendergast (2009), I consider poetic inquiry to consist of these voices. Firstly, the *participants' voice*, which is the voice of the young participants expressed through the words they use to describe situations, reactions and perceptions of opportunities and limitations. I use an interview method that is open, exploratory and participatory, allowing the participants to express themselves in a nuanced, personal and affective manner. Another layer of the poetic inquiry is the *researcher's voice*, which refers partly to my actual presence by virtue of

my questions, but also my emotional and ‘embodied’ (Davies 2000) presence, which influences the way I choose to construct the poetic analyses. A third layer is the *theory voice*, which consists of the theoretical concepts that inform the analytical questions and thereby the way the poetic analyses are constructed. Additionally, the theoretical concepts come to the fore in the analytical reflections on the poetic texts. The last layer is the *reader’s voice*, which emerges in the specific emotional context whereby the reader/listener is affected emotionally (Richardson, 1993). Poetic inquiry invites reflection and dialogue with the reader and may even inspire new understandings and collective action (Dark 2009).

The analyses produced by use of this method belong to what has been called a “*tender-minded interpretive community: intuitive, emotional, open-ended texts, interpretation as art, personal biases, experimental texts, anti-realism, anti-foundational, critical, science as power, multi-voiced texts*”. (Denzin 2014: 579). From this follows an epistemological acceptance of the researcher’s subjective interpretations in the research process (Davies 2000; Richardson 1997) and the researcher’s bodily experiences are seen, not as ‘contamination’ of the research process, but rather as a kind of evidence of the researcher’s presence in ‘empirical time’ (Krøjer & Hølge-Hazelton 2008). In this approach, there is no ‘great interpreter’ who has privileged access to meaning, but rather a research subject whose emotional experiences are used to create a connection between the empirical material and the poetic text (Ibid). Validation, in this sense, focuses on the ability of the analyses to create a dialogue between participant, researcher and reader (Richardson 1997; Dark 2009).

### **Analytical perspectives and process**

As in much qualitative research, poetic analyses of empirical material build on theoretical perspectives. This entails a systematic reading of the interview transcripts



with a certain theoretically informed optics. In this article, the analyses examine young people's subjectification processes specifically regarding education, activation and work. Following, this investigation is based on analytical perspectives focussing on 'the family', 'the state', 'the labour market' and 'uncertainty' as a condition. These perspectives contribute to the construction of analyses that capture 'the mutual processing' between the young participants and the political, social and cultural contexts and conditions, while at the same time identifying specific social conditions that are particularly important in youth research.

### ***The family, the state and labour market***

Internationally within youth research, young people's transitions between education and work are described as being non-linear, fragmented and shaped by structural inequalities (Antonucci *et al.*, 2014; France, 2007; Walther, 2006; Dwyer & Wyn, 2004). As a consequence, there has been a certain amount of pressure on social policy interventions for young people (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014). The different politically controlled systems often offer various interventions that do not work together. Therefore, Hamilton calls for increased merging of the interventions in order to find solutions that not only focus on efforts in one place, but span more of the areas that are important for the young people's situation and the processes directed towards education and work. In line with this, Antonucci and colleagues (2014) stress that it is important to investigate how the young people rely on the state, labour market and family to be able to support themselves during their transition to adulthood. This tripartite division of the family, the state and the labour market has inspired the analysis in this paper because it provides an opportunity to examine how social, political and family-related circumstances affect the young participants' subjectification processes.

I make an analytical distinction between the young participants' movements and positioning in relation to the family, the social security system and the labour market respectively. Thus, I am interested in how the young participants' subjectification processes are formed in the meeting with education, but also how they are created through participation in other 'arenas'. This perspective, therefore, gives the opportunity to explore subjectification in the educational system, but also in relation to other arenas that inevitably co-produce the young participants as subjects.

### ***Uncertainty as a condition***

Globalisation and the effects of the 2008 financial crisis on the labour market have created new forms of uncertainty and exclusion (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014) and this has brought about major changes and unrest in youth life as well (Woodman & Wyn 2015). This calls for new ways of understanding, not only what it means to be young and how to define boundaries between being 'young' and 'adult', but also of the conditions that the young people have for, what we traditionally understand as, 'adult life' (Kelly & Kamp 2015; France 2007; Shildrick & MacDonald 2007). Woodman & Wyn identifies three main trends that have had a significant impact on young people. Firstly, a marked increase in education participation, second, increased urbanisation and third, the globalisation of the labour market for young people (Woodman & Wyn 2015:19). The trends must be seen in close conjunction with each other. Thus, the global tendency to use education as a means of increasing economic growth builds on the premise that an increased level of education creates demand for skilled labour, which will ensure national competitiveness on the global labour market (Brown *et al.*, 2011; OECD 2010). However, statistically we witness an increase in youth unemployment regardless of educational level (Furlong 2015, Ainley & Allen 2010). The global labour market changes have consequences for the young people in the form of short-term, precarious

employment, underemployment (MacDonald 2011), ‘churning’ between short-term employment, insecure jobs and education and activation (Simmons & Thompson 2011; Shildrick, Blackman & MacDonald 2009) and social and psychological consequences hereof (Furlong 2015; Standing 2011). Instead of being in continuous progression, educational and working experiences are characterised by defeats at one place, leading to a shift to another place.

These are radical interventions in the lives of the young people and leave a profound effect on the young people’s subjectification processes. Uncertainty becomes a condition, and it is therefore interesting to explore this uncertainty and the consequences further. It should be mentioned that gender, class and ethnicity also play a role in these processes, but I do not apply those to the analysis, as my focus is not gendered, classed or ethnic subjects, but rather how the political and social conditions co-produce the young people’s subjectification processes. The intention is to construct analyses that move in the mutual processing between the young people’s lives and the social and cultural contexts.

### **Analytical process and data**

Empirically, the analysis is based on young participants who have participated in ‘Bridges to Education’, which is a nationwide project that was initiated by the Danish Ministry of Employment and the Ministry of Education. The project has been running for a period of two-and-a-half years and its aim is to help young people switch from education benefits to ordinary education. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 33 young participants from four case projects out of the 12 pilot projects. The 33 interviews were conducted as focus groups with four young participants; two focus groups for each case project divided into young women and young men. The interviews

usually lasted for approximately 90 minutes and were transcribed. The anonymity of the participants was secured in order to academic standards.

Specifically, the poetic inquiry method entails the ‘condensing’ of the interview transcripts based on open analytical questions that inform the condensing process. The analytical exploration is based on questions like: Which concepts and discursive categories appear in the young participant’s narratives? How are these co-constitutive of the young participant’s educational and working opportunities? These questions are explored in a process that, in my use of the method, can be separated into three phases. Overall, the analytical process is driven by deleting and moving text. Firstly, I place all the statements from each of the young participants in the focus group interview together consecutively under each other so they appear in the order in which they were said in the interview, but not in the context in which they were said. The content is then condensed further and constructed in ways that let affective perspectives emerge.

In the second phase, the further condensing of the poetic texts is based on specific theoretical perspectives, in this case different forms of uncertainty related to; 1) the labour market; 2) education; 3) the social welfare system, and; 4) the family. The questions that inform the construction of the poetic analyses in this phase are: How are uncertainties co-constitutive of the young participant’s opportunities within each of the arenas? How do uncertainties co-produce the young participants’ processes of becoming? Which patterns, fractures and contradictions are apparent in these processes? In the analyses, the interaction amongst categories, negotiations and subject positions is used as a way to investigating what the complexity of the structural, institutional and discursive conditions ‘does’ to the young, and how they young participants interact with it.

The analytical process itself proceeds in interaction between the theoretical perspectives, analytical concepts and empirical material. In this specific process, across the poetic analyses, the term ‘distance’ stands out clearly as a feature of the young participants’ processes in relation to the different arenas. Hence, ‘distance’ is not a theme in the interviews, nor brought up by the participants, but rather an analytical theme that emerges in the process of analysis via statements like: “never did anything” or “no one to hold on to”. As these statements emerge repeatedly in the analytical process, the term ‘distance’ was chosen as an ‘umbrella concept’ and was consequently explored in the young participants’ subjectification processes.

In the presentation of the analyses, I distinguish between poetic texts and poetic inquiry. I should, therefore, clarify that poetic inquiry consists of the individual poetic sub-analyses, which I call ‘poetic texts’, and the analytical reflections I use to interpret the poetic texts. I will now present the poetic analyses.

## **Distance as a condition**

### ***Growing up in distance***

everybody looks down  
social benefit  
not welcome  
a class of misfits  
on the dole  
send them out there  
a class of misfits  
then, they can bother each other  
then, we don’t hear from them  
I think  
we become  
more and more separated  
apart  
from society  
this project  
is straight back into society  
(Tina)

This initial poetic text lays out the framework for the inquiry in this paper; distance in the young participants' subjectification processes as movements between 'inside' and 'outside', between inclusion and exclusion. It shows how society is depicted as an entity one can be inside or outside. The poetic text shows how Tina, like other young people, has felt 'unwelcome' and 'cut off from society'. The young participants' subjectification processes are, thus, influenced by experiences of being excluded, not just as recipients of social security, but as subjects in a process that starts early and which for some has been a condition during their upbringing. This has shaped their subjectification processes.

At school  
no lunch box  
I wouldn't be in this room  
if I had had  
a lunch box  
I would have done something  
never did anything  
at school  
didn't think it was interesting  
couldn't think  
hunger  
(Sebastian)

My parents didn't look after me  
my teacher told me what to do  
in the end, she didn't bother  
I was there  
or not  
no one said anything  
got out of there  
and on the dole  
was told  
either you turn up  
or you're out  
why not warn me  
why say this now  
why not in school  
nine years  
could've changed  
if they had told me  
how would I know  
a child  
a child knows shit  
now this, a bomb  
you're not good enough

do something  
now  
right now  
(Henry)

In the young participants' narratives about their families, 'distance' emerges as a recurring condition that the young participants have grown up with. Henry, Sebastian and other young participants talk about being left to themselves and, therefore, being constantly at risk of being excluded. The relationship between the young participants and their parents is characterised by distance and the parents' lack of responsibility for their children's schooling. However, what is central to this distance is that, as shown in the poetic texts, it also occurs in relation to school. The young people who feel left to themselves in the family, also experience being left to themselves at school. Thus, it is not an isolated condition that only manifests itself in the context of the family, but rather it is a condition that contributes to shaping the young participants' subjectification processes.

When the young participants finish primary and secondary school and face continuation in the educational system, they also face specific demands of skills and competences and the distance that was otherwise invisible becomes visible. In Sebastian's narrative, the missing packed lunch symbolises the distance between him and education, as a consequence of the distance between him and his family. But the packed lunch is also an illustration of the duality of the subjectification process as Davies (2006) describes it. It illustrates Sebastian's school-related subordination and exclusion, but at the same time, the fact that he articulates it is a way of discursively 'mastering' this subject position. Rather than silently accepting it as a condition through which he 'subordinates' himself, he identifies his parents as being responsible. 'If I had been given a packed lunch, I wouldn't be sitting here' is a way of discursively

mastering his subject position. Similarly, the poetic text about Henry's subjectification processes also highlights a certain degree of isolation that contributes to his being positioned as 'not good enough'. Henry articulates the condition, that a child who is not cared for by its parents cannot be expected to know how to navigate in society.

Sebastian's and Henry's subjectification processes, therefore, are characterised by the fact that they deflect responsibility for their situation from themselves. If the conditions had been different, they could be in a different place. This also implies a certain degree of flexibility in their processes of becoming subjects, which opens up for the potential to master the distance in their subjectification processes. Other young participants focus more on themselves in their subjectification processes.

I have dropped out  
of everything  
bad environment  
lots of problems  
at school  
outside of school  
in the whole town  
never learnt much  
never had anyone to look up to  
no one in my family  
no education  
no one to hold on to  
I should have  
I should have held on  
I should have pushed away  
Should have listened  
Should have used my chance  
The only one I had  
(Anna)

As this poetic text shows, Anna also expresses how the great distance in the family coincides with the distance in relation to education. However, in contrast to Henry and Sebastian, she sees herself as being responsible. Her subjectification process, thus, is not only characterised by distance and isolation, but also by individualising the responsibility (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In her own perspective, she 'ought' to have been able to hold on, to 'push the problems away', 'to have listened' and



subsequently have been successful in education. Thus, she reproduces a more general dominant societal discourse that points to her as responsible (Fergusson 2013, Simmons and Thompson 2013). The poetic text shows the multiple movements of subjectification in relation to the family, to school, and to meanings connected to mental health problems as co-constitutive of Anna's subject position.

### *Distance as mastering*

When the young participants' subjectification processes are characterised by distance in relation to family and school, a frequent consequence is that the social welfare system (Antonucci *et al.*, 2014) also plays a role in their processes. If the participants haven't been in contact with the social welfare system before, it often happens when they leave secondary school. In this context, they meet the social welfare system in the form of case managers at the municipal administration. In the poetic analyses 'distance' re-emerges in their narratives about the social welfare system. Young men and women describe how they have experienced being isolated for long periods and have found it difficult to get out of this situation and to find actual help in the social system.

Society, that is the welfare office  
could have done a lot  
did nothing  
called them  
Hello  
she's off today  
leave a message  
shit all happened  
shit all happened  
walked around  
no place to live  
slept where I could  
walked around  
to the neighboring town  
found help  
(Michael)

One year, nine counsellors  
being thrown about  
from one to the next  
he's on vacation

then the other  
start over  
back to the first  
he doesn't remember  
Shit  
doesn't remember who I am  
I, can't be bothered to explain  
(Natasha)

The young participants' narratives are filled with powerlessness and frustration of not having continuous contact with the social welfare system. The poetic texts show that irregular and inadequate contact with case workers produces anger and alienation in relation to the system, which may have the consequence that the young people are distant with the case workers; they 'can't be bothered to explain'. Their trust in the system (Giddens 1990) seems to be jeopardised and thereby the stability in their everyday life is threatened too. Their subjectification processes are influenced by this lack of trust and instability and they attempt to master the distance by continuous attempts at making contact. Giddens suggests that psychological trust, trust in abstract systems and ontological trust are necessary for individuals' ability to navigate in a complex world and can be increased by individuals engaging in reassuring interaction and 'facework commitments'(Giddens, 1990, 88). This is illustrated in the following poetic text.

Had a new case worker  
fresh from the state  
now you need to start an education  
was the first thing she said  
fresh from the state  
my old case worker  
was much more understanding  
concerned  
about me, now  
(Freya)

When the young participants meet case workers, who, according to them, implement regulations and reforms and do not consider them individually, they encounter a lack of

facework commitment and trust. Freya describes the case worker as someone who ‘comes from the state’. Thereby she creates a distance that is also a way of mastering her subjectification; a way of handling the distance and lack of facework commitment. At the same time, the poetic text illustrates that a ‘more understanding’ case worker, whose practice is characterised by being relational, would increase her ‘relational trust’ (Bryk and Schneider 2002) and, thus, the opportunities which shape her development as a subject.

In addition to case workers in the social welfare system, the young people who are under 30 without an education or job meet a system that demands education and has it as its focus (Ministry of Employment, 2013).

I am not smart enough  
tried one education  
after the other  
tried to find work  
tried VET  
and to argue with my teacher  
she told me to leave  
so I left  
and tried another education  
it didn't work  
tried again  
and again  
and one day  
I stopped trying  
and broke down  
then I went to the doctor  
and tried depression  
now I am here  
(Lina)

This poetic text shows how Lina repeatedly attempts to complete educational programmes and how distance continues to manifest itself in this process both in relation to education and the labour market. She tries, but never achieves her goal.

When the young participants’ subjectification processes are characterised by repeated failure, distance and defeat, it limits their opportunities for progression (Standing 2011).

Lina would like to break the distance between her and education, but instead she ‘breaks down’.

The break down implies that all attempts have been exhausted and depression becomes an available category, which shows that she is ‘not ready for education’.

Depression can, thus, be considered to co-produce Lina as a subject. In our diagnostic cultures (Brinkmann 2017) depression is not only a mental disorder that requires treatment, but also a category in relation to participation in education. Diagnoses are in general “(...) no longer just medical, biological and psychological concepts, but also bureaucratic, social and administrative entities” (Brinkmann 2017, 1; Rosenberg, 2007).

Depression reveals that Lina’s efforts at positioning herself in the educational system have been exhausted, but simultaneously it legitimises a break from her efforts.

Therefore, depression is both a break down and a legitimate subject position.

### *Distance as resistance*

My dream is to become a nurse  
I have had lots of jobs  
in shops  
nursing homes  
places like that  
I tried to get an education  
to find an internship  
didn’t succeed  
(Sophie)

school  
I would much rather work  
school  
doesn’t do much for me  
much rather work  
no idea  
what I want  
what to do  
frustration  
irritation  
don’t know what  
I want  
what I can  
much rather work  
prefer to work

no idea  
no apprenticeship  
losing  
motivation  
(Lucas)

As this poetic text illustrates, the young participants have made many attempts at finding and keeping a job, but uncertain conditions on the labour market have made this difficult. Hence, they have to alter their plans and this has consequences for their subjectification processes too. Negative job experiences have a de-motivating effect on young people (Simmons et al 2014) and when the participants meet a shortage of apprenticeships, layoffs, closures, and lack of unskilled jobs, they develop a certain degree of uncertainty and are partially paralysed in relation to the future. Their opportunities for action have gradually become more limited and with the educational demand comes a growing distance in relation to their motivation for education.

The poetic texts show how Lucas positions himself in relation to education, contrary to the employment policy focus on education. He does not want education, he wants to work. Education and work appear as a discursive contradiction. This highlights the distance between the young participants' opportunities on the labour market and their opportunities for education. Their project as subjects is to find a foothold on the labour market, but they have not been successful and, therefore, they must, in spite of much resistance, obtain educational qualifications. At the same time, they have demonstrated responsibility, taken on work, earned money and have tried to support themselves, or they have made educational decisions, have completed a first year introductory course, and applied for apprenticeships. The labour market is described as inaccessible, and hence they position themselves 'outside' the labour market despite repeated attempts at positioning themselves 'inside'. This calls for 'bridging strategies' (Strathdee 2013) between education and the labour market, but instead the young

participants take on individualised strategies and try to search for motivation. As subjects, they find themselves in a no-man's-land and they do not quite know where to go. However, despite resistance and stagnation, most of the young participants' narratives are marked by a strong desire to move forward.

It's all about  
self esteem  
entering the labourmarket  
my problem  
am I good enough  
do they want me  
am I able  
(Louise)

It would be a lot better  
for me  
to start a job  
and someone  
like the boss  
was the one who educated  
(Anders)

As these poetic texts show, the young participants' navigate in a discursive field in which personal competences, responsibility and action are legitimate subject positions. This echoes the neo-liberal focus on the individual responsibility for one's 'employability' through qualifications and changing attitudes and behaviour (Standing 2011; Simmons & Thompson 2011; Brown et al 2003). The young participants acquire the logic that higher self-esteem increases their chances of getting a job particularly through the discursive practices of the projects, which are characterised by more general cultural discourses on personal development, social skills, self-esteem, self-confidence and other concepts that frame the focus on self-development as contributory to personal success (Rose 1989, 1998). Therefore, some of the young participants, e.g. Louise, use this logic to position themselves in relation to a demanding labour market. Having self-esteem - and not professional competences - is highlighted as being the ticket to the

labour market. However, this form of mastering means that Louise must assume responsibility if she fails to increase her self-esteem, which, as illustrated by the example of Anna, can be problematic because it also leads to a certain degree of stagnation.

Things are different in the case of Anders's positioning efforts, which are articulated in the form of a 'fantasy' that he could obtain educational qualifications on the labour market with a boss as the teacher. However, this 'fantasy' is called the 'new apprenticeship scheme' in Denmark and is an alternative to the traditional vocational course that starts with a 20 weeks introductory course followed by apprenticeships. In the new apprenticeship scheme the young person is being trained by the employer and the hours at the vocational school is decreased. The challenge for this 'new apprenticeship scheme' is that an employer has to agree to take on an apprentice. And unfortunately there has been a decline in companies' willingness to take on these apprenticeships (AE-Rådet 2016), leaving the only option for young people like Anders to enter the traditional path. Hence, it becomes a fantasy rather than an actual opportunity.

The young participants who have work experience are often motivated to a great extent by work and having a connection with a workplace (Görlich 2016a). Therefore, it seems that a closer connection between the labour market and education may help to reduce the gap between education and work, thereby making it more realistic for young people such as Anders to get an education.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The application of poetic inquiry as a method in this article has made it possible to construct evocative and polyvocal analyses of the interviewed young participants'

subjectification processes. By condensing the interview transcripts, I have constructed analytical concentrates, which in a sense ‘pushes’ the analytical perspectives to the forefront. Thus, when the concept of ‘distance’ emerges in the condensed analyses, it should be viewed in contrast to terms such as ‘marginalisation’ or ‘exclusion’, which have a range of theoretically defined meanings attached to them. I do not assume young people to be marginalised, but rather I explore how multiple forms of ‘distance’ emerge in the young participants’ narratives and how can this be understood in relation to subjectification processes.

It is important to note, that the poetic inquiry-based researcher is constructive of the knowledge that emerges from the poetic reproduction of the young participants’ voices. Poetic analyses do not pretend to *represent* the young, but are analytical polyvocal constructions (Gergen & Gergen 2012, Görlich 2016b). The researcher writes and analyses from her subjective perspective and constructs analyses in which different perspectives interfere. The researcher writes *her* story about *their* story (Richardson 1993) and thereby invites for dialogue between the participant, the researcher and the reader.

Through the analysis, different forms of distance emerge in the paper: Distance as a lack of closeness and a lack of responsibility on behalf of the parents; distance as non-participation in school and as a lack of opportunities for education in general; distance as isolation - to be left to oneself and, thus, isolated and at a distance from society in general; distance as irregular and inadequate contact with the social welfare system; distance as uncertain and inadequate opportunities on the labour market leading to a double distance in relation to both work and education. The application of theoretical and analytical concepts of ‘submission’ and ‘mastering’ to the analysis has enabled the



investigation of how these different forms of distance are experienced in terms of different forms of ‘submission’ and simultaneously by different forms of mastering. By use of poetic inquiry, I have demonstrated how the young participants are subject to the demand of educational activity, to limited employment opportunities, to a lack of trust and facework commitment, but I have also demonstrated how, at the same time, they try to resist individualising the responsibility (Roberts 2009), how they search for true facework commitment (Giddens 1990), and how they dream of more cooperation between employment opportunities and educational institutions. Distance is, thus, both a condition and something they come up against repeatedly as well as a way of protecting themselves.

To conclude, what does the concept of distance add to the understanding of young people without education and work? First of all, it has long been established that school to work transitions are less simple than 20-30 years ago (Shildrick and MacDonald 2007). However, this does not make it less relevant to explore how the young people handle these complex transitions (Görlich 2016a). With constructionist perspectives on the young people’s processes of becoming in complex transitions, my contribution is the attempt at understanding the mutual processing (Søndergaard 1996) between the young people and social, political and family-related circumstances. As the poetic analyses illustrate, multiple forms of distance have a significant influence on the young participants’ subjectification processes. Distance seems to reappear in various contexts, and this consequently contributes to the stagnation of the young people in their school to work transitions. Rather than exploring processes of marginalisation or exclusion, the analyses conceptualise distance as a phenomenon that seems to be intertwined with the young people’s efforts in the educational system. The concept of distance adds an understanding of what goes on in the transitions processes, when the

young people seem unable to progress. Rather than categorising the young people as ‘marginalised’ or ‘excluded’, the concept of distance concerns the quality of transitional interaction. Since it is a relational concept, it also has a potential for perspectives of change, which ‘marginalisation’ and ‘exclusion’ sometimes seem to lack.

Following this, the poetic texts also suggest that the antidote to distance is relation. When teachers, case workers and others relate to the young people, when they offer facework commitment (Giddens 1990), it helps the young participants to (re)build the trust in systems, in others and in themselves. And similarly, when measures like the ‘new apprenticeship scheme’ offer the young participants an opportunity to use their skills and competences in a company, they build trust. In another paper (Görlich and Katznelson 2015), Katznelson and I suggest the concept of ‘educational trust’ as a non-individualising and collective way of helping young people to build trust in the educational system. Hence, the concept of educational trust creates a shift in focus from the individual young person to the education system also regarding the target of more young people completing education. Rather than focussing on self-esteem, competences and self-development, it is suggested to apply a focus on social security and recognition, flexibility in structures and progression in skills. There seems to be a potential to explore further how multiple forms of ‘distance’ in school to work transitions can be avoided or replaced by a relational focus on the building of educational trust.

It has not been the intention of this paper to determine ‘what works’ (Biesta 2009), but the analyses do suggest that the young participants gain traction and start to move forward when opportunities for reducing the various forms of ‘distance’ are increased. Thus their mastering may involve other strategies than adopting their own forms of distance and instead involve a focus on qualifications by the relational interventions mentioned above and hence strengthening their possibilities of

establishing themselves on the labour market in the long term. Young people without education and job face complex transitions and transitional movements that are affected by changes in the educational system, on the labour market, and by the general financial situation. Even in countries with relatively low rates of youth unemployment, this call for an increased awareness of how young people face a globalised and neo-liberalised labour market with major changes in job opportunities regardless of educational level (Furlong 2015). It is important to continuously making inquiries into what kind of ‘reality’ the young people are ‘transitioning’ towards and how young people without education and job process actual social, financial, and political conditions.

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