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### Original Citation

Simmons, Robin, Russell, Lisa and Thompson, Ron (2013) NEET young people and the labour market: working on the margins. In: Youth Studies Conference, 8-12th April 2013, Glasgow, UK. (Unpublished)

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## **NEET young people and the labour market: working on the margins**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is based on findings from a longitudinal study of twenty young people who have spent significant periods of time categorised as NEET (not in education, employment or training). Drawing on three years of ethnographic research conducted across two local authorities in the north of England, it focuses on the lived experience of a set of young people as they move between various sites of exclusion and participation in the labour market. Central to the paper are the experiences of three individuals and their attempts to begin work in the retail, care and catering industries.

The paper illustrates a range of tensions between the aspirations of young people and the opportunities open to them. It provides a critical insight into some of the conditions which characterise work on the fringes of the labour market and the inter-play between these and the attitudes, values and dispositions of the young people taking part in the research. The paper's findings challenge popular discourses about young people on the margins of participation and pose questions about the articulation between education, work and training for those seeking to enter the labour market.

## **Introduction**

This paper presents findings from a longitudinal ethnography conducted in two neighbouring local authorities in northern England: Middlebridge and Greenford. The research investigates the lives of twenty young people, aged between 15 and 20 when fieldwork began, all of whom spent periods of time classified as not in education, training and employment (NEET). The paper focuses particularly on the experiences of three young people as they move between various forms of participation and non-participation in education and employment. Although we recognise that young people's experiences of education and work are diverse, these case studies have been selected as reflecting many of the challenges encountered by other participants in their attempts to navigate the margins of the labour market. The case studies explored in this paper therefore have a significance which reaches beyond the individuals concerned, and the findings raise important questions for policymakers and practitioners working with marginalised young people.

The first section of the paper provides the backdrop for the research – the collapse of youth labour markets, the changing nature of youth transitions in the UK, and the rise of NEET as a problem category. The second section provides an overview of the research project, an outline of its methodology, and a description of the two authorities in which it took place. We then present our findings, summarising some of the most significant features of participants' labour market experiences before focusing on three young people – Sean, Jasmine and Cayden. These case studies illustrate how young people's personal characteristics, their family lives, and experiences of education and training interact with the quality and nature of employment available. They expose tensions and contradictions within these interactions and their effects upon an individual's ability to find and retain work, or complete a training programme. The participants' experiences of paid and voluntary work reveal that official discourses about NEET young people often underestimate their commitment to work. They also show that, whilst it is difficult to establish clear distinctions between 'supply-side' and 'demand-side' factors in the labour market, the quality and conditions of work available to young people significantly affect their ability to obtain and retain employment. Finally, the paper reflects on the relationship between these factors and policy discourses surrounding young people and work. It concludes by highlighting a number of features about the nature of employment in the UK and argues that a significant shift in policy direction is needed if we are serious about integrating NEET young people into the labour market in constructive and meaningful ways.

### **NEET young people: the rise of a problem category**

Whilst significant concerns about youth unemployment in the UK have existed for almost forty years, NEET is a policy construct associated with certain technical and ideological shifts which have occurred since the 1980s. Although the term NEET has had a central place in recent policy discourse, particularly in the New Labour years, it is problematic in many ways. Defining young people by what they are not, rather than who they are, can be unhelpful: the NEET category places a diverse range of individuals with very different circumstances and prospects under one label (Yates and Payne, 2006; Spielhofer et al. 2009). The designation of young people outside education and work as NEET individualises non-participation and, at least in official discourse, tends to overlook social and economic inequalities. Furthermore, being NEET may not be the most immediate or important challenge facing a young person, and it is necessary to unpick the NEET category in order to understand the needs of those with specific circumstances. Moreover, whilst many young people spend periods of time being NEET, most move between different forms of education, training or employment, interspersed with periods of non-participation (Furlong, 2006). The size of the NEET population fluctuates across the academic year and according to seasonal employment patterns, as well as broader economic circumstances.

Disaggregating the NEET category into subgroups, such as those seeking work, young parents and those with a disability or illness, improves our understanding to some degree (DCSF, 2009: 12). There have been a number of attempts to do this, all of which organise NEET young people according to various objective or subjective conditions or circumstances. These have been used to inform a range of interventions and initiatives aimed at reducing their number (see, for example, Scottish Executive, 2006; Spielhofer et al, 2009) but, as Finlay *et al.* (2010) argue, that this does not mean that individuals with certain common experiences or characteristics are necessarily members of a homogeneous subgroup, or that their needs can be addressed in a uniform manner. Whilst, for example, young people with caring responsibilities share a particular circumstance, they are likely to experience and view their situation in diverse ways, and to need different forms of support.

Despite its shortcomings, the term NEET does at least provide a reference point from which to critique social inequality and, for most young people, being outside education and employment is not only a consequence of poverty and disadvantage, but increases the likelihood of long-term social exclusion (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). We recognise that social exclusion is itself a slippery concept and that it evokes multifarious overlapping

discourses, often with moralistic connotations (Levitas 2005). Although it can refer to structural processes, social exclusion has often been used as part of an essentialising discourse which describes a condition people are in - mainly through individual shortcomings - rather than as deriving from broader social and economic processes. However, social exclusion should not be dismissed as merely a discursive construct. Indeed, it may be expressed in terms of tangible inequalities, including not only material consumption and accumulation but also in relation to education and training; employment; care-giving; and social engagement (Burchardt et al. 1999: 230). Either way, being NEET is often associated with a range of social problems including an increased likelihood of involvement in crime, drug use and anti-social behaviour, as well as greater risk of long-term unemployment, poor health, and other sustained disadvantages (DfES, 2007).

For three decades after the end of World War Two the transition of young people from school to work was relatively straightforward. Although high unemployment existed in certain areas of the UK, most young people were able to obtain work consistent with their expectations. The majority left school at the first opportunity, often with few qualifications, and relatively small numbers of young people went on to post-compulsory education. For working-class boys especially, an apprenticeship was often the goal, but various other forms of work were available in most parts of the country. Either way, the transition from school to work was normally soon followed by leaving home, marriage and parenthood (Ainley and Allen 2010: 21). Although young people's experiences varied according to social class and gender, youth transitions were at their most condensed and unitary during the 1950s and 1960s (Jones 1995: 23). The relatively uncomplicated nature of youth transitions during the post-war era and established relationships between the individual, work and community meant that structural explanations – whether class-based critiques or functionalist analyses of the 'fit' between young people's aptitudes, abilities and certain forms of employment – seemed appropriate.

Youth transitions have altered radically since the 1970s and the advent of mass unemployment that accompanied the collapse of the UK's traditional industrial base. Nowadays few young people leave school at the earliest opportunity to enter full-time employment and, for many, access to traditional signifiers of adulthood has become disturbed or suspended, in some cases almost indefinitely (Ainley and Allen 2010). Social structures appear less fixed and predictable, and radically reduced opportunities for stable working-class employment have disturbed traditional notions of social reproduction.

Subsequently, it has been argued that structural, class-based analyses of young people's lives are now inappropriate. Indeed, Jeffs and Smith (1998) go so far as to challenge the very currency of the term youth transition. But, whilst contemporary society may well be more complex and difficult to understand than in previous generations, the degree of agency which any individual or group is able to exercise remains structured by a range of social, economic and cultural factors (Beck 1992). Although young people often view the social world in highly personalised and individualistic ways, their life chances remain related to the enabling and constraining effects of gender, ethnicity and social class (Rainbird 2000). Furthermore, although class consciousness, at least amongst lower socio-economic groups, has diminished substantially since the 1970s, traditional orientations towards work and education remain important for many young working-class people (Shildrick et al. 2012; Shildrick and Macdonald, 2007).

Conflicts between increased social expectations, social immobility and persistent youth unemployment have led to questions about the legitimacy of the state, and one way in which successive governments have responded to this has been through an increased emphasis on education and training - both as mechanism to boost economic performance and promote social inclusion (Strathdee 2013). As in other Anglophone nations, this has taken a number of forms including re-alignment of the curriculum to more closely serve the perceived needs of industry and commerce, and increasing levels of participation across all social groups. Although rates of educational participation in the UK remain below those of many comparable nations,<sup>1</sup> post-compulsory education and training is no longer confined mainly to the privileged. Importantly though, participation takes many forms and is highly differentiated according to social class and other forms of difference. Although low-level vocational education often offers participants little in terms of labour market returns (Wolf 2011), early departure from education is generally viewed as problematic and vocationally-orientated training is now largely a substitute for employment for young working-class people.

Drawing on Habermas (1976), Strathdee (2013) has described three broad approaches adopted by government in attempting to resolve the state legitimation crisis, of which chronic youth unemployment is one manifestation. These he identifies as motivational, bridging and punishing strategies. Motivational strategies are intended to encourage young people to

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<sup>1</sup> The 15-19 participation rate in the UK in 2009 was 73.7%, compared with the OECD average of 82.1% and the EU21 average of 86.2% (OECD, 2011: 303).

adopt the attitudes, dispositions and other forms of human capital deemed necessary for labour market success. Examples of such an approach can be found in the expansion of various forms post-compulsory education but are perhaps most evident in emergence of an array the state-sponsored employability programmes, most of which aim to motivate and invigorate participants and tend to emphasise the acquisition of personal and social skills at least as much as gaining traditional vocational skills rooted in the unity of knowledge and action (Simmons and Thompson 2011). The cost of providing expanded education and training systems is high and various other ways of both dealing with youth unemployment and reproducing the conditions conducive to capitalist accumulation have proved necessary. The state has used various punishing strategies to attempt to force NEET young people to engage or re-engage in education and work – a series of measures which, for example, have either disqualified youth from receiving welfare benefits, reduced their entitlement to them, or made benefits conditional upon participation in training, work placements or other disciplinary activities.

Bridging strategies attempt to generate links between the unemployed and employers, and to create social networks which broker opportunities for employment. Research shows that many employers favour recruiting staff through social networks which, they often believe, Whilst, over time, various initiatives have been used to subsidise employers to recruit workless young people, a range of other bridging strategies are apparent. One recent trend is the promotion of various forms of unpaid work as a ladder of opportunity for young people seeking entry to the labour market. Whether these are relatively brief periods of work experience, internships for graduates seeking to enter desirable occupations such as fashion, advertising or the media, or less glamorous forms of voluntary work in low-skill sections of the labour market, increasingly young people are expected to perform various forms of unpaid labour. Either way, voluntary work is usually promoted not only as providing participants with intrinsic rewards but also as a vehicle for smoothing participants into paid work. However, as will become apparent later in the paper, the experiences of the young people who took part in our research suggest a more complex relationship between voluntary work and paid employment.

## **Methodology**

The findings discussed in this paper are part of a longitudinal ethnography of NEET young people, with fieldwork taking place between October 2010 and March 2013. In total, twenty-six young people participated in the project but, for various reasons, six did not take part

after March 2012. Twelve of the remaining participants were female, and eight male; four of the female participants and one male were parents, each with a child aged two or under. Ten had been in care and fifteen lived 'independently'. Two females were Asian and one male mixed-race; the others were white.

The main corpus of data includes 280 hours of participant observation conducted in various settings including young people's homes, cafés, benefit offices and Connexions<sup>2</sup> centres as well as the premises of work placement and training providers. Seventy-eight interviews were conducted and transcribed, including twenty with Connexions advisers, Jobcentre staff and other practitioners; three with employers; and 54 with young people. Data also includes photographs taken by the researcher and by participants; copies of qualifications and certificates of achievement; minutes of local NEET strategy group meetings; national and local NEET statistics; and course information literature.

Gaining and maintaining access to NEET young people is challenging and, to some extent, our participants constitute an opportunity sample. Contact was made through young people's services, through training providers, and by means of 'snowballing', whereby existing participants put us in touch with others. Nevertheless, the sample provides a range of participants which include representatives of major NEET subgroups such as care leavers, young people with learning disabilities, young parents, early school leavers, and young offenders. Whilst some were academically successful before becoming NEET, most had experienced disrupted schooling and some had few qualifications. In some cases, particularly for those who had been in care, frequent changes of residence had led not only to changes of school, but to being placed in schools with places available due to lack of popularity and/or high pupil turnover. Perhaps the main common factor in our sample is that they were all from working-class backgrounds. In the majority of cases, our participants had lived for most of their lives in areas of significant deprivation<sup>3</sup>.

In many ways, Middlebridge and Greenford, the two authorities in which this research took place, typify the changing context of youth transitions within 'new urban economies' (Ball et al. 2000). As local industries have declined, employment has fragmented and shifted towards mental and emotional rather than manual labour. Although in both places manufacturing still accounts for a higher proportion of employment than the UK average,

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<sup>2</sup> Connexions is the integrated advice and guidance service for young people in England aged 13–19.

<sup>3</sup> The areas referred to are Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA): homogenous small areas containing around 1,500 people (DCLG, 2011). Most participants currently live in LSOAs amongst the 10% most deprived in England and typically have lived in such areas throughout their lives.



service work predominates: 72% of jobs in Middlebridge, and 80% in Greenford. Unemployment rates (approximately 9.5% in June 2012) are above the UK average; one-third of employment is part-time and much work is insecure and low paid. In 2009, 16 to 24-year-olds made up 30% of unemployed people.

There aren't the jobs ... 60% of employers in Middlebridge don't employ anybody under the age of 25. We're working on that with the local authority ... and our engagement team ... are working with employers to try and get them to give a young person a chance. And that's why the Future Job Fund was so successful for these young people. So it is difficult because, of course, that's finished now. (Jobcentre manager, 04/02/11).

Middlebridge has a population of around 400,000 and comprises two large towns and a number of smaller towns and villages. Greenford has a population of approximately 200,000 and is based on one major town and its environs. The history of both authorities is strongly influenced by the textile industry and, like many areas with a similar past, both Middlebridge and Greenford are ethnically quite diverse: over 10% of the population is from an ethnic minority background, mainly Pakistani or Indian, although there are significant numbers from African-Caribbean and mixed-race backgrounds.

The case studies used in this paper represent something of the varied nature of the NEET population and their different biographies, circumstances and responses to particular challenges. Whilst they illuminate the themes we wish to explore, this is sometimes by exception as much as by example. As we have already discussed, it is important to remember that variation within NEET subgroups can be as great as those between them. Consequently, whilst the individual case studies are illustrative of a number of key findings emerging from our research they have been chosen to highlight patterns of difference as well as similarity.

## **Findings**

Most of the young people taking part in our research were on or had previously had access to Income Support or Job Seekers Allowance, although those under 18 in more stable

circumstances are not normally eligible for such payments. Some were well versed in the benefit system, and this knowledge appeared to have been passed on and reproduced through family and friends. Although few recognised the term NEET, most showed a broad awareness of popular discourses about benefits, unemployment and the economy. Such discourses shaped their lived experience in a number of ways, such as public perceptions of them as benefit claimants, the stigma attached to early parenthood, and the increasing conditionality of benefits associated with welfare-to-work programmes.

In some instances, the logistics of the benefit system acted as a barrier to moving into employment or training, although sometimes participants were coerced into work placements or training provision when access to benefits was made conditional upon such activity. However, the relationship between benefits and labour market participation is complex. Young people often responded instrumentally by attempting to manage whatever sources of income were available to them and, in many instances, financial considerations influenced decisions about undertaking certain forms of work or training. Some resisted official support structures, and many refused to engage with Connexions - ignoring phone calls, missing appointments, and declining offers of training. In some cases, this may have perpetuated stereotypes about NEET young people and their families amongst practitioners.

Some people are better off on benefits... And it's also the culture because with some of these incapacity benefit customers you've got five generations and we see trends where a young person's dad has done alright on incapacity benefit and so that's what they do – they'll say they've got a bad back. So it's to try and break that cycle. (Jobcentre manager, 04/02/11).

Many of those taking part in our research faced significant barriers to finding employment. These included systemic matters such as low levels of demand for labour, especially for young people; the poor quality of much of the work that was available; the rigidities of the benefits system; and the de-motivating effects of repeated compulsory engagement with training which offered few opportunities for meaningful progression. It is, however, important to note that many at least superficially personal barriers to participation are also linked to broader structural inequalities; a lack of viable access to transport, repeated residential re-location, and a lack of childcare support were often related to circumstances over which young people had little control. Moreover, mental health issues, learning difficulties and behavioural problems are not unrelated to systemic disadvantage. Either way, we found no

robust evidence to support the notion that inter-generational worklessness or 'cultures of poverty' were a significant cause of youth unemployment. Whilst the Jobcentre manager quoted above was critical of many of her clients, she also provided important insights into some of the circumstances encountered by many NEET young people.

...what Connexions didn't know was they let those two young people down because they couldn't afford to keep coming in because their mother wasn't receiving any benefits, because they stopped when they went into an apprenticeship... She's got an NVQ2 but there is no provision to take her onto an NVQ3 and she frantically wants a job but there is nobody supporting her, and she is caring for her mother as well who is severely depressed. The mother is not getting the right benefits and she's getting into debt and the kids are both carers and trying to look for work and because they are self-motivated nobody is helping them. So we've picked that up and we have now got Connexions back in the loop. (Jobcentre manager, 4.02.2011)

Some participants returned again and again to the same training providers, sometimes repeating virtually identical training programmes. But, in most cases, their aspirations remained broadly similar to those of other young people: most wanted a job, their own place to live, and eventually a family and various other signifiers of adult life. None of our participants said they wanted a life on benefits - although many feared that if they took a job they would soon find themselves out of work again, and consequently lose the benefits they were currently receiving. As Finlay et al. (2010) found in their research, the young people taking part in our study had low *expectations* rather than low *aspirations*. Few had illusions about obstacles facing them, and most thought that obtaining a decent, secure job was unlikely in the foreseeable future. In some cases, a lack of qualifications and experience acted as significant barriers to gaining work. Most participants had attended some form of employability training since leaving school but the strategies they were able to use to search for work were generally ineffective, and were often constrained by lack of money for travel or a disinclination to look past familiar localities. Official channels, such as Jobcentre Plus, rarely led to employment; personal contacts seemed to offer the greatest chance of securing work - although typically they served only to reproduce patterns of low-paid, insecure employment experienced by family and friends.

In a few cases, participants were more focused on building a family rather than education or employment, and some young parents were content to remain on benefits for periods ranging from six to eighteen months, rather than juggle work and childcare. Set against a backdrop of frequent unproductive efforts to find decent work, and the ineffectiveness of the training courses they had undertaken, they could not envisage obtaining a job which was well-paid and secure enough to compensate for losing benefits. For those who gained work, employment was often insecure and, in many cases, exploitative in nature. Many experienced significant tensions between the demands of work and education. Some were expected to work excessive hours; others would accept cash-in-hand work, often at little notice. This not only affected their attendance at college, but potentially placed their education allowance in jeopardy; but whilst such work was insecure and infrequent, it at least offered the attraction of immediate financial gain.

### *Sean's story*

Sean was born in Greenford and was sixteen-years-old when fieldwork began. His parents separated when he was three. Sean's step-father is a chef and his mother is currently at home looking after children, although she formerly worked as a nursery nurse. Sean has three young siblings, as well as three brothers aged fifteen to eighteen who, like him, live outside the family home. He attended primary school and began secondary school in Middlebridge. In 2009, Sean moved with his family to a larger house in Greenford, where he finished his schooling and passed nine GCSEs, including maths and English, and two BTEC qualifications. Sean left school at 16 and began a catering apprenticeship soon afterwards. His work placement was at *Rick's Bar* in Greenford but Sean left after two months. Initially, he worked 40-hour weeks, but this soon increased. Sean at first accepted the longer hours as he knew placements were scarce. However, he was working sixteen-hour days (plus travelling time), six days a week for the Apprenticeship rate of £2.50 an hour. Sean found the work exhausting, with long shifts preparing food, cooking, laying tables and cleaning. He describes going into 'robot mode' and having difficulty coping with college work alongside his placement.

I was feeling ridiculously tired every day and [a friend] said that, legally, they aren't supposed to let us work more than forty hours-a-week anyway and I sort of realised that it was a little bit dodgy, and I just couldn't hack it anymore with the hours we were doing so I had to tell them I were quitting ... they weren't really too bothered...they paid me and they let me go. [Interview 18.11.2011]

Sean left home shortly afterwards, following disputes over caring for his younger siblings.

There were disagreements in the house...I had to look after the kids constantly while [Sean's parents] were going out and getting drunk and coming back at some time in the morning leaving me up with a little girl and stuff ... I was applying to colleges and stuff...but none of them could take me. And the same with jobs; no one could take me on apprenticeships [Interview 18.11.2011]

After four months without a permanent address, Sean moved back home and began a nine-month period of short-lived engagement with various training courses, during which time he left home again and began living at his girlfriend's family home in Greenford. Sean felt 'annoyed' at his situation: he believed he had tried hard, and talked about struggling to get work without a reference from his apprenticeship. But in May 2012 Sean was offered a job as a trainee chef at the Middlebridge branch of *Pietro's*, a national restaurant chain. This stemmed from a short period of temporary work at a different branch the previous July.

Sean seems happy with the direction his life is taking. He sees himself carving a career at Pietro's over the next few years. There is a clear employment and training structure for him to follow, and he will soon take his grilling exam (a written examination carried out on Pietro's premises in a room set aside for this purpose). Then Sean might try to become a 'buddy' to help train others. He says he doesn't want to go much higher though - he wants to stay in the kitchen, not running the business side of things. He says he knows [of] people who have moved onto Michelin star restaurants after working for Pietro's. Sean hopes that one day he'll do this too.

He is contracted to work 16 hours per week but usually works over 30. Sean takes on all the overtime offered as he wants the money. Pietro's have made him aware that he can't work before 9am or after 11pm due to his age, and that he cannot work over 40 hours-a-week. Sean says once he has passed his grill test he will get red stripes (on the plain t-shirt which forms part of his uniform). The higher the worker's status, the more decorated the t-shirt. (Field notes 20.07.2012).

Although, at the end of the year, Sean was still on the national minimum wage of £6.19 per hour he expressed a certain pride in his work.

[w]hen people know that I work at Pietro's it's like 'oh that's really good' or another thing I get is: 'oh you get free this and free that'. Whereas if you are working for McDonald's they think you're a prat, sort of thing. Pietro's is probably a bit more recognised and working for Pietro's is seen as a nice place ... So if you work for Pietro's it's sort of seen as a good thing which is not the same if you work at McDonald's. (Interview 27.11.12)

Although Sean's story could be interpreted as representing a transitional stage in his working life through which many young people travel, the experiences of many older workers are increasingly similar. There is in contemporary Britain a thriving 'secondary labour market' in which a broad cross-section of working-class people participate, 'churning' between various forms of insecure work, repeated training and re-training programmes, and intermittent spells outside the labour market (Shildrick et al. 2012). Sean's tale illustrates how those on the margins of employment are often vulnerable to exploitative conditions that differ greatly from the official discourse on education and work. His story and that of Jasmine below suggests that, in many cases, employees are a disposable resource for employers – a modern 'reserve army of labour' in which workers are endlessly interchangeable.

### *Jasmine's Story*

Jasmine was eighteen, NEET, and living alone when we met her in December 2010. She spent the majority of her time outside education and work and in receipt of benefits until the completion of fieldwork in March 2013. At least superficially, Jasmine's behaviour reflected many of the negative stereotypes which surround NEET young people: she had a turbulent relationship with her mother; a number of fickle friendships; and an intermittent series of boyfriends. She was a habitual cannabis user throughout the fieldwork and prone to bouts of heavy drinking and other nihilistic behaviour. Jasmine believed she had bi-polar disorder and, generally, her personal life was full of drama. In January 2013, Jasmine announced she was pregnant. The field notes below give some insight into her life:

Jasmine lived in [East Anglia] for the first five years of her life and then attended primary school in Selhurst [in south-east England] for five years before moving to Middlebridge. They moved as her mum's boyfriend beat

her mum up. Jasmine went to middle school and high school in Middlebridge... She went on to Middlebridge College to do performing arts, although she didn't finish this course; she was there for four months ... 'stuff kicked off' and she got depressed. Jasmine then started an apprenticeship in childcare while living at home with her mum. She was on the course for nine months but didn't get any work done. Jasmine then did an unpaid nursery placement, which she found stressful ... she has undertaken various [other] courses, including an independent living programme, a dance course, drama, and peer education on drugs and alcohol ... Jasmine went to [another training provider] to build on her maths and English... She quit this as she felt it was wasting her time, she wanted a job. (Field notes 08/10/10 – 24/06/11).

One of the benefits of ethnography is that it enables researchers to see beyond the immediate and to monitor change over time. Whilst Jasmine's motivation and commitment to work decreased over the course of the research she did, at certain times, engage in various forms of paid, voluntary and informal employment, and a number of training programmes - although her participation in all these activities tended to be short-lived. In part, this can be explained by Jasmine's frequently changing career goals and ambitions:

Since January 2010 Jasmine has wanted to work in childcare, policing, youth work and catering. Morag [housing charity worker] tells me that she wanted to do dance at Middlebridge College but they would not accept her as she had already reached that level in performing arts. Jasmine is now interested in catering, she enjoys cooking. (Field notes 08/10/10 – 24/06/11).

However, as Finn (1987: 47) reminds us, generally low levels of unemployment in post-war England concealed the way some young people 'churned' chronically between one job and another. A certain proportion of young people have always exhibited changing priorities and shifting goals but what is significantly different today is the limited availability of work, especially decent full-time employment. Moreover, when Jasmine's labour market

experiences are examined in more depth her decreasing motivation to work becomes understandable.

Towards the end of 2011, Jasmine began paid employment as a care assistant with H-Care, a company providing care to the elderly in their own homes. However, she didn't stay in this job for long.

Jasmine left H-Care in January 2012 after questioning a pay packet – she felt she was underpaid and kept getting ill. She describes 'throwing up' in a client's house; the client phoned H-Care and asked for someone take Jasmine home. He was told that if Jasmine didn't do his care nobody would. She describes them as 'dodgy'. Jasmine shows me her final pay slip: her pay was docked by £60 for training. There is also a pen mark at the top of her pay slip which states that £5 was deducted for loss of a staff handbook. (Field notes 29/02/12).

Jasmine visited eight or nine elderly people in their homes each working day. She worked every day, although she had Monday mornings off. Jasmine was paid £7.50 per hour, £7.80 at weekends, and £11.20 on bank holidays. She was not paid for travelling time between clients' homes. Before Jasmine began working for H-Care she was required to pay £58 for a Criminal Records Bureau check. She had to save to pay this from her welfare benefits, which delayed her start date. One of Jasmine's friends, Charlie, was also employed by H-Care before finding a job in a residential care home.

Charlie says she has learnt a lot of things in the home, like how to handle people properly – and that she was taught this wrongly at H-Care. She says you shouldn't stand on Zimmer frames; you shouldn't drag or pull but should always use a hoist or belt if the old people cannot get up. Charlie says it is dangerous for their back and for the person they are lifting. She says a lot of H-Care's activities were 'illegal' and that they would be shut down if it was brought to officials' attention. She says her social worker was appalled by what she was expected to do. Charlie said she left H-Care as she was underpaid and was being put with inexperienced girls when two people were needed for lifting – something she complained to



them about as she knew it was wrong. Jasmine says she hasn't done her handling training yet but is handling people. (Field notes 1/12/11).

Coupled with the repetitive, unfulfilling nature of the various employability programmes Jasmine undertook during her involvement with the research it is hardly surprising that she became dispirited, and her commitment to work waned over time. Yet Jasmine did not lack qualifications:

Yeah I got a B in drama; I got a Level 2 award in digital applications; I got a C in English, a D in maths, C in media studies, C in dance, D in my other English and D in French ... then I got a C in additional science and I got a D in science ... and ... a Level 3 BTEC national award in performing arts and I got a gold certificate for excellence in technical theatre. (Interview 29/03/11).

Jasmine also acquired various other qualifications during the course of our fieldwork, including numerous certificates in first aid, outdoor activities, and healthy living. She also undertook voluntary work at a local hospital, and played a central role in organising a charity ball at which the mayor of Middlebridge was a guest. Jasmine sometimes played scrabble in her spare time – to improve her vocabulary.

### *Cayden's Story*

Cayden was 19-years-old when we met him towards the end of 2010, and officially NEET until fieldwork finished in March 2013. Shortly after leaving school, Cayden dropped out of college and his commitment to finding paid employment fluctuated over the course of the research – although, over time, various agencies applied pressure upon him to do so. There are, however, two important caveats to consider in understanding Cayden's apparent lack of motivation to work.

Firstly, Cayden has learning difficulties and went to a special school where GCSEs were not offered, although he did gain numerous low-level pre-vocational certificates. These are kept tidily in a file and document his ability to recognise and use shapes, numbers and words at a basic level and to carry out various tasks such as growing plants and flowers. Cayden also gained an 'Engage' certificate in April 2011, after attending an employability programme. Cayden had been in care but had been living alone in a flat for about a year before he began

taking part in the research. His mother had died about a year beforehand, and Cayden was receiving counselling for his grief when we first met him; his uncle, who had acted as his foster parent for a while, had recently moved to Scotland. Cayden talked about wanting 'to get my life back together' at the beginning of the research; he seemed lonely, desperate for any form of interaction throughout the study. On first meeting his Connexions Personal Assistant, Heather, in November 2010, she stated that Cayden would 'probably never work'. Clearly, he is a vulnerable young man with a number of social, personal and material disadvantages.

Secondly, Cayden's labour market experiences are revealing. Despite his particularly problematic circumstances, like virtually all the young people taking part in our research, Cayden, often said that he wanted 'a normal life' – including his own house, a family, and a job. Initially, Cayden said he wanted to work in a nursing home and, after taking part in a short employability programme, began a voluntary work placement at The Avenue Care Home in Mistgate (a small town in Middlebridge) in February 2011. His placement was officially for 12 hours per week (Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays), although Cayden often worked significantly longer than this. Amongst other duties, he made tea, helped staff with lifting and handling, assisted residents with meals, and spent time talking with them. Sometimes Cayden also helped the old people go to the toilet. He received no pay but was pleased to be given a 'free' lunch.

Violet, the care home manager, described Cayden as 'polite', 'on time' and able to take the initiative and seek work. He seemed happy with the placement for a while, and got on well with the residents.

We then go and visit Nora an elderly lady who Craig has struck a relationship with; she is sat up in her chair filling out her leaving form as we arrive. She smiles and welcomes us into her room, Craig pushes a trolley down with him to freshen her water. Nora has 7 grandchildren...she jokes about having an 8<sup>th</sup> grandchild in Craig. Craig smiles, she tells him she is going home today and tells him where she lives, 'across the football pitch' – he says he knows it and she says he is welcome any time. (Field notes 16/02/11).

After a while, Cayden formed the impression that that he would be offered paid employment at The Avenue. However, he was still working on an unpaid basis when we visited him in May. By July, he had left the care home.

Cayden says this was because of his confusion over payment. Connexions said they (The Avenue) would pay him and then it transpired that they could not. Cayden says he needs a job that pays. He also tells me that his benefits are about to decrease, giving him more need to find paid work. (Field notes 15/07/11).

Despite this, Cayden began another voluntary work placement in early 2012, organised for him by Connexions. This time he was placed in a retail shop in Middlebridge run by a national charity. Initially, he attended four days per week (from 10.00-5.00), but Cayden was soon working at the shop for six days per week. He deals with customers, works the till, cleans, and does odd jobs around the place. Tara, the shop manager, recognises that Cayden is vulnerable and describes taking him 'under her wing'.

He seems a lot happier because when he first came here he was quite down and he used to talk about the tablets that he took and ... he'd say 'oh I feel a bit down today, Tara' and I'd say 'oh come on let's go and take your mind off stuff'. And the other day I gave him worry angels and he's got some at the side of his bed and he said they've taken his worries away from him now. He just doesn't seem as down and depressed and he's happy coming to work ... and, in the last couple of weeks, he's been given proper calls to make ... he does really well at selling the badges. (Tara 31/5/12)

I don't get bored really here. I like doing all the different things here as well and I like the people here, and I like a laugh with them, and I've made new friends with them. I've made new social friends. (Cayden, 31/5/12).

The Jobcentre want Cayden to find paid work but he wants to stay at the charity shop. Cayden is hopeful that the shop will pay him - although he was still working there on a voluntary basis when our fieldwork ended.

## **Conclusion**

Although young people's actions and beliefs undoubtedly influence their work and life trajectories, their choices are not made within a social and economic vacuum. Policy decisions taken at local, national and international levels shape and order not only the allocation and availability of work, benefits and education, but the nature and delivery of targeted interventions aimed at young people on the margins of participation. Broader social structures have a significant influence and becoming or remaining NEET is deeply embedded within an interplay of structure and agency. Many of our findings chime with those of other longitudinal research into the labour market experiences of working-class people in post-industrial settings (see, for example, Shildrick and MacDonald 2007; Shildrick et al. 2012), especially the participants' generally mainstream and relatively durable aspirations relating to work, family and other traditional signifiers of adulthood. But we have also found that, perhaps understandably, repeated negative labour market experiences – both on training schemes and in paid and voluntary work - can have a de-motivating effect.

Over time, engagement in poor work can act in synergy with real and imagined barriers to participation and curtail a young person's desire to work. As we have seen, chronic churning between repeated low-level training courses and certain forms of paid and unpaid employment, often characterised by insecurity and exploitation, was the norm for those participating in our research. Whilst official discourses about building work experience are superficially seductive, we found that disillusion engendered by continued failure to progress to higher levels set in sooner or later, often with negative consequences for attitudes to employment. Indeed, it may be appropriate to apply the classical Marxist conception of alienation to their experience. Lacking control over whether, when or where to work and study, often isolated from other people, and with little prospect of self-actualisation, it is perhaps unsurprising that they sometimes engage in nihilistic (in)activity. More prosaically, agency/resistance finds expression in avoidance and self-exclusion, as many of our participants take refuge from external pressures in familiar surroundings where they have some degree of autonomy.

Having said all this, and despite pervasive discourses about globalisation and the inevitable transformation of work and society, policymakers, employers and practitioners working with NEET young people are not powerless in the face of wider social and economic change. There is a range of possible options which could be used to create more meaningful opportunities for those on the fringes of labour market participation. Stimulation not only of the general demand for labour but of particular forms of work is necessary, as is regulation of employer practices, relating both to paid and voluntary work. Targeted local initiatives and worthwhile incentives both for employers and young people to create and take-up work can play a significant part alongside broader labour market policies. The quality of training available to young people and meaningful progression both between training programmes and employment is clearly important too. However, without a coherent industrial policy which creates and regulates the demand for labour, any intervention – whether training programmes, work experience or longer periods of voluntary employment – can never be adequate.

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