University of Huddersfield

School of Education and Professional Development

Youth Practitioners' Perspectives on Employability Provision for NEET Young People

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January 2024

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Copyright Statement

Acknowledgements

Thank you to those who gave up their time to take part in this research as it wouldn't have been possible without you. Thank you to my supervisor, Robin. You have expertly guided me over the years, for which, I am grateful. Thank you to everyone else who has supported me on this journey.

Abstract

This thesis constitutes a critical evaluation of the changing relationship between youth work and young people classified as NEET (or at risk of becoming NEET), through an analysis of youth practitioners' perspectives on employability provision. The thesis locates youth work within its sociohistorical and political context to illuminate three competing discourses which have underpinned and shaped it as a practice – these are discourses of care, social control, and economic competitiveness. These ideas are used as a conceptual framework through which to analyse youth work employability provision. The data was drawn from seventeen student youth workers across a range of youth work provision, using a variety of qualitative methods, including interviews, observations and field notes. Some of the data reinforces existing literature inasmuch as it shows that contemporary youth work has been redefined and reoriented along increasingly instrumental lines, suffering from a simultaneous narrowing of its focus and broadening of its practice. These new arrangements are conceptualised as something of a triage operation, utilised by neoliberalism to control and contain marginalised and dispossessed sections of the working class. Evidence of this is apparent within the practitioners' employability training as it incorporates a generic pedagogy which, it is argued, only serves to perpetuate disadvantage and bond NEET young people to marginalisation. Moreover, some of the practitioners in this research endorse official discourse on NEET, in which they incorporate a pedagogy of control into their practice. All the practitioners, however, believe they are caring for NEET young people, meaning significant conflict arose between care and control. It is argued nevertheless that the practitioners' practice is underpinned by a discourse continuum which is primarily mediated by their perspectives on NEET young people. So, whilst some practitioners reinforce deficit views of NEET which drives their practice towards control, others reject deficit views on NEET based upon a critical consciousness which, in turn, enables them to take a middling position, whereby they interweave between different positions on the continuum and maintain care in their practice. It is, therefore, a critical consciousness that enables some practitioners to navigate and negotiate the discourse continuum more effectively.

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List of Abbreviations

AGI	Advice, Guidance and Information
ASB	Anti-Social Behaviour
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
DfE	Department for Education
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
E2E	Education to Employment
EET	In Education, Employment or Training
EoC	Ethic of Care
FE	Further Education
IDYW	In Defence of Youth Work
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IYW	Institute for Youth Work
JCP	Job Creation Programme
LA	Local Authority
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
MUD	Moral Underclass Discourse
NCS	National Citizens Service
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NOS	National Occupation Standards
NYA	National Youth Agency
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
RED	Redistributive Discourse
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
SID	Social Integration Discourse
WEP	Work Experience Programme
YOP	Youth Opportunities Programme
YT	Youth Training
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will begin with a reflexive biography. Whilst there is always a risk of research becoming self-indulgent (Blackman, 2016), it is, I believe, necessary to make explicit my positionality and document how the research focus has been shaped by my own background and life experiences. I then provide an overview of the research aims and questions, detailing what this thesis hopes to achieve and how. Finally, I outline the structure of the thesis.

Why Reflexivity?

From the outset, it was known that this research is concerned with the views and experiences of practitioners, and therefore, required a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can be challenging for numerous reasons, not least that it is located in the interpretivist paradigm. This means that qualitative data is a product of the process of interpretation in which the researcher utilises their agency to construct meaning and knowledge about the social world (Atkinson et al., 2001; Merrill and West, 2009). Consequently, the researcher's values, beliefs and identity cannot be detached from the research process, as the researcher's self is inevitably an integral part of the analysis and should be acknowledged as it operates on the basic assumption that findings are a creation rather than discovery of facts (Atkinson, 1990; Denscombe, 2010).

Despite the human presence of the researcher being unavoidable, for a long period in academia, the researcher's self was rarely acknowledged, rendering them invisible in the construction of knowledge (Merill and West, 2009). This is perhaps due to the hegemonic influence of traditional positivistic understandings of research whereby knowledge is supposedly objective, quantifiable and generalisable, modelled on the natural sciences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The rise of the Chicago school strengthened the interpretive paradigms however, which attempted to capture human agency as shaping social reality via symbolic interactionism and phenomenology for example (Bulmer, 1984; Merill and West, 2009). These paradigms focused on people's

actions, the meanings they assigned to phenomena and how they made sense of the world. Not all qualitative researchers were influenced to acknowledge their presence though.

Merill and West (2009) suggest that many regard the sociological imagination by C. Wright-Mills (1959), defined as 'the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society' as driving the 'reflexive turn' with the conceptualisation of researcher biography into the research process. Merill and West suggest this was the driver in reconceptualisation of the social sciences and the paving of a clear dichotomy between objective and subjective paradigms. The sociological imagination can also be viewed as a challenge to traditional theorisations of structure and agency. Whilst Wright-Mills recognised the importance of how individual experience and worldview are products of historical contexts, he also placed significant emphasis on the everyday immediate environment in which individuals exist. This is largely underpinned by a belief that human beings are active agents in making their lives rather than being predetermined by social and historical forces – in other words, we are actively interacting with, experiencing, giving meaning to, and creating our world. This is a central point in E.P Thompson's (1963) *The Making of The English Working Class* – inasmuch as Thompson argues that class is not merely a category or structure, but rather something that is *made* in human relationships as a result of common experiences. Put simply, it is about how people learn about their place in the world. Through the ideas of personal troubles and public issues, Wright-Mills (1959) nevertheless invites us to examine the relationship between personal experience and the wider society, which was driven as a reaction against forms of social enquiry that tended to deny subjectivity in research and to neglect the role of human agency in social life.

Another major influence driving the reflexive turn has been the emergence of postmodernism and alternative ways of conceptualising the self, viewed as a dynamic interplay between social structure and individual lives (Giddens, 1998). Postmodernists have argued that the intergenerational continuities associated with the certainties of

industrial life have significantly weakened, supposedly replaced by a new politics of identity whereby many seek to live their lives in different ways from their parents and grandparents (Giddens, 1998). The social scripts that once shaped people's lives, as in earlier agrarian and industrial societies, have weakened. Some have suggested that social class is no longer relevant and individuals are free to choose and live as they want. Giddens (1991) refers to this as 'the reflexive project of the self', where individuals continually rework their identity and self-definition. Giddens however sees inherent paradoxes where individuals are able to have a greater degree of self-definition, but are still constrained by social, economic and political forces. Giddens adds this is often accompanied by existential doubt for many, as composing a life identity and finding meaning is much more fragmented, individualised and unpredictable, due to the redundance of old certainties and the rise of a globalised world.

The 'reflexive turn' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) has nevertheless increased ethical responsibility of the researcher, whereby the researcher should acknowledge their presence, and consider their positionality throughout the research process. As biography is now recognised as a crucial factor in interpretivist paradigms, Blackman (2016) warns that research now also has the capability to get lost in narcissistic ways – whereby the researcher becomes overly preoccupied with the self. For example, the researcher could potentially put their own story, thoughts, feelings, biases and agendas above those of whom they research and write about. This would amount to a form of ventriloquism since the researcher is using the voice of participants to explore or express things they want to say or represent. This could include, for example, being selective with data or omitting data that doesn't align with one's beliefs. Blackman (2016) suggests research therefore demands an openness and awareness, including a specification and continuous consideration of positionality to ensure that participants voices do not become marginalised, and the research has fair representation and validity. This is particularly relevant when researching with marginalised people and oppressed groups, who can sometimes be misrepresented and further marginalised (Hodkinson, 2005; Clifford and Marcus, 1985).

In response to such challenges, Blackman (2016) proposes the concept of critical ventriloquism to overcome any tensions in positionality. Blackman advocates to speak from within and to represent fairly by denouncing one's own epistemological and political baggage. This requires extensive levels of self-awareness on positionality to analyse underlying assumptions so that the researcher's perspective is open to change, enabling them to represent the data in a fair and honest way (Blackman, 2007). Neglecting reflexivity increases the potential of, for example, purposely selecting data which confirms preconceived ideas, beliefs or assumptions (Lumsden, 2019). Research is essentially about having integrity and being ethical, being open to change, and preparing to be challenged (Hodkinson, 2005). Merrill and West argue that:

> We cannot, in a sense, write stories of others without reflecting our own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values. Moreover, choosing a topic for a biographical study tends almost always to be rooted in our own personal and/or professional biographies. A topic we choose in others' lives may be motivated by or raise profound issues in our own. We, therefore, argue the case for bringing the researcher, and processes of relationship, into the research frame – and for interrogating this quite explicitly – rather than pretending, as many researchers do, that our interests and ways of making sense of others is, or should be, divorced from the people and experiences we are. (2009, p.5)

In this sense, it is also important for researchers to be honest about how the research agenda has been shaped as it is never a neutral process – it is experiences rooted in biography that engage people with a particular topic, so self-awareness needs to be at the heart of our work (Atkinson, 1990; Atkinson et al. 2001). Taking Blackman's (2016) advice, I believe it is necessary for me to make myself visible in this research as I come with a substantial amount of biographical baggage and need to consider how this will shape my thoughts and analysis. So, the rationale for incorporating a reflexive biography is to explain how my background and experiences have shaped and developed this research. Merill and West (2009) encourage researchers to choose a topic which has been shaped by personal or professional appeal for at least two key reasons.

Firstly, due to the punishing nature of long-term research projects, which can often result in disillusionment for many, researching something meaningful can ensure deep engagement and higher levels of energy and motivation when times get tough. Secondly, Merill and West argue that the presence of the researcher cannot be avoided and so, we should aspire to devise a research project which can utilise this presence, rather than pretend it does not exist.

My Journey into Research

During my teenage years, despite being 'bright', I was a high school dropout at the age of 13, subsequently followed by NEET status, during which time I rejected the mainstream and became involved in the informal economy and various illicit activities. I managed to turn things around in my early 20s, however, as I was able to, through extended family, draw on social and cultural resources that are largely unavailable to most working-class young men. For example, research demonstrates how the social and cultural capital of the working class has been devalued and shrinks over time and space, entrapping them in a state of perpetual marginality (Shildrick et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2020). Generally, I always embodied mainstream ambitions and attitudes, at least concerning home and family life, but upon diverging from my local area, I now viewed the means to achieving these through a legitimate avenue, as opposed to illicit activities.

In any case, now embracing the mainstream, I found my first job in a warehouse on a temporary basis before working in manual labour – this was a physically demanding, filthy, low-paid job, but I stuck with it for nearly two years before I was laid off as the company went under. I struggled to stay in the labour market from here, often churning between temporary, low-paid factory and labouring work. This may have been related to limited opportunity during the height of the 2008 global recession, although the chronic inability to find and sustain meaningful employment is a common experience for many working-class NEET young people (Simmons et al., 2014). Either way, during my early 20s, I was skint, struggling to find work, signing on the dole, had zero prospects and nothing to look forward to in life - it was a dire situation.

During this time, I moved back to my area of origin due to its close proximity to the city centre as I believed I could be more successful in gaining employment. It was back here, however, that I witnessed many local young men, who were much younger the last time I saw them, taking the same path I had during my teens – disengaging with education and engaging within the informal economy. I began to question why this pattern of social behaviour was a 'normal' way of life here. Often chatting to them outside the shop precinct and offering life advice, this is where I found the inspiration for youth work as a prospective career path. I wanted to help try to break this cycle of risky behaviour that was impeding the life chances and opportunities of young people - based on my struggles and experiences, I viewed these young men as throwing their lives away with the choices they were making. I believed that I had the relevant life experience and 'street knowledge' which could benefit younger people and possibly steer them away from making the same mistakes that I did – this is a common motivation for many people to get involved in youth work (St Croix, 2016).

Still on the periphery myself, however, faced with instability and uncertainty churning between precarious employment, I now began to embrace and embody meritocratic aspiration discourses associated with neoliberalism (Stahl, 2015), which I'd previously rejected during my schooling. I became aware that I needed to attain formal qualifications to enhance my employment prospects and general life trajectory. From here, I made enquiries to local FE colleges, and despite the absence of formal qualifications, I eventually secured myself a place on a two-year vocational youth work course. As I needed a placement to fulfil the course requirements, I approached a local youth work organisation and started on a voluntary basis, leading to part-time paid work, then later, contracted employment. Towards the end of the course though, I successfully applied to university to study youth and community work.

I arrived at university a week after my 24th birthday without formal qualifications. Naturally excited about the direction my life was now taking, little did I know at the

time that university would be a severe site of struggle for me. Put simply, during my university education, I studied sociological-based undergraduate modules examining a long history of structures, systems and ideologies working to produce and reproduce social inequality. I began to resonate with much of the content within these lectures and seminars. I was particularly interested in social class, as I could relate to many themes discussed in lectures and seminars. I often felt resentment about how the working class were perceived more generally because it was, I felt, a personal attack. For example, underclass discourses would infuriate me, as I knew these to be flawed, whilst others on my course argued that they knew people who were poor because they chose not to work, opting for benefit lifestyles, drug and alcohol abuse, big screen TVs, and gambling. In other words, some attributed poverty to agency based upon deficit discourses, whilst I saw it as primarily deriving from social structures. I often debated with colleagues as I felt I had to defend my social class, sense of self-worth, and respect. We were essentially in dialogue about people like me and where I came from; sometimes, it was hurtful and humiliating, and other times, exciting and eye-opening.

I had become aware, explicitly, for the first time of my social class, previously only known tacitly as I experienced symbolic violence in the social world. I always knew that I came from a less well-off background, but this was normal for me as I didn't have the knowledge or understanding to conceptualise my disadvantage in terms of social class and inequality, often assigning my marginalisation to personal factors. Research demonstrates that many NEET young people ascribe their disadvantage to personal attributes, negating broader structural inequalities, due to a dilution of class consciousness (Simmons et al., 2014). Studying Marxism in my first year was the beginning of my critical questioning of the mainstream. In my second year, I became interested in NEET, which enabled me to understand how deindustrialisation and economic restructuring associated with neoliberalism had, for at least some sections of the working class, systematically dispossessed and marginalised them (Harvey, 2005). In short, my university education armed me with conceptual knowledge, which enabled me to become a critical thinker. I began to reframe my whole life and how it had, mostly covertly, been shaped by forces beyond my control.

If ignorance is bliss, then knowledge can be dangerous because this led to a difficult time in life for me, whereby I became overly class-conscious. During my teens, I internalised social structures which marginalised me from the mainstream, but I was not aware of this and locally, my choices to inclusion offered me a subjective sense of value, status, belonging and power. This is a phenomenon Wacquant (2008) labels 'super marginalisation'. Now, however, I had internalised a devalued social position from my conceptual understanding. I became aware of how I was viewed externally in various social spaces. I began to experience social anxiety in middle-class social spaces as I became increasingly aware of my class position. I found myself habitually scanning environments to figure out if it was a social space I was safe within. From here, I made a conscious effort to present myself as more 'normal' to try 'fit in' new social fields. I still felt like a 'fish out of water' for the most part (Bourdieu, 1989), where I'd consciously observe myself, particularly in unfamiliar territory, but crucially, I had internalised the rules of the mainstream game and began, though ill-equipped, to play by them. I didn't feel safe within university, and I became very critical of education's role in this as it had done something quite profound to me, often feeling anger, frustration, insecurity, and resentment. My conceptual understanding is that I experienced a habitus tear and a process of hysteria (Bourdieu, 1989), but at the time, I didn't know what had happened to me. My self-concept had been destabilised as I interweaved and negotiated different identities.

The critical questioning of my education and reframing of my life experience so far led to another dilemma. I began to experience considerable tensions in my practice, whereby I was questioning my role or at least the aims of it. I now understood that social structures work to produce and reproduce inequality, which transpired into my practice as I was unsure of my role in this as a youth worker. Working primarily with marginalised young people, such as those who are NEET, I was often having an internal dialogue examining how it was possible to truly embrace a professional commitment to anti-oppressive practice and working towards social justice (NYA, 2001; Jeffs and

Smith, 2010; Davies, 2015), without challenging the structures and systems which function to reproduce class and cultural disadvantages…

> …DC mentioned a young man, H, who had asked for help. He is a small-time dealer and DC was conflicted over what his aims should be; whether he should be helping H find a job, which DC saw as pushing him into a system/capitalist structure designed to exploit, abuse and oppress him; or whether empowering him might mean helping H become a more diligent drug dealer! We explored how this confusion/dilemma over aims for young people, particularly very disaffected young people, mirrors DC's reflections about his own journey and experiences growing up; how his uni sociological learning has enabled him to reframe and understand differently his childhood experiences and to have a more critical view of society, recognising that society frequently works to maintain social injustice, privileging a few at the expense of the many. This has been a recurring issue in some of DC's face-to-face encounters: DC said he gets caught up in his own thinking and his personal, emotional response to situations, which then overwhelms and debilitates him from focusing on the young person and acting in their best interests (because he's trying to reason out what those are). (Placement Supervisor, 2014)

This was a continuous challenge throughout my undergraduate degree, in which I regularly explored the contradictions I faced. I did not want to be unconsciously colluding with systems of oppression by integrating NEET young people into unjust structures, so I was often trying to disentangle the aims of my role. Seeing inherent conflict in society due to competing interests of social groups, I began to question whether youth work was functioning as an instrument of social control. This was further compounded as I began to engage with funding bids and discern that young people were often, and necessary to successfully win bids, depicted as deficit. I was being required to describe NEET young people as socially and economically deprived, exhibiting low aspirations, a lack of skills, unhealthy attitudes and behaviours, and withdrawn from a sense of community and mainstream society. Now, whilst some of this may be true, to some degree at least, it was positioning young people as socially and psychologically lacking and in need of fixing. As funding was tied to viewing NEET young people this way, I was now extremely suspicious of the role of youth work. Through the

outsourcing and delegation model under a bidding process, I felt that I was being employed as a working-class man, indirectly driven by state concerns, to help incorporate working-class young people into an unjust system.

This was not a direct aim of the youth project I worked for, as the manager and project were generally Left-leaning and had a similar critical view of society regarding inequality and injustice. It seemed to me though that to acquire funding, it was, although maybe unintended, indirectly supporting deficit constructions and the social control of working-class youth. For example, small pots of funding still came in from local authority, particularly for work with NEET, and other bodies such as the police crime commissioner with particular agendas, such as reducing crime and violence. The funding returns and reports also involved some 'monitoring' of young people – a nicer word for 'surveillance' (St Croix, 2017). I brought these concerns to my manager, and she mostly agreed that youth work had been codified to some extent but argued that she was always trying to find ways to balance the competing needs of young people and funders. Something I have discovered during the process of this research is the concept of strategic compliance. My manager described strategically complying where possible - directing resources to young people, prioritising their needs, and still finding a way to keep funders happy.

In any case, learning about social class and the marginalisation of NEET made me consciously aware of agendas not always in their best interest. My concerns were, therefore, that I didn't want to be coercing NEET young people into training, education or employment which would only further oppress them and reproduce social inequality. Based on further discussions with my manager, I made it clear that I wanted to do more 'radical youth work', which often led to strong dialogue in staff meetings as two of my colleagues were from relatively affluent middle-class backgrounds, Conservative supporters and defenders of the free market, often advocating for freedom, which is a complex argument to counter. Despite the endless enervating debates, I still

viewed class inequality as a collective issue deriving from social structures. Where my Right-leaning colleagues were concerned about inequalities, it was about remedying disadvantages at individual level, such as helping young people overcome the issues they faced, often suggesting they are in their current circumstances because of poor life choices. I didn't let their view of youth work deter me though, I believed many of the local young people's class consciousness had been diluted in the same way mine had. It was my concerns and the conversations that I was engaging young people and colleagues in which led to the emergence of a 'politics project'. This involved:

- Engaging young people in collective dialogue about social issues to do with class, 'race', and other forms of inequality.
- Examining academic extracts and literature to make links between individual lived experience and broader systems, structures and ideologies.
- Activities such as analysing political party manifesto policies; examining different newspapers and tabloids and how they portrayed the same story from different perspectives; watched the film PRIDE together in which the LGQBT community allied with striking miners.
- Attending a youth participation and politics debate at the University of Manchester, in which young people spoke to and questioned local councillors and MPs about their concerns.
- Bringing in speakers, such as Akala (social and political commentator, amongst other things), and going to George the Poet's show (ditto).

The project aimed to get young people thinking and talking critically about social and political processes which, directly or indirectly, can affect them. This resulted in some social action whereby young people petitioned locally and protested outside the town hall about public funding cuts, including for youth work. Whilst I was still suspicious of LA funding for youth work, if it could enable space to work creatively and critically with young people, such as via projects like the one above, I was prepared to

compromise, at least to some extent. Then again, my understanding of this now is that this is strategic compliance, although at that point in time, I was unconsciously but competently doing this.

It was my journey in university, nevertheless, that not only enabled me to understand my schooling rejection and experience of NEET through social class, but it also brought me some great difficulties as I began to question the legitimacy of the mainstream. This journey from rejecting the mainstream as a teen, to embracing it as a young man, and then questioning it, formed the roots of this research – it was the beginning of my critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). For example, whilst I was proud of instigating the politics project and other similar work, negotiating tricky territory that I didn't yet fully comprehend, I mentally began to take a step back as I was never completely content in my practice after graduating due to broader social class concerns and the personal struggles from the journey I was still on. I knew that I needed to continue studying, which might also help overcome my disillusionment with my practice. Basically, I believed that if I was able to eliminate the personal difficulties I was encountering, this would ameliorate the professional ones too. Mentally and emotionally, I was not at peace, feeling quite torn about who I was, where I came from, and where I belonged – I just wanted to know what happened to me and find a place in the world. Pierre Bourdieu has had a significant degree of popularity in the academic world in analysing social class relations, particularly in relation to education, but his work was derivative from the same need to know and understand. In his words...

> ...My main problem is to try to understand what happened to me. For that reason, even if my work – my full work – is a sort of auto-biography, it is a work for people who have the same sort of trajectory, and the same need to understand (Bourdieu, 1992, p.117)

I subsequently pursued a Masters by Research. This was a critical examination of social class, culture and identity and their relationship to education and employment

conceptualised through a Bourdieusian lens. This research was a reflection of who I am, and many of its findings enabled me to understand my own life experiences. On reflection, I see now that, although I held conceptual knowledge during my undergraduate days, this wasn't coherent – for example, I viewed structures as completely crushing all working-class young people and social class as fixed category and somewhat deterministic. My mind was rather primitive inasmuch as I was unable to understand the nuanced debates between structures and agency. I wasn't entirely oblivious to agentic explanations as the means of producing underlying inequality; for example, I resonated personally with Willis's (1977) 'lads' who just wanted to 'have a laugh'. I did, however, give more weight to structures, finding particular inspiration in Marxism for critiquing their role in the reproduction of social class inequality. Marxism, however, became unhelpful for me since I began to see structures as unovercomeable. Essentially, something was missing, an epistemological divide as although I had given more weight to structures in producing inequality, I knew it was a more convoluted picture. I had not yet studied any work that enabled me to amalgamate theoretical divisions and fully conceptualise social class as both a category and a process of stratification through practices which have meaning attached, or distinction (Bourdieu, 1989).

Bourdieu (1977) enabled me to understand the dialectical relationship between subjective agency and objective social structure through the concepts of habitus and field inasmuch as individuals internalise social structures, which become structuring structures, generating specific modes of thought and behaviour. I also further understood divisions in social space, conceptualised through the unequal possession and accumulation of social, cultural, and economic capitals. The work of Bourdieu provided me with much more optimism, as it recognises the potential and processes of human action rather than relegating people to mere passive objects without capacity for autonomous movement. Simon (2005) broadly supports this argument in that much Marxist/Neo-Marxist critique has become somewhat fatalistic. This became increasingly apparent to me during my MA, as I recognised that although structures

may disadvantage individuals, they always still have some degree of agency. In other words, social structures create unequal and unfair playing fields, but they do not entirely crush everybody. Another example would be my view that educational structures were completely oppressive in supporting the reproduction of inequality. I failed to consider that some universities actively seek to support working-class students, whilst some academics incorporate a critical pedagogy into their practice. Equally, I underestimated the emancipatory potential of education. Again, this relates to my former manager's discussion of strategic compliance – still enabling space to work critically with young people, despite broader constraints.

Whilst my MA was enlightening, this need for answers was the impetus for me to pursue further research. I had become a more mature critical thinker, rather than looking at phenomena with 'black and white' binary thinking. I began to recognise my own personal power in shaping the direction of my life, decisions, and consequences, despite structural constraints. Eliminating the class tensions I was having, therefore, did also help overcome the stresses and pressures I felt in my practice. Recognising the role agency plays in the reproduction of class disadvantage, my views on youth work changed. I now understand the role of a youth worker, or any other educational role for that matter, as to encourage and produce critical thinkers. I accepted it was not my responsibility to be making judgements for young people I work with about what is best for them, for example, between the informal economy and a lifetime of risk or a lifetime of potentially precarious work. In my view, the role of youth work education is to help young people better understand their situations and the options available to them whilst assisting them also to consider the consequences of choices and supporting them in making their own decisions. This links to Freire's (1970) ideas around conscientisation, starting where people are at, and working with them, rather than 'on' or 'for' them – through dialogue to help young people critically explore, understand, and name the world. I was attempting to do this through the politics project for example, although somewhat from a place of uncertainty.

Despite now having a strongly formulated view of youth work, these tensions have driven me to examine youth work critically, and in particular its role regarding working with working-class marginalised young people, such as those who are NEET. I'm also aware that many of the people on youth and community work courses come from working-class backgrounds (Jones, 2011). Whilst I viewed myself as a critical youth worker and aware of agendas not in the best interest of NEET young people during my undergraduate degree, I was under the impression, based on discussions and debates I had with others on my course, that they viewed youth work more functionally and consensually. There seemed to be little comprehension that youth work is a social practice embedded within a social and economic context of inherent conflict related to competing social groups, so examining how youth practitioners navigate and negotiate their practice will be illuminating.

Moreover, I am not conducting this research because I am still trying to overcome tensions, or equally, to reinforce my own ideas about what I want or believe youth work to be. Rather, I am acknowledging that this is the journey that has brought me into research and also shaped my ideas. In the interest of research integrity, I have taken a reflexive approach and made explicit any tensions in my position and my understanding of the youth work role. This is necessary as I not only have a personal interest in the topic, but I also have personal experience as a youth worker working with NEET young people, as well as this research being partly shaped by my own life experiences. This means I have well-established thoughts on the topic under investigation. I am nevertheless aware that my views may be challenged, as the practitioners' conceptions of youth work, for example, may not align with my own. I am either way, at an individual level, aware of, and able to mentally and emotionally detach from my own thoughts, feelings, beliefs and assumptions. Where I have felt challenged by some data based on my positionality also, I have devised strategies to limit the impact of this (documented in data chapters). It is also worth noting that I am primarily pursuing a PhD out of professional ambition and for personal achievement, rather than to utilise the voice of participants to express my own views. Of course, not many researchers set

out intentionally to do this, but having a strong sense of self-awareness will mitigate the risk of this.

Overview of The Research

This research is essentially about the changing relationship between youth work and NEET young people through an analysis of youth work employability provision. Youth work, however, has never been a clearly defined practice (Cooper, 2018), and this is perhaps related, at least in part, to the diverse forms of work that have taken place with young people in the UK over the last two centuries (Fusco, 2018; Bright and Pugh, 2019). During this period, youth work has been in constant transition and continuous remaking, whilst at the same time, who or what qualifies as a young person has expanded over time, particularly for sections of the dispossessed working class, as traditional structures and transitions into adulthood have been shattered (Ainley, 2016). Youth work is, therefore, heavily contested terrain – the term itself can mean different things to different people, including practitioners, policymakers, and the public more broadly (Davies, 2015). There is, however, at least amongst academics, a broader acceptance that youth work in the UK is primarily concerned with the *education* and *welfare* of young people (Taylor et al., 2019).

Youth work has a long history, but official accounts tend to locate its development in the rise of the state-organised Youth Service in 1939 (Davies, 2009). The 1944 Education Act, nevertheless, merely considered youth work a form of recreation rather than an educational activity *per se.* Some years later, the conclusions of the Albemarle report (1960) delineating education and association as the principal purposes of youth work were well received, and youth work became as close to being unified as it has ever done. There were, thereafter, considerable efforts to theorise and fortify youth work practice, including its educational foundation (Davies and Gibson, 1967; Smith, 1988; Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Despite the state supporting an educational approach and sponsoring youth work under social democracy, producing a progressive practice reflective of the times, youth work was never granted professional recognition in the

same way as say, teaching or social work. In other words, youth work was at the mercy of the state, susceptible to shifting ideologies (Davies and Taylor, 2018). So, although state intervention was relatively unproblematic for some years, complications emerged as the post-war consensus started to unravel driven by a series of economic crises in the 1970s.

The 1980s was a significant turning point for youth work and young people generally, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. Longer-term economic trends were accelerated throughout that decade associated with the rise of neoliberalism, which led to the rapid demise of Britain's manufacturing base (Ainley, 2016). The labour market was radically restructured and young people found themselves at the sharp end of severely decreased employment opportunity (Green, 2017) – the traditional youth labour market was, in effect, almost entirely eradicated, subsequently followed by substantial youth unemployment (Simmons et al., 2014). At the same time, there was significant rise in youth training schemes, epitomising the state's concern with up-skilling young people to enable them to compete in the so-called new global marketplace (Mizen, 1990). It was this same concern which caused the state to intervene in the lives of the working class 100 years earlier with the introduction of state schooling as Britain's economy began to fall behind international competitors (McCulloch, 2005). Either way, these resurfaced ideas, concerned with the correspondence between education and the economy, came to dominate the political landscape. Young people were thereafter firmly constructed as deficit by official discourse, positioned as 'lacking' in skill, knowledge, and appropriate attitudes and aspirations (Finn, 1987; Ainley, 2016).

Successive governments have embraced neoliberalism – ideological goals concerned with market fundamentalism, a small state, and efficiency through managerialism and performativity incorporating business models into public services (Harvey, 2005; Bright and Pugh, 2019). There have also been continuities in deficit discourses about young people. The rise of NEET, for example, encapsulates this as it is a stigmatised

and degrading label, only valuing young people if they are participating in education or employment (Yates and Payne, 2007; Finlay et al., 2010). NEET does, however, also typify state concerns about the increasing economic role of education in enabling young people to transition into the labour market (Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

For youth work, neoliberalism has led to the imposition of targets, alongside progressively reduced funding with incrementally narrower focuses, justified by deficit constructions of young people (Taylor et al., 2019). The trends originating in the 1980s began a corruption of youth work as, to continue to receive a proportion of the increasing reduction in state funding, it had to adapt to some extent by embracing the agenda of deficit. The alternative was to face the prospect of being bypassed by various skills training schemes, services such as Connexions, and the sharp rise in employability training programmes (Davies, 2009; Bright and Pugh, 2019). In other words, neoliberal state agendas for young people, concerned with the increasing economic role of education have, over time, infiltrated and repurposed youth work. During the last two decades in particular, state funding has drastically been reduced for youth work, whilst simultaneously, it has been radically reorganised, including the introduction of a bidding process for funding under a outsource and commissioning model (Davies and Taylor, 2018). State youth work, during this time, has brutally contracted and youth work is now primarily located within the voluntary sector, reflecting the roots it grew from (Jeffs et al., 2019).

Contemporary youth work now incorporates many different variants, taking place in different contexts, with different aims and focuses (Davies and Taylor, 2018). It is however fair to claim that youth work has been driven along increasingly instrumental lines, and nowadays, 'youth workers' predominantly find themselves dealing with various issues including youth unemployment, career guidance, homelessness, and drug and alcohol abuse (Davies, 2019). Consequentially, orthodox youth work, based upon a potential perspective of young people, concerned with informal education, recreation, and responsive to young people's needs, has declined due to neoliberal preferences for

targeted work concerned with hard outcomes (Ord, 2016). Academics, nevertheless, continue to argue that this is not youth work, which they claim, is a specialised practice with young people, with a particular set of principles that differentiates it from other similar, sometimes overlapping, practices and work with young people (Davies, 2015; Ord, 2016). Academics have, therefore, drawn lines between youth work, and work with young people that shares some features of youth work, but don't necessarily share the same principles (Banks, 2010; Jeffs and Smith, 2010). This is the crucial distinction between traditional youth work and more contemporary variants of youth work. Either way, predetermined goals are now a reflection of youth work's success criteria according to the demands of different funding bodies, which are often shaped by neoliberal policy imperatives (St Croix, 2017). Funding mostly necessitates that young people are described through 'lack' to justify a response to resolve 'the problem', which therefore, reinforces deficit discourse emanating from the state (Davies, 2019). Youth work has become polarised and codified through a succession of neoliberal policies that have integrated business models into youth work, concerned with rectifying deficits in young people.

From the inception of this research, it was understood that, traditionally at least, it has never been the remit of youth work to specifically deal with youth unemployment or the skills training of young people. Typically, this was supplied through other state services, for example, through mainstream forms of education and training such as schools, colleges, youth training schemes, Connexions, and the Job Centre for those aged 18+. It would seem that contemporary youth workers often find themselves engaged in formal post-compulsory education based upon deficiency models, attempting to rectify unemployed young people through employability training and support, where broader principles of youth work are often unachievable. For example, in many settings, NEET young people are coerced into conforming and participating in extended education and training.

Either way, the instrumental changes discussed above are well-established and largely uncontested in the literature and so will not be challenged in this thesis. The aim of this thesis rather, is to develop new and novel understandings of a particular variant of youth work aimed at NEET young people. The research aims are to:

1. Critically analyse youth practitioners' perspectives on employability provision for NEET young people.
2. Critically consider the relationship between NEET young people and youth work employability provision.
3. Theorise and develop critical understanding of youth work employability provision for NEET young people.

To meet these aims, the research has the following three questions:

- What are the practitioners' perspectives on employability provision for NEET young people?
- How do practitioners' view NEET young people and their role in working with them?
- What impact do dominant discourses about NEET young people have on the practitioners' perspectives and practice?

There is substantial academic literature on youth work (see, for example, Davies and Taylor, 2018; Jeffs et al., 2019; Bright and Pugh, 2019) and NEET young people (see, for example, Finlay et al., 2010; Simmons et al., 2014; Maguire, 2015), but much less on their relationship. To my knowledge, there is only one journal paper from Scotland that currently discusses the relationship between youth work and NEET (Miller et al., 2013), but this is based on the perspective of NEET young people. Miller et al. (2013) argue that the NEET young people in their research are socially bonded in a history of deprivation, a lack of opportunities and closed networks due to their disadvantaged backgrounds, which has built up feelings of anger and negativity towards their

community, often opting for their own micro-communities. In other words, it was claimed that the NEET young people lacked in bridging capital and were marginalised from the mainstream. The paper argues that youth work can help develop bridging capital, although there was little evidence of this.

Bridging capital is outward looking and aims to move beyond the community to open up and extend networks to build opportunity (Putnam, 2001). This paper rather, argued that youth work could build bridging capital within the community, such as with youth workers themselves, the authorities, schools, libraries, sports centres, shops, and community groups. It was suggested this could act as a glue between the young person and their community and provide a counterweight to their marginalisation. It was further claimed that youth workers built bridging capital by building aspiration and opening up possibilities in NEET young people's minds - this is, however, a subjective interpretation and there was little evidence to support this. There were no concrete examples of how any of the above helped move NEET young people into paid employment, although it was claimed some began volunteering in their community. Whilst this can be considered a 'good thing', if the community is generally deprived and disadvantaged, then the likelihood is this is further bonding them to deprivation, rather than building bridges to broader social space which can potentially open up meaningful employment. It appears they have, at least to some degree, confused bridging capital for bonding capital, which can strengthen community relations. If anything, youth workers were helping bond NEET young people into a community from which they were withdrawn rather than building bridging capital that can mitigate the effects of youth unemployment as the paper claimed.

Aside from this, I have not discovered any research that examines the relationship between NEET and youth work from practitioners' perspectives, or any that considers youth work practitioners' perspectives on NEET or employability programmes. These are real limitations which this thesis aims to address. There are, of course, research projects on a range of employability provision and various practitioners working with

young people and young adults, including for example, E2E tutors (Simmons and Thompson, 2011), welfare to work practitioners (Shildrick et al., 2012), or FE tutors (Cornish, 2018).

On that note, it's important to make some distinctions regarding research design. Knowing prior to undertaking this research that youth work is a profession in conflict, I will, within this thesis, deploy the concept of youth practitioner as opposed to youth worker. The rationale for this is relatively simple. Youth work contains a particular set of values and principles which define and distinguish it as a specialised and unique practice with young people. It was anticipated that, as youth work employability training is a variant of more traditional youth work, some of those who would take part in this research might not be working towards traditional youth work principles. After all, narrower variants of youth work have been driven by the fragmentation of provision and erosion of some key youth work principles. Therefore, terminology is fundamental to this research, as to refer to some participants as youth workers, even though they are potentially not doing youth work, may contribute to a misconstrued perception of what youth work actually is. So, a conscious decision has been made to avoid conflating youth work as a specialised practice with other welfare professions or practices which do not hold the same values or principles because this would potentially be contributing to its denigration. For that reason, youth practitioner, which is a broader term, will be utilised to encapsulate research participants, including those who are working to youth work principles and those who are not.

It is however necessary to define some boundaries of who or what a youth practitioner is, as essentially it could refer to any practitioner working with young people, and again, conflate youth work variants with other practices. One key example here may be welfare to work practitioners who may share many similarities with a youth practitioner in this research since they utilise a supply-side orthodoxy and may provide similar forms of employability training and practice. Shildrick et al. (2012) also discovered many welfare to work practitioners embody deficit discourses regarding young people

associated primarily with the underclass. This is, according to prominent writers in the field (Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Davies, 2015), oppositional to how youth workers should view young people, which again, undermines youth work principles – young people should be viewed through a potential perspective as opposed to a deficit lens. This then produced something of a dilemma for defining what a youth practitioner is within this research – are they youth workers or are they not? The answer to this is both yes and no. To clarify, the understanding of youth practitioner I am deploying does not mean any generic practitioner working with young people, it means youth workers who may or may not be working to the principles of traditional youth work. In other words, they may or may not be traditional youth workers, but they are nevertheless contemporary youth workers.

This then raises the question of how a contemporary youth worker is defined as they may or may not be working to a particular set of principles or body of knowledge which defines their practice. The answer to this lies simply in the sample criteria – those who have participated in this research are undergoing youth work training or have undergone youth work training within the last five years. Further justification is given to this sample criteria when considering that those who have been in the field much longer will have witnessed and possibly experienced multiple shifts in practice as the general remit of their work has changed due to youth work being driven narrower in focus. For example, many scholars in the field are former youth workers and have some strong views regarding the impact of neoliberal policy on youth work (see, for example, Jeffs et al., 2018 or Taylor et al., 2019). Those who are still in training and new to youth work have been socialised into an ununified practice and will therefore help paint a cohesive picture of a contemporary variant of youth work.

Additionally, the creation of new knowledge requires a robust understanding of current knowledge through a systematic evaluation of literature. Whilst this introduction gives a broad overview to put the research focus into context, the literature review will critically explore how youth work arrived at where it is today. Firstly, it seeks to define

youth work as concerned with both education and welfare; then traces its roots to reveal where it came from and why; then details its journey from state intervention to present day. This, essentially, encapsulates the theoretical, sociohistorical, and political context of youth work. Finally, the literature review critically analyses the rise of NEET, which then enables alternative understandings of the instrumental changes in youth work, as well as the fortunes of working-class young people.

Structure of Thesis

The structure of the thesis is described below. Including this introduction, there are six other chapters - the literature review, methodology, three data chapters, and finally, the conclusion. I give a brief overview of what each chapter contains, its key arguments or areas of focus.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review is divided into four key areas. It begins by examining what youth work is, seeking to define it theoretically as concerned with both education and welfare. Particular attention is paid to the principles which have traditionally defined it as a unique practice, as well as to social and informal education which have been competing for youth work's educational base, analysing the various strengths and limitations of these. Secondly, tracing the educational and welfare roots of youth work to situate it within a sociohistorical context helps examine where it came from and why, analysing the various competing discourses underpinning its development. Broadly, it's argued that industrialisation created a protracted crisis of social order in which competing discourses of care and control emerged and have, over time, played a large role in shaping youth work practice. After this, the journey of youth work is detailed, from state intervention to present day, making explicit how the general purpose of youth work has shifted with changing ideologies of the state according to different priorities. It also argues this was the introduction of a new discourse into youth work, economic competitiveness. This has been incorporated by instrumental policy changes associated with neoliberalism, such as targets, outcomes, and the withdrawal of funding under new

managerial performativity, justified by an economic view of young people as deficit. Finally, there is an analysis of the rise of NEET, connecting this to deindustrialisation and economic restructuring. Critically examining the changing transitions of working-class youth due to a decrease in employment opportunity, alongside the simultaneous extension and normalisation of post-compulsory education, offers alternative ways to understand the changing nature of youth work. It is argued that youth work's relationship to NEET can essentially be conceptualised as something of a triage operation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter begins with an overview of the paradigm underpinning the chosen methodology, before offering a rationale for this strategy and approach. The methods and fieldwork are then discussed, alongside difficulties related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aims and questions are also unpacked in some depth, explaining how and what these hope to achieve, which also gives justification for the deployment of the term youth practitioner, as well as a rationale behind the chosen sample of research participants. The chapter concludes with discussions of reflexivity, ethics and an overview of how the data analysis was conducted.

Chapter 4: Youth Work Employability Training

Chapter four applies three discourses extrapolated from the literature review to the data. The first discourse analysed is economic competitiveness, which is, it is argued, imposed in youth work employability training via targets and funding demands ratified by state agendas. The second area is a critical examination of a discourse of social control where it is argued that all the practitioners are providing a generic pedagogy in their employability training which is bonding NEET young people to marginalisation. Some consideration is then given to the overlap between the economic and control discourses inasmuch as there appears to be a relationship of support. The final discourse to be examined is care whereby practitioners view their work as relationship based – an ethic of care is then applied to the data to conceptualise their relationships. From this

initial analysis, it appears that the practitioners' practice is underpinned by something of a hybrid discourse as it seems that all three discourses are present. Recognising there is some significant conflict and competition between discourses of care and control however, the final section of this chapter unpicks this is more detail. It is argued that it is not in fact a hybrid discourse underpinning practice, but rather a discourse continuum as care and control cannot, at least in theory, exist together. This is depicted via numerous diagrams of the continuum.

Chapter 5:Practitioners' Perspectives and Practice

This chapter considers the perspectives and practice of eight particular practitioners. It is demonstrated that they embody deficit views on NEET young people in relation to their skills and morals in which parallels are drawn with underclass theory. It is then argued that these views translate into the practitioners' practice wherein they incorporate a pedagogy of control concerned primarily with regulating NEET young people's attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles. From here, it is suggested that these practitioners are enabling their relationships to be overridden by social control and that their practice does not contain care, but rather, a pseudo-form of care. Diagrams of the discourse continuum are also used throughout as visual aids to support this analysis.

Chapter 6: The other Practitioners' Perspectives and Practice

This chapter analyses the other nine practitioners' views on NEET young people. These practitioners challenge official discourse on NEET, reject a pedagogy of control, aim to prioritise young people's needs and create a space to incorporate care. It is argued that, essentially, it is the practitioners' perspectives on NEET young people, based upon a critical consciousness, which is the determining factor that enables them to navigate their practice more competently. As they are being pulled towards social control, they are, through their critical perspectives on NEET, subverting external agendas, looking for a compromise and leaning back towards care. This is theorised as a middling position as they interweave between two different positions on the continuum which are a combination of two different discourses – care and economic, and control and

economic. More broadly, they also negotiate their targets through strategic compliance, enabling them to take a ‘middling position’ between triage and traditional youth work. Again, diagrams are used to support this analysis. Focus then returns to the other eight practitioners with deficit views to argue for a pedagogy of hope.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The conclusion draws together the thesis, firstly revisiting key arguments and insights from the literature. The data chapters are then reflected on to outline and reaffirm the original contribution to knowledge this thesis makes. Alongside strengthening existing literature on youth work, this thesis provides a comprehensive picture of youth work employability training and its relationship to NEET young people. It theorises the practitioners' practice as underpinned by a discourse continuum which is mediated by the perspectives of practitioners, often in a process of negotiation. The chapter then concludes by highlighting some limitations of the research and making recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This literature review covers four key areas. It begins by attempting to define youth work practice as concerned with both the education and welfare of young people. Next, the roots of education and welfare are then traced to understand where youth work came from and why. The third area analyses state intervention into youth work and documents the journey of youth work from post-second world-war to present day. Then finally, there is a critical exploration of NEET young people, and in light of when, where and why youth work came into existence, and how it has changed over time, consideration is given to the relationship between NEET and youth work.

Defining Youth Work

Youth work is a practice and profession in dispute as briefly touched upon in the introduction of this thesis and so, this first part of the literature review seeks to define youth work. Despite there being no universally accepted definition of youth work, there is general agreement that it is concerned with welfare. For example, youth work practitioners, along with other welfare professionals, have a legal duty of care towards all young people, which includes safeguarding and ensuring that no harm comes to the young people they work with (NYA 2021, IYW, 2019). Youth work practice is, at least officially, informed by professional standards and ethical principles that practitioners should adhere to and let guide their practice, pertaining to the broader well-being of young people (NYA, 2021; IYW, 2019). The National Youth Agency outlines youth work principles as:

> *Ethical principles*
>
> Youth workers have a commitment to:
> 1. Treat young people with respect, valuing each individual and avoiding negative discrimination.

2. Respect and promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices, unless the welfare or legitimate interests of themselves or others are seriously threatened.
3. Promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people, while permitting them to learn through undertaking challenging educational activities.
4. Contribute towards the promotion of social justice for young people and in society generally, through encouraging respect for difference and diversity and challenging discrimination.

Professional principles

Youth workers have a commitment to:
5. Recognise the boundaries between personal and professional life and be aware of the need to balance a caring and supportive relationship with young people with appropriate professional distance.
6. Recognise the need to be accountable to young people, their parents or guardians, colleagues, funders, wider society and others with a relevant interest in the work, and that these accountabilities may be in conflict.
7. Develop and maintain the required skills and competence to do the job.
8. Work for conditions in employing agencies where these principles are discussed, evaluated and upheld. (NYA, 2021, p.6)

This code of ethics is, however, not legally enforced and is more of a framework of professional values (Jones, 2018), which implies that the personal values of the practitioner should reflect the professional values of youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Banks, 2010). The National Occupational Standards (NOS), which set the standards for youth work practitioners to become JNC-qualified professionals, say that:

> At the core of all youth work practice are the Values for Youth Work. The Values describe an approach to youth work and it is expected that all those

> working with young people will work within the values. (LSIS, 2012, p.2)

Both the NYA and NOS principles and values were developed in conjunction with academics in the field, such as Davies (2005; 2010) and Banks (2009; 2010). For example, Banks (2010) suggests that youth work has the following values:

- A voluntary relationship with young people, who are free to choose whether or not to be involved;
- An informal educational process that starts where young people are starting, and seeks to go beyond where young people start by encouraging them to be outward-looking, critical and creative in their responses to their experiences and the world around them;
- The value of association, which involves young people working together in groups, fostering supportive relationships and sharing a common life;
- The value of young people participating democratically and as fully as possible in making decisions about issues that affect them in youth work contexts and in life generally.

Many others agree with these values but often describe them as principles (see, for example, Smith, 2013). There is, either way, a correspondence between values and principles, but these are not necessarily the same thing, although they are often used interchangeably in youth work. Banks (2001; 2009) makes a useful distinction between them. Firstly, that values underpin the core aim of work, so this is the service ideal which, for example, may be an aim of social welfare, and the values supporting this are, for example, human flourishing, justice and equality. Secondly, principles then derive from applying values to practice describing the qualities and actions necessary to promote the underpinning values. Finally, standards emerge as a descriptor and measure to translate principles into practice – which implies 'good practice'. Using this analysis, Banks (2010) makes explicit that all elements of youth work practice, including

principles and standards, are encompassed by values which are, in turn, concerned with ethics/morality – for example, the service ideal (young people's well-being) and a principle-based framework to guide ethical practice.

Ord (2007), however, is a strong advocate for a shift away from thinking about values in youth work, primarily towards principles and practice. He argues that values are a tricky area as generally they are open for debate due to the pluralist nature of contemporary societies. Focusing on values alone to articulate youth work is, therefore, problematic (Ord, 2016). There has, nevertheless, in recent years, been a general shift in terminology and discussions in youth work from values to ethics, which is an attempt to give youth work more of a definitive grounding in relation to its purpose. Essentially, however, they describe the same practice (NYA, 2004; Banks, 2001; 2010; Sercombe, 2010). Either way, many informed commentators draw upon the principles of youth work and its ethical commitment to construct a description of a number of features which informs a particular approach to working with young people that distinguishes youth work from other welfare practices, such as social work (Bright and Pugh, 2019; Davies, 2015; Taylor et al., 2018). These include:

- A holistic educational focus – including personal, social and political development
- A focus on young people – starting where they are at, their needs, experiences, and perspectives
- Voluntary participation – it should always be young people's choice to participate in any youth work
- Fostering association – enabling young people to come together in groups and develop relationships with peers and youth workers that contribute to growth and human flourishing (Smith, 2013, p.7)

Davies (2015) unpacks the significance of principles in differentiating youth work from other welfare professions. For example, he discusses in some depth 'starting where

young people are' and 'working alongside them'. This describes an approach that seeks to neutralise power dynamics inherent between adults and young people and aims to tip the balance of power in favour of the young person. Youth work, according to Davies (2015) and others (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Batsleer, 2008; Sapin, 2013), intends to work in partnership with young people, so alongside them, rather than 'on' them, or 'for' them as is the remit of other welfare professions. This is influenced by Freirean (1970) ideas to education that seek to share power between student and teacher. The key defining principle or feature of youth work that distinguishes it from other welfare professions (such as social work or youth justice), is the principle of voluntary engagement. In other words, young people should have the right to choose whether they want to participate in any youth work activities, including engaging in conversation with the youth worker. In any context where this principle is removed, then it cannot be considered youth work (Davies, 2015; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Bright, 2015).

Examining the role of a youth worker today, however, distinctions between welfare professions are becoming increasingly blurred (Taylor et al., 2013; Davies, 2018). Traditionally, youth work has taken place within open-access, informal settings in young people's leisure time, but has, of late, become increasingly targeted driven with a more individualised 'impact' agenda against a backdrop of 'hard' outcomes for young people (Batsleer and Davies, 2010; St Croix, 2017; Bright et al., 2018). Nowadays, a youth worker is expected to operate within a wide range of contexts including in schools, the youth justice system, housing, and health care for example, and therefore, take on a variety of roles, making it difficult to distinguish and define what a 'youth worker' actually is (IDYW, 2009, 2013; Taylor et al., 2018). Defenders of youth work suggest that youth work is no one thing, but a combination of roles that cut across the ethos of other professions (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). This diversity could potentially be considered a strength, but the amorphous nature of youth work has been its biggest downfall. Due to the incorporation of youth workers in different contexts, its principles have been undermined, serving to further polarise it, so it is not considered a unique or specialised professional practice underpinned by a coherent body of knowledge in the same way as, say, teaching or social work (Ord, 2007; Bright et al., 2018; Taylor et al.,

2018). As we have seen in this discussion, however, academics and practitioners have, over the years, attempted to theorise youth work practice through its principles to fortify it as a unique profession. Youth work status is now more equivalent to that of a paraprofession, rather than being viewed as a distinct specialised practice.

Informal Education

Whilst there is no universal definition of youth work, other than a set of agreed-upon principles previously discussed outlining its aims, there is also a broad acceptance that youth work is essentially an educational endeavour (Bright and Pugh, 2019). The educational focus of youth work, according to the NYA (2021) and IYW (2019), revolves around facilitating the personal and social development of young people and enabling them to develop their voice, influence, and a place within their community and wider society. There have been various attempts to theorise the primary educational base of youth work in an effort to create a professional body of knowledge and professionalise it, and thus, defend it as a distinct practice. This has, however, led to widespread debate about the educational approach underpinning youth work and this still remains contested terrain (Banks, 2010; Taylor et al., 2018). Youth work incorporates many different strands of educational thought and philosophy, including social education, informal education, outdoor education, creative education, semi-formal (such as project work), or even formal education (courses related to accreditation), and more recently, as youth work expands to lower age groups to attract funding, some aspects of play therapy (Sapin, 2013; Jeffs et al., 2019). Social education and informal education have been most dominant and at the centre of such discussions, both making claim to provide the theoretical base of youth work (Davies and Gibson, 1967; Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Batsleer, 2008).

Informal education was first associated with youth work by Brew's (1946) *Informal Education, Adventures and Reflections.* She advocated for education to be taken 'to the places where people already congregate, to the public house, the licensed club, the dance hall, the library, the places where people feel at home' (Brew, 1946, p.22). Brew

believed it was possible to learn through the social environment if attention is paid to experiences, events and settings of everyday life as every human activity, she suggests, has some educational value (Brew, 1946, p.28). In her approach to informal education, Brew outlines five key elements:

- Concern should be with the cultivation of the 'educated man' – by educated man, she means that 'he is capable of entertaining himself, capable of entertaining a stranger, and capable of entertaining a new idea'
- Educational value can be found in every human activity – so start where young people are at, and pay attention to experiences, events and the environment
- Work with people's interests and enthusiasms – by this she meant work with what is in young people's hearts, attend to their feelings and emotions, and disregard notions of curriculum, programmes or courses
- Use the power of association – make it engaging by linking informal education with peoples interests and associations
- The informal educator needs to have a wide cultural background and be educated themselves – by this she means they have to be able to connect to the diverse cultures of people, as well as be able to engage with intellectual ideas to foster environments for learning (p.28)

Although some of these ideas are still relevant, Smith (2001) suggests that Brew's informal education does not draw upon an explicit theoretical framework and is more the insertion of teaching into social situations, rather than a process of stimulating reflection and participation. Following the state inspired Albemarle Report (1960) nevertheless, informal education became conflated with 'social education' as the central organising principle of youth work practice:

> [The youth service] provides for the continued social and informal education of young people in terms most likely to bring them to maturity, those of responsible personal choice (HMSO, 1960, p.103)

Social education, thereafter, became the defining feature of youth work throughout most of the 60s and 70s; and in the process, diluted and displaced the concept of informal education. Social education is not a unified concept either and has been in circulation since at least the late-nineteenth Century in Britain and North America, concerned with citizenship, a moral education, respect, and manners (Scott, 1908; Baker 1919). Social education within youth work was to become defined around maturity, and its primary concern, according to Davies and Gibson (1967), can be understood as:

> Any young person's meetings with others, with his capacity in these meetings to accept others and be accepted by them, and (with) the common interests around which these meetings may revolve. Social education is thus concerned with the ideas, thoughts and opinions, the motives and the emotions inherent in such meetings and interests. It is about the interaction of human beings, about their friendships and enmities, about the way these are deepened and extended, and about their consequences. Its product is any individual's increased consciousness of himself — of his values, aptitudes and untapped resources and of the relevance of these to others. It enhances the individual's understanding of how to form mutually satisfying relationships, and so involves a search for the adult for ways of helping a young person to discover how to contribute to as well as take from his associations with others. (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p.12)

Social education in this understanding is defined as the social development of adolescents. Learning then can be interpreted as 'an internal change in consciousness or as the process of acquiring knowledge, feelings and skills that help young people achieve maturity (Smith, 1988, p.91). Maturity is a slippery term though, especially in contemporary society as youth transitions become increasingly protracted (Ainley, 2016). This conception of social education did manage to put the focus onto the relationship between youth worker and young person, but Smith (1988) is critical of social education on a number of grounds. Firstly, he suggests that there is not enough educational theory supporting it as a justifiable purpose or method for youth work practice. Secondly, social education encourages paternalism by problematising 'youth', positioning it as a life stage to be traversed, for example, from adolescence to adulthood. Finally, the focus on the person-centred approach to help young people 'grow up',

despite not primarily being concerned with personal adjustment, is still rooted in individualism, largely disregarding broader structural forces that shape and structure young people's life chances, experiences, and opportunities (Smith, 1988). Social education could be conceived as largely concerned with the social control of young people by subsuming them into the existing social order and its dominant ideologies.

Smith concluded that social education does not provide a unique educational practice for youth workers to draw upon as its rationale is unjustified, its methods lacking, and so, should 'be abandoned as a way of conceptualising the aims and methods of youth work (Smith, 1988, p.xii). Instead, Smith (1988) argued for a unique approach distinct to youth work practice, which would enable young people to pursue their own well-being autonomously whilst also being concerned with the development of communities and wider society, thus reconciling 'person-centredness with broader political and moral aims' (1988, p.115). Smith subsequently argues for the need to 'rehabilitate the notion of informal education' to help youth workers think about the method and purpose of their work (p.124). Smith argues for a focus on the process of learning specifically through dialogue and placing the aim of human flourishing at the heart of such processes, underpinned by Aristotle's ideas of eudaimonia and phronesis (Smith, 1988). These ideas were later built upon in conjunction with Tony Jeffs, and in turn, displaced social education as the dominant rationale for youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 1990, 1994, 1997, 2005, 2010). Jeffs and Smith (1990) drew up a model of informal education in practice:

Informal educators enter …

- Particular social and cultural situations

With …

- Personal but shared ideas of the good
- An ability to think critically and reflect-in-action
- A disposition to choose the 'good' rather than the 'correct'
- A repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions and

- An understanding of their identity and role.

They encourage …

- Dialogue between, and with, people in the situation …

  Out of which may come …

- Thinking and action.

  This affects …

- Those situations
- The individuals concerned
- Significant others
- The educators themselves. (p.19)

Jeffs and Smith claim that informal education is a purposeful, but spontaneous process of helping people to learn. They later define informal education as:

> A process – a way of helping people to learn. For us, informal education works through, and is driven by, conversation; involves exploring and enlarging experience; and can take place in any setting. (Jeffs & Smith, 2010, p.xii-xiii)

Although there were some shifts in terminology over the years, such as from dialogue to conversation, the basic idea is that informal educators can help people explore themselves by reflecting on their experiences and situations, and gain new perspectives and understanding which will lead to learning and action. The primary purpose is to cultivate associations, relationships, and communities for human flourishing, based on Aristotle's idea of 'the good life'. According to Jeffs and Smith (2005), firstly, informal education involves intention to foster learning, so it is purposeful. Secondly, it is negotiated with young people, rather than there being a predetermined curriculum, meaning it can be flexible and spontaneous. Thirdly, conversation is central to negotiating and fostering learning underpinned by the idea of process.

Dewey's (1916, 1938, 1986) ideas have been influential in numerous ways. His belief that education must engage with and enlarge experience has been significant in shaping Jeffs and Smith's (2005) model of informal education, which also claims that informal education involves enlarging people's experiences – the assumption being, that young people hold tacit knowledge, and the role of the informal educator is to make this explicit. Dewey (1986) argues that the only true education comes through the social situations people find themselves in. Therefore, the root of learning is located in everyday life experiences and situations, and it is created by interaction with other people and in their interaction with the world. For Dewey, this is where 'subject matter' and 'learning situations' emerge.

Related to this, are Dewey's thoughts around thinking and reflection. A generally accepted axiom of informal education is that we are constantly learning as we are thinking all the time, although mostly we are not consciously aware of our thoughts. We only become conscious of them when something seems unusual or problematic, a dilemma that offers alternatives or challenges the already accepted in our minds. Dewey (1986) suggests that:

> Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a 'forked road' situation, a situation that is ambiguous, that presents a dilemma that proposes alternatives… The origin of thinking is some perplexity confusion or doubt' (1986, pp.122-123)

Jeffs and Smith (2005) argue that an informal educator seeks to facilitate learning through encouraging people to explore what is going on in their minds and the world around them, by reflecting on dilemmas or a lack of understanding that brings confusion and doubt. In thinking about experiential learning and reflection, Jeffs and Smith draw on Kolb (1984), who was also influenced by Dewey (1986). Reflecting involves returning to experiences, detailing exact events, connecting with helpful feelings and removing negative ones, which then enables one to re-examine the situation and can lead to new meaning emerging (Schon, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988). Therefore,

learners deconstruct and reconstruct their experiences and attach their own meanings to them. By encouraging reflection and offering new perspectives, the informal educator can help young people enlarge experience, learn, and find new understanding.

These ideas around thinking and reflection are largely uncontested in the youth work literature, although Ord (2007) challenges 'subject matter', as he is critical of no curriculum in informal education. Jeffs and Smith (2005) believe there is a distinction between informal education and conversation, and formal education and curriculum. They argue that whilst formal education focusses on product through knowledge transmission, informal education is concerned with processes and leans more towards knowledge generation; therefore, if predefined outcomes are set, this not only limits the conversation's potential, but undermines the entire process as young people have not been included in shaping the subject matter (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Either way, Jeffs and Smith (2005, p.81) argue that 'it is the very absence of curriculum that is a key defining feature' of informal education - conversation is process orientated, and during the process of exchange, new knowledge and understanding can be found. Ord (2007, 2008), however, argues that informal education is inconsistent and contradictory, based upon its position in advocating for no curriculum at all, but yet lays claims to being educational:

> The arguments offered by informal educators against a curriculum for youth work are untenable. Informal education is only incompatible with certain "types" of curricula and not with curricula per se. Indeed, to oppose curricula completely is tantamount to saying that, as an educator, one has no agenda and takes no responsibility for the facilitation of the young people's learning (Ord, 2008, p.51)

Ord instead advocates for a curriculum, although he agrees that this needs to be process-led, rather than outcome-based. Due to the imposition of targets on youth work, Ord is fearful that managerialist agendas are putting pressure on youth work for outcomes which then raises the problem of curriculum. Whilst statutory services incorporated a curriculum into their practice, informal educators continued to deny there is any such

thing and refused to do this. This leaves Ord (2007, p.xii) to suggest there is an 'ever widening gap between youth work theory and youth work practice', and for this reason, it is, he suggests, failing to unify and defend itself, both internally and externally. Therefore, informal education is problematic because it is not incompatible with all curriculum, just a content and product-based curriculum.

Ord (2007) argues that Jeffs and Smith (2005) have misrepresented Dewey (1939), who was both critical of state school curriculum, but also any laissez-faire approach to planning - not taking accountability for any input into the learning environment. Ord himself, then draws on Dewey's (1939) ideas of 'learning situations' and 'subject matter', as well as Stenhouse's (1975) 'principles of procedure' to advocate for a loose curriculum based on broad aims, rather than objectives or outcomes – in which there are outcomes, but not prespecified outcomes; these aren't known until they are achieved, nor should they be predicted; they are emergent in the process (Ord, 2007). These aims under a process-led curriculum, would not only guide the educator but also give purpose and justification to youth work practice in which its educational aims can be explicitly articulated, legitimated and protected as a unique educational approach. Ord (2007, 2008) suggests that despite informal educators' claims to the contrary, they are not escaping the gaze of the state: they are indirectly supporting it as many youth workers are pressured into a product and content-related curriculum, without an adequate defence to their practice. Ord's main concern is one of protecting youth work as a distinct profession, but informal education, he suggests, by denying and refusing to accept a curriculum, is not helping to make a case for it.

Ord's (2007) concerns are justified when considering that Jeffs and Smith (1994) attempted to push informal education beyond the realms of youth work. Drawing on Dewey (1986) who argues that interaction within different environments plays a key role in shaping learning, Jeffs and Smith (2005) claim that free-flowing conversation is central to the learning process, which means that the setting can have either a direct or indirect positive or negative influence on the conversation's potential. For example,

there may be other people present who have their own agenda and wish to steer the conversation in a certain direction, or somehow constrain the learner's participation. Drawing on accounts from varied practitioners, including social workers, teachers, and probation officers, Jeffs and Smith conclude that, where conversation can flow freely without any external influence or constraints, then the practice of informal education is viable (1994). In other words, Jeffs and Smith (1990, 1994) argue that informal education transcends the boundaries of youth work and could potentially be used in various other contexts and with any age group. Informal education, therefore, is about the relationship between the educator and learner rather than bound up in external constraints such as a particular profession or institution.

Attempting to push informal education beyond the realms of youth work has weakened youth work's claim to be a unique educational practice and distinct profession. In other words, Jeffs and Smith, whilst starting out trying to theorise an educational base particular to youth work (1990), then attempt to bypass it to further strengthen their theory (1994). If one thinks about formal education for example, it would usually entail a school, teachers, classrooms, lessons, uniforms, exams, tests and qualifications. There is a set curriculum and teachers have set goals and aims, lesson plans, particular methods and schemes of work, reporting systems, and so on. Typically, the teacher has control over the environment (physically and socially) and attendance is compulsory, contrary to many youth work principles, especially the principle of voluntary participation. Suggesting that informal education can actually prosper in formal contexts so long as there are no constraints to free-flowing conversation is, therefore, unhelpful to youth work's struggle for professional recognition. Jeffs and Smith (2005; 2010) do, however, seem to later recognise these tensions and claim that informal and formal education are actually on a continuum – sometimes the informal educator will draw on more formal modes, and vice versa. Belton (2009) shares Ord's (2007) concerns as he is particularly critical of informal education, arguing that it cannot be considered an equivalent or replacement for youth work as it is not a profession in its own right, rather a set of notional approaches and techniques. For Belton (2009, p.3), 'a professional informal educator means very little outside the academy walls', so should

be abdicated in all forms as a way of conceptualising youth work as transitory titles such as 'informal educator' do not provide any clarity over the youth work role, rather they make it vaguer.

Attempting to bring informal education back towards youth work, Jeffs and Smith (2005; 2010) draw on Dewey's (1916) argument for democracy through education, which they suggest, provides a strong rationale for informal education and the settings in which informal educators mostly operate. Ideally, this would be social settings and everyday places where young people choose to be, meaning that informal educators have limited control over the environment physically or socially, which Jeffs and Smiths (2005) argue, reduces power relations and promotes democracy. There will, however, always be an imbalance of power between young people and the adults working with them (Belton, 2009), but Jeffs and Smith (2005, p16) argue that informal education should offer 'choice not compulsion; freedom not order; empowerment not indoctrination' underpinned by values of democracy and equality. Ord (2007) though, as mentioned earlier, advocates for a focus on the principles of practice. He takes aim at the values Jeffs and Smith (2005) espouse as fundamental to informal educators:

- Respect for persons
- The promotion of well-being
- Truth
- Democracy
- Fairness and equality (Jeffs and Smith, 2005, p.95)

Ord (2007) claims these are too broad and ambiguous since they could apply to many other welfare/education professions and therefore further undermine youth work as a distinct practice. For Ord, these values are, at present, embodied amongst most people within liberal democratic societies. He also suggests these are equally open for debate and scrutiny, as much as anything else:

> We live in a pluralist society, disagreement exists in relation to values. As a consequence, youth work values need to be made more specific and articulated through a curriculum, otherwise youth work is beholden to the mere whim of the individual practitioner. (p.51)

This is a particularly slippery slope according to Ord (2007): practitioners using informal education are making personal value-based judgements about the 'direction' of work reflected by the content and responses in conversation. Practitioners inevitably bring their own personal agendas to their practice, such as their prejudices, assumptions, beliefs, passions, and motivations (Batsleer, 2008; Sapin, 2013). One way around this is through reflection, as Jeffs and Smith (2005) argue that informal educators need to recognise their own values and the impact this may have on their actions and intentions. However, if the aim of informal education is broadly 'the good life' or 'well-being' and giving young people the skills and practical wisdom to pursue this, their idea of the good life might not be the same as the young persons. What if young people don't want their idea of a 'good life'; what if they want to be involved in gangs, violence or crime? It's not uncommon for young people, particularly those from dispossessed sections of the working class, to invert 'mainstream values' and celebrate forms of deviancy and defiance which, subjectively at least, enhances their well-being and status in certain contexts (Simmons et al., 2020). The point being that informal educators are coming from subjective perceptions in which judgements about young people are being made and, even though they may believe it is in the young person's best interests, this can result in a degree of paternalism. For example, if informal educators direct the conversation based on a perception of young people's preconceived needs, this can be seen as oppressive, treating young people as objects (Freire, 1970). An example of such may be seen in the work of Young (2006) who, drawing on informal education in *The Art of Conversation*, describes it as a process of 'moral philosophising'...

> …insofar as it enables and supports young people to examine what they consider to be 'good or bad', 'right or wrong', 'desirable or undesirable' in relation to self and others (Young, 2006, p.3)

Young (2006) suggests this is to help young people come to and form their own ideas and opinions, but the belief that they need 'moral philosophising' in the beginning may be seen as prescriptive and oppressive. This means informal education with no curriculum, just as a value-based practice, could be viewed, or at least utilised as a form of social control concerned with incorporating young people into the existing social order; seen in earlier forms of social education tasked with moralising and civilising young people through citizenship and maturity training (Davies and Gibson, 1967; Smith, 1988). More generally, Belton (2009; 2010) finds associating the concept of 'education' within youth work problematic arguing that it makes youth workers complicit in oppressing and subordinating young people; firstly, connecting education with state agendas in the form of instruction and schooling which has historically principally been concerned with control, discipline and surveillance. Secondly, in attempting to educate young people who have not asked to be educated, he argues that informal education is both prescriptive and oppressive underpinned by paternalism, automatically positioning young people as dependent and deficit (Belton, 2009). For Belton (2010), youth workers should…

> …Abandon the badge of the informal educator and take up the torch of socialising knowledge and supporting the genuine politicisation of those who you work with'…'education, as Malcolm X might have it, 'by any means necessary' (p.9)

The argument that informal education is complicit with social control may be strengthened when considering that Jeffs and Smith initially were influenced by Freire (1970) and concerned with trying to incorporate critical pedagogy into their model of informal education. From Smith's (1988) original ideas, there were some tweaks in the following years, such as a shift in aims and terminology of informal education. Smith (1988) initially argued that informal education should be based on 'critical dialogue' underpinned by the ideas of Freire (1970), but this was later replaced with just 'dialogue' (Jeffs and Smith, 1990), and then, 'conversation' (Jeffs and Smith, 1994;

2005). This was, Jeffs and Smith (1990, 1994) claim, due to research with practitioners and their accounts of practice; who they claimed they wanted to give a voice to in the development of their theory. This dilution of the initial radical focus in favour of more liberal aims, was also part of the attempt to progress informal education beyond the confines of youth work into other professions.

Although Dewey (1986) provided the foundations of educational philosophy for Jeffs and Smith (2005) around subject matter, experience, thinking and reflection, initially, so did Freire, particularly his critique of more formal modes of education. Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is primarily concerned with liberatory education. Freire argues that the oppressed and the oppressors exist in a dialectical relationship - the oppressor the thesis, the oppressed the antithesis, and the only synthesis is reconciliation, which is liberation. Achieving this, however, is not so simple according to Freire. Due to the oppressed being submersed in the reality of oppression, the oppressed become dual beings in contradiction with themselves. In other words, they perceive themselves as opposites to the oppressor, but rather than aspire to liberation to overcome their oppression, they identify with the oppressor thus adopting and internalising the oppressors' model of humanity. This is an individualistic view, argues Freire, because the oppressed have no consciousness of themselves as a member of an oppressed class - their behaviour is a prescription by the oppressors, to transform the consciousness of the oppressed into one that conforms with theirs. Put more simply, Freire argues that to uncritically adapt to the world is to be oppressed, it makes one an object, as opposed to a subject, which is one's natural ontological vocation. He insists the oppressed have to liberate themselves without taking on the model of the oppressors, because the oppressors themselves are dehumanised in the process of oppressing the oppressed, so they must not become oppressors of the oppressors, rather the restorers of humanity of both (Freire, 1970). Liberatory education therefore encourages learners to challenge and change the world, not to merely uncritically adapt to it. To do this, they have to 'name the world':

> To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming.… Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. (Freire, 1970, p.61)

Freire (1970) insists that no education is neutral: it either functions as an instrument of oppression or becomes the practice of freedom by which people deal critically and creatively with reality to discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. Freire is highly critical of formal education referring to it as essentially 'a banking system' which is knowledge transfer from one person to another, whereby educators deposit approved knowledge into learners' minds rather like an empty vault. He argues this is indoctrinating, advocating instead for a dialogical critical pedagogy as didactic teaching encourages monological thinking with no room for dialogue or dialectical thinking, and therefore, turns students into objects, which serves the interests of the oppressors who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed (Freire, 1970).

Liberatory education provides a working model because it links individual problems with broader social issues, and its hope and promise lie in social action and change as an intended consequence of a newly found critical consciousness. An informal educator could assist in building a critical consciousness but, for Jeffs and Smith (1994; 2005), this got diluted somewhere along the line in favour of a more holistic view of 'well-being' and democracy. For Freire, 'critical dialogue' was to be used to challenge oppression and inequality, but for Jeffs and Smith, informal education doesn't explicitly focus on such matters; ironically, something which Smith (1988) critiqued Davies and Gibson's (1967) model of social education for. Batsleer (2008), on the other hand, embraces the concept of informal education in youth work, but argues for the need to engage with the dynamics of power and oppression. She argues this is essential, and therefore, informal education must contain some aspects of critical theory explicitly focused on inequality and injustice with emancipatory intentions. Batsleer (2008) critiques Jeffs and Smith (2005) for:

> Distancing themselves from the engagement with questions of power and oppression which characterised the understanding of informal education as it developed from the work of Paolo Freire (2008, p.9)

Batsleer argues that empowerment informed by a critical and emancipatory pedagogy, should be the basis for informal education. In practice this would mean replacing Jeffs and Smith's (2005) more liberal aims with social justice and equality within critical dialogue. A potential area of weakness in Batsleer's (2008) suggestions to challenge power and oppression through consciousness raising - to rename their reality, rather than adapt to the one that has been named for them - is the primary focus on working with individual identities that are experiencing oppression, discrimination and prejudice, underpinned by forms of identity politics. Batsleer amalgamates critical race, feminism and queer theory with Freirean ideas, but is explicitly focused on oppression of individual identities, and therefore concerned with individual transformation and empowerment, which undermines a more collective focus. As social class mediates the largest social and economic inequalities within British society (Savage, 2015), neglecting any class-based analysis therefore diminishes any broader systemic challenge or change. A much more thorough intersectional analysis of social inequality amongst young people would see inherent conflict within the social and economic system, and alleviate some of these tensions and areas of weakness.

Generally, there has been a mixed response within youth work to Jeffs and Smith's (2005) conception of informal education. Many (for example, Young, 2006, Richardson et al., 2007; Mills and Kraft, 2014) embrace informal education and believe that through general forms of conversation, people can explore different ideas and concepts, learn about each other, communities, and wider society, which make for well-being and human flourishing. This is largely uncontested, as there is agreement that conversation is a youth work activity in its own right, and has been at the heart of supporting young people more generally over the years. Others, however, have argued for more radical forms of informal education due to concerns about power, oppression, and social control

(Batsleer, 2008; Taylor, 2013; Cooper et al., 2015); whilst some have, of course, critiqued informal education processes as detrimental to youth work as a distinct profession (Ord, 2007; Belton, 2008; Forrest, 2010). Therefore, not everyone has openly accepted the notion of informal education based upon conversation and dialogue as the key defining feature of youth work; some (Ord, 2007; Davies, 2015) see it as just one mode of educational activity within a broader youth work practice, which may draw upon informal, semi-formal, non-formal, or formal activities. Either way, informal education has never been officially accepted by any voluntary or statutory bodies as the principle purpose of youth work.

This role of youth work is not clearly defined and youth work as a practice and discipline is, and has always been, internally inconsistent in regard to purpose, methods, and theory. Youth work is nevertheless concerned with some form of social pedagogy. As discussed above, some see it as more routine, to support young people into the existing social formation potentially making youth work complicit with social control, whilst others think it should challenge existing ideologies, systems and structures. This discussion echoes some of the foundational contradictions that youth work has been built upon. The next section delves deeper into how and where these historic tensions arose by tracing the history of education and welfare.

Education and Welfare

This part of the literature review follows the two themes of education and welfare, tracing the history of these to pinpoint the development of youth work, which helps understand why it came into existence. Tracing history, however, can be problematic. For example, there are two dominant but competing accounts of the roots of youth work in the literature, centred around discourses of care and control. Historical accounts - both primary and secondary sources - are always subject to some controversy and open to disagreement as they are for the most part based on subjective interpretation. Bright (2019), for example, argues that the inception of youth work was initiated by the

Victorian upper and middle classes because they were moved by the plight of the poor; in contrast, Davies (2009) argues that the roots of youth work emerged from working-class self-organised social and political movements to challenge class oppression and social control. Now, although both of these may be true, at least to some degree, writers have their own perspective which emphasises more on one side while neglecting the others. This can generally lead to an unbalanced version of historical events. For these reasons, both education and welfare will be isolated as it is hoped that, by critically analysing both separately, competing arguments can be interrogated and reveal a more balanced picture in attempt to understand and locate the roots of youth work.

Welfare of The Working Class: A Discourse of Care

Youth work is concerned with a moral ideal. It embodies certain principles and an underlying ethical framework focused on the welfare and well-being of youth people, as well as social justice and equality more broadly (Smith, 2013). This means that youth work doesn't have ethics, it is an ethic (Banks, 2010); or in other words, it is a moral activity working towards a moral ideal – it is moral work (Bessent, 2009; Sercombe, 2010). Youth work's ethical commitment nevertheless reflects its historic base which can be traced back to the early-19th Century – a responsive humanitarian discourse to the social and economic disruption deriving from industrialisation and urbanisation (Smith, 2013; Bright et al., 2018). This discourse was predominantly about showing care and compassion to the poor as there was, at least in some circles, growing concern about the moral and physical 'condition' of the working classes, especially those living in the new industrial cities across the country (Briggs, 1990; 2000; Thompson, 1963).

This period, sometimes referred to as 'The Great Transformation' (Polanyi, 1944), characterised by unprecedented social, economic, and political change, brought about by technological and intellectual advancement (Giddens, 1984) gave birth to modern society. The onset of the industrial revolution which began around mid-18th Century and is generally associated with the rapid process of industrialisation through innovation based on new machinery is understood to have played a pivotal role in

modernisation (Bilton et al., 1996). Industrialisation significantly reorganised people's lives, marking a distinct break from traditional ways of living, destabilising established roles, rituals and relations. For example, urbanisation accompanied industrialisation, in which great numbers of people from all over the country flocked to the new industrial locales to seek employment opportunity. In 1750, approximately 15 per cent of the population lived in towns; by 1850 it was around 50 per cent, and by 1880, roughly 80 per cent (Evans, 1993). It would, however, be inaccurate to say that it was industrialisation singlehandedly pulling people to the new centres of manufacturing, as there were both push and pull factors at work. Between the mid-17th Century and late-19th Century, an agricultural revolution was taking place due to new patterns of crop rotation and livestock utilisation (Thompson, 1963). This led to increased productivity and efficiency which enabled an increase in health and significant population growth. This brought about the enclosure movement, which ended the open-field system of cultivation and allowed wealthy Lords to purchase public fields and push out small-scale farmers. The Enclosure Acts reduced the need for farm labourers and released the surplus for industrial production (Thompson, 1963). Nevertheless, there was a large shift from agriculture to industry as the main source of employment. In 1801, two-fifths of the population were employed in manufacturing, but by 1871, it was nearly two-thirds of the population (Evans, 1993).

Urbanisation led to many social problems, such as appalling home-life conditions for large quantities of people moving to the new industrial centres as they had little choice but to live in slums (Briggs, 1990). Streets were filthy, while skies were dark and cloudy with fumes and smoke from factories (Engels, 1845). Nor was there any adequate sanitary system. Epidemic breakouts were common, while crime, alcohol, violence, and exploitation were prominent features of urban life. Engels (1845) described Manchester, the first industrial city, as 'hell upon earth' (p.53). Such harsh social conditions, poverty and fears about spiritual decay emanating from industrialisation and urbanisation gave rise to significant growth in charitable work by both philanthropists and faith groups in the late-18th and 19th centuries (Prochaska and Prochaska, 1980).

For many (Smith, 2013; Jeffs, 2018; Bright et al., 2018), the groups, organisations and facilities that catered for the social, educational, welfare and spiritual needs of the working class, underpinned by a discourse of care, form the roots of youth work. Smith (2013) points to the development of Sunday schools associated with evangelical Christians in the early-19th Century as laying some foundations for youth work. Although 'school' is often associated with formal learning, Sunday schools, despite primarily being concerned with religious instruction, generally used informal ways of working and included recreational activities, day trips and sports-based work (Smith, 2013). By 1851, 'over two million children were enrolled in such institutions' (around three-quarters of working-class children aged between 5-15) (Laquer, 1976, p.44; cited in Smith, 2013).

Similarly, ragged schools, in some ways, can be seen as precursors of youth work (Jeffs, 2018). Ragged schools also emerged during the first half of the nineteenth Century and catered to the most disadvantaged young people within the poorest inner-city areas, who were neglected by Sunday schools and other forms of charity – famously developing their name from the 'ragged clothed' children that attended them (Smith, 2013). There would be an emphasis on the 'three R's', as well as bible study, which also later grew into commercial and industrial subjects and included sports and outdoor recreation. Until the 1840s, there were around 20 ragged schools in existence, usually run by volunteers, using stables, archways, or rooms in pubs as classrooms. After the development of the Ragged School Union in 1844, there was substantial growth and it is estimated that at least 300,000 children went through the London ragged schools alone (Smith, 2001). The establishment of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in 1844 was also a landmark in the emergence of youth work as it was Britain's first dedicated youth organisation. Their aims predominantly stem from a Christian ethos: to create a healthy mind, body and spirit in young men (Binfield, 1973). The common denominator between these so-called early youth work initiatives then, is that they arose from a faith framework as the pioneers are all associated with

evangelical Christianity and the notion of the church being responsive to the poverty and deprivation associated with early industrial capitalism, underpinned by a humanitarian concern for welfare more broadly.

On a side note, according to Jeffs (2018), it is important to recognise that there was a broader ongoing moral and political struggle taking place between the state and Church. Ethics have long been a key part of human history with the earliest distinct metaethics, and normative ethical framework located in the Old Testament of Christianity and the ten commandments. Significant ethical development is also rooted in Ancient Greece and associated largely with Plato and Aristotle, who sought the good life (or a life of moral character) and encouraged adoption of a set of virtues in achieving this (Bessent, 2009; Smith, 2014). The New Testament re-established Christian ethics which, as well as establishing principles as the will of God, also promoted the embodiment of virtues to become more like Jesus, such as humility and showing compassion to the poor (Smith, 2014). Into the Middle Ages, Christian ethics and the Church continued to dominate large parts of European thinking, although the state and other officials persistently dealt with the poor rather harshly.

The 17th and 18th centuries brought about substantial change to thinking about morality in line with the Enlightenment whereby philosophers and scholars constructed new understandings of reason, freedom and individualism in human affairs (Jeffs, 2018). This era could be conceived as a struggle between personal freedom and government control and religious doctrine – it was the start of a new age, a western paradigm shift that superseded the darkness of the Middle Ages, characterised by feudalism's authoritarianism, and general superstition, mysticism and irrationality, due to a lack of knowledge and culture, hence the 'darkness' (Ferrone and Tarantino, 2015).

The Enlightenment, nevertheless, changed ideas about natural laws and natural rights as the capacity for reason became the cornerstone of many philosophies aimed at discovering truth and answers to humanity's greatest questions. Some of the greatest

thinkers to emerge from the Enlightenment viewed history as a progressive struggle to develop a rational society and culture (Ferrone and Tarantino, 2015). What evolved was the concept of governance founded on principles of individual rights, systems of justice, and democracy based on the doctrines that reason is one's main capacity to enable correct thinking and action; one is inherently good and rational by nature; and that one has the capacity to evolve to a more perfect state of existence (Ryan, 2012). According to Kant (1984), people can enlighten themselves if given the freedom to do so through intellectual inquiry. Freedom, therefore, is the freedom to use one's reasoning ability. Prior to this, individuals were bound to the traditional authority of absolutist monarchy and moral authoritarianism backed by the religious monopoly of Catholicism and Protestantism (Smith, 2014). The intellectual inheritance in the form of reformation and the renaissance paved the way for this paradigm shift and gave birth to liberal, secular and democratic societies (Ryan, 2012).

In some ways, the Victorian era was a step forward compared to previous approaches to welfare with some limited relief for the 'deserving poor', although the state engulfed in classical liberalism, laissez-faire economics, commitment to a small state and maintenance of the rule of law, refused to intervene in industrial relations. This generally meant individual responsibility for your own welfare – if you were poor, it was your own problem. For example, a welfare state, or any kind of sustenance was unwelcomed, not only because liberalism is not concerned with social justice, but because it would require a large state, which it is argued, reduces the autonomy and responsibility of individuals by encouraging dependency. On the other hand, however, a minimal state means minimal moral responsibility (Ryan, 2012). So, despite a shift away from religious doctrine, the state refused to take responsibility for the poor.

Within Victorian morality charity was popular due to changing social attitudes and many began to show compassion towards the poor alongside the missionaries, such as philanthropic individuals from more secular backgrounds (Jeffs, 2018). Primarily, however, concerns for the poor were still located amongst the 'child savers' from faith

backgrounds, whose mission it was to save the souls of working-class youth. Then again, there was also conflict between Conservative Christians who wanted to maintain the status quo and Socialist Christians and philanthropists who sought social change, many of whom are commonly referred to as the 'Victorian reformers'. It is fair to conceptualise Victorian Britain as part of a broader moral and political struggle for progress, epitomised by the 'Age of Reform', which was, at least in theory, a bid to show compassion and care for the working class. For example, industrialisation led to extremely harsh working environments – factories, mines, mills and workshops were often unpleasant and dangerous places. Although it's worth noting, even after industrialisation, large amounts of manufacture still took place outside factories via the 'putting out' system of production which meant lots of work still took place in small-scale workshops (Thompson, 1963). Manufacturing industry had little health and safety regulations, and many people died, or were seriously injured whilst working in factories. The conditions in the worst mills of Bradford for example, were compared with those in 'hellish' colonial plantations (Briggs, 1990). Pressure from Reformers, however, led to the first employment safety legislation - the Factory Act in 1833 - to help protect factory workers, and in 1847 the Ten Hours' Act was passed limiting the working hours of women and children; the first Public Health Act was passed in 1848.

The Age of Reform then, was not only based on Christianity, but also newly-found social attitudes and values emanating from the Enlightenment period's dominance over Europe, associated particularly with Kant's approach to moral philosophy (Burke, 2000; Briggs 1990). A principle-based approach to ethics has therefore been most dominant across Europe, particularly influential and reflected in the youth work NYA, IYW and NOS documents outlining youth work's principles aimed to help youth workers in understanding their role, the goals of youth work, and guide their ethical decision making (Sercombe, 2010). These documents draw on both Kant's categorical imperative and the principles of utility concerned with social justice and equality more broadly (Banks, 2010), whilst also encouraging adoption of a set of virtues (Bessent, 2009). The moral ideal of youth work is part of broader moral advancements underpinned by a metaethics of reason, particularly in relation to showing compassion

to the poor, and the underlying ethical frameworks continue to influence and guide this as moral activity – or at least where these are applied. This means that the care discourse underpinning youth work's development, whilst responsive to industrialisation and urbanisation, is also affiliated with, at least in part, broader moral advancements (Jeffs, 2018).

When examining this care discourse later in the findings chapter, this thesis will draw on the Ethic of Care in attempt to understand the practitioners' perspectives. The ethic of care (EoC) is part of the cluster of normative ethical theory, but compared to the more traditional moral theory, EoC is relatively new, developed by feminist thinkers in the late twentieth Century. Whilst deontological and consequentialist theories focus on principles, rules and duties concerned with justice and fairness, the ethic of care centres on moral action through interpersonal relationships in responding to individuals (Noddings, 1984). More generally, care theorists are concerned with feminist perspectives considering how caring has traditionally been assigned to women and devalued, whilst arguing that ethical caring is a more concrete model of evaluation of morality than the male-orientated ethic of justice and fairness, and should also be the social responsibility of both men and women (Reid, 2018).

The genealogy of the EoC is associated with Gilligan (1982), who was concerned with a gendered approach to moral development. Gilligan argued for an EoC based upon a cognitive model of moral development, but in a feminine 'voice', as an antidote to her mentor's theory – Kohlberg's (1973) stages of moral development. Gilligan believed that Kohlberg's model, whilst purporting to be gender neutral, was a masculine perspective of morality, founded on justice and abstract duties, in which males were often found to be more morally mature than females because they were excluded from reaching the higher stages on the model (Owens and Ennis, 2005). Challenging this gender bias, Gilligan (1982) posited a theory of relational 'voices' or a 'voice of care', in considering how both men and women view and develop their moral positions. Voice is the sense of self and how one makes meaning of the world, thus, how they make

moral decisions. Generally, Gilligan argued that whilst men's moral reasoning may be concerned with notions of duty and consequence in line with the justice approach, women place more emphasis on relationships and responsibilities, meaning that women needed a moral theory in their own terms (Reid, 2018). Gilligan's model resembles Kohlberg's stage model inasmuch as the metaethic is embedded in developmental psychology's longstanding concern with understanding the lifespan and cognitive reasoning, although as it emphasises virtues over rules, it differs normatively (Reid, 2018).

Whilst Gilligan's model made substantial progress in establishing an ethical theory based upon women's experiences, numerous critiques have followed, suggesting her premise is essentialist and parochial (Sander-Staudt, 2011). The essentialist critique revolves around the gendered binary of one voice being male and justice-based, and other feminine and care-orientated (Owens and Ennis, 2005). The parochial concern is that Gilligan's research is based on a small group of women from which she attempts to generalise to all women, defining care as exclusively feminine behaviour. This does as much to reinforce socially and culturally constructed gender stereotypes as challenge them (Walker, 1998). Her work, nevertheless, laid the foundations for an ethic of care.

Noddings (1984) on the other hand, began developing her own approach to feminine ethics and moral education arguing that the feminine trait of caring emerges through a 'different door', as opposed to a different 'voice'. What Noddings means is that the moral development of women is based on their experiences and social learning, rather than reasoning based upon cognitive development (Reid, 2018). Noddings begins from the position that all people want to be cared for, and that natural caring is a basic in human life, evidenced particularly through that of a mother, which doesn't require any ethical effort to motivate it (Noddings, 2002, p.11). Noddings (1984, p.2) claims that 'the approach through law and principle is not the approach of the mother. It is the approach of the detached one, of the father', and therefore, she argues that this natural caring is significant in women's experiences and is a moral attitude developed from

their learning and experiences of being cared for. Many academics have sought to apply Noddings' (1984) theory of an ethic of care to educational settings and relations between student and teacher (Mercado, 1993; Tarlow, 1996; Wilson, et al., 1996). Whilst conceptual commonality exists, the terminology has varied as others have developed and added their own characteristics, but generally, they support the theoretical framework of Noddings (1984).

The EoC, nevertheless, started off challenging some of the more traditional ethical theory. The basic assumption underpinning the idea of the EoC associated with Noddings (1984) and subsequent care theorists, is that individuals have varying degrees of dependence and interdependence on one another, which challenges some of the more traditional ethical theories, particularly deontology. Firstly, emphasising relational care over individual logic and reason claims moral interdependence in opposition to Kant's (1984) claim that individuals are not responsible for others moral development. Care theorists suggest that we as social beings must accept responsibility for how we treat others as this can affect how they behave in the world, or who or what they become. Secondly, by positing that logic and reason are subservient to natural care which is characterised by irrationality, is opposed to Kant's (1984) notion that only rational action taken out of duty has moral worth.

Moreover, there have been debates within the EoC. Firstly, Noddings rejects the universality of Gilligan's stages, suggesting care is both contextual and reciprocal – proximity between the cared for and the person caring for is a crucial element in a reciprocal caring relationship, which most agree with (Reid, 2018). Noddings' metaethics are therefore based on reason in the experience of being 'cared for', as opposed to Gilligan's reason based in cognitive development, whilst Noddings' normative ethic is concerned with the capacity for relatedness and engrossment, compared to Gilligan's concerned with feminine traits of caring, relationship and responsibility (Reid, 2018). Like Gilligan (1982), however, Noddings' (1984) work has faced criticisms too. Firstly, that engrossment perpetuates gender stereotypes of women

solely as caregivers (Davion, 1993). Moreover, Tronto (1993) is particularly vocal about 'naturalness' which Noddings refers to as the basis for caring which seems to exclude men. Secondly, questions about the potential absence of reciprocity, as caring relations are, by nature, inherently unequal. Finally, drawbacks in proximity disregarding any moral obligation to those at a distance, as well as disregarding institutional and structural types of care (Tronto, 1993). The EoC can nevertheless help conceptualise the relationship between youth practitioner and NEET young person and make explicit whether youth work employability provision contains care.

Education of The Working Class: A Discourse of Control

Youth work, understood as an educational activity, can also be mapped back to 19th Century Britain, (and shares its roots with the rise of state schooling). It was previously argued that some early youth work initiatives, such as the Sunday and Ragged school movements, emerged from a discourse of care responsive to harsh social conditions and poverty caused by industrialisation and urbanisation (Smith, 2013; Jeffs, 2018; Bright et al., 2018). It is, however, important to recognise that (both) youth work (and schooling) developed against a backdrop of broader ongoing tensions between social control and social change related to the formation of social class and subsequent class struggle (Davies, 2009; Fusco, 2018).

Premodern societies have always been characterised by hierarchical divisions. Within British society, such divisions traditionally occurred through the feudal system - hereditary transmission of deferential relations between serfs and landowners, for example (Thompson, 1963). Industrialisation and urbanisation disturbed social order by breaking such relations. Spearheading this critique of the twin phenomena of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation was Karl Marx (1983). Marx was concerned with the relationship between labour and capital, and the inherent conflict within the economic base of industrial capitalism. Marx and Engels (2015, p.2), in *The Communist Manifesto*, wrote that...

> ...The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

It was argued by Marx and Engels (2015) that society had split into distinct antagonist classes, the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Industrialisation was primarily about new ways of organising and controlling capitalist production. Marxist historian Thompson (1963) argues that individuals' lives became much more compartmentalised through the new working arrangements: the introduction of the clock and working hours. He argues that work duties were, prior to industrial capitalism, set by factors such as daylight, breaks between completing tasks, reaching deadlines or other social duties. Factory life was, however, regulated by the clock synchronising labour with set hours on set days. Time literally became money. Whilst the factory provided a new working environment and new working arrangements, a regular wage became crucial for survival under the conditions of industrial capitalism - the timing of labour for a wage, effectively depersonalised the economic relations of capitalism. So, although premodern societies were characterised by social difference, industrial capitalism created new social divisions through the introduction of wage labour (Thompson, 1963; Marx, 1983). Social class is therefore a product of the modern capitalist era. This period also saw the rise of the capitalist class who effectively usurped the existing ruling class of landowners and nobility, who were increasingly marginalised. In other words, there was an increase in the significance of wealth and income as indicators of social position, and a general decrease in significance ascribed to hereditary characteristics (Thompson, 1963). Essentially, new money superseded old money.

Whilst people became bound by the conditions of labour, subject to class distinctions, these divisions of labour produced an increasingly unpredictable society, or what Durkheim (1964) refers to as 'anomie' (chaos), due to a weakening of collective consciousness. Similarly, Marx argued that material conditions shape consciousness, which is a product of social division in the processes of production and labour (Marx

and Engels, 2015). Thompson (1963) supports this inasmuch as he suggests that working-class identity and consciousness began to develop as folk began to perceive themselves with separate interests to those whose interests opposed theirs. This, Thompson (1963) argues, led to working-class self-organisation, industrial action and various power struggles, expressed through Luddism for example, in protest to mechanisation replacing traditional forms of craft labour; or larger opposition such as Chartism which sought to widen the franchise through political and educational reform to further the interests of the working classes. Such forms of working-class self-organisation though met heavy defeat via repression expressed through state power or other bodies alike whose interests opposed the working classes (Thompson, 1963).

So, industrialisation destabilised the existing social order and Victorian Britain was an arena of power struggle as the upper classes and large sections of the new ruling class sought to keep the poor in order (Fusco, 2018). The new working classes were largely considered dangerous, as were the new industrial cities rife with crime, gambling, drugs, alcohol, destitution, and prostitution. Living and working in harsh and crowded conditions, the working-class urban mobs were considered a threat to capital accumulation. New forms of social control were therefore required to contain the 'dangerous classes' and maintain social order. It is no coincidence that modern agencies of control such as policing, social work, schooling, and local authorities emerged during the 19th Century due to the social chaos deriving from industrialisation (Thompson, 1963; Williamson and Coussee, 2019).

Whilst it was suggested earlier that reforms were driven by a discourse of care against a backdrop of broader moral progress, the age of reform was also about control as much as anything (Briggs, 2000; Stansky, 1973). Reforms were implemented to improve the conditions of the working class in a bid to keep them from rebelling against the new social order, and reduce any threat of revolution (Thompson, 1963). The 19th Century was a volatile time across Europe with various power struggles, in particular between Britain and other great European powers, such as France and Germany (Taylor, 1977),

so the last thing the ruling class needed was further power struggles at home. Although reforms were due, in part, to humanitarianism concerns and pushed by working-class self-organisation, they were also largely in the ruling classes' interests – a compromise to ensure that the working class could still be utilised to maintain production while limiting the threat to capital accumulation (Briggs, 2000; Thompson, 1963). In other words, some degree of accommodation between labour and capital.

For Davies (2009), the perspective on social class formation, class struggle and the need for social control to counter radical mobilisation is significant to alternative arguments on the roots of youth work. For Davies (2009), youth work developed as a bottom-up movement for popular education amongst the working classes with radical intentions. Davies (2009) suggests that once such movements were largely defeated, they were replaced with top-down provision concerned with social control which has served to conceal the real roots of youth work and in the process neglect working-class contribution. For Davies (2009), who draws on the historical work of Johnson (1976, 1977) to make his argument, education wasn't being 'done' to the working class by their superiors or 'betters' as many dominant historical accounts suggest, but by and for working-class people themselves.

The working-class popular educational movement which took place from the late-18th Century basically until the defeat of Chartism, comprised three main strands. The first was a sustained critique of religious and philanthropic institutions including Sunday and Ragged schools, as well as dominant forms of adult education such as mechanics' institutes. Significant critique was also directed towards the state for its role as enabler of exploitative employers profiteering from working-class labour (Davies, 2009). Secondly, deriving from this critique, were alternative education goals concerned with 'really useful knowledge' for working-class people, to generally assist with the harsh realities of daily life, as well as to challenge an unequal society and oppressive capitalist system (Davies, 2009). Finally, Davies (2009) argues, this led to a varied educational practice, including a radical press and other printed documentation disseminated

widely. Superficially, this is bottom-up, self-organised, working-class activism, but for Davies (2009), this laid the foundation for some of the key characteristics of youth work. These include adults and young people collectively, but more importantly, voluntarily coming together and forming respectful relationships and informal working groups, concerned with a creative but critical social pedagogy and experiential learning with broader aims of empowerment and social justice. For Davies, this is, at various points, what youth work has striven but struggled to be (organic education), being met by the same fate as the earlier forms of working-class popular education – diluted and replaced by a top-down, welfare-prescriptive alternative.

The replacement of working-class self-organisation can be located in the youth institutes that came into existence in the 1850s, primarily concerned with 'youth leadership' and instruction (Fusco, 2018). These youth institutes were places where young men could come together in a large room or hall, talk, read, play games, get hot drinks and sometimes food, and participate in different classes and activities. Workers were initially referred to as superintendents, but later become known as youth leaders (Smith, 2013; Dawes, 1975). Whilst leadership isn't inherently a bad thing, Davies (2009) argues that 'youth leadership' was instigated with the goal of social control through 'remoralising' working-class youth, leading them into appropriate social behaviours and attitudes, such as teaching them a 'better tone' and 'good form'. Or, in other words, instilling respect for 'their betters' and discipline to not attempt to rise above 'their station' (Williamson and Coussee, 2019).

Over the next three decades, girls' clubs started to grow alongside boys' clubs, and by the 1880s-90s, a range of specific top-down provision for young people had been established. The youth institutes were, nevertheless, based upon voluntary participation, whereby working-class youth had to be persuaded to attend. The state also intervened directly into the lives of the working class in 1870 with the inception of compulsory state schooling, which had the same agenda as other youth provision – social control of working-class youth (Simon, 1960). Whilst formal schooling has existed since

Medieval times, it was largely the preserve of the socially and economically privileged. Over time, 'poor schools', 'dame schools' and other provision for the 'lower orders' developed but such forms of education were varied and uneven and many children went without organised schooling until the late-19th Century when the state became more proactive in promoting education for all (Simon, 1960). Schooling was the first major state intervention into the lives of working-class young people and superficially, was considered as social progress under the broader reform agenda. At root though, it was an attempt to civilise and moralise the working class as much as anything (Ball, 1986; 2012; Simon, 1960; McCulloch, 2005). In other words, schooling was driven by a discourse of control related to class struggle which emerged out of the social and economic ramifications associated with the industrial revolution and urbanisation. It was, of course, also intended to educate the working class for their roles in industrial production, military and domestic service (Thompson, 1963; Simon, 1960).

The rise of youth institutes and establishment of state schooling exemplifies that, from the 1850s at least, the ruling classes won the crucial educational terrain in the class struggle, and thereafter, become the dominant provider of education for the labouring classes. Whilst schooling was a more overt attempt to assert social control, youth leadership still played a large role – 'the betters' had become the 'leaders' of working-class youth, a position rooted in a combination of paternalism and an attempt to assert social control. Ruling class perspectives and ambitions, Davies (2009) argues, kick-started a trend which was to become the dominant version of 'youth work' over the next 100 years and acted largely as a bulwark against urban youth mobs. For example, during the early 1880s, the idea of 'uniformed youth' as a means of evangelism emerged from the ideas of William Smith, and out of this, the Boys Brigade grew. This was shortly followed by military style brigades, targeted at 'working lads' and 'the factory girl', again, this was an attempt to subjugate and pacify working-class youth (Fusco, 2018).

The exception to these, was Robert Baden-Powell, who it has been argued was concerned with the well-being and creativity of young people (Smith, 2011). Baden-

Powell was apparently troubled by the Boys' Brigade's emphasis on drill, evangelicalism and regimentation, particularly their supposed debilitating effects on creativity. He later, established scouting groups for boys and guides for girls. By placing a special value on adventure, association, and learning through doing, Baden-Powell managed to develop an alternative educational form that some regard as the foundation of 'good' youth work today (Smith, 2011; Jeffs and Smith, 2010). It is probably important to point out though that there were inequalities amongst boys' and girls' youth leadership provision during this time and for many years to come, due to power imbalances of different gender roles, and girls having significantly less leisure time due to domestic labour taking place mostly in evenings (Jeffs, 2018). It wasn't until the 1950s that mixed clubs became the norm as many, including Baden-Powell, believed that 'only boys were destined to scale the highest intellectual and physical peaks, and that women, inherently weaker in both spheres, must be protected from the rigours of life and equipped for sheltered domestic roles' (Jeffs, 2018, p.8).

Youth leadership, nevertheless, continued to be the dominant form of youth work up until around the Second World War. Youth work was still heavily dominated by independent voluntary organisations during the early twentieth Century and largely concerned with character-building and leadership. Shortly after the First World War though, there was some limited state funding to subside voluntary providers for work with young people, although this was piecemeal and lacking in any follow-through (Jeffs, 2018). Youth work was low down the list of priorities with international wars, the Great Depression and domestic pressures in the form of the labour and trade union movement underpinned by the working class demanding better working conditions and fairer pay (Davies, 2009). It seems to be well supported that youth work's development was driven by a discourse of social control related to working class youth. My research will seek to discover whether youth work employability reflects any of these traditions.

Constructions of Youth: Care and Control

So far, discourses of care and control, associated with education and welfare, have been identified as driving the development of youth work practice. I have isolated and examined both arguments separately to evaluate which holds more weight, but both arguments are well-reasoned and heavily supported which leads me to believe youth work's development was driven by both discourses – care and control are seemingly two sides to the same coin. This position is supported by Fusco (2018) who argues that control and care in youth work are intertwined and have been competing overtime within a prevent-protect paradigm, primarily due to the way working-class youth have been constructed. Put simply, Fusco (2018) argues that it's necessary and important to consider the alternative ways in which 'youths' have, over time, been conceived because, although initial forms of youth work may have potentially developed from discourses of humanitarianism and the notion of the church being responsive to urban poverty to protect children, this equally, according to Fusco (2018), was about preventing the threat that working-class young people posed.

In the grand scheme of things, youth as a social category is relatively new associated with the onset of the modernisation era (Gillis, 1974; Griffin, 1993). During the eighteenth century the concept of youth was largely non-existent for example. A boy as young as aged seven could be considered a man and had labouring duties at home or on the farm and would sell crafts and goods on the streets or in the marketplace for their 'daily bread' (Fusco, 2018). This labour was important for families and was generally seen as good for instilling work ethic and moral fibre, particularly in young boys (Gillis, 1974). There has, however, existed a much smaller group of privileged young people who always experienced something of a distinct life-stage set aside for learning and intellectual development, which grown alongside the rise of universities (McCulloch, 2005; Cullen and Bradford, 2018).

Throughout the nineteenth century, youth as a category started to gain significant recognition - the rise of youth institutes for example, or the regular newspaper articles focused on the social problems of and for 'youth' (Davies, 2009). Fusco (2018) argues that the emergence of youth related terminology positioned young people as inherently problematic, associating them with 'uncivilised and savage notions of criminality and immorality' (p.46) derived from the social problems of industrialisation and urbanisation. For example, due to changing social and economic conditions in the latter half of the nineteenth century, such as falling demand for child labour due to reforms, many young people were neither in school or work, and instead, hanging around on the streets, gambling, or at drink-shops or the penny gaff (low-music halls) (Smith, 2013). From the 1870s onwards, there was widespread concern about violent gangs of youth across various regions – for example, 'the scuttlers' of Manchester (Davies, 2008), or the 'hooligans' of Victorian London. Similar phenomena were evident in Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow and other industrial cities. In other words, 'youth' were constructed as part of the 'dangerous classes' and needed to be contained.

Hebdige (1988) documents the twin discourses of youth 'as trouble/in trouble' which have over time shaped a range of state intervention within a prevent-protect framework. Fusco (2018) argues that these twin discourses of youth can be associated with the theological beliefs embedded within some of the early pioneers of 'youth work'. The 'child-saver' missionaries and philanthropists for example, whose work it was to save the souls of young people was based on the belief that 'idle time along with 'weak character' was the perfect playground for the devil to do his work' (Fusco, 2018, p.46). The missionaries believed that working-class Victorian street children needed a range of provision, not only material necessities to do with their poverty - due to their inherently problematic and socially deviant behaviour, they were in need of significant instruction, discipline and character development (Fusco, 2018). The activities working-class young people were engaging in were nevertheless seen as immoral, wicked, and sinful, which meant that they were not only 'at risk', but also 'presented risk' to morality and the social order. Youth as a social category is therefore immersed in a history of youth as being problematic, and is, more broadly, concerned with the

social control of working-class young people (Gillis, 1974; Hebdige, 1988; Griffin, 1993).

Although these beliefs were initially embodied within the wider child-saving movement, theological underpinnings of 'youth' would nevertheless later give way to more scientific understandings, such as Darwins's theory of evolution in 1877 and the emergence of psychology in 1879 (Griffin, 1993). The official construction of youth as a category separate from children and adults with their own needs and demands, was cemented by the psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1904), who began to theorise 'adolescence' and different stages of life. Hall (1904) argues adolescence is a period of 'storm and stress' in which young people make risky decisions and so, they need guidance to reach maturity – this justified top-down arrangements to contain 'youth', of which youth work is complicit in (Davies, 2009). Moreover, this has set into motion repeated and amplified 'crises of youth' over the years, often resulting in moral panic about various forms of deviancy and delinquency – well known subcultural groups include the beatniks, teddy boys, mods and rockers, punks, skinheads, football hooligans, all night ravers, and more recently, hoodies and chavs (See, for example, Cohen, 1972, Hebdige, 1988, Griffin, 1993, Jones, 2012). The point is there have always been worries about youth 'as trouble/in trouble' in nearly every generation – the roots of which potentially go back to the theological beliefs embedded in missionary work that positioned youth as innately and socially deficient.

The social construction of youth therefore helps to understand and also support the notion that youth work is underpinned by conflicting discourses. For example, 'youth as trouble' require forms of social control and punishment, whereas 'youth in trouble' require care and guidance. In sum, it would seem that discourses of control and care are intertwined – both are well supported by various sources as driving the development of youth work. These two discourses have been competing over time, although it does also appear that social control came to overshadow care as concerns for the welfare of working-class youth seemed to be diluted due to the threats they presented to social

order, encapsulated by the top-down models of youth leadership and the rise of state schooling. Both of these initiatives have been concerned with a pedagogy of control (Simon, 1960; Davies, 2009) - inasmuch as they are concerned with containing working class youth, teaching them appropriate attitudes and behaviours, in an effort to civilise and moralise them into existing structures and systems. My research is more broadly seeking to understand whether the practitioners in this research are applying a similar pedagogy of control within their employability training to regulate youth and keep them out of trouble; or whether they perceive youth as in trouble, and therefore needing care and guidance due to their vulnerability.

The next part of this literature review will explore the rise of state organised youth work and how it has changed over time in response to the re-emergence of deficit and 'problematic' constructions of youth via the NEET category for example.

Youth Work and The State

As we have seen so far, youth work developed against a backdrop of moral and political struggle associated with industrialisation and urbanisation. Whilst state intervention into the lives of the working class through schooling was driven by a discourse of control, equally at the same time, British industrial growth was decelerating and under threat from overseas competition such as the USA and the rising power of Germany. Britain was at risk of losing its status as the world's greatest industrial power and sought to bolster its economic and political position. It was due to economic competitiveness, therefore, that Britain needed to invest in its working classes as they mostly had poor skills, were illiterate, unhealthy, and generally unfit for the rigours of industrial labour (Simon, 1960). Competitors like Germany had much more modern education systems, so it was argued that educational reforms were the solution; a state education system would not only ameliorate social problems amongst the working class, but increase economic competitiveness by creating an educated and skilled workforce (McCulloch, 2005). It was this which finally pushed the state to intervene and establish compulsory schooling (Ball, 2012).

Some 70 years later, the state intervened in youth work. The motives behind this, however, were different as it has been suggested that it was the impending war situation that pushed the state to step in (Davies, 2009; Jeffs, 2018). Leading up to the Second World War, government began to take more interest in youth work, due to anxieties about the fitness and motivation of young men to be called upon to fight for their country if needed, as well as a more general concern regarding discipline while fathers were away. Either way, the state was largely considered as an unwelcome intruder by some voluntary organisations, who were cautious over other state national youth movements such as the Hitler Youth, or the Communist Youth movement in Russia (Jeffs et al., 2019). With war imminent and anxieties looming over the general population though, Davies (2009) argues that the popular mindset began to soften in regard to state intervention, which led to increased powers for local authorities to establish youth work.

The Rise of The Youth Service

Initially, the state began to invest in existing voluntary provision. But following the outbreak of the Second World War, and the publication of *In the Service of Youth* (Circular 1486, 1939), the first state-organised service arose to deal with the young people in wartime Britain. This was a nationwide service managed by local education authorities, who would set up their own youth clubs and centres, and continue to support voluntary organisations in a partnership. This produced a settlement between state and voluntary sectors known as the 'Youth Service', founded in 1939 (Jeffs et al., 2019). In many ways, this is a similar order of affairs to schooling. First, a voluntary endeavour, then subsidised by the state, before the state becomes a direct provider. This was never an equal partnership in any case, argue Jeffs et al. (2019), as the state held financial control. In this way, the state eventually swallowed up voluntary youth organisations which became dependent on state funding, with only uniformed youth leadership organisations remaining financially independent.

Towards the end of the War though, the government's enthusiasm for the educational potential of youth work had dwindled – the 1944 Education Act considered youth work

as largely recreational rather than as a form of education *per se*, although the Act did require local authorities to provide youth work facilities (Davies, 2009; Smith, 2013). The McNair Report (1944) suggested that youth workers were 'to be guide, philosopher and friend of young people' (p.104) – still reflecting previous forms of youth leadership. McNair also stated that it did not intend to professionalise the service as that would potentially take it away from its spontaneous and voluntary nature. Although youth work was now firmly under the control of local education authorities, it didn't have a robust theorised or distinct educational practice *per se*. Taylor et al. (2018) argue that youth work in the early 1950s was facing extinction due to weak legislative educational recognition in the 1944 Education Act as the state was more concerned with keeping young people in at least part-time formal education until they were 18, although this was not achieved.

The moral panics about youth in the 1950s revived interest in youth work (Cohen, 1972). There were various worries about 'teenagers' which can largely be attributed to the rise of popular youth culture encompassing various music, fashion, and the rise of new 'risky' behaviours such as drug taking and drinking, alongside increasing disposable income and consumer power. The social construction of youth at risk, or as a threat to social order was, as we have seen, nothing new (Brannen et al., 1994; Davies 2008), although moral panics about Beatniks, Teddy boys and race riots in various cities, did help bring attention back to youth work as education ministers ordered an independent review of the Youth Service in 1959 (Davies, 2009). Youth work in Britain reached its 'golden age' following the Albemarle Report (1960), which outlined that education, association and challenge should be the primary focus of local authority youth services, which represented a significant step forward from previous positions of the youth worker as a moral guide and philosopher. Taylor et al. (2018, p.86) summarise the key features of the Albemarle report as:

- A commitment to a distinctive, process-led social education whose rhythm was determined ultimately by the young person;

- A belief in the virtue of association, caught in Albemarle's edict that nurturing 'young people to come together into groups of their own choosing is the fundamental task of the Service' (Ministry of Education, 1960: 52);
- An acceptance of the autonomy and integrity of the professional worker – 'the first adult not to be an authority figure';
- Whilst classically concerned with a young person's character, a move away from inculcating social conformity to facilitating both self and social awareness;
- A ringing endorsement of the centrality of young people's voluntary participation 'because it introduces adult freedom and choice'

A renewed national Youth Service was launched again managed by local education authorities. There was, thereafter, substantial state expenditure on youth work. This included purpose-built youth club buildings, formal training at a national training college, and establishment of youth work as a paid occupation with a movement towards professionalisation (Davies and Taylor, 2019). The Albemarle Report was, in essence, quite radical for a state report in challenging what it considered to be the outdated values of youth leadership, such as prevention and child saving (Taylor et al., 2018). Davies (2009) suggests Albemarle was mostly a challenge to the underlying class attitudes of the 'betters', which had underpinned youth leadership and still remained strong in class-conscious Britain. The Report attempted to deconstruct the oppressive value base of youth leadership and reconceptualise youth work as a liberating practice under a social educational model. In considering the broader history of the working classes' relationship to the state, capitalism, and their 'betters', this was a significant shift, emblematic of a socially and economically optimistic society, underpinned by social democracy. The so-called post-war settlement had produced a more progressive society, which Davies and Taylor (2019) argue, was encapsulated within the earlier Conservative Party slogan 'you've never had it so good', referring to the limited redistribution channelled through the welfare state and increased expenditure on public services.

Despite a substantial leap forward for youth work, tensions remained. During the 1960s and 70s, a growing body of literature emerged championing social education as a framework for youth work (Davies and Gibson, 1967; Davies, 1974). Social education, however, soon fell out of favour as the guiding philosophy of youth work. Davies (1976) himself acknowledged social education's shortcomings, suggesting it mostly emphasised the uncritical social integration of individuals through supporting smooth and socially acceptable transitions into adulthood. Essentially, youth work remained caught between discourses of care and social control:

> Though the terminology and balance between them changed over time, 'education' and 'protection' – commitments both to liberating young people's potential and diverting them from socially risky behaviour – remained deeply rooted within the youth work philosophy. (Davies and Taylor, 2019, p.5)

Taylor et al. (2018) note this tension was evident in the hostility between full-time state workers and the large army of part-time voluntary sector youth workers in regard to methods and aims, torn between education and prevention of risky behaviours. State youth workers embraced social education, whilst the voluntary sector youth workers would often still be more focused on recreation, prevention and the moral character-building tradition, leading to endless debates amongst workers, although both remained committed, at root, to the voluntary principle of engagement (Taylor et al., 2018).

A Sign of The Times

From the mid-1970s onwards, youth work hit a number of obstacles and cracks began to emerge due to shifting ideology and state concerns with the skills of young people. The economic and political landscape was changing and the post-war settlement was beginning to unravel, caused by rising oil prices, mass unemployment, a financial crisis, and bail out loans from the IMF which, in return, placed restrictions on public spending resulting in the 'winter of discontent' as workers refused austerity (Davies and Taylor, 2019). These deteriorating economic conditions disproportionately affected working-

class youth whose unemployment rates were at least triple that of the national average (Mizen, 1990). British industry, essentially, was collapsing, and with the Empire now gone, there were serious economic concerns amongst those in power. Following the 'Great Debate' on education (Callaghan, 1976), mass youth unemployment, nevertheless, became associated with supply-side qualities – young people were redefined as lacking the required skills, knowledge and attributes that employers and the economy need (Mizen, 1990).

This provided the basis for increasing intervention in the labour market as the state sought to ameliorate the perceived deficits. Somewhat ironically, similar concerns had pushed the state to establish compulsory schooling a hundred years earlier as Britain's economy came under increasing international pressure. There was a rapid growth of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) during the 1970s and 80s backed by huge funding, and underpinned by state concerns about the youth labour force (Finn, 1982) – the MSC offered various youth training schemes which were intended to be a bridge into employment. The ramifications of these challenging economic times led to the rise of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 along with a new ideology, neoliberalism, which led to rapid deindustrialisation and economic restructuring accompanied by mass unemployment across the nation, especially in old industrial heartlands. Neoliberalism is also underpinned by the assumptions that high taxation and high public expenditure limit both economic prosperity and personal responsibility (Davies, 2009). A primary goal of neoliberalism, therefore, is to shrink the role of the state by cutting back on local and central government spending as far as reasonably possible to let the market thrive. Neoliberalism is unpacked and discussed in more depth later (p.94). From here, there were fears about further investment in young people under the market fundamentalist model, but the state committed to further intervention in the labour market via youth training schemes

As the economic crises deepened throughout the 1980s, the voluntary and state Youth Service settlement began to come under increasing pressure for funding. There were

some decreases in public expenditure, alongside the rise in MSC training provision. Generally, other work with young people such as schooling and further education, social work, and criminal justice were seen as higher priorities by the state (Smith, 2013; Cooper, 2018). Either way, the MSC was seen as more favourable by those in power as opposed to open-ended, process-led youth work which was not contributing to national prosperity or economic competitiveness (Davies, 2009). Taylor (2011) argues that the MSC was, in essence, an attempt to bypass youth work which the state considered as a 'refuge of permissiveness'. The response by local authority youth services to competition with MSC initiatives was to find alternative ways of working with young people.

Unofficially at least, many youth work organisations had begun to adopt state agendas and deficit constructions of young people by providing issue-based projects focused around education and employment (Smith, 2013). Davies (1981) warned of the dangers of this, and later (2009), is highly critical of the way in which youth workers uncritically embraced state economic imperatives. This, he argues, was a pivotal moment that begun a narrowing and corruption of youth work. Issue-based work started to drive youth work towards perceived deficits in skills of young people, and essentially begin an erosion of the social democratic value base (Smith, 2013). Taylor et al. (2018) argue that social democratic youth work primarily drew on a 'potential' perspective of young people, which now moved backwards towards a practice based on a discourse of deficit. Young people were now essentially judged by their economic value. Ultimately, this was the beginning of a major shift in youth work from being a universal, 'open' service founded upon social democracy, towards narrower more instrumental work with young people. In other words, from youth services to services for youth (Jeffs and Smith, 2001). What this signifies, is the beginning of the gradual introduction of an economic competitiveness discourse into youth work which would over time grow exponentially and justify a radical reorganisation of youth work practice.

New Labour, New Problems

The election of a Labour government in the 1997 might have been a cause for optimism amongst some youth workers due to Labour's traditional focus on investment in public services, but ultimately, the marginalisation of local authority-run youth service was further reinforced by the third way policies of the New Labour administration and its focus on social exclusion (Levitas, 2005; Davies, 2018). New Labour's 'third way' was effectively an attempt to find the middle-ground between neoliberalism and social democracy with a focus on social integration and inclusion (Levitas, 2005). For public services, third way ideas meant the state would provide limited resources to combat social exclusion and deprivation, but these resources would need to be used to deliver services as efficiently as possible, underpinned by managerialism and performativity - concerned with control, accountability and measurement (St Croix, 2017). Further corruption of youth work towards state agendas can be found in the introduction of targets and emergence of 'joined-up' services. As soon as New Labour came into power, there were attempts to…

> …Radically restructure – "modernise" – public services. To achieve this, heavy reliance was placed on two approaches: an unrelenting search for the holy grail of "joined-up" services and "seamless" provision; and tight, top-down micro-management of policy implementation and direct practice by targeting resources on groups identified by national policy as priorities and by an insistence on "measurable outcomes". (Davies, 2009, p.77)

Davies (2009, p.78) argues that a 'failed attempt was made to implement both at same time through the creation of a comprehensive "youth support service" for all 13- to 19-year-olds – Connexions – which was originally planned to absorb the Youth Service'. The overarching aim of this new youth initiative was also to tackle social exclusion by reducing the percentage of young people classified as NEET. Connexions essentially attempted to 'educationalise' young people's transitions and broader social problems, as if education itself was *the* solution to youth unemployment (Maguire 2008; Keep and Mayhew, 2010). The creation of the Connexions personal advisor was nevertheless a

new and important initiative, effectively being an 'assembler of solutions' for marginalised young people, but it was essentially a hybrid role drawing on the traditions of careers' advice, youth work and social work (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). After the development of Connexions, the focus was on individual young people with the primary objective for the personal advisor being to move them from NEET to EET (into education, employment or training). Connexions referred many NEET young people onto Entry to Employment (E2E), which was another new initiative focused on 'employability' skills training. E2E shared some continuities with the MSC youth training schemes in the 1980s. Either way, upon completing E2E, many young people would quickly end up NEET again afterwards (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Yates and Payne (2007) found that Connexions personal advisors often took 'a firefighting approach' – focusing their efforts on those young people most easily able to move from NEET to EET. In many instances, this meant that those with the most serious and complex issues were overlooked and further disadvantaged.

Initially, Connexions and the Youth Service were unconnected as Connexions was planned, similar to the MSC skills training, to bypass youth work. Youth work would, however, not escape the gaze of the state. The New Labour report *Transforming Youth Work: resourcing excellent youth services* (DfES, 2002) for example, introduced quality standards for local authorities in delivering youth work. Secondly, it set compulsory 'performance measures' whereby youth services had to 'reach 25% of young people aged between 13-19, with 60% of those to achieve some form of accredited outcome' (2002, p.16). For the first time in its history, youth work had official 'hard' targets imposed on it. Ord (2008) traces the roots of this significant shift back to the rise of Thatcherism and the 1988 Education Act, which led to a national curriculum in schools; shortly after there was a failed attempt to impose a national core curriculum on youth work. What followed this in the early 90s, was a compromise in that local authority youth services would identify and produce a locally agreed curriculum [goals] and establish outcomes, which was now also the task of the National Youth Agency to support (Ord, 2008). Whilst many youth organisations had already begun producing issue-based projects to prove their worth due to the challenge of MSC

initiatives in the 80s, this came to full fruition under the new managerialism (St Croix, 2017). As outlined in *Transforming Youth Work*:

> Such broad goals need to be expressed in a set of more specific outcomes if they are to be helpful in the planning and in practice. The more clearly we can specify the ends, the better we will be able to choose the means for achieving them (DfES 2002, p.11)

Youth work had now shifted to a system of imposed targets monitored through registering young people's participation, accreditation or achievements on electronic databases (St Croix, 2017). The argument for informal education, which had largely replaced social education by this point, became increasingly untenable as youth workers were required to plan and predetermine aims and outcomes through formal structured programmes of learning (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Some within the voluntary sector though, continued to resist regardless, insisting that they were informal educators and refused to incorporate a curriculum into their practice (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Ord, 2007; Davies and Taylor, 2019). So, whilst the youth service managed, to some extent, to evade the neoliberal machine throughout much of the 80s and 90s, by the early 2000s, it had been heavily infiltrated by state concerns based on deficit discourses of young people, such as those who were NEET.

Whilst targets remained in place, more significant change followed *Every Child Matters* (2003) which was significantly shaped by the high-profile child abuse scandal of Victoria Climbe. This acted as the catalyst that led to the reorganisation of state-funded children's and young people's services. The goal was to integrate them all into youth support and development structures, including the pooling of budgets (Smith, 2013). New Labour's position on revolutionising public services because 'joined up problems require joined up solutions' (SEU, 1998), was now further justified underpinned by their concern with child safeguarding (DfE, 2003) and targeting 'early intervention' of young people 'at risk' (DfE, 2002). This set into motion unprecedented

interagency partnership of state-sponsored services (Taylor et al., 2018). The result was local authority multidisciplinary teams which included youth workers, Connexions personal advisors, social workers, mental health practitioners, school teachers, colleges tutors, and various other professionals (Smith, 2003). Significantly, the Youth Service budget became tied to the Connexions strategy funding pot, in which, Smith (2013) argues, youth work became increasingly downgraded and marginalised. Youth work was already on the periphery with only some key features and principles to defend it as a distinct practice. Once conflated within this multidisciplinary structure, youth worker roles were essentially redefined to focus on referred young people in the form of a caseload of individuals for one-to-one work, tutoring and teaching linked to accreditation, planning and coordinating activity (St Croix, 2017; Taylor et al., 2019).

Youth workers now not only had to evaluate and evidence their work against the backdrop of local and national targets, but in partnership to support other agendas of young people at risk, such as those who were NEET (Smith, 2013; St Croix, 2017). In other words, they could have a seat at the table and receive funding, but they would need to earn this by embracing state agendas for young people primarily revolving around preparation for work and reducing anti-social behaviour. In doing this, their distinct practice evaporated (Bright and Pugh, 2019). Davies (2009) argued that the Youth Service, founded in 1939, was essentially absorbed, then completely dissolved within this new reorganised structure underpinned by managerialism. This served to conflate youth work with other forms of practice, which Bright and Pugh (2019) suggest was a de-professionalising process – effectively, the state had begun to redefine and repurpose youth work to be directly and overtly concerned with social control and economic imperatives.

More change followed the collapse of the Connexions strategy in 2007. E2E no longer exists (although it has been replaced by various forms of employability training), and most local authorities have now abandoned Connexions. Those still in operation, have been privatised and rebranded, and are running at severely reduced capacity and under

payment-by-results geared towards specific targets, often with staff facing performance reviews in relation to 'hard outcomes' primarily concerned with shifting young people from NEET to EET (Jeffs et al., 2019). Either way, the collapse of Connexions temporarily left the state with no clear youth strategy. This prompted the *Youth Matters* (2007) report, which placed the burden of careers advice and guidance, previously provided by Connexions PAs, on to schools, alongside an extended school programme which was to offer school-based activities in young people's leisure time, such as evenings, weekends and holidays (Jeffs et al., 2019).

The more significant white paper for youth work came in the form of *Aiming High for Young People: A Ten Year Strategy for Positive Activities* (2007). Youth work was then replaced, or at least substituted for 'positive activities', which 'sought to offer all young people 'safe places to go' where they could make the most of their 'spare time'' (Jeffs et al., 2019, p.21). This demonisation of young people, particular those from the dispossessed working-class, was epitomised by the state's concern with 'positive activities' (Ord, 2016) which inferred that some young people were engaging in negative activities, or at least, activities deemed inappropriate by the state. Either way, the 'positive activities' agenda carried a number of assumptions which served to further weaken and ultimately, replace what was considered as youth work (Ord, 2016; Bright and Pugh, 2019). Positive activities, more significantly, instigated a youth development fund for youth organisations to apply under a bidding process which was time consuming and costly, and required time-limited, specific interventions focussed on outcomes driven by deficit discourses to give the work purpose and justification (Taylor et al., 2018). This set in motion the outsourcing and commissioning of youth work, which was significantly ramped up thereafter. In other words, it created an early triage model of youth work. Funding would be directed towards where surgery was needed, such as NEET and ASB. Many smaller youth organisations ceased to exist during these changes, due to the wide and uneven scattering of funding, while also encouraging competition in pitting organisations against one another (Jeffs et al., 2019).

The Fall of The Youth Service

The 2010 Coalition government began to shift away from third way policies and intensify neoliberalism again, which on the whole, was further detrimental to public services, including for state-sponsored youth work which was hit by deep reductions in funding. This time though, there was supposedly a more justified rationale to cutting public expenditure - the 2007-8 economic crisis, which caused the UK to go into recession, promoted austerity as necessary to 'balance the books'. Austerity led to the disbanding of *Aiming High for Young People* (2007) in 2011, which was then replaced with a grant to local authorities of seventy-seven pounds per young person between the ages of 11-19. Jeffs et al. (2019) argue this was not sufficient to provide even a very basic service. Either way, the grant was discarded in 2013 and around the same time, youth work was effectively downgraded within governmental departments, shifting from the Department for Education, to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Jones, 2018).

Within these few years, the youth service was almost obliterated. Between 2012 and 2016 over 600 youth centres closed, 139,000 young person places lost and some 3,660 youth worker jobs abolished (Unison, 2016). In 2010-11, spending on young people's services was £1.2 billion (DfEa, 2021), by 2016-17, it was £0.4 billion (DfEb, 2021). Cuts to youth services were delegated to and undertaken by local authorities according to different priorities, but the direction of travel was clear – funding for young people was drastically reduced (Taylor et al., 2019). It could be argued that this is also because central government didn't want to take responsibility for over a decade of failed youth policies, which would have required substantial funding and investment to rectify. This can be exemplified by the inception of the National Citizens Service (NCS), which developed alongside the decimation of state-sponsored youth work, making explicit that there is funding available for young people so long as it fits with the government's agenda (Maguire, 2015). NCS was meant to replace youth work (or youth services) altogether. Taylor et al. (2018) nevertheless conclude that the NCS was largely a failure, both in theory (as a replacement for youth work) and practice. Either way, the NCS

succeeded in diverting resources away from LA funding for youth work, and towards contractual delivery of narrower forms of provision (St Croix, 2017; Bright and Pugh, 2019).

Significantly diminished local authority funding for youth work continued to be outsourced to private and voluntary sector providers (Smith, 2013). Secular voluntary bodies had, however, similarly contracted along with state provision (Jeffs et al., 2019). With funding now harder to obtain, and organisations having to operate under the quasi-market conditions, most provision for young people has become increasingly focused upon hard outcomes, particularly revolving around participation, accreditation and employability (Taylor and Taylor, 2013; Bright and Pugh 2019). These outcome-driven targets are not aimed at meeting the needs or wants of the young people however, but rather, neoliberal agendas in relation to education and employment, underpinned by discourses of control and economic competitiveness. Bright et al. (2019) argue that:

> Organisations are compelled to compete aggressively for ever-smaller funding pots designed to meet incrementally narrower agendas which increasingly prescribe how young people should self-govern. Neoliberal youth work has been co-opted in the service of the state, at the expense of serving young people (p.67)

This, in turn, means embracing and contributing to deficit constructions to justify 'youth work'. Funding bids are often focused on young people's lack of opportunity, skills and social deficits, through their poverty, low income and deprivation. In other words, youth workers are catering to the most disadvantaged in society and judging them by their economic value. Under neoliberal principles, money needs to be used as efficiently as possible. Funding is now no longer based just on predefined targets and outcomes, but also the measurable 'impact' of those outcomes, which determines the worth those within the youth sector can make in regard to external agendas, such as the labour market (St Croix, 2017). Targets, a bidding model, and funding cuts, along with neoliberal managerialism, have set in motion a continual, ever-evolving mechanism of

discipline. The more the competition there is, the narrower the focus becomes, and the narrower the focus is, the more 'efficiently' funding will need to be used – this cycle will repeat itself until it reaches its maximum efficiency point. Whilst this could potentially sound like a good thing, this process has decimated traditional youth work and contributes to demonising certain sections of young people.

Churches have now become the largest employer of youth workers in the country (Stanton, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019). Church-led youth work has grown as they are able, to some extent, generate their own funding, but also due to the ideological shift and part of the long-term disempowerment of local authorities. In this way, the Church has been the beneficiary of neoliberalism. Churches are also catering across a broad range of individual and community provision, including homeless shelters and food banks, reflecting Victorian provision for the poor. There has also been a significant growth in youth work by Mosques and Muslim civil society organisations, some funded by the state to work against extremism and radicalisation, which contributes to demonising Muslim young people (Belton, 2017; Thomas, 2017). Youth workers now, either way, are predominantly located in the voluntary and private sectors, although some LAs with particularly high crime, ASB, and NEET rates, do have some youth workers still on their books. What has been witnessed, nevertheless, is youth work going full circle where it now reflects the voluntary roots it grew from. This potentially also represents society going backwards, at least in regard to class-based inequality. For example, levels of inequality now have not been seen since Victorian times, although the rise of general living standards through technological innovation plays a large role in masking this (Green, 2017).

NEET and Youth Work

State intervention, various policy changes such as compulsory targets, integration into multidisciplinary teams, outsourcing and commissioning, followed by the withdrawal of state funding, have, over time, radically transformed youth work and challenged it as a distinctive practice. These changes have been justified by the rise of deficit

constructions of young people against a backdrop of economic competitiveness. This a trend that dates back to official discourse stemming from the 1980s which set in motion a concerted attack on young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. There are, however, alternative arguments which challenge official discourses promoted about young people over the past 40-50 years. This final part of the literature review explores the rise of NEET young people as a social problem and considers their relationship to youth work.

Social and Economic Change

The rise of NEET young people as a social problem can be associated with large-scale social and economic change which fractured traditional youth transitions into adulthood. For around 30 years after World War Two, young people's transitions were largely collective and relatively smooth during, what is often referred to as, the 'golden age' of British capitalism (Hobsbawm, 2013). This was largely due to economic growth in which employment and opportunity structures for young people were plentiful. Entry into the labour market was easily accommodated in the prosperous post-war years of investment and reconstruction (Green, 2017). Moreover, attitudes and ambitions were congruous with expectations of work. Most young people were happy to leave school at the earliest possible opportunity, often with no qualifications, and go straight into employment in their community, where they would work alongside peers, family members and local adults. This was generally followed by marriage, moving out and starting a family in quick succession (Jones, 1995).

The post-war transitions, however, masked underlying problems associated with chronic churning between low-skilled work, and more generally, industrial inefficiency (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005). Traditional working-class life should also not be romanticised due to often harsh working conditions, and overt discrimination and bullying in the workplace. It did nevertheless provide a sense of stability, security and continuity, when compared with the position of young people today. Nowadays, young people are generally staying in education and living with their parents for much longer,

which can, at least to some degree, be explained by many struggling to achieve financial independence based on their inability to secure stable employment, especially jobs which match their qualification levels; alongside changing social expectations particularly related to gender roles and parenthood more generally (Ainley, 2016). Consequently, cohabiting, marriage, and starting a family are also coming much later than in post-war Britain, which leaves Ainley and Allen (2010) to argue that transitions from youth into adulthood are increasingly protracted, delayed and disordered.

Such patterns correlate with large-scale changes in the UK economy attributed to deindustrialisation. The ramifications of economic restructuring and deindustrialisation were mass unemployment and the disintegration of the youth labour market (MacDonald, 2006), disturbing social reproduction processes related to traditional class structures (Beck, 2002). In academe, postmodernism has brought to the fore discourses of individualisation, based upon supposedly new-found freedom and choice, with official discourses claiming that without the constraints of social class limiting an individual's aspirations, expectations or trajectories, their life chances are greatly improved (Giddens, 2001). Research challenges such discourses inasmuch as social class still plays a large role in shaping choices, attitudes and ambitions towards education, employment and life more generally (Simmons et al., 2020). Shildrick et al., (2012) examine the interplay of class, space and place in shaping youth transitions, arguing that locally embedded networks often serve to perpetuate and reproduce poverty, exclusion and class inequality by closing down opportunity and limiting possibilities for escaping such conditions, entrapping young people in economic marginality. In other words, social and economic structures continue to constrain and enable the choices and opportunities available to NEET young people (Simmons et al., 2014). So, although traditional social class structures have, in many ways, been shattered, Beck (2002) argues that structural inequalities have effectively been individualised, whereby they have been recast in terms of an individual's ability to respond to the disadvantages they are confronted with. Therefore, an individual's social, cultural, and economic resources become increasingly important in navigating and negotiating life, chances and opportunities (Savage, 2015).

Either way, in post-industrial Britain, many traditional working-class jobs have, over time, been largely replaced by part-time, temporary and casualised service-sector employment (Green, 2017). Shildrick et al. (2012) identify a 'secondary' labour market characterised by poor-quality, low-paid and insecure employment, in which working-class adults and young people compete for similar forms of poor work, becoming trapped in a revolving door of no pay/low pay. For working-class youth in particular, this cycle is often interspersed with various forms of employability training which purport to equip them for the rigours of employment but rarely help them find secure work (Simmons et al., 2014). The working-class labour market more broadly, has been intensified and tightened by increasing numbers of women joining the workforce, large numbers of immigrants willing to accept lower pay, middle-class students who seek part-time work as a 'stepping-stone', redundant workers 'trading down' and semi-retirees. This is primarily to the detriment of working-class young people, particularly young men whose performance of masculinity puts them at a further disadvantage (Ainley, 2016; Green, 2017). For the working class, however, this secondary labour market is a career of insecurity and low pay that has come to define their transitions in which they struggle to carve out a clear path into adulthood (Shildrick et al., 2012; Green, 2017).

Whilst remuneration rises at the top end of the labour market, employment requiring intermediate skills, largely in production and craft, are in decline along with salary, leading to a hollowing out of the middle (Green, 2017). Meanwhile, much low-skilled employment has been in long-term relative decline due to automation of routine work and outsourcing to countries with cheaper labour costs (although outsourcing is also happening with intermediate and high-level work, for example – digital Taylorism (Brown et al., 2011)). Youth have nevertheless found themselves at the sharp end of these long-term trends, experiencing the greatest casualisation of labour and wage decline via part-time, short-term, and zero-hour contracts. Low-skilled work, however, still accounts for the majority of employment in the UK, which leads Ainley (2016) to

suggest that Britain's class structure now resembles something of an hour-glass shape. What he means by this, is that technological innovations have replaced most skilled-manual work, therefore the labour market has become pinched in the middle since there has been some growth of high-level employment, but mostly a decline of traditional core middle-level occupations. Ainley (2016) argues that some factions of the old working class have been relegated into an economic underclass characterised by insecure casual employment, periods of unemployment and economic inactivity - he predicts that Britain's class structure will increasingly be going 'pear shaped'. Much research supports this line of argument inasmuch as working-class youth have experienced a process of 'economic marginalisation' (Simmons et al., 2020).

Neoliberalism, The State and Discourse

Large-scale social and economic change has significantly affected the lives of young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, many of whom have been marginalised from the labour market. It is, however, important to recognise that change does not take place within an ideological vacuum (Simmons et al., 2014). Although the roots of NEET as a policy discourse can be traced back to the collapse of Britain's traditional industrial infrastructure from the early-1970s onwards, the election of Margaret Thatcher at the end of that decade accelerated the demise of much of the UK's manufacturing base. Due to the loss of empire, various economic crises throughout the 1970s, and wider fears that Keynesian economics was constraining Britain's capacity to compete in the 'new global marketplace' with emerging economies, Thatcher rose to prominence, instigating a sharp ideological shift with the abandonment of the social-democratic policies which had characterised the so-called post-war consensus (Sandbrook, 2012). The fragile compromise between labour and capital was replaced by social and economic neoliberalism anchored in discourses of competition and choice, privatisation, and quasi-markets (Harvey, 2005). This led, in turn, to rapid deindustrialisation and economic restructuring accompanied by mass unemployment across much of Britain, especially amongst young people. During the early years of the

monetarist experiment, the working-class labour market was shattered, whilst the traditional youth labour market was almost completely eradicated (Ainley, 2016).

The main driver of the changing fortunes of young people has therefore been neoliberalism, justified by the threat of 'globalisation'. Official discourse claimed there was no alternative but to adapt to the demands of increasing global competition by restructuring the economy (Green, 2017). Globalisation is, however, a contested concept. Simmons and Thompson (2011) remind us that globalisation should not be viewed as a conclusive break from the past, but rather as an amplification and intensification of capitalist trade. Either way, globalisation and neoliberalism are intensifying economic competition and increasing income inequality across the world, albeit at different rates based on the political regime that individual nation states have in place (Green, 2017). The so-called skills-biased technological change has been a major driver in income inequality through placing a premium on higher-skills, whilst simultaneously reducing the labour market value of low-level skills (Green, 2017). More broadly though, since the 1980s, globalised capital in a financialised global economy has switched the balance of power and increased the proportion of profits going to capital at the expense of labour (Cahill and Konings, 2017). This shift is due to a combination of deregulation and significantly weakened trade unions, along with unrestrained capital movement and the dominance of corporations. With the global integration of markets and the rapid flow of capital, technologies and ideas, corporations are continually searching for more profitable environments regarding labour costs, taxation policy, and access to markets, so thus, offshoring labour and production to countries with more favourable conditions (Green, 2017). Low-skilled workers in developed countries are most vulnerable; their bargaining power is depleted, simultaneously increasing the leverage of corporations putting a continual downward pressure on wages; at the same time, due to corporate tax competition and the mobile nature of capital, state resources are being reduced and public services severely cutback (Cahill and Konings, 2017).

Whilst there have been large-scale economic changes across the globe over the last 40-50 years, the reasons for this are often subject to debate. Harvey (2005, p.2) describes neoliberalism as:

> A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade

It is the role of neoliberal states to create and maintain this institutional structure, although 'state intervention in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum' (Harvey, 2005, p.2). Harvey, however, suggests that neoliberalism can be interpreted in two ways:

- A utopian (theoretical) project in the reorganisation of international capitalism based on discourses of individual freedom associated with economic liberalisation and a minimal state
- A broad economic political project primarily geared towards achieving the restoration of the global economic elites' class power (2005, p.19).

Harvey argues it is the latter, as the capitalist class have successfully reconstituted their power via 'accumulation by dispossession'. According to Harvey (2005), a series of economic policies utilised by neoliberal states in the form of privatisation, deregulation, and competition have created quasi-markets. These institutional arrangements though, under the fallacies of neoliberal thought, instead of promoting individual freedoms, have actually legitimised and masked the balance of power swinging back in favour of capital at the expense of labour.

Harvey argues that neoliberalism effectively constitutes a premeditated attack on the working class, and can therefore be seen as revolution from above, not only to restore

upper-class power, but to also counter resistance from below. The post-war era saw something of a shift of power from capital to labour due to social democracy, which coincided with rising international socialist movements during the 1960s and 70s. The 'cojoining of labour and urban social movements throughout much of the advanced capitalist world augured a socialist alternative to the social compromise between capital and labour that had grounded accumulation so successfully in the post-war period' (Harvey, 2005, p.27). The various economic crises throughout the 1970s, such as oil price rises, stagflation, rising unemployment and industrial unrest presented a legitimisation crisis - in particular, the viability of capital and the fiscal integrity of government budgets through declining taxes (Harvey, 2005). For Harvey, neoliberalism set out to restore class power through a concerted attack on workers' rights, wages, and conditions. Neoliberalism could potentially be viewed as a global conspiracy to oppress the working classes through reducing the value of labour and an attempt to curtail the threat to capital accumulation posed by trade unions and the redistribution of wealth associated with the welfare state. Chomsky (1995) endorses such a perspective, describing a 'class war' which witnessed an onslaught on the working class through the disassembling of manufacturing and industry, which consequently, disorganised and individualised much of the labour force. Harvey (2005) argues that, whilst neoliberal theory promised liberation and world-wide prosperity with the creation of wealth, in practice wealth has been transferred upwards to global elites. At national level, wealth has been channelled from the mass population to the upper class, and on a global scale, from poor countries to richer ones. Privatisation has played a major role in this as the 'enclosure and the assignment of private property rights is considered the best way to protect against the so called "tragedy of the commons"' (Harvey, 2005, p.65).

Neoliberalism is nevertheless underpinned by discourses of economic liberalisation, which suggests by reducing trade barriers and stimulating free trade, then free markets, without government intervention, will increase economic efficiency, growth, and encourage technological innovation. Key policies include privatisation of state-owned and public enterprises, deregulation of the corporate and financial sectors, monetarism, and reduction in government spending and income. Neoliberal reform has spread via

international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. In order for developing countries or those in crisis to obtain loans, they were coerced into agreeing what is known as structural adjustment – institutional reform adopting policies based on privatisation, deregulation, and reduction in government spending. Neoliberalism has been so dominant because of the 'individual freedom' it seductively, but rhetorically promotes; whereas, in reality, true freedom is reserved only for the elite. Moreover, even when neoliberal discourse has conflicted with elite power, neoliberal values and principles have been immediately overridden as the latter took precedence – this has included bailouts for Wall Street, banks, and entire industries. Based on this evidence, one would be inclined to agree with Harvey's (2005) argument that neoliberal discourse is a smokescreen for dispossession and class interests.

Harvey (2005) suggests that neoliberalism changes the role of the state as it must not interfere in markets. The state, however, is contested territory, at least within political philosophy. Weber (1978) defined the state as 'a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'. Historically, under feudalism, lords nor the king could claim a monopoly over the use of violence – as their vassals, despite their commitment to serve, remained free to exercise power in their fiefdoms. From 16th century onwards, monarchs increasingly sort to control more by, in simplistic terms, centralising power and authority. According to Weber, this is where the modern concept of the state emerged via the art of governance. These ideas can be located in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, in which the objective of the exercise of power is to reinforce, strengthen and protect the principality, whilst disregarding any moral obligations. The art of governing therefore refers to the capacity to maintain the transcendent position of the prince by any means necessary. The modern state was nevertheless achieved by expropriating the means of political organisation and establishing the legitimacy of its rule (Weber, 1978). The state then became a centralised authority and the only actor with legitimacy over a defined geographical area with potential to use violence to back up this authority.

Modern states, as an organised political community, are typically composed of institutions including the government, legal system, military and the police. Giddens (1998) argues that modern states can intervene far more extensively in people's lives than those of the past because they have large and powerful bureaucracies which can tax, supervise and police the conduct of the people it governs. Modern states are therefore able to exercise a far greater amount of power and control than premodern states. Marxists nevertheless emphasise the role of nation states in perpetuating the dominance of the ruling class. Althusser (1969) for example, argues that the state acts to ensure political decisions are made which enable capitalists to continue accumulating wealth. Gramsci (1971, p.244) defines the state as the 'entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules'. Gramsci (1971) therefore views the exercise of power by the state through both force and consent. He suggests that the political society rule by force via the army, police, and judiciary. With the more recent growth of civil society, however, which consists of various institutions, he argues that these rule by consent via ideological hegemony – this is a form of ideological control in which dominant ideas, values, attitudes and beliefs are disseminated throughout society. Hegemony embraces all aspects of life by defining 'common sense', so it doesn't have to coerce or indoctrinate - these ideas saturate society and shape people's perceptions of self. These common-sense ideas are not neutral however, but represent the interests of the dominant class as common good, in turn, legitimising and cloaking the exercise of state power.

Foucault (1977) on the other hand, challenges the centralised view of the state by examining the shift from sovereign power to disciplinary power. He argues that power must be analysed at a localised level as, he claims, this is where it is most visible - in relations whereby actions modify other actions. Power can therefore be conceived as a relational force and which, by contrast, challenges the notion that power is concentrated. Foucault nevertheless turns traditional political science on its head by focusing on those subjected to power, as traditional hierarchical analyses tend to focus on those perceived to be at the top of power structures – the monarchs, rulers, government, politics, law, or

capital (Giddens, 1991). Foucault (1977) is however not primarily concerned with domination or exploitation, but in subjectivation – how humans are taught to be subjects through institutions and discipline mechanisms.

In medieval times, power was maintained through sovereignty, characterised by overt discipline, open surveillance, armed forces, direct repression, and external regulation. Monarchs and nobles used various forms of control and punishment to reinforce social order. For example, harsh forms of punishment, such as being hung, were once primarily a public spectacle, which enforced individuals to regulate themselves to escape a similar brutal fate, therefore maintaining order and security within a given territory. The shift to disciplinary power, however, can be associated with the rise of modern institutes such as asylums, hospitals, prisons, and schools. A particularly influential example of a modern institutional disciplinary mechanism is made explicit though the concept of the panopticon (Foucault, 1977). This is where prisons are purposely designed with a guard watch tower high in the centre so it can see all around and if necessary, keep constant surveillance on prisoners. He elaborates that if a prisoner feels like they are being constantly watched, they're worried about stepping out of line, so this surveillance is internalised by prisoners and acts as a discipline mechanism. Foucault (1977) argues that the panopticon is a generalisable metaphor for a system of surveillance in social life in which individuals never know whether they are being watched, so behave as if they are always being watched. All are therefore visible to a powerful gaze which itself is invisible but internalised through self-surveillance; this produces technologies of the self and docile bodies which are compliant. The genius of modern disciplinary power, Foucault adds, is that it doesn't feel like tyranny – conversely, it can reward individuals for self-discipline and productivity. What this represents nevertheless is a shift from punishment of the body as the soul is now the target through technologies of the self.

More broadly, Foucault (1972) is concerned with the development of new forms of knowledge regarding what people are like and the ways in which these forms of

knowledge can be used to control people. For example, specific explanations of how and why people commit crime support different systems by which these same people can be understood and measured, and therefore controlled. In other words, the disciplinary mechanisms utilised by institutions are driven by discourses within a power-knowledge nexus. For Foucault (1972), discourse essentially means a range of statements that provide a language with the way of talking about something. It provides a language with a way of representing knowledge about a particular subject matter at a particular given historical juncture. Discourse then, is about language and practice – what people say and give meaning to, and what action is attached. Physical things and actions exist independently, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse.

Discourse therefore has the power to define how the world is categorised and perceived as it constitutes a body of knowledge. Institutions then give prestige to particular bodies of knowledge, and bestow legitimacy on so-called 'experts' to speak and act within that discourse, in turn, perpetuating and reproducing the discourse (Foucault, 1972; 1977). Discourse is dependent on scientific knowledge to normalise and stabilise it, so it produces or generates its own objects of study in a circular motion via disciplines, knowledge, institutions and experts - all these are essential components of a discourse as they wouldn't constitute a discourse individually. Discourses are however material as there are real world implications – they shape bodies and minds. A psychiatrist or doctor, for example, can diagnose people with 'abnormal' mental or physical conditions. The enunciating subject has the privilege and power to designate someone, and this is uncritically accepted due to the one being subjected to power in a discursive space based upon a regime of truth. More generally, for Foucault (1972), everything is determined by discourses within which you exist – there is nothing outside of discourse.

Foucault (1977) nevertheless contends that modern disciplinary society has three forms of control: surveillance, normalisation (of behaviour), and examination. These are characterised by covert power, internalised regulation, self-surveillance, subtle control, and discursive repression by putting people in subordinate positions. This represents a

shift towards something Foucault (2008) later names governmentality. Foucault's earlier archaeological work focused on the shift from sovereign to disciplinary power through the examination of how individuals are subjected to discipline via the power-knowledge nexus of discourse. His later genealogical work, however, moves beyond understanding discipline at the localised level, and towards a macro understanding of a decentralised form of governance.

Governmentality can then be understood as when power and knowledge come together to create discourses that label and shape larger human populations. Foucault (2008) also introduces the idea of biopower which intersects with governmentality – biopower refers to the power over life, in which there are regimes of truth about the logic of bodies and consolidation of a norm, including their size, height, weight, race, birth, life expectancy and so on. Due to viewing power as dispersed at multiple levels, Foucault therefore moves beyond traditional notions of the state-centric model of governance. In this sense, the state isn't a fixed or monolithic entity, but rather, a complex and dynamic system of decentralised power relations diffused broadly through society. For Foucault, power is not only manifested in formal political institutions, but has also evolved over time into various societal mechanisms and practices which regulate self-conduct. Governmentality, in essence, can be understood as the conduct of conduct – whereby individuals internalise the logic of discourses and govern their own conduct in approved ways through technologies of the self.

Foucault (2008) argues that neoliberalism represents a shift to a new mode of governance inasmuch as the market has become the organising principle of society - so neoliberalism not only created a market economy, but also a market society. Neoliberal discourse plays a significant role in legitimising this through ideas, language, narratives, and policies which depict free markets as the most efficient and effective means of organising society, whilst promoting both individual freedom and economic growth. In this understanding, neoliberalism is more than an economic theory, it is a mode of power with material implications in social, political and individual domains. Foucault (2008) argues that essentially, neoliberalism created a new regime of truth for governing

human beings, and how they should govern themselves towards human capital formation driven by market fundamentalism. Neoliberal governmentality therefore fosters a particular form of subjectivity by promoting self-regulation, entrepreneurial behaviour, and individual responsibility, which, in turn, perpetuates and reinforces neoliberal discourse.

Foucault (2008) also suggests that state institutions, including the education and social welfare professions, have a crucial role to play in producing and sustaining the enterprise society by embracing and espousing market discourse. So, whilst neoliberalism advocates for limited state intervention, state institutions remain crucial actors in the implementation of neoliberal policies. This would support Harvey's (2005) thoughts that neoliberalism doesn't eradicate the state, but transform it into a facilitator in the creation of market forces by promoting privatisation, deregulation, and reduction in spending on social welfare, whilst emphasising private enterprise and market-driven solutions.

Bourdieu (1997, p.41), on the other hand, understands the state as the 'culmination of a process of concentration of different types of capital: capital of physical force or instruments of coercion (army, police), economic capital, cultural capital or (better) informational capital, and symbolic capital'. Bourdieu (1997, p.40-41) argues the state therefore possesses a metacapital which 'enables the state to exercise power over the different fields and over the different particular species of capital, and especially over the rates of conversion between them'. Therefore, the state has the power to validate neoliberalism as a worldview, or doxa – an unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were an objective truth – in both the habitus of individuals and collectively at the level of fields. Bourdieu (1998) nevertheless critiques neoliberalism for its emphasis on market forces and individualism, arguing that it exacerbates social inequality. Neoliberalism prioritises economic capital which perpetuates a hierarchical structure, while the emphasis on individualism favours those who are already in positions of dominance due to their possession of economic, cultural and social capital, leading to

concentrations in wealth and power. More generally, Bourdieu (1993; 1998) is interested in how neoliberalism affects cultural production and consumption, as cultural practices become commodified and subject to market forces, leading to the dominance of mainstream commercial culture over more marginalised forms of culture. In this sense, neoliberalism also shapes cultural norms and practices in ways that serve the interests of those already occupying privileged positions.

The social and material ramifications of neoliberal globalisation for the British working class have nevertheless been extensive. Large-scale economic restructuring has shattered their employment, systematically marginalised them from the labour market, decimated communities, fractured solidarity, and eroded traditional identity (Shildrick et al., 2012). Many post-industrial working-class communities today contain a disempowered and demoralised populace plagued with deep-rooted social problems associated with poverty, deprivation and disadvantage (Simmons et al., 2014; Shildrick et al., 2012; Ainley, 2016). NEET can then, be seen as a social class issue. Working-class youth have experienced processes of economic dispossession and enforced marginalisation under the guise of national economic interests against the backdrop of neoliberalism and globalisation (Simmons et al., 2020).

The Emergence of NEET

Despite youth unemployment being a structural issue associated with large-scale social and economic change as discussed above, the main response of governments to unemployed youth over the last four or five decades has been serial policy initiatives which aim to promote participation in education and training justified by the changing view of young people. Over the past 50 years, young people have increasingly been presented as 'lacking' – deficient in skills, knowledge, attitudes and aspiration. This view of young people began against a backdrop of economic crises and mass youth unemployment during the 1970s when both official and popular discourse claimed that the calibre of school leavers had declined, therefore placing responsibility both onto schools for failing to produce the skills and qualities required by employers, and onto

young people themselves (Ainley, 2016). The state then, rather conveniently, constructed young people as deficient shifting the debate away from a failing economy and lack of investment, and onto the shoulders of the education system and young people.

The perceived deficits in skills paved the way for the rise of training schemes initiatives delivered by the MSC. The first two initiatives of the MSC were the Job Creation Programme (JCP) in 1975, and then the Work Experience Programme in 1976 (WEP). Both paid a low allowance and provided experience in a work environment, supposedly to produce a higher-quality supply of young people who possessed transferable skills and knowledge for work (Mizen, 1990). The Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) followed in 1978, although this ceased to exist in 1983 due to low attainment and around two-thirds of its 'graduates' having no success in securing employment, promptly returning to signing on for benefits (Mizen, 1990). Further intervention in the youth labour market under the New Training Initiative in 1981. This led to the emergence of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), delivered by MSC with a huge budget, again though, based on the notion that young people lack the necessary skills and knowledge for the demands of working life (Mizen, 1990). YTS, however, shared many continuities with YOP, and was largely utilised to try and mask chronic youth unemployment (Finn, 1987; Mizen, 1995). More generally, alongside being viewed as a substitute for real work, the YTS has been criticised as poor-quality, offering low-skill training and used for cheap employer labour. Mizen (1995) also argues, overall, YTS served to reinforce divisions of labour and broader social inequality by producing unequally skilled young people.

YTS was supposed to be a long-term bridge between school and work, but had a severe inability to retain young people, who often disengaged preferring to search for 'real jobs'. At least one in ten school leavers also rejected such training, which was deemed politically unacceptable (Williamson, 2006). Those who didn't engage with or dropped out of such provision became known as 'status zer0'. Status zer0 was first introduced

in the late 1980s after changes to the benefits system whereby most 16-18 year olds were disqualified from state benefits, including unemployment benefit, and therefore removed them from official unemployment statistics (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). This now meant that describing 16-18 year olds as 'unemployed' became technically inaccurate as they were no longer given the 'option' for unemployment (Williamson, 2006). Status zer0 youth were instead offered a guarantee on a youth training scheme for a small allowance which could barely provide any kind of independence (Williamson, 2006). This can essentially be seen as a 'coercing of compliance' (Williamson, 2006) – parallels can be drawn to the more recent 'welfare-to-work' initiatives (Shildrick et al., 2012). Regardless, as recessions deepened and economic restructuring obliterated the youth labour market, training more young people simply wouldn't create more jobs, so there was always going to be a residuum of youth on the margins (Williamson, 2006).

Status zer0 was initially constructed as a technical concept to depict the status of young people 'doing nothing', and to differentiate them from those enrolled in education (status 1), training (status 2) or employment (status 3). Status zer0 however seemingly appeared as a metaphor to describe young people as 'worthless' (Furlong, 2006) and 'going nowhere' (Williamson, 2006), so it was a politically contentious term and was therefore replaced by NEET which was supposedly a more neutral alternative. NEET still categorises young people by what they are not, rather than who they are however (Furlong, 2006). Either way, a new problem category of youth had emerged - the unemployed young person now ceased to exist, replaced by a youth 'outside' education, employment or training which, implicitly at least, suggests that young people are not in education or work due to their own shortcomings or personal choice (Finlay et al., 2010). Status zer0 and NEET therefore kickstarted a trend of economically troubled youth, but the key difference between NEET and status zer0 however is that the NEET category has, over time, expanded and now incorporates young people up until the age of 24. This has broadened the makeup of the NEET population, meaning it has become a complex and chaotic concept due to including various sub-groups encompassing a broad range of individuals. As many young people do not fit neatly into one category,

NEET has lost much of its explanatory power but NEET young people have nevertheless become pathologised (Maguire, 2015).

The rise of NEET as a policy discourse in the UK can primarily be associated with the election of a New Labour government in 1997 and the emergence of the Social Exclusion Unit shortly thereafter (Maguire, 2015). Following two reports outlining strategies to reduce the number of NEET young people – *Learning to Succeed* and *Bridging the Gap* - the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) highlighted a lack of skills, education, and advice, guidance and information as key contributors to high NEET rates. It was argued that many young people were socially excluded due to being 'left behind', although this was, to a large extent, due to their own shortcomings; therefore, implicitly ascribing youth unemployment to a skills deficit, often with moralistic connotations, moving it from state responsibility to an individual problem and paving the way for further emphasis on supply-side solutions (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Deficit discourses about young people underpinned New Labour's wider focus on building human capital to combat social exclusion:

> The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience ... Getting this right offers the prospect of a double dividend. A better life for young people themselves, saving them from the prospect of a lifetime of dead-end jobs, unemployment, poverty, ill-health and other kinds of exclusion. A better deal for society as a whole that has to pay a very high price in terms of welfare bills and crime for failing to help people make the transition to becoming independent adults (SEU 1999, p.6)

Social exclusion is, however, a contested concept. Byrne (2005) regards social exclusion as a discourse used to depoliticise poverty arguing that social exclusion presupposes there is nothing wrong with social inequality as long as society is inclusive; it paints a cohesive society, representing the majority within a circle of acceptable conditions and the only problem being, that the excluded are not within it. In this way, discourses of social exclusion have implicitly sugar-coated poverty and discursively

restructured inequality as a problem of participation, whilst simultaneously camouflaging the rich and powerful (Byrne, 2005). Levitas (2005) generally agrees that the concept of social exclusion disguises the enormous inequalities in wealth and power in contemporary society but identifies three different discourses of social exclusion that have shaped various ideas and policy initiatives – Social Integration Discourse (SID), Redistributive Discourse (RED), and Moral Underclass Discourse (MUD). Whilst New Labour, according to Levitas, emphasised social integration through education and training, with some limited redistribution, there was also a focus on moral underclass discourses. Moral Underclass Discourses (MUD) tend to emphasise narratives of welfare dependency and moral turpitude as causing a lack of participation in education and employment. NEET young people then, in this understanding, can be viewed as either lacking in skills, morals, or some combination of both.

Education and Training: A NEET Solution?

Increasing interference in education and the connection between education and the economy accelerated throughout the New Labour years, underpinned by discourses of social exclusion, human capital and the knowledge economy (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Official discourse claimed that there was an increased demand for skilled and educated workers and that low-skilled work was a thing of the past as mass production shifted to the so-called third world. It was nevertheless argued that the new global economy offered unprecedented opportunities for those who were educated but little for those who were not, as 'knowledge work' was the future of the UK. This has driven the normalisation of post-compulsory education, as it was now supposedly the role of extended education and training to supply workers capable of adapting to the knowledge economy (Ainley, 2016).

Skill deficit discourses against the backdrop of social exclusion have therefore ushered in a drive for participation. Overall, education and training has expanded exponentially since the 1980s, viewed as the new economic strategy for national prosperity in the global marketplace. This strategy has presented social inclusion as an individualised

discourse – the state would assist by expanding educational opportunity, but ultimately it is the responsibility of the individual to equip themselves for competition in the new global division of labour. Education, training, and other supply-side factors have therefore been presented as the solution to globalisation, economic competitiveness, and youth unemployment (Levitas, 2005; Ainley, 2016).

As research highlights though, young people often repeatedly churn between poor quality training and education, temporary and insecure employment, and NEET status (Shildrick et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2014; Ainley, 2016). This challenges dominant discourses about education's role in relation to the perceived needs of the economy. The reality is that many of the NEET cohort engage in low-level generic skills training and employability programmes, which are not designed or equipped to create a high-skilled workforce for the so-called knowledge economy (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Cornish, 2018). Additionally, both Shildrick et al. (2012) and Ainley (2016) argue that the number of jobs requiring few or no qualifications appears to be growing alongside the growth of low-skilled work more generally, despite official claims about demand for skilled workers. Either way, many NEET young people still find themselves directed towards employability training programmes or other similar forms of generic skills training.

Superficially at least, employability is about the ability to be employed in a flexible economy. Employability, a bedrock of New Labour's third-way approach and active labour market policy, has become increasingly popular over the years. There are nevertheless different conceptions of employability, for example, associated with thresholds for labour market readiness, or for continued skills development in an ever-evolving flexible labour market (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Employability then, contains two overlapping discourses. The first is that individuals need to equip themselves to access employment opportunity. Secondly, due to a more precarious and flexible labour market (Standing, 2011), individuals must engage in continuous skill development, or in other words, life-long learning to sustain themselves within the

labour market, as they are under constant threat from dropping out if they do not keep up.

According to McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), 'employability' under New Labour was a 'supply-side orthodoxy' which emphasises the development of personal strengths and skills in increasing prospects of entering, sustaining and effectively dealing with any changes in the labour market. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) however construct what they believe to be a more holistic definition of employability, which not only focuses on individual factors, such as skills or personal circumstances, but considers external and structural factors, such as labour market opportunity and access to support. Although this would form a more comprehensive picture, policy under New Labour and subsequent governments has drawn on more narrow definitions, concerned exclusively with individuals' skills, knowledge and attitudes (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Crisp and Powell (2017) argue that employability has been colonised by neoliberalism to reduce spending on supporting young people, as well as simultaneously driving competitive, insecure and flexible labour markets. They draw on Wacquant's (2013, p.41) concept of 'neoliberal state-crafting' - 'whereby governments purport to curb, contain, or reduce the very poverty that they have paradoxically spawned through economic deregulation, welfare retraction and revamping, and urban retrenchment'. Leonard and Wilde (2019) agree with this line of argument, suggesting that employability essentially embodies neoliberal ideas as it is rooted in individual responsibility whilst simultaneously representing a shift away from previous approaches to welfare and spending.

Employability training has nevertheless been shown to be usually of a low standard and rarely offer any meaningful progression to young people in entering the labour market (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Cornish's (2018) examination of low-level employability training in a FE college emphasises its role in 'keeping busy' those young people who would have previously been routine manual industrial workers. In essence, Cornish (2018) argues that many employability training courses are effectively warehousing young people and concealing unemployment rates,

offering poor training and generic skills. More recent research by Cornish (2023) demonstrates that dominant discourses of employability may actually attenuate meaningful progression by reinforcing divisions of labour and skill in an FE setting. Drawing on Wacquant (2008), Cornish argues that low-level courses such as employability 'ghettoizes' young people who internalise labels of 'undesirables' and 'outsiders' due to often being segregated from mainstream education and students. Cornish argues that those on employability courses are spatially excluded by design, often in old buildings which are out of sight, restricting their access to 'fan into the city', where they can acquire support, resources and higher levels of credentials to progress. Generally, employability courses are low down the QCF and stigmatised sites, viewed as a dumping ground for the 'undesirables'. Cornish concludes employability courses in FE are largely sites of social control.

As employability training does not often offer entry to anything meaningful to upskill or progress on higher level courses, young people tend to repeat courses at the same level, rather like a 'merry-go-round' (Shildrick et al., 2012). For example, 'progression' for those involved in Cornish's (2023) research was starting another prevocational low-level course or being recycled on to a slightly modified employability course run by the same team of tutors – out of 51 students, over 70% enrolled on to a similar course, while 8 went on to a level 1 vocational course. Supply-side strategies in general are often ineffective with poor outcomes for young people because training more young people simply does not create more jobs (Ainley, 2016). The major flaw of the employability discourse is therefore that it operates on the assumption there is employment available for individuals to gain and sustain. This is why it is argued by Simmons and Thompson (2011), Shildrick et al. (2012), and Cornish (2018) that young people churn between low-level employability provision, poor employment, before back to NEET status. Parallels can be drawn from the pattern also evident amongst working-class adults in the revolving door of no pay/low pay (Shildrick et al., 2012). NEET young people are more likely to join this pattern of precarious employment primarily due to a lack of employment opportunity, rather than any perceived skill deficit or individual shortcomings (Maguire, 2015). In short, the dominant variant of employability is a

neoliberal concept, driven by an economic competitiveness discourse, which has personalised youth unemployment and reinforced NEET as an individual issue by contributing to deficit discourses about young peoples' lack of skills and work readiness.

As part of the broader employability strategy, there has been an extension of active labour market policies, such as emphasis on unpaid work placements as a means to get individuals 'work ready'. These schemes have usually operated in exchange for benefits, whereby recipients are required to engage in unpaid work placements with both the private and charitable sector (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). The Community Programme during the 1980s, Employment Action in the early 1990s, New Deal in mid-2000s, and the Youth Contract from 2010 onwards are examples of active labour market policies, which all incentivised employers to take on the young unemployed on unpaid placements to develop 'good work habits' and experience. Many evaluations of these schemes showed that they made little difference to employment prospects, as the majority returned to the dole after temporary spells in poor work (Dean, 2016). An exception was the relatively successful Future Jobs Fund created by New Labour in 2009, which offered those in receipt of benefit a temporary 6-month job on minimum wage within business or the third sector (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Additionally, Hirst (2002) conducted research with a range of JSA claimants and examined non-obligatory volunteering schemes. He concluded that they didn't offer much benefit in real terms as those who were volunteering stayed claiming JSA for much longer than those who were not. Those who were not volunteering moved off benefits much quicker due to putting their time and energy into job searching as opposed to volunteering (Hirst, 2002). Hirst did also find however that volunteering in work placements schemes did help enhance wellbeing, but despite all respondents reporting a positive impact, such as increased confidence and motivation, Hirst claims it made little difference to their employment prospects.

More recently, the lines between volunteering and unpaid work have become increasingly blurred. Volunteering has traditionally been considered an altruistic activity within the context of active citizenship, but it has increasingly been driven along more instrumental lines, often promoted as a way for young people to gain work experience and develop skills (Dean, 2016). New Labour first promoted this discourse, but it was intensified by the Coalition as youth unemployment grew. In the context of severely reduced paid opportunities for young people, the volunteer discourse was further entrenched within government advice to young people. The Coalition made extensive efforts to encourage young people to volunteer for the supposed employability benefits and rewards available (Dean, 2016). Various schemes such as the National Young Volunteers Service, the National Citizen Service, and Work Together, encouraged young people 'to consider volunteering as a way of improving their employment prospects while looking for work' (DWP, 2012). A range of volunteering initiatives were introduced aimed specifically at getting those from disadvantaged backgrounds volunteering, such as The Volunteering for Strong Communities project funded by the Big Lottery to engage hard to reach young people. The Work Together Scheme and the Volunteer Brokerage Scheme introduced a large number of volunteer centres. Many of these still exist and provide employability training for people of all ages, but mostly for marginalised youth (Leonard and Wilde, 2019).

Allan (2019) views volunteering and unpaid placements for the young unemployed as a form of 'hope labour', premised on the logic of the neoliberal self as a portfolio of investment and development under human capital theory. Hope labour implies deferred compensation, for example, that increased exposure and experience may possibly lead to future employment offering monetary rewards, but Allan argues that there is a large disconnect about what is promised and what the reality is. This is because, Allan (2019) suggests, employers do not value 'unpaid work experience' and that volunteering/unpaid placements rarely offer any opportunity for meaningful skill or network development. Smith (2010) contends that opportunities for high skills development are extremely uncommon as many unpaid work/volunteering

opportunities tend to be located in charity and non-profit sectors, with routine tasks, limited responsibility, or no real specialised task or activity. Wilson (2000) and Dean (2016) argue that despite the widespread belief that volunteering helps people find jobs, there is little evidence to support these ideas. Therefore, 'hope labour' is nothing more than a fallacy of human capital, exacerbated by competitive precarious labour markets, which paradoxically produces continuities in social inequalities. For example, Smith (2010) demonstrates that, due to class-constricted resources and opportunities, enhancing employability (human and social capital) is a strategy only available to middle and upper classes in reality, as they are in better positions to seek, find and take advantage of opportunities to build real technical skills. The working class on the other hand, lack the social capital to seek out employability enhancing activities - Dean (2016) also supports these points. Smith (2010) also highlights that higher status positions, such as journalism or architecture for example, have usually required internships, whilst the creative and cultural industries are increasingly excluding the working classes due to often lacking resources to fund unpaid work and develop the necessary portfolios of experience. Unpaid volunteer work in low-status positions are what Allan (2019) views as a 'poor man's internship', with no real benefit to gaining employment. Grant-Smith and Mcdonald (2017) have recently explored how unpaid work has extended into the graduate labour market, arguing that graduates are being exploited by employers under the enhancing employability rhetoric, which is, in turn, producing a further downward squeeze on the labour market.

Unpaid placements are not totally useless, however. As briefly mentioned above, sometimes volunteering and unpaid placements are a valuable way to boost confidence and wellbeing, particularly for those with ill-mental health (Hirst, 2002; Allan, 2019). Research nevertheless shows that many young people already have the skills, ambitions and attitudes to work, but just lack in meaningful opportunity (Simmons et al, 2014; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). For some NEET young people, however, it may just be the case of having the ability to articulate the skills they possess. For example, the 'employability skills' that employers mostly cite as lacking among young people today include communication, commitment, professionalism, time management, teamwork,

motivation, enthusiasm and confidence (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Although the majority of young people may already have these soft skills, they often lack in concrete demonstratable examples due to a lack of work experience – so unpaid experience, at the very least, may present them with the means to do this. Either way, there is little evidence to suggest unpaid work placements are beneficial to gaining paid employment or genuine opportunity for progression (Wilson, 2000; Hirst, 2002; Leonard and Wilde, 2019), so could be conceived as just another way to 'keep young people busy' and support social control whilst reinforcing divisions of skill and labour (Smith, 2010; Allan, 2019). Reiterating an earlier point, training young people and helping them develop personal skills does not simply create more jobs (Ainley, 2016; Crisp and Powell, 2017; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). More generally, given the lack of evidence for the benefit of these voluntary/unpaid work schemes, it appears the reason they continue to persist, is because of the strength of the discourses of employability and economic competitiveness. Seemingly, volunteering has shifted from being seen as something that is beneficial to others, to something that will help young people gain skills, experience, references and boost 'work readiness' (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Volunteering has therefore also been colonised by neoliberalism to govern young people through individualisation and responsibilisation – they are accountable for their own career management, work experience, and skill development (Dean, 2013).

So, an alternative reading to official deficit discourses is that the collapse of much of Britain's traditional industrial base has severely decreased the demand for young people's labour, leaving little option for them but to remain in education and training, or become NEET (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Generally, young people in Britain today spend more time in education and gain higher qualifications than preceding generations, although they are unlikely to do as well as their parents in terms of income and wealth (Ainley, 2016; Green, 2017). Twice as many continue in further education, and 50 *per cent* more gain degrees than in the 1980s (Green, 2017). More to the point, there is a serious mismatch between qualifications and employment opportunity. The expansion of education and training without increased labour market opportunities has

led to credential inflation, and a legitimation crisis of the education system (Ainley, 2016).

Superficially at least, discourses of the knowledge economy and education as a progressive force sound attractive, but they do not reflect the reality of the situation in which many young people find themselves. Young people are essentially trying to navigate a hostile labour market with poverty wages commonplace in the UK, along with job insecurity and negative work experiences. For example, in-work poverty has been on the rise since at least 2010, related to intensified neoliberal policies and the rise of the gig economy (Ainley, 2016). Moreover, the majority of foodbank users are already in full-time employment. Yet, despite all this, education and training are still promoted as *the* solution to youth unemployment. This seems to be more a reflection of successive governments' commitment to neoliberalism than a genuine belief as, under neoliberalism, supply-side initiatives are considered the only legitimate area for state intervention (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). The focus on supply-side initiatives is also supported by broader discourses of individualism and entrepreneurialism underpinned by various assertions about 'trickle-down economics' and meritocracy: the belief that anyone can rise to the top with hard work, talent and skill, and that the more an individual prospers, the more society as a whole will prosper. Based on this, it's possible to extrapolate, at least from an official standpoint, education and training, along with being the solution to youth unemployment, globalisation, and increasing economic competitiveness, is also charged with eliminating social and economic inequality. Ainley (2016) argues that 'the education system cannot bear the weight of this expectation that has been put on it, and is therefore losing legitimacy at all levels. The policy response to this tends to be… more education!' (p.23).

In light of this, education's role, contrary to official discourse, has now become largely one of social control. Ainley (2016) argues that essentially, British society has effectively moved its young people from employment to education, to education without employment. Whilst education has always played a role in social control for the

working classes to 'shackle minds' and 'civilise the class as a whole' (Ainley, 2016, p.67), waged labour has also been one of the major mechanisms of social control for young people. During the Fordist era, a 'basic education was sufficient for the majority in an economy characterized by mass production and a relatively low demand for high-skilled professional or managerial workers' (Avis, 2016 cited in Simmons and Smyth, 2018, p.238). Now with the collapse of the traditional youth labour market and generally diminishing opportunities for youth, education has become a substitute for employment for many young people. This is, Ainley (2016) argues, leaving young people running up a down escalator - deprecating qualifications and limited employment opportunity have twinned to create an environment where young people are getting 'all dressed up with nowhere to go' (p. 63). Education now plays a crucial role in excluding young people from the labour market; rhetorically encouraging aspiration, but paradoxically neutralising it whilst assigning them to the reserve army of labour (Ainley, 2016). This means that, for Ainley, extended education and training is playing a key role in shaping and reinforcing class divisions of knowledge and labour, not only by sifting and sorting young people into their 'proper position', but essentially replacing youth wage labour for some young people altogether, with the hope of achieving an adult one someday.

NEET and The Underclass

The Moral Underclass Discourse (MUD) Levitas (2005) identified attached moralistic connotations to social problems, such as unemployment, crime and deprivation, meaning these problems required punitive policy measures, and further education and training to remoralise youth. The skills deficit discourse explanation for youth unemployment therefore become entangled, at least to an extent, with moral turpitude within the NEET category. MUD is, either way, connected to broader underclass debates that have been ongoing since at least the 1980s. There are a number of different views and ongoing debate about the so-called 'underclass', including what it is, how it is defined, and who or what is included. One such definition however can be found in MacDonald (2006):

> A social group or class of people located at the bottom of the class structure who, over time, have become structurally separate and culturally distinct from the regularly employed working-class and society in general through processes of social and economic change (particularly de-industrialisation) and/or through patterns of cultural behaviour, who are now persistently reliant on state benefits and almost permanently confined to living in poorer conditions and neighbourhoods. (pp.3-4)

MacDonald discusses four different views on the underclass, but the two main arguments relate to classical structure and agency perspectives. The most popular, yet most controversial argument is known as the cultural underclass theory associated with moral turpitude. The underclass here is basically based upon the idea that there is a group of people at the bottom of society who embody values which oppose the 'respectable' mainstream – such as antisocial, antieducation, and anti-work attitudes, whilst crime, promiscuity, drugs and alcohol are common features of their daily lifestyle (MacDonald, 2006). These ideas re-emerged as fashionable in the 1980s and 1990s and can be associated with Charles Murray (1990; 1994). Murray insists that most social problems are caused by a culture of dependency due to an overgenerous welfare state and family breakdown. Murray views this new group as a 'dangerous class' which threatens to morally corrupt society.

The second argument is that of the structural underclass, in which the underclass, if it does exist, is understood to have emerged from large scale social and economic change, particularly deindustrialisation which has had extensive implications for the British working class as discussed earlier. The main driver therefore being a scarcity of legitimate and respectable employment, in which sometimes, potentially deviant cultures can develop in response to depressed local labour markets. More recent work by Shildrick et al (2012) exemplifies how deregulated markets have manifested flexible, casualised forms of poor work, which keeps workers on the periphery – these are the new working poor who occupy a revolving cycle of no pay/low pay. These old factions of the working class, along with the unemployed, would constitute the structural underclass. So, more generally, whilst structural theories do not necessarily deny the

existence of an economic or structural underclass, they differ in their origins when compared to cultural underclass theory – if deviant cultural behaviours do exist, they are largely derivative from structural inequalities rather than the primary cause of an underclass. In short, so-called underclass members are seen as victims of circumstance rather than the antagonists.

Whilst there is little evidence to support a cultural underclass, these ideas have been hugely popular amongst politicians and policy makers on the Right – there have, for example, often been claims by prominent Conservative members that there are up to three generations of families that have never worked. It has been suggested that workless parents pass on their poor attitudes, values and idleness to their offspring, which then reproduces as they transmit the same idleness to their children. These discourses have had some significance in shaping policy responses to the poor, such as retrenchment of the 'nanny' state. This has included large scale welfare reform which supposedly encourages dependency by zapping away moral fibre. MacDonald and colleagues have conducted extensive research into the 'cultural underclass' debate and the 'three generations of worklessness' claims, analysing marginalised groups' attitudes, values, lifestyles, behavioural patterns, and history. Despite the popularity of these ideas, little evidence of intergenerational worklessness has ever been found (Shildrick et al., 2012). It is possible for three generations to be out of work at the same time (multigenerational worklessness), but no evidence has ever been found whereby a family has not worked for an entire three generations (intergenerational worklessness). MacDonald et al. (2013) describe their research as 'hunting the Yeti' due to the elusiveness of evidence to suggest the existence of families characterised by three generations of worklessness. Despite their specialised fieldwork designed for the purpose to find such families, they did not manage to do this whilst working in some of the most deprived places in the UK.

MacDonald et al. (2013) did however manage to locate some families in the old industrial heartlands, wherein structural disadvantage has become spatially

concentrated, that had two generations currently out of work (multigenerational rather than intergenerational). This still was rare, but usually included a member of the middle-aged generation out of work due primarily to poor health (although they wanted to work but were unsuccessful in finding work, often becoming 'discouraged workers'). The other workless member was from the younger generation, so the offspring who, due to the absence of resources and general disadvantage, against a backdrop of depressed local labour markets, were struggling to find work also. Despite two generations being simultaneously out of work, they both however shared the positive evaluation of employment, and it was unacceptable to the parents that their son or daughter were not currently in work, whilst their situation as welfare recipients was not in the slightest any bit glamourous or desirable. MacDonald et al. (2013) conclude that this wasn't about a welfare dependency story, but a deprivation story. So, despite populist stereotypes espoused by politicians, the tabloids and mainstream media about the causes of poverty and unemployment, research also demonstrates that most NEET young people have quite traditional values and aspirations for a job, a home and family life, although many of them do have low expectations – or, in other words, they see bleak futures (Simmons et al., 2014; 2020). There is nevertheless little evidence of an identifiable underclass, at least culturally, although it is clear that certain individuals and groups have experienced far-reaching processes of 'economic marginalisation' which have, in some cases, led to feelings of anger, frustration and alienation (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; MacDonald, 2006; MacDonald et al., 2013).

Regardless, these ideas surrounding worklessness continue to infiltrate the popular imagination, often espoused by those in positions of power – MacDonald et al. (2013) describe them as 'zombie ideas' due to their resistance to die despite evidence to the contrary. Underclass theory seems to have a certain popularity within official discourse, potentially because it serves certain political ends (MacDonald et al., 2013). A government committed to neoliberalism, for example, can justify the implementation of punitive measures, such as limiting RED (Levitas, 2005) - redistributive policies associated with the welfare state. Evidently, recent governments have got tough with a hardening of stance, including a rollback of the state with means-testing. This seems to

be, however, a return to Victorian values with the notion of less eligibility, judging the poor as deserving or undeserving.

Youth, Subcultures and Marginalisation

Underclass discourses are nothing new and have been around in various forms over many years, whether through the rough and respectable working classes, the social residuum, the deserving and undeserving poor, or the dangerous classes of Victorian Britain, and even as far back as the Middle Ages (MacDonald, 2006). 'Respectable' fears about a socially separate groups that threaten to morally bankrupt society usually centre around the position of youth (Pearson, 1983). As discussed earlier, there have always been worries about youth as a distinct separate social category with values that oppose the mainstream (Gillis, 1974; MacDonald, 2006). The social category of youth is not fixed and evolves overtime in line with changing social, cultural and economic influences (Gillis, 1974; Griffin, 1993). Put simply, youth is not biologically determined, but constructed through social processes.

Hall and Jefferson (1989) emphasise the construction of youth through a lens of 'youth culture', in which youth identities are formed in response to cultural shifts, economic changes and political contexts. They argue that subcultures play a huge role in how young people create their own identities and expressions to assert themselves in response to the challenges and limitations faced due to societal structures which disadvantage them. Similarly, Hebdige (1988) is well known for critically exploring the concept of youth subcultures and their styles in post-war Britain. He suggests that subcultures, such as punks and mods, emerged as a form of resistance to dominant mainstream culture, in which they utilise symbolic forms through fashion, music and other stylistic elements to challenge and oppose dominant values and norms. For Hebdige, it is important to decode these symbols of style within subcultures which reveals deeper meanings behind actions and behaviour, rather than simplistically viewing them as deviant. Broadly, he views such expression through style and symbolism as ways to create and assert a valuable but distinct identity and voice to rebel

against oppressive social and power structures. Pearson (1983) also argues this point in examining how music and fashion provide the means to rebel and resist dominant norms and values. Exploring space and interaction within clubs, music venues and other social gatherings, he argues that young people negotiate and construct identities which not only act as a site of resistance, but also provides a sense of belonging, value and solidarity within the context of broader social constraints. Many scholars have critically examined so-called deviant subcultures of youth. Particular attention is paid to cultural processes in which youth actively engage in to create their identities, often through distinct styles, music, fashion, or other forms of expression that signify allegiance and belonging to groups/subcultures – the general argument is that such subcultural identities form as a way to develop and assert agency in response to structural inequality and limited opportunities. So, particular youth subcultural values, attitudes and behaviours could potentially support arguments about a cultural underclass, but it is important to remember however that these develop in response to structural inequalities.

Moreover, whilst subcultures may provide youth with a subjective sense of inclusion, paradoxically the behaviour associated with cultural identities can serve to disadvantage young people in a process of 'advanced marginalisation'. Wacquant (1996; 2008) is best known for studies on advanced urban marginality in the context of American cities, which refers to complex and multifaceted social, economic and spatial exclusion. Wacquant (2008) argues that a range of interconnected factors such as poverty associated with deindustrialisation and globalisation, limited access to resources exacerbated by punitive welfare policies, racial stigmatisation and segregation, and inadequate infrastructure interact to consolidate socially isolated and deeply impoverished urban areas he refers to as 'hyperghettos'. Whilst Wacquant places more emphasis on overarching structural factors in producing urban marginalisation, he also demonstrates how individuals within hyperghettos adopt certain cultural attitudes, behaviours and responses as coping mechanisms to enforced structural constraints. These choices to local inclusion however inadvertently reinforce their disadvantage in a perpetual cycle of marginalisation. Youth studies scholars have significantly contributed to the discourse of advanced urban marginalisation, not only in exploring

the interaction of structural inequalities and youth agency in driving the development of subcultures, but also in examining how youth navigate and negotiate their identities in marginalised spaces (Hebdige, 1988). Mungham and Pearson (1976), for example, shed light on the resilience and creative responses of marginalised youth through their strategies for survival, resistance and creation of alternative social spaces. There is nevertheless a general consensus in youth studies literature that urban marginalisation is not solely a product of structural inequalities, but also driven by the agency and resilience of youth.

My own MA by research (See, Connelly, 2018 and Simmons et al., 2020) examined processes of marginalisation and supports prevailing arguments. This was an ethnography critically exploring how working-class young men's cultural identity contributed to keeping them NEET. Many of the young men in my research, superficially at least, would appear to embody behaviours and lifestyles typically associated with a cultural underclass, including violence, drug taking, engagement in the informal economy and other illicit activities. It was important however to delve deeper and decode the game being played within their environment which made explicit that their cultural identity – which was an embodiment of class and race - was shaped primarily by the local value system of their community in the context of depressed youth labour markets, deprivation and disadvantage. Their identities were synonymous with 'street culture' and local understandings of black urban masculinity - stereotypical images often associated with coolness, danger and promiscuity. Being part of a gang, listening and watching popular gangster films and music, certain dress styles and ways of speaking, taking/selling drugs and engaging in crime and violence were all embodied social practices that offered symbolic value and a sense of belonging to the estate. This acted to create counternarratives to middle-class culture enabling the young men to constitute themselves as subjects of value and find a place of belonging in their struggle for recognition. MacDonald and Marsh (2005) suggest working-class young men encounter extreme difficulty in the transition from youth to adulthood, with the loss of the traditional youth labour market and manual masculine employment associated with working-class men on the whole – they call this 'displaced masculinities'. The practices

that actualised their local identities however, associated with illicit activities and the informal economy, offered a subjective sense of inclusion but contributed to keeping them NEET within a process of 'advanced urban marginalisation' (Wacquant, 1996).

Similar is evident in Back's (1996) research examining the relationship between youth, music, ethnic identity and place, mapping how certain images have infiltrated the psyche of the white working class. Back argued that patterns of migration and socioeconomic change have, in some urban locations, resulted in a "fashioning and re-fashioning" of interracial friendships that generates a cultural hybridity (Back 1996, p. 184). He talks of a 'neighbourhood nationalism' that transcends racial boundaries as different ethnic groups grow up together and creatively borrow from each other's culture to create 'local' identities. Similarly, the young men in my research defined their own value system and created counternarratives in acquiring different forms of resources that are valued on their estate, which offered status through symbolic legitimisation. The resources available were born out of a form of culture sharing in which local black street culture had been renegotiated and remade with white working-class young men, and although these local identities held little exchange value on the outside, they protected from marginalisation at the local level. Whilst inside resources give value, status, and recognition, and are important resources in the locality, choosing this path to inclusion, has ramifications in the wider context as it has negative facets associated with crime, gangs, and violence. In this sense, the dominated contribute to their own subjugation through symbolic violence - Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 167) say 'social agents are knowing agents who, even when they are subjected to determinisms, contribute to producing the efficacy of that which determines them insofar as they structure what determines them'.

As mentioned above, superficially at least, the young men in my MA research would epitomise characteristics of the cultural underclass, but despite being involved in the informal economy, they still projected mainstream attitudes and ambitions, at least in relation to home, family and work life which challenges underclass discourse. The takeaway point from this discussion is therefore that youth as a social category needs

examining to reveal deeper meanings because ideological representations of youth are not neutral, but heavily influenced by dominant discourses in society and can either serve to constrain or enable youth identities, opportunities and experiences (Halls and Jefferson, 1989; Griffin, 1993). As mentioned earlier, there has, at least since the emergence of youth related terminology, been twin competing discourses of youth as trouble/in trouble. These representations, for example, might initially idealise youth as symbols of hope, vitality and innovation, but still view them as needing rescuing or saving due to being at risk of their relative immaturity. Conversely, they may be depicted as problematic, rebellious and deviant, and therefore requiring control to be remoralised into civilised society (Pearson, 1983). NEET it would seem produces continuities in ideological representations of youth as essentially it parallels the dichotomies between youth as trouble/in trouble through the binary of 'on track' (EET) and those 'at risk' (NEET) of what is considered as socially acceptable transitions into adulthood (McPherson, 2021). Those at risk require education and training to transition successfully into adult work life, primarily driven by a skill deficit view of young people against a backdrop of economic competitiveness. Underclass discourse on the other hand, has attached moral deficits to skill deficits explanations, requiring behavioural, attitude and values change, meaning that potentially the NEET category has conflated discourse of economic competitiveness and social control.

More generally, NEET as a discourse holds marginalised young people accountable for their own predicament, often with moralistic connotations and derogatory overtones (Finlay et al., 2010; Crisp and Powell, 2017). There is a lack of critical awareness, at least in official circles, about the processes of social and economic dispossession and enforced marginality that many young people have experienced, especially those from working-class backgrounds (Harvey, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012; Maguire, 2015). The reality is that NEET is predominantly an issue of social class and only by connecting NEET young people to broader social and economic change can their position be understood (Finlay et al., 2010; Simmons et al., 2020). Such a perspective makes explicit that youth unemployment can largely be associated with neoliberal economic policy in the form of deindustrialisation and economic restructuring, but policy

responses have predominantly been aimed at supply-side initiatives that, in the process, through discursive policy constructs, have sugar-coated poverty, obscured inequality, and deemed young people responsible for their predicament. Individual agency is important, however, but choices are nevertheless shaped and structured by the social and economic matrix within which individuals and groups are located (Beck, 2002; Simmons et al., 2020). The rise of the term NEET is therefore part of broader shift in political discourse whereby various social and economic phenomena have, over time, been recast as deriving largely from individual failings rather than the structural inequalities in which they are based (Finlay et al., 2010; Maguire, 2015).

On a side note, as critically discussed in this literature review, NEET is a negative policy label. Although I am aware it is ideologically loaded, this thesis will retain the usage of NEET as it is an official policy label, and the provision the practitioners are providing has been driven by discourses of NEET as lacking in morals, skills, or both. NEET is therefore the precise reason those in this research are providing employability training.

Youth Work and NEET: A Triage Operation?

As discussed earlier, youth work has been incorporated into the extended education and training agenda against a backdrop of a broader economic competitiveness discourse associated with neoliberalism. This has been achieved through various policy changes, initially through the imposition of targets, then youth work was undermined as a specialised practice within integrated teams, before being further weakened through the outsourcing and commissioning model, and finally, substantial withdrawal of state funding under austerity. In the process, youth work has been repurposed to focus on particular goals justified by discourses of deficit to receive funding and stay afloat, primarily related to NEET young people and/or other problematic individuals and groups.

For Davies and Taylor (2019), this has played a large role in youth work once again being concerned with social control. Davies (2009) argues that some youth workers

tried to resist this instrumental agenda, but ultimately because their budgets were tied to viewing young people in this way, they were now employed to reduce and prevent risky behaviours, support reengagement, and prepare NEET young people for work. Youth workers are now really only engaging with young people if they have problems, or they are problems. At the same time, more and more youth workers have been incorporated into formal settings to receive funding which has diminished the principle of voluntary engagement and undermined the traditional informal nature of engagement with young people (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Batsleer, 2008; Bright et al., 2018). Young people's freedom of choice about whether to engage with youth workers/leaders had, for the last two centuries, been a key defining feature of the work (Davies, 2018).

In this way, youth workers have, following trends initiated in the 1980s, been colonised by an economic competitiveness discourse against a backdrop of neoliberal agendas, and are now effectively established as an arm of the state to deal with the problem of youth: unemployment, disaffection, disengagement, crime, anti-social behaviour. Taylor et al. (2018, p.88) highlight the key features of neoliberal youth work as:

- The imposition of prescribed outcomes on targeted groups via structured, time-limited initiatives and the conscious uncoupling of youth work from the Department of Education
- A deep distrust of young people's own peer groups;
- A stress on the worker as entrepreneur, 'inspiring young people with dreams of "making it"'
- Whilst classically concerned with the character of the young person, an explicit return to inculcating social conformity;
- A loss of faith in the voluntary relationship on the premise that as young people make poor choices their options are better predetermined;
- A depoliticisation of practice, a return to a generalised notion of young people;

- A desire to limit participation to agreed formal channels, reduce social action to volunteering and suppress direct political activity.

Youth work has therefore been redefined and repurposed to do the state's dirty work with an explicit focus on welfare, social control and economic imperatives, simultaneously suffering from both a paradoxical narrowing of its focus and a broadening of its practice. The irony is, whilst the rise of youth work was connected directly to industrialisation, NEET young people are, on the other hand, connected to deindustrialisation. Neoliberalism then, not only caused the rise of NEET through large-scale social and economic change, but has then used NEET young people, at least to some extent, as justification to reorientate youth work and redefine it along more instrument lines (Davies, 2009; Ord, 2016, St Croix, 2017). It seems the state, at least since the 1980s, has been opposed to open-access, process-led youth work – removing its informal education focus through group work, association and voluntary engagement. Either way, if we consider the broader ramifications of neoliberalism for the working class, it's possible to argue that, on the one hand, funding cuts (driven by failed neoliberal economic policies) and other neoliberal policies have caused the contraction and narrowing of youth work. On the other hand, new arrangements can be seen as something of a triage operation, utilised to fix, control and contain the mess caused by neoliberal economic policy (deindustrialisation, youth unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse) and its casualties – mainly sections of dispossessed working-class youth.

What is clear from this literature review is that youth work developed within the context of education and welfare which set in motion competing discourses of care and control related to the class struggle - youth work was initially concerned with some forms of social pedagogy, whether that was about social control or social change. This struggle collapsed in the 1840s and was replaced by top-down provision concerned with leadership and control to monitor and regulate the working class (Jeffs, 2007). The state later intervened in schooling, primarily as a form of social control to dilute further class

struggle and bolster economic competitiveness, whilst youth leadership continued to play a role in 'civilising the natives'. Some years later, the state then intervened in youth work, although this was, to a large degree, about compromise between control and care under the welfare state consensus.

Since then, youth work has become susceptible to the competing and shifting ideologies of the state and its changing views on young people and the poor more broadly; there were attempts to underpin youth work practice with a coherent body of knowledge in the form of social education and later informal education (the state did briefly support an educational approach between 1960-80s), although this has mostly only led to theoretical debates against a backdrop of unfavourable government policy. More recently, youth work has been colonised and codified by neoliberalism, which initially sought to, and succeeded in, wrestling back power from the working class, whilst at the same time, gradually introducing an economic competitiveness discourse into youth work through slow incremental changes largely based on skill deficit discourses of working-class young people. At the same time, the rise of NEET has further driven deficit discourses of young people, adding in an additional layer concerned with morals and values alongside a lack of skills. This has, effectively, repurposed and utilised youth work as a triage operation to serve control and economic imperatives considered essential to post-industrial neoliberal capitalism.

Literature Review Summary

This literature review has illuminated three discourses that have been pivotal in driving the development and structuring of youth work – care, social control, and economic competitiveness. These three discourses will be used to critically analyse and understand the practitioners' perspectives on employability provision for NEET young people. The concept of discourse has however been used throughout this thesis so far in a range of generalised ways, relating to a theory, an ideology or deployed more descriptively to understand particular phenomenon. It is therefore necessary to explain

how I am deploying the concept of discourse in relation to the proposed three discourses to ensure clarity.

To be clear, I am using the three central discourses to describe and conceptualise a range of ideas and ways of understanding young people, their circumstances, and how the state and its agents have, over time, engaged with young people. These discourses are used broadly to understand and explain a set of ideas and practices used by those in positions of power to think about and engage with youth, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. Below, I draw attention to where the discourse derived from and consolidate the ideas and practices associated with each particular discourse.

Care

This discourse is driven by humanitarianism, which can be traced back to responses to the social chaos associated with industrialisation and urbanisation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Smith, 2013; Bright et al., 2018), but also related, at least in part, to broader notions of moral advancement associated with the Enlightenment and the rise of more liberal social attitudes and values (Sapin, 2013; Jeffs, 2018). The ideas and practices of youth work associated with this particular discourse attempt to cater to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of young people, often based on pity and/or moral obligation (Bessent, 2009; Smith, 2013) – this is critically discussed in depth on pp. 57-66. As part of this discourse, some ethical theory will be drawn on when analysing the data, including, for example, the EoC (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002) which can help understand whether the practitioners' relationships with young people contain characteristics of care.

Social Control

This discourse was driven primarily by the formation of a class struggle deriving out of early industrial capitalism (Thompson, 1963), concerned with containing the dangerous

classes and the social problems often associated with them (violence, crime, drinking, gambling, *et cetera*) (Davies, 2009; Fusco, 2018). Youth work practices driven by this discourse attempt to address moral defects, and poor attitudes and values, by remoralising and reforming young people through leadership and education (Davies, 2009; Williamson and Coussee, 2019) – this is discussed in detail on pp. 66-73. As part of this discourse, some theory will be drawn on when analysing the data. For example, underclass theory (MacDonald, 2006; MacDonald et al., 2013) will be used to examine whether there is a moral hierarchy present in the practitioners' perspectives. Additionally, literature regarding the role, purpose and broader function of education (Ainley, 2016; Green, 2017) and employability (Crisp and Powell, 2017; Cornish, 2018) will be drawn upon, in conjunction with literature on the 'social problem' of NEET (Simmons et al., 2014; Maguire, 2015).

Economic Competitiveness

This discourse was driven by neoliberalism and a skill deficit view of young people against a backdrop of deindustrialisation and substantial growth of youth unemployment beginning in the 1970s (Taylor et al., 2018; Davies, 2019). This discourse has driven attempts to rectify perceived skill deficits, encapsulated by the exponential expansion of education and rise of skill training for young people (Ball, 2012; Green, 2017; Leonard and Wilde, 2019) – the literature review has argued that youth work has been incorporated into this agenda from the 1990s onward via targets and outcomes with a disproportionate focus on NEET (Ord, 2007; St Croix, 2017; Davies and Taylor, 2019). Whilst the role of neoliberalism in remoulding and repurposing youth work, supported by the emergence of NEET terminology is critically discussed on pp. 76-90; the rise of youth unemployment, NEET, and the re-emergence of deficit constructions of youth is examined on pp. 90-126; this analysis enabled the relationship between youth work and NEET young people to be conceptualised as something of a triage operation, summarised on pp. 126-129. In the data analysis, a range of literature on youth work, employability training and NEET young people is drawn upon to understand practitioners' views.

In sum, my research will seek to apply the broad range of ideas associated with these three discourses – control, care, and economic competitiveness – to practitioners' views and opinions in an attempt to understand what is going on in youth work employability provision.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology underpinning the research contained in this thesis. It starts by examining the philosophical position of the research before discussing how these ideas have shaped the chosen strategy and subsequent research methods. Whilst the research aims and questions were briefly discussed in the introduction, here they are unpacked further based on understandings and ideas articulated in the literature review, alongside a discussion of the rationale for the chosen sample and deployment of the concept of youth practitioner, as opposed to youth worker. There is then a discussion of the fieldwork and challenges encountered, which altered the direction of the fieldwork, meaning the research differs slightly from that set out in the original design. This is followed by an exploration of validity, ethics and how the data analysis was conducted.

Paradigm, Strategy and Methods

Research methodology infers particular philosophical positions about the nature of reality, knowledge and truth. Put simply, the conceptual background of research needs to be carefully considered in order to make informed decisions about how best to meet research aims (Crotty, 1998; O'Reilly, 2005). Needless to say, an incoherent conceptual framework would compromise the credibility of the research project as this ultimately determines the whole process. The paradigm shapes the approach or strategy which, in turn, determines the most appropriate methods to answer the research questions and achieve the research aims (Atkinson et al., 2001). The researcher's particular ontological and epistemological stances therefore shape and structure the research design and need to be explicit to ensure rigour (Pring, 2000).

Ontology is about the nature of reality, and 'what' can be known about that reality; epistemology is about the nature of knowledge, and 'how' we can know. They are intertwined, inasmuch as whether there is one single objective material reality whereby knowledge is 'out there' waiting to be discovered; or if reality is more subjective based

on perception and interpretation, meaning that reality and knowledge are socially constructed by the researcher (Brewer, 2000). At one end, there is the realism/positivist paradigm which claims objectivity, and at the other, constructivist/interpretivist, emphasising the relativism of the social world. Briefly, some positivists have claimed that there is a single material reality that can generate objective knowledge, whilst interpretivists recognise the subjective nature of human elements in the construction of knowledge through perception. Traditionally, these have been thought of as diametrically opposed and often, the interpretivist paradigm is viewed as inferior to the positivist paradigm which is often associated with the natural sciences (Crotty, 1998). More recently, however, there has been broader acceptance that the lines are not so clear cut and there is often overlap.

For this research, I have reconciled positivist and interpretivist paradigms by amalgamating a neorealist ontological stance with a constructivist epistemology. This position is compatible based on an understanding that there is a physical material world that can be acted upon, but without consciousness it has no meaning. Meaning is constructed through the processes of perception, acknowledging that each individual interacts, experiences and interprets the social and physical world in different ways (Denscombe, 2010). Individuals can, therefore, construct meaning in varying ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon, and although phenomena may exist independently of consciousness, it is only given meaning when a conscious being construes it in an interplay of subjectivity and objectivity. Thus, I am an active participant in the construction of knowledge of my reality, rather than it existing independently of me. By default, the same applies to the reality of my research.

This is not to challenge the positivist paradigm, rather it is the recognition that it cannot measure or construct the knowledge or understanding this research is attempting to build. Either way, the ultimate purpose of research is to further knowledge (Crotty, 1988). Based on this position, I am inclined to argue that my ontological position is inconsequential, so long as I am truly committed to my epistemological position – if all

knowledge, meaning and understanding is subjectively constructed, then I can never know the 'true' nature of reality because I can't transcend the parameters of my socially based constructions in which to view the objective world from an uncontaminated perspective (Crotty, 1998; Denscombe, 2010). In sum, I'm not in any way attempting to deny the existence of a physical material world that can be acted upon, rather acknowledging the relativism of the social world and the interpretivist nature of knowledge about it.

Either way, I deemed that a qualitative approach would be most appropriate for this research as it is mainly to do with experiences and opinions, rather than facts or figures (Atkinson, 1990; Crotty, 1998). A qualitative framework would therefore enable an exploration of lived experience by drawing rich, descriptive data from participants (Denscombe, 2010; Creswell, 2009). As noted above, the research strategy did change but was still located within a qualitative approach – more is discussed about this in the fieldwork section below. The initial idea was to utilise ethnographic methods (O'Reilly, 2005; Soyini Madison, 2012), such as semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes. Ethnography is contested territory (Brewer, 2000; Atkinson et al., 2001), but typically, it has been used to study 'closed' cultures by uncovering meanings and perceptions on part of the participants, usually viewing these understandings against the backdrop of their worldview (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Bradford and Cullen, 2012). The essence of ethnography therefore tends to focus on the everyday and the mundane rather than the unusual (Hodkinson, 2005). The identity of individuals involved is largely unimportant; what the research is trying to achieve is a greater understanding of regular, but convoluted social relations and processes.

In ethnography the researcher usually immerses themselves within the field which demands a significant amount of time to be dedicated to the site, usually deploying a range of methods (Brewer, 2000). I am, however, not studying culture *per se*, rather individuals' views and opinions; my fieldwork has multiple sites, although I did plan to use multi-methods – semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes. Therefore,

the research cannot strictly be considered a full ethnography. Qualitative methods enable the drawing out of thick descriptive data on social processes, which can provide access to the complexities of interrelated factors and assist in building a well-rounded picture of any area of social life under investigation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

My position outlined above, a constructed reality based upon human conception, shaped my choices and understandings of methods for data collection. As, from my perspective, knowledge is not 'out there' waiting to be measured or quantified, I needed to entice data from participants. This means asking questions of people to understand their views and opinions, so semi-structured interviews were chosen. Observations were also used to view the practitioners' practice with NEET young people. Although observations can also be associated within a positivist paradigm, there is still a process of interpretation in which sense making and meaning is assigned from the perceptions of the researcher (Atkinson, 1990; Crotty, 1998). Either way, in my view, I planned to use ethnographic methods to gain insight into practitioners' views and opinions about employability provision for NEET young people and what they think they are doing with them in practice.

Based upon themes evident in the literature, and tailored towards the research aims and questions, I devised a range of interview questions around the practitioners' views and understandings about youth work and employability, NEET young people, and the relationship between them. Prior to beginning the research, I conducted two pilot interviews to check whether the interview questions could generate the type of data needed. Once I was satisfied, I started the fieldwork.

Research Aims

The above strategy and methods would enable the following research aims to be met:

1. Critically analyse youth practitioners' perspectives on employability provision for NEET young people.
2. Critically consider the relationship between NEET young people and youth work employability provision.
3. Theorise and develop critical understanding of youth work employability provision for NEET young people.

This research set out to essentially examine the changing relationship between youth work and NEET young people, through critical analysis of practitioners' perspectives on employability training provision. Little has been written about this, with the exception of Miller et al. (2013), although this is from the perspectives of a small number of NEET young people, and is, in my opinion, rather weak scholarship with confusion amongst concepts and various unsubstantiated claims. There is no literature on provision for NEET young people from practitioners' perspectives. Analysing youth practitioners' perspectives will therefore enable an understanding of youth work employability provision and its relationship to NEET young people.

As discussed in the introduction, due to the challenges associated with the polarisation of what is understood as traditional youth work, and the rise of variants that mimic and threaten to incorporate it, the research design required further careful thought. Firstly, terminology is fundamental to this research. A conscious decision was made to use 'youth practitioners' to encapsulate traditional youth work and its variants of work with NEET young people in general. The rationale behind this is relatively simple – it was anticipated beforehand, and then became clear during the research that, although many participants believed they were doing 'youth work', they were not working towards the principles of traditional youth work. Some participants were working in contexts where traditional youth work principles were unachievable, and therefore, they cannot be

considered to be doing youth work *per se* (Davies, 2009). To refer to all the participants in this research as youth workers, would conflate youth work with other forms of work with young people which doesn't embody the same principles, and could contribute to the broader denigration of youth work as a specialised practice. The concept of youth practitioner will nevertheless enable a theorisation of contemporary youth work employability provision. To reiterate an earlier point, the research is trying to provide new and novel understandings of youth work employability provision, rather than make claims about traditional youth work, although this will be achieved by applying existing ideas that have shaped youth work to the data.

Another area that required careful consideration is the sample of participants – how to define the concept of youth practitioner (understood as a contemporary youth worker), and also how to present a fair and reasonable picture. The fundamental criteria for the sample was that the participants must be in youth work training, or have recently undergone youth work training, which enables the concept of youth practitioner in this research to be understood as a contemporary youth worker whether or not they are working towards traditional youth work principles. There was also further justification for this criteria as those who have been in youth work for a long time may have more awareness about the challenging climate as they have experienced multiple shifts in relation to reduced funding and the imposition of targets, and often, have quite strong views, mainly directed towards the state (St Croix, 2017; Jeffs et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018). This research focused on the views and opinions of early-career youth practitioners (those still in training or have undergone youth work training within the last five years). The participants have been socialised into the prevailing neoliberal climate, meaning they may lack knowledge about the challenges and journey of youth work due to being socialised into the more contemporary variants of it. To support this rationale, the practitioners were also questioned on their knowledge of youth work history to which they knew little, justifying the focus on early-career youth practitioners.

To meet the above research aims, the following research questions have been devised:

- What are the youth practitioners' perspectives on employability provision for NEET young people?
- How do youth practitioners' view NEET young people and their role in working with them?
- What impact do dominant discourses about NEET young people have on the practitioners' perspectives?

The first research question is aimed at gaining an overview of the provision the practitioners are working within, the service aims, purpose and methods. And also establish the practitioners' thoughts and feelings on the employability provision they are providing for NEET more generally. The second question is vital in understanding how the practitioners perceive their role and what they think they are doing with NEET young people. Their views and opinions on NEET and their role contribute to shaping their practice. This will enable the data to be analysed using ideas deduced from the literature – do they believe they are saving souls, keeping NEET young people on the straight and narrow, preparing them for work, offering general help and support, or policing them, for example? The third research question investigates whether deficit constructions of working-class youth play any role in the practitioners' perspectives. This will enable a fuller understanding of how they perceive their role and what their aims are within it. After all, it is these dominant discourses that justify the funding for 'youth work' with particular types of young people. This question was also part of the rationale for early-career youth practitioners.

I will create knowledge by applying three discourses deriving from the literature – care, social control and economic competitiveness – to the data to interrogate practitioners' perspectives and develop novel ideas and new understandings about youth work employability provision for NEET young people. In other words, through exploring what the youth practitioners are trying to do, what they think they are doing, and why,

I am attempting to build on current knowledge by using ideas about how youth work practice and provision has been shaped over time. This will address gaps in knowledge by providing a robustly theorised picture of contemporary youth work employability provision and its relationship to NEET young people.

Sample

Sampling is a significant element in research as it is essential that participants adequately reflect the 'research problem' (Denscombe, 2007). In this instance, a purposive sample was used. Crucially, participants had to be working within employability and with NEET. All the participants were from Yorkshire, aged between 19-39, and early-career practitioners (still in training or completed youth work training within the last five years).

The sample was accessed through the University. In October 2019, I attended second and third-year students' classes and gave a brief talk on my research plans, identifying potential participants. I then spoke to them individually to develop some rapport, before taking their contact details. I initially gained eight contacts, although three of these became elusive, and eventually, completely unresponsive to my emails during the process of negotiating a time and place to meet. A few weeks later I attended classes again to catch up with some students who weren't sure where their placement was going to be. I collected six new contacts and this time also asked for their mobile phone number so they were easier to contact. During the fieldwork, Covid-19 struck, which meant my research came to an abrupt end. On recommencing several months later, a number of the practitioners who I had already interviewed had left the University. Consequently, I recruited another six practitioners who had just moved into their second year. In total, there were seventeen participants**.** Thirteen were female, four male, and all of varying ages – reflecting the makeup of the youth and community work course, which is predominantly female and includes a higher than average cohort of mature students. A table of participants can be seen below.

Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Sector	Experience
Sophie	35	Female	Black British	Voluntary	4 years
Charlotte	37	Female	Black British	Voluntary	2 years
Leah	31	Female	White British	Local Authority	2 years
Tara	20	Female	White British	Private	2 years
Liam	27	Male	Black British	Local Authority	3 years
Lucy	35	Female	White British	Local Authority & Voluntary	4 years
Mel	20	Female	White British	Voluntary	2 years
Paula	36	Female	White British	Private	2 years
Sam	30	Female	White British	Voluntary	2 years

Elizabeth	23	Female	White British	Private	2 years
Roy	25	Male	White British	Private	2 years
Chloe	20	Female	White British	Local Authority	2 years
Gary	27	Male	Black British	Voluntary	4 years
Alice	28	Female	White British	Voluntary	3 years
Claire	21	Female	White British	Voluntary	2 years
Tony	39	Male	White British	Voluntary	3 years
Helen	20	Female	White British	Private	2 years

Table 1.1: Table of Participants

Fieldwork

In total, I conducted seventeen interviews which spanned between thirty to ninety minutes and were carried out, as far as possible, in an informal conversational manner to stimulate dialogue and depth of discussion. This enabled me to gain detailed insight by exploring participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings from their subjective viewpoint. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to probe into the world as

individuals know it and encapsulate their unique perspective. They also provide the opportunity to expand and elaborate, check for clarity, or follow up any particular areas of interest (Bradford and Cullen, 2012). This proved true, as the more interviews I conducted, the more familiar I became with potential responses to the questions and I was able to use this to generate a greater depth by teasing out more detail, such as following up interesting points. The disadvantage of interviews is that there is always a danger of using leading questions, largely as researchers are humans, not machines (Bell, 1999). I recognise the inevitably that I hold thoughts and personal views on the research subject. I tried to be reflexive by consciously stepping back from my own experiences, listening to what was said without imposing my own view, and not interjecting until they had fully answered the open-ended questions. This limited any potential of me, consciously or subconsciously, leading or pushing the conversation in a particular direction. It also enabled scope for the participant to freely express themselves to ensure that their responses are 'likely to reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent' (Denscombe, 2010, p.165).

Observations were chosen to supplement interviews as the plan was to hear what participants had to say about what they think they are doing in their practice and why, and then observe what they actually do as the two are not always in equilibrium. An individual can profess particular thinking, actions and behaviour, for example, due to social norms or professional obligations, but may not actually embody or enact them in practice. This means that there can be considerable disjunctures between what a person says they do and what they actually do. As such, interviews would capture their views and opinions, and observation would examine their actions and behaviour.

The fieldwork started off well. I had conducted several interviews and completed five placement visits, when my research was abruptly interrupted in March 2020 by Covid-19, so I applied for a suspension of my studies. It was clear my fieldwork was going to be affected. This began as an initial 3-month suspension, later extended to 6 months due to repeated lockdowns. Although I did not officially lose any time on my PhD, the

research with my participants was time specific – I'd interviewed them about their placements, but I now wouldn't have the opportunity to make observations of them all. The ones that I had observed provided limited data. Some of the participants had now left the University so I had to recruit new participants to replace them.

After multiple lockdowns, tiered restrictions including social distancing, and potential for further lockdowns, it was difficult to arrange new placement visits. Many student placements were suspended, or they were working in some other capacity – such as home and hybrid working. This required a rethink of my research methods with my supervisor and it was agreed further interviews via an online platform would be the way forward. It was already apparent that a picture was emerging from the data, with specific themes coming up repeatedly in the interviews. It was nevertheless agreed that I would carry on with interviews until I reached the point of saturation to maximise the creditability and trustworthiness of the research.

I have over 21 hours and 30 minutes of interview data, which has been transcribed verbatim. I also have a large chunk of field notes from my completed placements visits that totalled around 15 hours, in which I observed numerous activities and group work sessions. I cannot, however, claim that the research utilised ethnographic methods. Rather, I am now claiming the research took a broad qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. Although this reduced the 'reach' of this research, this is due to external forces beyond my control. Nevertheless, the fieldwork still enabled the research questions to be successfully addressed. The data reached saturation and a detailed picture emerged from the practitioners' perspectives, which permits an original claim to knowledge.

Validity

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that there is always an air of doubt placed upon the representation of qualitative research due to its small scale, meaning there may be a lack of transferability of findings to other settings or contexts. Due to the

interpretivist nature of qualitative research, soundness of research can be measured based upon reflexivity (Denscombe, 2010; Lumsden, 2019) - often unspoken assumptions that rest beneath the surface of research are axiology and the positionality of the researcher, which are concerned with their values, beliefs, and relationship to the research. There is little prospect of the qualitative researcher achieving an entirely objective position from which to study the social world (Lumsden, 2019). This is because the ideas the researcher uses to make sense of the world are also a part of the social world. We can't stand outside the social world in order to gain some sort of vantage point from which to view things from a perspective uncontaminated by contact with the social world (Denscombe, 2010; Crotty, 1998). From my own understanding, all research is theory-laden and cannot be neutral or objective, as we can't transcend our own perceptions as the research agenda has been shaped by preconceived perspectives and ideas arising from either theoretical presuppositions or life experiences. Even the quantitative researcher who claims to be objective and scientific, will still make subjective choices, such as what statistical measures to apply; and use interpretation as they utilise their perception in all stages of decision making (Atkinson et al., 2001). Assumptions, therefore, can potentially shape the outcome of the research, and what is found is shaped by subjective choices made about the methodology (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004).

Reflexivity is crucial, particularly for qualitative research. This means making one's stance explicit in a rigorous examination of one's personal commitments or prior assumptions (Brewer, 2000; Lumsden, 2019). Everyone has ethical and political positions, this is not bias, bias is not acknowledging them. As discussed at the start of this thesis, I have a close personal relationship with this research. I believe it was important for me to be open and honest about how this research reflects my own identity and personal interest in this specific topic; being categorised as NEET during my teenage years, to then working with NEET young people as a youth worker for a number of years. There is no doubt this has played a prominent role in shaping the research agenda. Naturally, as a former youth worker, I hold views and opinions on the topic under investigation. It has, however, been crucial for me to try to distance myself from

these to safeguard the integrity of the research. Research is about attempting to further knowledge and doing justice to the views of those involved. I have tried to be as reflexive as possible and use the data in an honest and robust fashion. This meant I needed to be critical and open minded to discover what is going on within youth work employability practice by critically examining the data, even if this challenged my own ideas. On that note, there are plenty of views in the data that do not align with my own perspectives and/or moral and political positions – such as views on NEET, social class and youth work. I have nevertheless included such data as it forms a vital part of the analysis, evidencing my commitment to being reflexive and safeguarding the integrity of the research.

In regard to reliability, repeating a semi-structured interview is highly unlikely to elicit identical responses, social life is not repetitive meaning content and phrasing would be different (Bradford and Cullen, 2012). Whilst qualitative research does not make claim to reliability as it is often not directly replicable, the research, nevertheless, gives an honest representation of findings and paints a credible picture in relation to the research aims.

Ethics

Before fieldwork was carried out participants were given information regarding the nature of the research and their right to withdraw at any point. It was made clear how the data will be used. Participants were then free to make an informed choice in regard to participation. As participants were working with young people, there is the possibility of sensitive information being brought up, so this is an area that needs to be approached with caution. Although the research is not directly focussing on sensitive issues, before any interviews were conducted, I made it clear that if legal issues or concerns were raised, such as safeguarding for example, then this would need to be possibly reported to the appropriate bodies (BERA, 2018).

Ensuring that no harm is brought to participants is a significant ethical concern (BERA, 2018). For this reason, all participants, locations and organisations are anonymised and pseudonyms are used. In addition, to adhere to the GDPR (2020) and to maintain confidentiality, all data collected was digitalised and kept on a secure device encrypted with passwords that only I had access to. Any written notes have been disposed of appropriately. Interviews were arranged at a time and date convenient for participants and conducted in privacy at the University or online. Participants were also reminded of the confidential nature of the research, and reminded that they could decline to answer any of the questions. Participants were also given the opportunity to read transcripts to check that they were happy with what was recorded, and also to have the chance to omit any data they were unhappy with. None of the participants however wished to read the transcripts.

The above steps ensure the identity of those participating in the research is protected as far as possible reducing any risk they could potentially be exposed to. Reflecting upon the amount of risk involved in the research and to what extent this may be detrimental to participants, it is believed the research poses minimal and limited risk to participants. As for observations in the field, on top of all locations and organisations being anonymised, young people and other staff members were anonymised to protect their identity. Enough detail will be given to situate the data within its proper context, but any data that can potentially identify individuals, locations, or organisations, will be omitted.

Data analysis

The data analysis is deductive as I have applied existing ideas to my data to challenge or confirm discourses and develop new ideas and understanding. However, there is no universal blueprint in analysis of qualitative data, but it is generally considered to entail a multi-layered approach, including organisation, classification, and finally, interpretation. Analysis is usually an ongoing process throughout the fieldwork, with interpretation mostly emerging after finishing fieldwork. There are a multitude of ways

to conduct qualitative data analysis, including software packages such as NVIVO and SSPS. Such software is about allowing the researcher to manage large amounts of data more effectively, as dealing with a large quantity of qualitative data can be challenging. Software cannot however do interpretation for the researcher; that is solely the responsibility of the researcher to assign meaning and conceptualise data.

Many qualitative researchers, myself included, prefer more conventional methods, such as paper-based examination using codes and themes to draw out patterns and relationships. I prefer to get 'physical' with the data, particularly transcripts – this enables me to 'feel closer' to data, whilst software packages have been critiqued for automating and decontextualising data. Equally though, an effective system for managing the data in a manual-based technique is needed – my approach can be seen in appendix one. An effective system generally begins with an initial reading to familiarise oneself with the data. This is followed by a comprehensive analysis to generate codes or themes which then hone in on relationships and patterns in the data. The final stage is interpretation and meaning making, or conceptualisation and theorisation.

The success or failure of a research project can nevertheless be said to lie in effective and efficient management, requiring meticulous organisation, analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. I felt confident coming into this analysis based on a good grounding in research methodology developed from previous research experienced via post-graduate study, in which I also dealt with a large amount of qualitative data in interview transcripts and fieldnotes from observations over a three-month ethnography. The stages of this analysis are detailed below.

Stage One: Initial Reading

This entailed familiarising myself with data via repeated reading, in attempt to get something of an overview and pay attention to anything that struck me as significant. Essentially, this was me trying to get close to the data, immerse myself within it and get a feel for what is going on.

Stage Two: Defining Data

To come up with an effective data management system, I then needed to define what data would reflect the three central discourses. Despite the three discourses being quite broad, the literature review allowed me to develop a clear understanding of the ideas and practices associated with each discourse. This, in turn, enabled me to define the data and decide which discourse it aligned to:

- Care data includes anything that suggests practitioners are caring, such as expressing sympathetic emotions, or demonstrating care in practice, for example, building helping and trusting relationships, or kind actions.
- Control data includes anything driven by external agendas deemed neither responsive to young people's needs nor in their best interest, particularly concerned with rectifying supposed moral deficiencies. This also includes general views on education, training and youth work, at least where practitioners' views may align with literature on these functioning as instruments of control.
- Economic data includes anything concerned with employability and skills training, vocational courses, the labour market, finances, or perceived skill deficits in young people.

I then placed the data in to one of three documents according to which discourse I believe it reflected. Some of the data did however not sit cleanly in one discourse or another, so I kept that in a fourth document which I would later return to.

Stage Three: Developing Codes and Themes

The interview questions were developed with the research questions and aims in mind and comprised three main areas: youth work, NEET, employability. This helped develop some initial general codes around these three areas. As I grouped data into these three areas, general codes become more refined, from which I developed some key

themes across the data. These included, for example, views on employability (how participants view it, what they were doing, how, when, where and why), on NEET young people (causes, effects, characteristics, skill levels), on education generally (purpose, value, qualifications), on employment (labour market, availability of jobs for young people, wages, training), and on youth work practice (remit and purpose, methods, practice, theory, experiences, young people).

Stage Four: Organisation

I formulated a table in which the themes ran vertically, and the three discourses (care, control, economic) horizontally - this can be seen in appendix one. I then allotted data in the quadrants which, I believed, reflected both the theme and the discourse. This analysis revealed that all three discourses were, to a greater or lesser extent, present within the practitioners' perspectives. It did however become increasingly clear that some of the data didn't cleanly fit into one discourse, as well as individual participants showing up across all three discourses.

Stage Five: Sense Making

Certain discourses appeared to be stronger in some participants than others, although at this point, it was unclear why. At the same time, I noticed tensions and support amongst the three discourses. To make some sense of what was going on, I first wanted to get a broad picture so began to analyse practitioners' practice collectively – what they were doing in practice and what they were saying about their practice. Briefly, all the practitioners were working towards the economic discourse, but it seemed that their employability training was also supporting social control, largely due to its low-quality and dull and repetitive nature with few success stories in terms of young people going on to obtain good-quality employment. Rationalising this, it appeared there was a strong relationship of support between these two discourses. Secondly, all the practitioners seemingly expressed care for the young people they worked with and seemed passionate about wanting to support them to progress, whether that was into employment or further education or training – I concluded there was also a relationship of support between the

economic and care discourses. This meant that, despite these discourses being separate, there was some overlap between them. This initially gave me the impression that there was a hybrid discourse, composed of the three central discourses, underpinning the practitioners' work. I was slightly troubled by this as the initial picture revealed that, although the practitioners appear to be caring people and claim to care about young people, they were supporting social control whilst working towards the economic discourse. This was a real tension I wanted to investigate further.

Stage Six: Redefining Data

A second analysis then followed to put to the test the hybrid discourse. I created three new categories alongside the singular discourses – economic-care, economic-control, and care-control. I began to move data around (keeping a copy of the original data analysis table in case I was going down a dead end and needed to start again). The economic-care and economic-control categories filled up without much trouble. I analysed each category further and was confident to conclude that economic-care were compatible to coexist, and so were economic-control – this still appeared as a hybrid discourse at this point though, as a number of practitioners appeared in both of these new categories.

A conundrum remained, however, as I was not convinced that care-control are compatible as these appeared to be largely in opposition and competing. I decided this was a pressing problem to try resolve. Whilst I am aware that both care and control can and do exist in various ways, and that control can potentially be seen as a form of care, and vice versa, I did not believe that these practitioners were both caring for the NEET young people they work with whilst, for example, simultaneously viewing them as deficit and bonding them to marginalisation. This required me to draw on ethical theory to overcome the tension. Using the EoC as a theoretical framework helped me to analyse the practitioners' relationships and whether they contained the fundamental characteristics necessary for their relationships to truly be considered as caring. This revealed that, despite some practitioners expressing care for young people, not all

characteristics of the caring relation according to the EoC were present in some of their relationships. It therefore became clear that practitioners can care *about* young people, but not necessarily care *for* them within a relationship – the key distinction is in the EoC characteristics which demonstrates that, at least in theory, control and care are incongruent. Despite earlier concluding that all the practitioners were supporting social control in their employability provision, the analysis of their relationships using the EoC also showed that some are able to subvert control, and open up space to incorporate care in their practice. Either way, I decided, for the purpose of the analysis and backed by the EoC framework, that caring relationships and control were not compatible in youth work employability provision, at least simultaneously.

Stage Seven: Conceptualisation – The Continuum

The previous stage shattered the illusion of a hybrid discourse as it became evident that care and control could not coexist. Firstly, I allocated data from the now redundant care-control category either into care, control, economic-care or economic-control, depending on where I thought it best fitted. I also used the overlapping data not previously allocated to the first table (mentioned earlier). I then returned to the remaining tension – that some practitioners were showing up in both economic-care and economic-control. This left four possibilities:

1. The categories are not fit for purpose – they are not showing an accurate picture with contradictory findings
2. I am mistaken and the EoC and social control are coexisting, meaning there is still a hybrid discourse in practice
3. The practitioners' views and practice are in conflict – what they say they do and what they are actually doing are incongruent
4. There is a continuum in practice whereby the practitioners are working towards all three discourses, but not simultaneously – they are moving around and interweaving between a combination of two different discourses

Based on the analysis so far, option three or four seemed the most likely, so I began to intensively analyse the practitioners' views and cross-reference with their practice. I had already noticed something of a broad opposition between the practitioners' perspectives regarding the young people they worked with, and how they were claiming they worked. I continued to read through the data intensively, comparing and contrasting, looking for similarities, differences, patterns and relationships. This then enabled the practitioners to be split into two broad categories, primarily based on their views on the causes, characteristics and skill levels of NEET young people, which was playing a significant role in shaping their practice. For example, some practitioners' viewed NEET young people as lacking skills, morals and decency, which justified their low-level employability training, the incorporation of a pedagogy of control and a form of pseudo-care. On the other hand, at least half the practitioners challenged deficit views of NEET young people, subverted control agendas via strategic compliance, and opened space to incorporate care, with some also able to include a degree of critical pedagogy in their practice. The latter were still however working towards economic-control via employability training, meaning that their practice is a process of negotiation along a continuum in which they interweave between discourses based upon a critical consciousness. This analysis cemented the presence of a continuum in practice, as opposed to a hybrid discourse.

Chapter 4: Youth Work Employability Training

The literature review has suggested that discourses of social control and economic competitiveness, based upon deficit constructions of youth, have been enforced into youth work, therefore implying that practitioners must conform with these discourses. This first data chapter applies these two discourses to the data broadly to illuminate whether they are, in fact, imposed on practitioners within youth work employability provision, before examining where care fits into this. In other words, these existing ideas are put to the test to confirm the existence of these discourses in youth work employability provision, whilst considering to what extent they are distinct, overlap, or coexist in practice. In essence, it is argued that all practitioners are contributing to both the economic and social control discourses in which there is substantial overlap and a relationship of support – this is, however, nothing new as it supports arguments in the literature. The care discourse on the other hand, is not imposed but emerges in the practitioners' relationships with NEET young people, made explicit through the Ethic of Care. Essentially, this initially appears as something of a hybrid discourse in practice, but due to some significant conflict between the care and control discourses, it is argued that it is not possible for all three discourses to operate in practice simultaneously. So, rather, I argue that, going forward, it is better to understand the data through a discourse continuum.

Economic Competitiveness Discourse

The introduction of an economic competitiveness discourse into youth work, it was argued earlier, can be traced back to the 1980s and associated with state concerns about the skills of young people and the increasing economic role of education more broadly. Whilst youth work was traditionally classed as informal education, it had not been directly concerned with economic competitiveness or the employability skills of young people (Cooper, 2018; Davies, 2019). The literature review suggested that through skill deficit discourses associated with NEET young people, cut backs in state funding, and the imposition of hard outcomes, youth work has been incorporated into serving

economic agendas. This section therefore explores whether the practitioners' targets are based upon skill deficit views of NEET young people to confirm the existence of the economic discourse.

To get a full picture however, I got out in the field to explore what is going on with youth work more generally. Much of what I found was representative of the literature and, to some extent, expected. There was limited state-sponsored youth work and open-access provision, with most provision focused on specific issues to do with, for example, mental health, drugs and alcohol, and of course, NEET young people. From my online research, the majority of youth work was now run by voluntary providers of different sizes and with different aims and focuses. Some were covering just a neighbourhood, while others covered entire wards. After some further local research, I was able to arrange a meeting with Sarah who is head of a local alliance of voluntary youth work provision:

> Sarah said the development of this partnership had been a journey over time with specific projects bringing together different youth organisations and community initiatives against a challenging climate for youth work. This led to the development of an umbrella organisation, which is now a partnership between various community groups and organisations to support one another and deliver provision for young people. As head of this umbrella organisation, Sarah's primary role is one of attracting funding to distribute among the network of voluntary provision. Sarah said that the main driver behind this alliance was an effort to try and fill the void left by the cutting of LA youth service, while also defending the need for open-access youth provision.
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> We had some long discussion about youth work, government, and funding - Sarah was particularly unhappy with the LA as she believes it 'changed youth work' and that funding is becoming increasingly narrow in its focus. She advocates for universal youth work and talked about the In Defence of Youth Work campaign and how youth workers and community groups need to come together and work to defend youth work otherwise it is at risk of becoming a thing of the past. She said it is a real challenge to get funding and can be very draining trying to advocate for young people led youth work. Sarah also produces monthly leaflets and newsletters which are distributed amongst partner networks to keep them updated with any

> changes, recent developments or other important information related to youth work practice, policy, and funding. She also provided me with information about all local provision currently aimed at NEET young people. [Field notes, Sarah, DATE]

This was an illuminating meeting with Sarah who highlighted the challenges for youth work and gave me an overview of what is happening locally, as well as providing me with information about local youth work provision for NEET young people. Whilst open-access provision was limited, it was still in existence. For example, Sophie invited me to an evening youth club session between 6.30-8.30pm:

> It seemed everyone here was enjoying themselves, it was loud, music playing, lots of conversations going on and lots of laughing and joking – it was a nice atmosphere, full of energy, although it felt slightly chaotic to me as I had not been in an environment like this for some time. The workers seemed very comfortable in this setting and had no problem keeping up with the young people's pace though. This seemed, in my experience at least, stereotypical of a youth club. All in all, it was a busy night for both workers.
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> A few young people sporadically spoke to me in groups of twos, threes and fours, asking me who I am, where I am from, etc – I explain that I'm just seeing what goes on here, that I'm researching at university and I'm from Manchester. I engage in some more general chat with them and I ask about who they are and where they're from – all from local area. I ask other questions such as what they think about the youth club, what they are currently doing with themselves and what they aspire to do in the future. All enjoy the youth club, really like chatting with youth workers who are always there for them and offer help if they ever need it, and other answers included, it's a good space for them to chill out and meet up with friends, have a laugh, do different activities and learn about different things through projects. Some are at college and some groups not currently doing anything (NEET). The NEET young people are currently attending the employability workshops and doing some one-to-one mentoring with the youth workers, which they believe is helpful for them in getting them to think more about their future. Some common answers about what they'd like to do with themselves in the future were be footballers, rappers/musicians, businessmen, others didn't have any ideas and seemed unsure where their interests lie. [Field notes, 26.02.2020]

I enjoyed my visit here as it was typical of my understanding of traditional youth work and reminded me of when I worked in youth clubs. It was nice to observe other youth work that is still happening away from youth work employability provision. This was an informal setting and it was clear that the young people had some sense of ownership of the club, particularly considering they were not shy to approach me and ask me who I was and what I was doing there. This also helped me to settle in and feel welcomed into their space. It didn't however seem necessary to include this abstract of fieldnotes as there is nothing too significant about the session as it not regarding the focus on the research. It does nevertheless evidence that, despite all the practitioners in this research providing employability training, some are still doing more traditional youth work in settings which are typically associated with youth work. The challenges for traditional youth work were apparent in some of the practitioners' views. Charlotte for example held some strong opinions on certain topics related to youth work

> Some general discussion about youth work – she thinks youth work is about fun, enjoyment, informal learning, building social and life skills, and working for change, making a real impact in young people's lives and being passionate about aiming to do that. She thinks her organisation is one of very few still doing 'grass roots' youth work, comparing her experiences with the stories she's heard about various placements by some of her course colleagues. She suggests some of them are not even doing any youth work at all, such as working in schools and youth offending teams, concerned with formality, rules, punishment, etc. This then led onto some discussion of funding cuts and targeted work – she thinks the youth work process is being replaced by ticking boxes. Making her point that even here they have to fill in names, input info and tick different boxes about who, what, where, when, during and after sessions – although she believes they still manage to work around those expectations of funders to deliver good quality youth work that is process focused and young person led.
>
> She then spoke about austerity more broadly linking this to problems in society, particularly for young people – crime, gangs, knives, drugs, homelessness, limited opportunity, etc. Hopes 'youth work' will come back around if there's a change in government as 'Tory's don't like youth workers or give a shit about young people'. She thinks youth work right now is serving government needs rather than the needs or wants of young people, but hopes it will be young people led again one day – asked what

> she means by this and she explains everything now seems focused on education or employment, rather than what young people want to do, even just having fun for example [Field notes, 18.02.2020]

I generally agreed with some of her perspectives and made this known to her. I was a little bit hesitant about doing this as it is tricky territory to balance, but Blackman (2016) encourages the researcher to share aspects of the self to build authentic fieldwork relations which can entice high-quality data. It is however important to take care when doing this. For example, Charlotte espoused some critical views, me agreeing with her could implicitly encourage her to do more of this as she might believe this is what I want to hear. In response to this, I aimed to stay consciously aware and take a more responsive role to avoid leading conversation – reminding her the research is about her views rather than my own. Charlotte did express strong ideas about what she believed is and isn't youth work, suggesting some of her course colleagues are not doing 'youth work'. This was also part of the dilemma of defining the practitioners, choosing not to refer to participants as 'youth workers', but rather 'youth practitioner' as although all are undertaking youth work training, they are working in very different settings.

Either way, this early data shown a bit of a mixed picture as, despite both Charlotte and Sophie conducting employability training, they both still seemed to be engaging in more traditional types of youth work. Deeper into the fieldwork though, it became clear that they were still working towards strict funding criteria, along with the rest of the participants. An example of such:

> The funding criteria is stuff like how many sessions we have to run per week, at what times. And then outcomes like getting a certain amount of young people a level 1 award, work experience or volunteering, or college or part-time job, or some form of education or training (Liam)

In most cases, practitioners had to try and move the NEET young people on to some other formal provision, whether that be more education, training, or employment:

> We're just told that we should try and get them into education, training or employment. It's always discussed, we do get pressurised and they are brought up quite a lot. We're just told that you have to do it (Roy)

This is, as explained in the literature review, driven by skill deficit discourses of young people, in which youth unemployment has largely been personalised and redefined as a mismatch between skills and the needs of the economy (Ainley, 2016). The same themes came up repeatedly, with most practitioners critical of targets for various reasons. But the general broad belief was the same – that targets are unsuitable to their work:

> Most of the time it's just about getting them into something, anything so they're not considered as a problem anymore. But if it's not interesting the young person then they're just going to disengage again (Gary)

All participants expressed some discomfort about targets in practice, although some much more strongly than others. The most common reason however, was due to targets putting the practitioners under pressure:

> The targets and numbers, it puts pressure on us. They don't value the youth work side of what we do, building relationships and confidence, they just want results but not all the young people are ready to achieve (Leah)

Although targets are imposed by funding priorities, Leah here was referring to government expectations that all young people should be in education, employment or training. Such sentiments were reiterated a number of times across several practitioners. It was mostly suggested that targets are unrealistic due to the complexity of young people and life more generally, meaning some young people are not ready to achieve in the terms of measurable outcomes and set targets. There were also concerns among a minority of practitioners that pushing NEET young people into education or

employment can destroy relationships with them and potentially marginalise them further:

> We're being pressurised a lot to try and get as many young people as possible to do some sort of formal activity. That's where the pressure comes from for us because, and I know the government have been accused of it, they're constantly accused of not living in the real world and I think we feel that as well because we get this pressure. Oh, you've got to get them to work, you've got to get them in a job, you've got to allow them to do training. But at this moment in time on their journey, they're not ready for that. And if you push that issue, you're going to destroy your relationship with that young person, and potentially, the failure of them. So if you push them into work or education, and then them failing at that, it is going to set them back even more (Roy)

What these few practitioners seemed to be suggesting is that targets are not always in the best interests of young people as they prioritise results at the expense of relationships. It would seem there are some real tensions here. More generally, a couple of practitioners also argued that targeted youth work, is not youth work:

> If you've got targets, I don't know if you can class it as youth work. It's like, youth work is about the holistic, the whole of the young person rather than just one issue, so it's like a life education. I think targets are added pressure and I don't think they work with young people because they can have lots of different issues at the same time. Having targets is setting you up to fail I think (Charlotte)

It would seem a few practitioners have an understanding of more traditional forms of youth work. Others expressed similar views, expressing opposition to work that is focused on those considered problematic:

> Youth work should be for every young person, universal. I don't believe we should even classify young people as disadvantaged or NEET because what happens then is all the works targeted at those young people and turns them into a problem to be solved. It should be universal and available to all young people. All young people struggle, with things like confidence, self-esteem, identity, direction, they all need support and

> guidance so it should be available for them all, not targeted at those labelled as disadvantaged or whatever (Tony)

What the practitioners are seemingly expressing is their opposition to the economic agenda in the form of outcomes and employability related work, but without directly critiquing their own practice. On the other hand, three practitioners advocated more of a balance between hard targets and the needs of young people:

> If you're too universal you somewhat become obsolete because people think you're doing nothing, but if it's too targeted then you're not meeting those universal young people who don't fall under the criteria for those targets. I think it needs to be somewhere in the middle (Liam)

Liam's concern here is that targets are removing youth work for all young people as, more often than not, at least in employability training, they are focused on those considered most problematic. Similar views were evident in a few other practitioners' perspectives:

> Like there's not even a youth club in where I live, not that I know of anyway. They only really do it in what they class as deprived areas, where it's a bit more rough and deprived. But they don't have, like not to call them, but they still need youth services like in nicer areas. There used to be but they just don't have them anymore… there's just nothing for young people in those areas because they're not seen as most at risk so it's a bit unfair. Like for my children, I'd like them to have a youth club to go to where they can meet up with friends and know they're in a safe place (Paula)

The decline of universal youth work is an important point within itself, as targeted youth work reflects the shift towards a neoliberal agenda (St Croix, 2017). More generally though, Liam and one or two other practitioners believed that some sort of targets are necessary as they direct help to those who need it. But, according to Paula, targeted youth work is mostly aimed at the working class in deprived neighbourhoods. Whilst this may not inherently sound like a bad thing, youth work is being used to reinforce

deficit constructions about certain sections of working-class youth (Davies and Taylor, 2018). In other words, deficit constructions such as NEET justify funding for particular types of youth work and keeps youth work relevant in the world of outcomes, enabling it to stay afloat (Bright and Pugh, 2019). This reinforces the idea that youth work has been codified under a triage model (St Croix, 2017). Lucy argued for targets based on input rather than outcomes:

> I don't think there should be outcome targets necessarily. I work hard I've always worked hard, I don't mind having targets based around what we put in because I think that's important, it should be measured to what you put in because it stops people from being, like lazy. But I'm not sure you can measure what comes out and, you know, like describe that outcome to a specific service or a specific person. Do you know what I mean? So I don't mind having targets like you have to spend so many hours a week with young people doing X, Y and Z, however I don't think it is fair for me to have a target that is get at least 5 young people every month into education or employment, otherwise you've failed. Because there's so much more going on isn't there. And I think they all want their targets based on outcomes which I just think, when you are working with young people, you can't make them do anything (Lucy)

Lucy is, in a different way to other practitioners, arguing that targets make traditional youth work untenable. Generally, the practitioners weren't happy about targets in their work, although most failed to see that hard outcomes are, to a large degree, driven by economic aims based upon skill deficit discourses of youth (St Croix, 2017; Davies and Taylor, 2018). Either way, despite practitioners expressing opposition to targets and outcomes, the majority spoke about the need to conform with this agenda for funding:

> There is a lot about targets and impact and evidence. But again, it's because if you don't do that, then you don't get the funding… that's the way it is now and you have to evidence to get the funding... Everything now is about education and employment, but it should be about the process. Um, because even if you got them in a job, they might still have needs, you need to help, you know, certain barriers, finances, family problems, around relationships, not knowing how to budget or use money, or cook, there's so many different issues (Charlotte)

Charlotte makes a good point as traditionally youth work has been concerned with supporting young people holistically. The agenda for reengagement and outcome targets, however, is being imposed on practitioners who have little to no say in the matter. They were doing whatever is necessary to meet targets, produce outcomes, and evidence their impact – which they need to do for the funding to survive:

> We've got to say whether we're hitting those outcomes or not, and if we're not, what we're going to do to change that, what can we do differently. Because obviously, then, when you're applying for funding you've got to say whether you've met those outcomes, you've got to have evidence… So yeah, that's like what we've got to do, we've got to make it work (Chloe)

There was only one practitioner who rejected targets directly. Roy seemed confident to challenge his manager, express his concerns, and explain why he is not pushing NEET young people into meeting outcomes:

> In supervisions and stuff, we have to justify why they're not achieving, what we want them to achieve. It's just not realistic, it's like we're being set up to fail with unrealistic targets… But like I said, I'm real passionate for that, they should achieve what they can in time. I'm quite happy to take the flack of that and discuss it with my manager, and explain I'm not comfortable to push people to do something they're not ready for. I know when they're ready, or when they're about ready and I will push them when they're ready… Like I said, you need to take those steps. And I suppose part of my role is discussing with my manager and sort of saying, 'stop, hold on a minute, we need to do this first and we might get there eventually'… they've got targets to meet, and they've got outputs and things too. But like I said, at the end of the day, we're not dealing with numbers, we're dealing with people. And I think that's the issue, isn't it, as you go up the chain of management, I think that the human element gets lost in that chain. It just becomes a spreadsheet and pie chart (Roy)

Here, Roy is pushing back against targets as they are often unrealistic in getting young people to conform and perform, as well as wanting to preserve his relationships with young people as discussed earlier.

In the data presented here, the practitioners explain some of their targets in their employability provision, such as the amount of time they have to spend providing employability training, getting awards/qualifications, work experience or volunteering, moving young people on to more formal education or training provision, or finding employment. Firstly, these targets are based on and driven by skills deficit discourses of youth unemployment - all the practitioners are working with NEET in employability training, concerned with moulding them into viable economic units. Put simply, by conforming to economic aims which are based upon skill deficit views of young people and providing employability training, they are enabling an economic discourse to be imposed and emerge in their practice. In this sense, the economic discourse is seemingly rather straightforward as the work the practitioners are doing via employability training is intended to contribute towards economic aims by rectifying skills deficits in NEET young people. This data therefore supports the literature in demonstrating how youth practitioners are forced to conform to economic agendas via the imposition of targets based on skill deficits (Davies and Taylor, 2018; Jeffs et al., 2019). The practitioners also expressed their dissatisfaction and opposition to targets which put them under some considerable pressure, reflecting arguments made by St Croix (2017) wherein targets have a detrimental impact on practitioners and how they perceive their practice. Either way, it is safe to conclude that the practitioners' employability provision is shaped and driven by an economic competitiveness discourse.

The practitioners also discussed targets more generally as detrimental to youth work due to narrowing it and potentially running their relationships with young people, whilst suggesting targets are not in young peoples' best interests as essentially they problematise them further. These views do also support arguments in the literature. Bright and Pugh (2019) argue that there are ramifications for youth work more generally as economic aims via targets are legitimised by skill deficit views of young people, the employability training therefore contributes to the efficacy of these views, which paradoxically reinforces the need for narrower forms of provision, such as

employability training. These targets therefore serve to reinforce notions of NEET young people as trouble and at-risk requiring forms of educational and training intervention to get them back on track. There is an important distinction to be made, however. More recently, the skills deficit discourse has become entangled with moral underclass discourses - NEET young people are often seen as lacking skills, but this can, in some cases, been explained a result of moral turpitude in which they come from cultural underclass backgrounds and embody antieducation and anti-work attitudes (MacDonald, 2006; Maguire, 2015). This view of NEET is, according to the literature, harmful to young people as it supports discourses of control, whereby NEET young people require behavioural and attitude change, rather than just skill development or achieving qualifications to get on in the labour market.

The practitioners' views on NEET young people and the employability provision they are providing are nevertheless explored in the next chapter as there is a complicated and mixed picture in how discourses manifest in practice. The next section of this chapter focuses directly on the employability training and explores whether it is contributing to economic aims, supporting social control, or both.

Social Control Discourse

Youth work has long been complicit with social control largely related to the class struggle deriving from industrialisation and urbanisation (Davies, 2009; William and Coussee, 2019). It was suggested that working-class popular education, which sought to challenge the status quo, provided institutions, and contained some early characteristics of youth work, was defeated in the 1840s. Thereafter, the education terrain became controlled by the ruling classes in various forms of provided top-down provision. Essentially, this provision contained a pedagogy of control as it was concerned with morals, manners, and a general civilising of working-class youth by 'superintendents' and 'youth leaders' - later leading to schooling as the dominant form of education for the working class (Davies, 2009; Fusco, 2018). Forms of education have nevertheless long been conceived as supporting social control, by regulating

behaviours and attitudes, sorting and sifting young people, reinforcing divisions of skill and labour, and generally reproducing social and economic inequality (Simon, 1960; Miller and Davey, 2005; Ainley, 2016). More recently, employability training as an extension of education, has faced substantial critique for 'warehousing' young people and supporting social control (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Cornish, 2018). This section broadly examines the practitioners' employability training and whether it reflects any of these traditions.

All the employability training the practitioners were providing seemed very similar, albeit with some slight variation from provision to provision. For example, some of it was in more formal settings, such as within independent alternative/specialist education buildings and classrooms. Some took place in residential settings in makeshift classrooms, and was linked to low-level accreditation such as Entry 3 or Level 1 qualifications in employability skills. Others were carrying out the work within informal youth settings, such as lounge areas of community centres and had to provide employability training over a number of weeks in a project style to meet funding outcomes. One example of employability training may be seen here in my observation of Tara's session focused on a budgeting within a residential setting:

> We then went to the lounge where Tara holds the group sessions. The young people begin to arrive and sit down, including the two lads that were just fighting (they seemed to have now calmed down and made up). 6 young people arrived altogether – 2 girls and 4 boys. They were all very inquisitive about who I am, except one boy who didn't say much – they were asking me where I am from, what I am doing here, why I am doing research, etc. They seemed quite giddy and excited by a stranger being here. Tara said she was going to get the other young person who was missing. Engaged in more general chat with the young people. Tara arrived back with the missing girl – she was making a cup of tea. All the young people were being quite loud and chatting with each other, laughing, etc. Tara then says 'right, let's begin' and starts handing out paper's – this had various subheadings and bullet points regarding the structure of today's session.
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> The session overall was structured and intended to be interactive. For example, it began with a discussion of the importance of budgeting. Then

> skills needed for budgeting. Then how to create a budget plan, including tracking expenses and setting financial goals. The final topic was the importance of sticking to the budget. The session last about 45 minutes altogether. The young people didn't seem to take it very seriously though, particularly the young men who often gave silly answers and joked around. The girls seemed to mostly laugh at the boys. Although the discussions were relatively informal guided by a structure, it seemed it was difficult for Tara to keep the young people engaged as conversations regularly went off track and it often took a while before she could pull it back. The boys were especially disruptive, who seemed to want to show off to the girls or acting up a bit because I was there, and often made comments such as this topic was boring and that they wanting to do something else. The boys also make jokes amongst themselves with lots of laughing. Tara didn't seem very amused and often just sighed before trying to reengage them. The last 10 minutes or so before the session ended, Tara appeared to give up, as the boys began telling stories of crime, drinking, taking drugs, and fighting – they were celebrating negative lifestyles. The boys seemed quite competitive about who had engaged in the worst type of behaviour, committed the worst crimes, 'banged out' the most people, etc. Throughout the session, the boys dominated much of the talk and discussions, whilst the girls tended to give more serious answers but mostly laugh at the boys and the things they had to say. The session finished and the young people started to leave as they were going to sit in the garden – I thanked them for their time and that I hope to see them again.
>
> After the session, Tara said the sessions don't always go like that but thinks they were just trying to show off today and 'big themselves up' – she said 'most of them are just softies really'. In other words, she believed it was fabricated behaviour because they were excited about a stranger being there. She said the aim of her sessions usually is to challenge and explore their perspectives and help their social development. I discussed the aim of the budgeting session in more depth knowing that all the young people she works with are on benefits and don't have much money. She suggested it is geared towards their future for when they do have jobs and are earning money. Aside from doing sessions such as these, Tara said she normally plays a supportive role to young people, just being their friend and hanging out with them, chatting, laughing, finding out more about them and their life and offering emotional support. [Field notes, 27.02.2020]

After leaving, I remember thinking that this session was generally low-quality and seemed more about giving young people 'something to do' as they seemed to find it quite tedious which could go some way towards explaining their lack of engagement

and disruptive behaviour. Of course, this was just an opinion and not a fact – I reminded myself that this is what I am here to find out, rather than jumping to immediate conclusions based on limited evidence. This has, admittedly, at times been something of a challenge for me, managing my feelings and thoughts as both as a former youth worker, and researcher from a disadvantaged background, as discussed at the beginning of this thesis. Doing fieldwork is challenging, not least because past experiences and temporary thoughts and feelings can cloud judgement. It is often only in reflection that you can separate your thoughts and feelings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), hence why it is fundamental to make good, detailed fieldnotes without omitted anything perceived to be unimportant. Having an implicit awareness that I tend to be overly critical though, helps me to keep any personal bias at bay and find opportunities and strategies to neutralise my personal thoughts and beliefs as to not impact on the validity of the research. In this instance, I noted down both strengths and weaknesses of what I had witnessed, to ensure I was not being overly critical. These initial suspicions regarding the low-quality of youth work employability provision were however given further impetus as I got deeper into the fieldwork because, regardless of context, the focus was on the similar generic skills and repetitive activities across provision:

> We try do everything we can for them and prepare them for work. So we'll do CV writing, pretend interviews, we'll get them to look into jobs they might want to do, practice doing application forms (Leah)

> We've got an employment club, focused on employability and skills, like doing mock interviews, making CVs, discussing how to dress and present themselves and all that type of stuff (Alice)

> We help with CVs, interviews, applications, help build their confidence (Paula)

> We do confidence building workshops, helping them make CVs, job searching and applications (Helen)

> They'll do work around CVs, interview skills, confidence building (Chloe)

This is data from a handful of practitioners, but all the participants were doing the same work across various settings which basically assumes the same deficits in all NEET young people. This is problematic for at least two key reasons. Firstly, because the NEET category is not a homogenous group, they all have diverse life experiences, circumstances, dispositions, abilities, ambitions, skills, interests and passions (Simmons et al., 2014). In other words, they are all at different distances from the labour market. Any training or intervention, therefore, needs to recognise the needs, strengths, and limitations of young people. A more tailored approach, considering the needs of local labour markets, would potentially enable better support and outcomes (Leonard and Wilde, 2019).

Secondly, and more significantly, the training the practitioners are providing is dull and repetitive focused on basic generic skills, which is extremely unlikely to offer marginalised NEET young people any advantages in the labour market, as other research of employability training demonstrates (Cornish, 2018). Another employability session I observed was at Leah's organisation:

> I arrived half hour early. Sat in staff room with Leah and Christy and had a cup of tea. Some general chat. Discussed with Leah what will be happening in today's session – she said it is focused on interview skills. Asked what a normal day looks like – most days they focus on level 1 and 2 functional skills to help them get some qualifications, and then something around employability, such as free time on computers researching different types of jobs, CV making, searching training opportunities, general careers advice, workshops focussed on confidence and motivation, etc. I questioned why they were 'researching jobs' and not applying. Leah doesn't believe they are ready for jobs. A main aim according to her, is to first build up a relationship and then their confidence as many of these young people are severely withdrawn and have been out of mainstream for some time
>
> Arrived at the classroom. Met 4 young men (all aged 17 and 18) who were sat on computers – two were working with Greg on functional skills and discussing questions and answers, others just browsing the internet.

> General chat with the two lads who were free. Asked them about their future plans - one wants to be in army, other is unsure yet what he wants to do. Asked about what they think about this place, the one who was unsure of his future plans spoke about the positive difference this has made to him, such as helping him be more confident and giving him something to do. Also spoke about differences between here and college – feels it's more of a safe space and chilled, so it's less strict as he struggles with authority and doesn't like to be told off. Engaged in more general chit chat with boys (they were asking who I am, what I do, etc.), also observing other two who continued to work on computers with Greg. He would discuss with them how to solve the problem and help them reach an answer, among some laughing and joking about. Greg is relatively young, maybe mid-20s, and seemed to get on well with the young people.
>
> After 10-15 minutes, Leah asked young people to sit at the table and told them that today they were going to look at how to prepare for interviews. Leah and Christy sat on a table facing the young people. The young people didn't seem very enthusiastic as energy levels seemed to drop, but they engaged. The session had some structure to it and was interactive. Leah and Christy took turns asking questions and probing for more detail. The questions were quite straightforward and included things such as:
>
> - What would you wear for a job interview?
> - What questions might a potential employer ask? (Including possible answers/responses to employer questions)
> - What skills do you need in an interview?
> - How do you prepare for an interview?
>
> The questions and answers were unpacked with young people and included a handout sheet afterwards with common questions at interview, potential responses, skills required, etc. Surprisingly, the young men took it quite seriously, such as no silliness and joking around. They did seem keen to get through it as soon as possible though and get back onto the computers. The session lasted around 30 minutes, then the young people were allowed back on the computers and they could have half hour free browsing, although Christy told them to be looking at jobs or apprenticeships. [Field notes, 05.03.2020]

I remember thinking after this session that nothing really struck me as significant about this training, except again that it seemed to be low quality and that I can't really imagine it provides much benefit to young people. What I found most surprising was how well the young people engaged with it in comparison to Tara's budgeting session for

example. The fact they were in a more formal setting may explain this though. Regardless, I found myself in a similar situation to the budgeting session I observed and noted down some strengths and weaknesses to ensure impartiality by documenting positives as well as negatives. Despite this, I was still firmly of the opinion that this session is not aimed at developing real tangible skills but seems to be more about 'keeping them busy' (Cornish, 2018). To my surprise, these thoughts about this session and youth work employability more broadly were supported by discussion with Mike, the manager of the provision. He doesn't believe employability training is really that beneficial:

> Walked down to main office and met Mike, the manager – Mike is semi-retired and had quite a lot to say so difficult to remember and document everything - long chat about his career as teacher to youth worker – thinks the two used to overlap, not very different except one is more professionalised. Lots of views on youth work. He thinks youth work has changed and become more about conformity. He connected this to target-based work and believes product is replacing process-led youth work but also controlling workers to get young people to conform – long chat and he talked a lot so difficult to keep up, but lots of ranting/swearing about government, policies, getting young people back into education, work, etc – told him this is some of the focus of my research. Asked him his thoughts on what they're doing here. He said he is 'going to be honest' with me because he's semi-retired and 'doesn't really give a F anymore' - thinks this is just about giving young people something to do to keep them busy and adds the qualifications young people do here are 'not worth much in the real world' – basically babysitting young people until they get them into something more worthwhile. He does believe his staff are all really passionate and care about the young people, but basically they're fighting a losing battle as they work on building them up, but when they leave they just get knocked down again as most are vulnerable lacking in mental resilience and emotional maturity More views about youth work and education. Discussed how youth work is more than just a tick in a box – it's about the relationship and level of participation between young people and worker, and young people themselves. He talked about good foundation of youth work – which he suggests is the quality of relationship, conversation and ladder of participation. Thanked him for his time - he told me to come back and see him 'before he's dead' and laughed. [Field notes, 05.03.2020]

It seems that Mike was suggesting youth work has become about social control. He also claims that the employability training his organisation is providing is about control since

it is warehousing young people without offering much advantage in terms of securing paid employment, as is often the case with such provision (see, Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Cornish, 2018). But Mike recognises that he must conform for funding and provide this work. I discussed in some depth with Mike the topics of focus, sharing my thoughts which, now based on what I had viewed across different provision, align rather well with his own. I did also share some personal viewpoints to strengthen fieldwork relations and Mike seemed to appreciate that we were both on the same page, although I did remind him that this research is not about my own thoughts. I found Mike rather genuine in sharing his own personal thoughts as he didn't seem too concerned about any potential consequences of having views that challenge the prevailing climate due to nearing retirement. This nevertheless epitomises why it is necessary to write myself in to these fieldnotes and data to ensure I am not using participants views as my own, whether I agree or disagree, showing I am being reflexive - aware of my own thoughts and feelings and able to distinguish them from those in the research to avoid ventriloquism (Merill and West, 2009; Blackman, 2016).

So, now after viewing employability sessions and hearing what practitioners had to say, I was of the opinion they were inculcating social control as opposed to contributing to economic aims. Dull and repetitive training, which assumes the same deficits in all young people, challenges the skills deficit discourse as this provision is not aimed at developing high-level technical skills. It is moreover worth reiterating that low-skilled work and jobs requiring little to no qualifications are the fastest growing in the UK (Shildrick et al., 2012; Green, 2017). This provision could potentially support entry into low-skilled work, but certainly not produce technical skills. Additionally, it's also extremely unlikely that all young people lack the same soft skills. Either way, there was little evidence in the data to suggest any of what the practitioners were doing helped any of the NEET young people they work with develop coherent skills, find jobs, or a meaningful further education opportunity, and therefore it cannot yet be considered as beneficial. This is not to say it couldn't in the future but, in fact, the bar was set extremely low in what they hoped the young people could achieve or could be considered as a success:

> Even if we can help find a job once a week or one morning a week, wherever. It's the work experience that counts, even if that's just a week (Roy)

This data therefore aligns with much of the literature which extensively critiques employability provision. Reiterating some of these key arguments, many evaluations of employability training have repeatedly demonstrated the ineffectiveness of a supply-side strategy with poor outcomes for young people (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Cornish, 2018; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Supply-side solutions to youth unemployment rarely take into account labour market conditions; finite jobs and surplus of experience and skilled workers that compete in the secondary labour market, whereby they become locked in a revolving door of low-paid poor work and unemployment (Shildrick et al., 2012; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Employability training does therefore not usually offer any meaningful progression or much of an advantage in entering the labour market (Simmons and Thompson, 2011), whilst training more young people simply does not create more jobs (Ainley, 2016). Equally, employability holds no real value in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), it usually involves generic skill training as shown in this research and doesn't offer any meaningful advantages in progressing to higher-level provision. In fact, the most common destination for a NEET young person after completing an employability course, is another similar course at the same level (Cornish, 2019; 2023), encapsulating what Shildrick et al. (2012) dub 'a merry go round' as there is limited pathway to progression. Continuities can be found across a broad range of skill and employability training dating back over forty years, in which such provision has often been deployed to 'warehouse' young people, conceal unemployment rates, while exercising social control and reinforcing divisions in skill and labour (Finn, 1987; Mizen, 1990; Cornish, 2018). In other words, the provision the practitioners in my research are engaging in, due to its low-quality and repetitive nature underpinned by a generic pedagogy, can be seen as an extension to these. It would seem all practitioners were, at least to some degree, inadvertently working towards a

discourse of control in which they are only serving to bond NEET young people further into marginalisation.

Further support is given to this position when theorising the practitioners' employability activities through the work of Putnam (2001), who makes distinctions between bridging and bonding capital. Bonding tends to be more inward-looking and reinforces local identities, maintaining homogeneity, solidarity and unity. On the other hand, bridging is outward looking aiming to make connections across various social spaces – it broadens identities and brings together people from across the social realm. In this understanding, it would seem that bridging capital aligns more with Bourdieu's concept of social capital - which is basically a resource made up of social ties and connections, and can be converted into economic capital for an individual to accumulate for personal economic gains (Bourdieu, 1986, p404). From an official stance at least, it's claimed that through participation in employability training, life chances can be improved and new opportunities opened up that would normally be closed to NEET young people (Levitas, 2005; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). In other words, it is aimed at building bridging capital, but this data suggests that practitioners are bonding NEET young people to marginalisation as opposed to providing a bridge to meaningful labour market opportunities.

Prior to the 1980s, working-class youth had an abundance of bonding capital to draw on embedded in the social infrastructure of their families and communities, as there was mostly full employment and local work available, which usually made the transition into adulthood relatively smooth (Jones, 1995; Ainley, 2016). This bonding capital, although constraining the life opportunities of working-class people in many ways, bonding them into certain forms of work and relationships, did offer a sense of security and stability. Globalisation, deindustrialisation and individualisation, associated with neoliberal policy have shattered working-class social capital as their social networks have largely become obsolete, at least in having significant economic value (Ainley, 2016). Based on this, it is possible to argue that the social capital the working classes

possess, now sometimes bonds them to poverty and marginalisation as wider networks slim down over time to the confines of family, friends, and peers within a local context (Shildrick et al., 2012). Strong bonding capital can therefore limit the potential of bridging into wider networks and social spaces.

The practitioners reinforcing NEET young people's bonding capital disguised as building bridging capital was further evidenced as at least five of the practitioners were also attempting to connect NEET with voluntary/unpaid placements for work experience:

> Starting from next week, the young people we work with, we'll be getting them into work placements like with decent businesses. So they'll start doing a 3 hour placement a week and build it up to 18, then when they get up to 18 hours they'll get some paid work from it (Liam)

Whilst Liam had not worked with any young people who had successfully gained an apprenticeship or paid employment, there was optimism that it was possible. This could be construed as attempting to build bridges by linking NEET young people with unpaid employment opportunity. Across the data, at least four other practitioners were doing identical outcome focused work linking young people up with a range of voluntary/unpaid placements to get them 'work ready':

> We're also trying to get them into work placements now as well. So recently we just got one at the fire station up the road, he's going to go down once a week and just sort of shadow them and see what they do. Another wants to work in construction, so he's going to go to a building site once a week as well. So I think that will help build up the confidence as well (Leah)

Sometimes unpaid placements are a valuable way to build vocational and personal skills, boost confidence and wellbeing (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). There is however, as discussed in some depth in the literature review, little evidence to suggest

volunteering on unpaid work placements is beneficial to gaining paid employment (Smith, 2010; Allan, 2019). There were limited success stories within the data:

> We spent a bit of time finding out what they wanted to do and what their interest was in, and kind of linking up with businesses, local businesses, and that's what we did. We had some success stories from that where, you know, some of them had gone on to further education, or got a Saturday job out of it. And that would obviously give them the experience to go on and get a full-time job (Sophie)

The likelihood is this is a long distance away from a full-time, salaried career. Although such voluntary/unpaid work placements may be well intentioned, they could also be conceived as another way to warehouse and 'keep young people busy'. There may also be a range of reasons for their failure to provide meaningful progression – for example, poor-quality placements, whereby young people are meaninglessly filling their time, in which their needs or interests are not being met:

> I've heard about placements, where they're giving them work experience in places that are getting them to do silly stuff, you know, like, stock shelves all day or go make teas and coffee. And it's like, is that helping them? (Tara)

Such placements offer no real work experience or skill development, and no genuine opportunity for progression. A range of research on voluntary/unpaid work placements has found similar (Allan, 2019). At the very least though, they can provide some good work habits and help build confidence. Other considerations include resources of employers, such as their commitment and interest in helping develop young people; whilst many placements are in the charitable sector which rarely offer any opportunities for paid opportunity or progression (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Generally speaking, however, research has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of volunteering/unpaid placements as a means to securing employment (Wilson, 2000; Hirst, 2002; Allan, 2019). Allan (2019) argues that voluntary unpaid work constitutes a form of hope labour with no real benefit to young people in enhancing their prospects or employability skills, but rather, mostly serves to reinforce divisions in skill and labour. Essentially, in this

understanding, volunteering/unpaid work, despite claims to the contrary, is continuing to bond young people to marginalisation and contribute to social control.

Congruent with an approach attempting to build bridging capital, the youth practitioners in this research can now potentially be described as 'bridge builders', at least superficially. A number of the participants basically saw their role as being a conduit between the NEET young person and employment and training opportunity:

> I think by helping connect young people with work experience, or training for work. So like have a connection with different industry and business, and then talk to young people about different routes they can take and the steps needed to get there. So a bit like how Connexions used to be… just helping them connect to opportunities in general but I know youth workers can't help every single young person, which sucks, so we need Connexions back basically (Sam)

The Connexions strategy was introduced under New Labour as a result of the Social Exclusion Unit's report *Bridging the Gap*, which identified a lack of skills, aspiration, and advice, guidance and information as key factors in youth unemployment. It was created as a service for all 13-19 year olds, but ended up focused largely on NEET. Due to the dissolution of the Connexions strategy, there was a substantial void in support for young people. Through targets under a bidding process, it seems that youth work has been drawn into this (Taylor et al., 2019):

> So being involved when people are younger, and being in educational settings, being in high schools, colleges, so that they've got that support. So they're doing the academic stuff, but then they've got somebody who they can go to for that support, for the informal stuff like a middle person to help connect with education and work by removing those issues and barriers (Charlotte)

Youth workers have always offered general advice and guidance to young people, as well as signposting them to relevant services where possible to deal with mental health,

drug and alcohol abuse, sexual health, careers advice and so on (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Now, however, it appears a number of the practitioners who took part in my research perceive their role as being the middle-person to offer advice, guidance and information on young people's career management. In short, youth work is now, at least to some extent, attempting to do what Connexions used to do, such as linking to training, placements and work experience, support acquiring paid jobs or other formal opportunities, and offering AGI. At least from an unofficial standpoint, they have been positioned as bridge-builders between NEET and employment or training. They are, however, not professional careers advisors. The work they are doing related to employability and supporting NEET young people in their career management is of low quality, incorporates a generic pedagogy, and there was no evidence in the data to suggest what they are doing is beneficial to NEET young people. Out of all seventeen practitioners, there was only one NEET young person who managed to find a job for a few hours per week on a Saturday morning.

Based on this evidence, I believe it would be fair to claim that the employability training and initiatives associated with it, such as unpaid work, are more about social control as opposed to building technical skills and boosting economic competitiveness since they are reinforcing divisions in skill and labour and bonding NEET young people to marginalisation. Traditionally, youth work has emphasised community cohesion, limiting tensions and differences between individuals and various community groups, developing positive relationships and networks for wellbeing (Thomas, 2003). Now, however, youth work has been co-opted into providing low-level employability provision, but through analysing what they are contributing to in their practice, it can be argued that the economic competitiveness discourse in youth work has, to some degree, been used as a smokescreen for social control. As discussed above, the practitioners are not actually building bridges to anywhere useful or meaningful. Rather they are bonding young people to marginalisation and supporting social control, though perhaps unwittingly. This means that social control has been imposed at a macro level and the practitioners are, at least indirectly, emerging this discourse through their efforts in employability training. The data is reflective and supportive of arguments in the

literature, particularly that youth work has been repurposed to focus on economic and control aims (Davies and Taylor, 2018).

This means that there is considerable overlap between the social control and economic discourses, whereby there is a relationship of support. It is important however to point out that these discourses are distinct. The economic discourse primarily relates to a skills deficit view, and on the other hand, the social control discourse has traditionally been concerned with a moralistic view of youth, concerned with regulating behaviours and maintaining social order, whereby oppressive class relations are reproduced. This can however get a little confusing as both discourses are rooted in deficit views of young people, meaning that different discourses can become conflated. For example, it was argued earlier that via the NEET category, the skills deficit discourse has often become entangled with moral turpitude, where it has been claimed that NEET young people lack skills due to coming from cultural underclass backgrounds which embody anti-work and antieducation attitudes. This analysis has not yet considered the practitioners perspectives on NEET young people however, but argued they are inadvertently contributing to a broader discourse of social control driven by economic aims based on a skill deficit view of young people, as opposed to intentionally trying to regulate behaviours and attitudes of young people within a moral framework. Regardless of this overlap and relationship of support, it is important to remember that these are separate discourses though - if the employability training was actually helping NEET young people, then, so far at least, it wouldn't be concerned with social control, albeit at a much broader level. Either way, based on the data so far, these two discourses are compatible to coexist. The next section explores where care fits into this.

What About Care?

Earlier, it was argued that the development of youth work was at least partly underpinned by a care discourse, predominantly as a response to the social and economic effects of industrialisation and the accompanying stresses and strains of urbanisation (Smith, 2013; Bright et al., 2018). In other words, the child saver

movement instigated by the middle classes, as well as various philanthropic bodies, established charitable provision such as the Sunday school and Ragged school movements due, at least in part, to their care and compassion for working-class young people, though sometimes moralistic in tone. Youth work has nevertheless long been concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of young people (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). This section examines whether the youth practitioners' employability practice reflects this tradition by examining their relationships with NEET young people using the Ethic of Care (EoC). I asked the participants for a description of their practice. Sam said that…

> …It's about building a relationship with young people, you know, we identify their needs or discuss stuff they'd like us to do or what we could do for them. I feel like it's not something you can define because you've got so many different elements to it. It's because there's so many different things that you've got to do, so many different hats that you've got to wear. So it's quite a diverse (Sam)

Within such descriptions, there was more emphasis on certain elements of youth work than others, such as education, fun and enjoyment, building confidence and skills, although this is perhaps unsurprising considering the amorphous nature of youth work. However, the quote above encapsulates a general consensus among all the practitioners, inasmuch as they saw their practice as primarily revolving around building, developing and maintaining relationships with the young person. There was, across all practitioners, a recognition of the relational nature of their work. Leah said:

> I think that it is about having that relationship with young people, being someone they can trust and can confide in. So they will open up if you have that relationship and you'll be able to support them through that relationship (Leah)

All participants, at some point, discussed the importance of developing good relationships with young people. The relationship then, for the practitioners, is central to all variants of youth work, including employability training:

> It's a collaboration between you and the young person, that's the basis of everything, isn't it? Relationships. If you haven't got that relationship, then I don't think you can't call it youth work (Roy)

This means that, despite practitioners operating in different settings with different NEET young people with a range of needs, there was a common commitment to build relationships to support NEET young people. Sercombe (2010) argues that primacy to youth work, is not a set of principles or competencies, but a relationship. This is supported by the practitioners who seemed largely concerned with developing relations with NEET young people which can be examined through the EoC.

The EoC is based upon a caring relationship between the one caring and the one being cared for. Noddings (1984) argues that people are naturally caring, but that caring is more significant in a woman's experience particularly demonstrated through motherhood. Paula, who is a mother, supported this by suggesting that she is a naturally caring person – she believes that caring is what being a human is about:

> I think we do care, like just as a human being, to help, being a bit of a cheese ball, but it's just what it means to be human, to help and care. Just to help another human being, do you know what I mean (Paula)

Due to the sample being predominantly female however, no distinctions will be sought between men and women in their caring relations. More generally, Noddings (2002) argues that everyone learns to care developed from their experience of being cared for. Noddings (1984) suggests that everyone has an ideal state of caring developed from their experience of being naturally cared for, as well as, to a lesser extent, giving natural care. According to Noddings, people recall from memory their most caring moments and experiences, and attempt to recreate these in their caring relationships. The caring ideal motivation, Noddings argues, then evolves from natural sympathy humans feel for one another. It appeared most of the practitioners are caring people, often expressing

sympathy for the NEET young people they work with due to their difficult circumstances:

> I think just seeing them struggle. I see certain young people with lots of issues and I really want to help them. I can see they've got potential, so I want to help them see that too. I think, especially some of the young people I work with, they've just been fobbed off by social workers, teachers, everyone. So, it makes me want to make them feel valued. I've got that relationship with them and I know where they've come from, so I want to help them even more (Liam)

Many of the practitioners also seemed to embody their own caring ideal in their practice, which revolved around helping NEET young people to change their life…

> …It's something that's close to my heart. It's something I really care about. If I can make a change to a NEET young person's life, even just help change their mindset, I'd see that as being successful in my job (Mel)

Mel also spoke about fond memories of going to youth clubs and the help, support and care she received there, such as with writing her university application and CV. She suggested she gained a lot of confidence and motivation from her youth workers, which helped her develop into a caring person. Positive experiences of youth workers were a common motivation for many participants to become involved in youth work, reflecting findings from St Croix's (2016) research. This would suggest that a care discourse in the practitioners' work is personal, brought and manifested by the practitioners themselves as they appear to be caring people driven by a caring ideal. They were motivated into this line of work for three key reasons. Firstly, for three practitioners, it was their positive experiences of youth work and youth workers as mentioned above:

> When I was younger I was very shy and really struggled, but after meeting my youth workers and started going to the club, I really started to come out of my shell, I started to grow in confidence, to socialise with others,

> and the youth workers just made a lot of time for me. I know the difference it made to my life so I know the difference it can make (Tara)

Secondly, for ten practitioners, it was due to negative life experiences as a young person:

> I suppose because when I was younger, I left home when I was like 17, I had a difficult life and there wasn't much support otherwise. So I just think there needs to be much more support for people like me growing up who find themselves in hard situations without any help or support… My experiences have made me the person that I am, to help other people. I'm just like that as a person but it's what you go through yourself that makes you that person, if that makes sense… They've got to feel like you relate to them and can empathise with them. To be a youth worker you've got to have a heart (laughs) (Paula)

Similar stories of struggle were evident across nine other practitioners in which they suggested their experiences had shaped them into caring people because they know and understand hardship. It would seem their initial aim was to fill the void they experienced in support, or simply, to become the person they needed when they were younger as expressed by several participants. And finally, for four practitioners, it was their positive experiences growing up which shaped them into caring people. These four participants came from more affluent backgrounds as they had various privileges other young people didn't have. Roy, for example, discussed how he felt it was unfair seeing others, including friends and peers, who were in difficult circumstances, or who didn't have the same opportunities as he did:

> I had good upbringing when I was younger. I had a couple of friends when I was younger that I knew didn't have a great upbringing. I just sort of felt like, in my heart, felt that it was a bit unfair to me, because their mum and dad weren't getting on, or didn't have much money, they missed out on things... People don't choose the circumstances they're brought into so life can be unfair. People can be played a bad hand, so it really opened my eyes to a world that perhaps I never knew existed (Roy)

So, aside from a professional commitment to wellbeing/protection of young people, the practitioners appear to embody their own caring ideal and be naturally caring people. From the observation of natural caring, Noddings develops the notion of ethical caring, which embodies four core characteristics:

- Engrossment
- Motivational displacement
- Reciprocity
- Commitment

Firstly, receptive attention is essential – the carer is open to what the one cared for is saying and experiencing. Noddings (1984) conceptualises this as 'engrossment', whereby the one caring for is open and accepting of the feelings and experiences of the cared for. The one caring is now engrossed in the cared for, and once the cared for know their feelings and experiences, needs, and wants are heard, valued, and accepted, the one caring for is now receptively attentive – they have received what the cared for is feeling and trying to express. According to some of the participants, their practice is not only about just building relationships, but about engrossment in the NEET young people:

> It should be about the young person, young person centred. Everything should be about them, their needs, wants, wishes, feelings, emotions (Elizabeth)

This quote also encapsulates the second characteristic, motivational displacement, in which engrossment opens the motive energy of the one caring for to flow towards the needs and wants of the one being cared for. The one caring for focuses on the needs and wants of the cared for, accepting and valuing them, setting aside their own needs and wants to give primacy to the needs and wants of the person cared for (Noddings, 1984;

2002). Many of the practitioners have already suggested that motivational displacement is a part of their practice since they claim that they attempt to develop relationships to learn about and respond to young people's needs. Noddings (2002) suggests that motivational displacement is naturally occurring, as the one caring is now able to effectively shift focus from the self to the cared for and can view the needs and motivations of the cared for through their perspective. An example of which can be viewed from Sophie who discussed being able to locate herself in young people's experiences and perspectives:

> I think for me, when I work with young people, whether they're male or female, black or white, middle class or working class, I always see an element of myself in terms of a younger version. It always takes me back to growing up myself. I see myself in those young people, so I feel if I kind of don't act according to their best interest, I see that affecting me in a way, the younger version of me (Sophie)

It seems that Sophie is putting her energy into trying to understand their world to be able to act in their best interest. This could also be considered empathy, but Noddings (1984) has some reservations about the use of the term 'empathy', seeing it as a predominantly western and masculine concept, preferring the idea of 'natural sympathy'. Either way, sympathy for young people was strong across the majority of practitioners' responses:

> It's so sad some of the lives that young people have had and the stuff they've went through. It's hard sometimes hearing stories and these different things they've experienced. It's not right and it's not always their fault. So it's being able to deal with that personally, because when you go home, it's still on your mind (Tara)

Noddings (1984) draws on Bronfenbrenner (1978) to suggest that caring relationships are irrational. By irrational, Bronfenbrenner says that 'somebody has got to be crazy about that kid!' (1978, p.774). Bronfenbrenner argues, through this irrationality, that children develop situational competence becoming able to navigate more complex situations through a cooperative participatory relationship with adults. Noddings argues

that whilst what mostly occurs in the caring encounter is considered and rational, the basic relationship is not as it is characterised by engrossment and motivational displacement. As discussed in the quote above, this irrationality is encapsulated in the emotional challenges of the work. This meant that in practice, much of the time, practitioners could be wrestling with their emotions – although they do need to maintain a professional distance (NYA, 2004). Paula said, for example:

> My manager says to me you are going to have to like, get a little bit tough because I am a little bit soft. I mean, like I'm not a pushover, but I'm thinking if he's [NEET young person] not there when I go back tomorrow, I'm going to be wounded (Paula)

Here, Paula was talking about a young man she had been working with who was going through a particularly tough period, and that she was going to be worried about him until she sees him again. Spier and Giles (2018) discuss the challenge of balancing a caring relationship that supports the young person, as opposed to smothering them through intense mothering. They suggest that a youth practitioner should have the capacity to process their feelings and keep a professional distance rather than overwhelm young people. In practice, there's usually a temporary suppression of feelings, although this is not necessarily the same as a lack of care for or about young people. Whilst some participants faced challenges, others felt better placed to maintain their professional boundaries by not letting their emotions overwhelm, debilitate or interfere with their practice and their primary goal of supporting the NEET young person. The practitioners tended to take their emotions home with them and process them then:

> I don't struggle with feelings at work, you just get used to it, you know your boundaries, so you just have to remind yourself… But there's some young people who you don't forget, yeah. And you might be driving home, or you come home and you just like can't get them out your head. So, it doesn't really affect your practice at the time. But afterwards, I think it plays on your mind (Lucy)

NEET young people often lead chaotic and turbulent lifestyles, usually come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and may be extremely vulnerable on the margins of society (Simmons, et al., 2020). This means the work can be personally and emotionally challenging as practitioners are often encountering young people in, or previously in, difficult circumstances. This doesn't necessarily mean practitioners are caring for young people via a caring relationship still, as although it can potentially be conceived as achieving engrossment and motivational displacement, what has been discussed so far can still fall under the category of just caring about (Noddings, 1984). Either way, the ability to shift from a focus on one's own emotions and needs towards the needs of the NEET young person by putting their needs first, and not being overwhelmed or debilitated by challenging emotions is essential to enabling practitioners to maintain professionalism and work in the young person's best interest. Working with other humans, especially in welfare professions, requires emotions, so this was an area of challenge for a number of practitioners because human emotion, such as sympathy, is a natural response:

> I'm quite an emotional person. And that's something that I want to deal with. I've had to kinda like, toughen up. People say all the time, they go to work and switch off when they come home. I don't switch off… it's the caring aspects that some people can switch off, some people, it's like, more than a job, it's part of your life (Sophie)

The fact that many practitioners were taking home negative emotions from work was constant throughout the data. What can be understood from this, is that many of the practitioners' feelings are genuine and they appear to be caring people, but again, this doesn't necessarily imply that they are caring for NEET young people through a caring relationship. The feelings the participants express however, do seem to be more than just within the context of their role, their feelings seem to be what Noddings (1984) refers to as natural care. Noddings does, however, argue that ethical caring derives from natural caring, and there was evidence to support this in the data. Tony, for example, views his practice as embodying the love of a family:

> It's like the love of a family. They think, you're interested in me, why? Why are you listening to me? That's what it's about. They're special and they need to be treasured and made to feel like it. They're not used to somebody asking them about their life, adults taking an interest in them, being kind to them (Tony)

There were also discussions of being a sibling who looks out for younger siblings. Tara suggests that youth workers are…

> …Someone who acts like a big brother or sister, and just looks out for you. Someone who has been there and done it and can relate to them (Tara)

This supports Noddings argument that ethical caring is derived from people's understanding and experiences of giving and receiving natural care, in which they naturally care about their younger brother or sister, or have experienced natural care as the younger sibling, and relate this to the young people they are working with. Sophie said:

> I see myself as a big sister, not a parent, but more the older, wiser sibling (laughs). I can't even explain it. It's a relationship that, they know that, when they're not in that provision or that session, that the relationship is still the same. I mean, so if I see them out, and I'm not in that session, or working, I'm still going to give them the guidance and support and love that I would give them if I was in that session, it wouldn't be any different. I've still got to go to them, I've still got to speak to them, ask them how they are, see what they're up to. You know, I mean, it doesn't end (Sophie)

This is an example of authentic and natural care rather than just ethical care, although both of these share the same characteristics – in the view of Sophie, natural care is not bound to external constraints as it transcends the parameters of professional time and context meaning it is unconditional and constant. This is not to suggest that context is unimportant however, as proximity is a crucial element in building and maintaining caring relationships (Noddings, 1984).

According to Noddings (1984), for this to be considered a caring encounter, there must some caring action and recognition by the cared for that an act of caring has occurred – there must be some reciprocity. Noddings (1984) in analysing a mother's caregiving, suggests that even babies respond to acts of caring, whether it's as simple as a smile, laugh or wriggle. For Noddings, it is crucial that the cared for, regardless of age, give some form of acknowledgement of the caring act, so that the one caring for can see it has been received, thus completing the caring relation. Without caring being affirmed, it cannot be considered a caring encounter or relation. As the motive energy flows towards the cared for, this is supported by the responsiveness of the cared for which, in turn, the one caring for responds positively to enhancing the development and quality of the caring relationship (Noddings, 2002). It would appear that at least a few of the practitioners have managed to complete this caring relationship in their practice, in what they consider to be reciprocal relationships. For example, Paula discussed the importance of just being there and giving time to young people, which also becomes an expectation of the cared for:

> I think they'd, erm, they'd expect to, after a while to like, to trust me. They'd expect me to be there for them like, when I say I'm going to do something, do it and not let them down, and just like be consistent. So just being there, like I had a meeting with one of them to help him with his Universal Credit thing because he literally didn't have a clue – that's just an example – and we sat down and I spent two hours with him. So just to give them that time, I suppose, that's what they expect from me (Paula)

There was, across a few practitioners, some evidence that they have mutual relationships of trust and support with young people. In some cases, these had been built up over time, as many of the NEET young people they are working with were severely withdrawn and untrusting:

> Initially there wasn't any expectations, because I think they've been let down by that many services and that many people, like social workers or other key workers they've had. But now it's like a mutual relationship, so

> if I ask them to do something, they'll do it, if they ask me to do something, then I'll do it, as long as it's reasonable (laughs) (Helen)

Noddings (1984) discusses reciprocal caring relations, which implies a mutual sense of obligation and responsibility in which specifics can be negotiated in search of balance between needs – for example, the one caring for may adjust their own needs to cater for the needs of the cared for. In Noddings' (1984) analysis of the teacher-student relationship, she acknowledges that this is an unequal relationship, with the teacher naturally assuming the one caring for role, but based on being the recipients of care, and through their responsiveness, reciprocity is achieved as students learn to care too. Noddings does, however, suggest that both the one caring for and the one being cared for gain different things out of the caring relation. The one being cared for primarily receives caring acts to help them meet their emotional, physical, and mental needs, and whilst there are a lot of negative emotions involved as seen above, sometimes what the one caring for receives is positive emotions such as genuine happiness. So, for example, when a practitioner has been able to help a young person, they reap the rewards of that which fills them with joy:

> I do really enjoy it, especially when I know I'm making a difference. So when you go home, you feel happy and think, yeah I sorted that young person out today (Liam)

Liam here, discussing how a NEET young person's confidence had grown, makes him feel happy, meaning his work has a significant impact on his personal life, as it does with many of the other practitioners. It seems the rewards can be plentiful:

> I work with such a wide range of young people and do all different types of things, so I get like different types of rewards if that makes sense. It makes it worth it because you feel like you're making a difference (Claire)

Sam was particularly vocal about how much she enjoys what she does, considering it a privilege to get to know and learn about other people's lives, whilst learning new things:

> I think I'm a people person. So, I get to spend all day every day with loads of different types of people. And I get to learn about people's lives. The young people teach me so much. I've learned that many new words, even in last couple of weeks. Oh, yeah. I'm going to start using some of those to make me feel younger again (laughs) (Sam)

It seems that the rewards available in this work can mitigate other negative aspects. The practitioners spoke fondly about their work and seem to genuinely enjoy working with young people, and aim to make a difference in their lives. What can be extrapolated from this is Noddings' final characteristic – commitment. For example, Elizabeth said:

> It's nice just to be there for them. They haven't had good experiences or had anyone there for them so you know, I want to be that person they can turn to and who's not going to let them down (Elizabeth)

At least six practitioners felt strong expectations in their relationships with NEET young people such as being trustworthy, somebody who won't let them down where they've been failed before by teachers, social workers, key workers, support workers, and adults generally. This commitment was further evidenced in some practitioners' discussions of trying not to be an authority figure. The relationship they have with NEET is, claimed by some practitioners, distinct from other professions, particularly teaching and social work:

> Sometimes you'll see teachers or social workers, and you sit in meetings, and you think you don't even like young people. Why are you doing this job? I genuinely don't think you can do a good job with young people if you dislike them… As adults, if we want to change something, or we want to change our lives, we use the support of the relationships around us. It's not really strangers that make an impact, it's people you have relationships with, and you can only build relationships with people that like you or that you like them, So, if you've got a social worker or youth worker, and you know, they don't want to be there, they don't really like you and they're not really interested. Are they going to have an impact on your life? (Lucy)

There was a common theme running throughout the data of youth practitioners encountering other professionals who didn't seem keen on young people, or want to build good relationships to support young people. The practitioners believed that young people need healthy and positive relationships with adults who care about them as some may lack in that department, particularly those that come from challenging backgrounds and may be susceptible to negative influences in the absence of positive role models. By the practitioners comparing and making distinctions between their caring relationships with NEET young people and other professionals makes explicit that the relationship they have with young people has much more of a commitment. The reciprocal relationship is then further strengthened once the one cared for recognises the commitment of the one caring for. The caring relation can be summarised as:

1. A cares for B – that is A's consciousness is characterised by attention and motivational displacement – and
2. A performs some act in accordance with (1), and
3. B recognises that A cares for B. (Noddings, 2002, p.19)

All four core characteristics – engrossment, motivational displacement, reciprocity, commitment - in the ethical caring relationship are broadly encapsulated across and within the practitioners' perspectives and can go some way towards helping to understand the relationship between youth practitioners and NEET young people. The characteristic of commitment is strong, whilst there is also some evidence of reciprocal relationships. It seemed that some practitioners are naturally caring people who want to do their best for NEET young people and genuinely aim to help and support them. Superficially at least, this reveals that care and compassion have retained a significant presence within youth work practice, including in employability training. The EoC characteristics, however, have so far been illustrated across a range of practitioners, but this doesn't necessarily mean that every practitioner was individually working to all the

characteristics. The next section explores the tensions in practitioners' positions, noting a large degree of conflict between care and control.

A Hybrid Discourse or Discourse Continuum?

All three discourses – economic, control and care – appear to be present in youth work employability provision. The practitioners are working towards targets concerned with rectifying skills deficiencies by developing the employability of NEET young people. They are all, however, through low quality generic training, reinforcing divisions of skill and labour, bonding young people to disadvantage, perpetuating social inequalities and contributing to social control. Yet, all practitioners in this research appear to be caring people and claim to have caring relationships with NEET young people in their employability training. This would, superficially at least, imply something of a hybrid discourse in practice as elements of all three discourses seem to have emerged. Economic and control are imposed on practitioners through targets based upon skill deficit constructions, which they contribute towards through their employability training, whilst care is brought by the practitioners, meaning it is personal and seems to emerge in the practitioners' relationships.

There are some significant tensions here, however. If the practitioners are perpetuating the marginalisation of NEET young people, whether consciously or unconsciously, it is hard to fathom that they are also caring for NEET young people via a caring relationship. It doesn't seem conceivable that these two discourses are compatible. Care and control can overlap in some circumstances, for example, outside the realms of youth work, these twin discourses may be seen in parenting, whereby control and protection are mutually present. Other examples may include individuals with serious mental health issues who have been sectioned against their will, but for their own and others protection. Similar can be said for crime or addictions, which may require rehabilitation and recovery centres, or other behaviours detrimental to self, which require forms of control to care. There appears to be quite a fine line then, as in some cases, control could be seen are a form of care. There were some examples in the data which seemed to

reflect both care and control. Leah reflected on her employability session and spoke about her work more generally:

> Walked back to staff room with Leah – asked her more about her role. She feels she's more of a support worker than youth worker/employability tutor – thinks her role is mostly 'mothering' young people, which she said she does also enjoy and embraces. She talked about how the young people mostly come from really troubled family backgrounds. Making reference to one young man that I had just met whose mother has been really ill with cancer, she said more than anything he just needs emotional support and someone to show him they care. Sounds like she does genuinely care about helping the young people she works with. Leah said she sometimes feels like she's just babysitting young people, especially some of the post-16s because they are capable of doing so much more with themselves, but are just completely withdrawn after years out of any sort of mainstream provision, and with hardly any confidence in themselves – Christy agreed with this [Field notes, 05.03.2020]

Firstly, this was a genuinely heartfelt conversation with Leah. She didn't mind sharing some of the difficulties of her work, and as a former youth worker, I could empathise with some of what she was saying. This was actually a bonding conversation as I shared some difficulties from my practice with young people - Leah seemed to appreciate the reciprocation. My positionality therefore supported me in this interaction. From just observing Leah engaging well with young people, and then listening to what she had to say, particularly about trying to prioritise her relationships, and expressing her care for young people in various forms, I perceived Leah to be a caring person. Reflecting on my fieldnotes however, after concluding employability was about social control, I noticed some tensions in Leah's position.

Whilst this may be seen as exemplifying care, there seemed to be some overlap with control due to her talk about 'babysitting' (a form of warehousing) and so, maybe unintentionally, holding young people back from progressing and reaching their potential. It could appear, superficially at least, that both control and care are present as she is demonstrating and discussing her care, but to some degree at least, including

aspects of social control. Leah, however, sees herself primarily as caring for NEET young people rather than anything else. She did nevertheless acknowledge the employability provision was 'keeping them busy', but she sees this as a good thing:

> Leah believes the employability training is good for young people as it gets them out the house and gives them something to do rather than sat in on their phones and computers. She said that there's not much else for them going on and most of their parents don't have money to give them to do activities, so a lot get bored and could end up getting into trouble in search for some entertainment and excitement. This training is keeping them busy and giving them something positive to do. [Field notes, 05.03.2020]

It seems that Leah was suggesting that there is, again, some degree of overlap between care and control, as although this provision is keeping NEET young people busy, it is also preventing and diverting them from socially risky behaviours which can be considered beneficial to young people. This can be conceived as either control or care, or elements of both, like the parenting example, whereby a large degree of paternalism is exercised but primarily from a place of care in the best interest of the offspring. Traditionally, youth work has aimed to be responsive to young people's needs, or led by young people (Davies, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 2010). In other words, it is a different relationship from that of a parent, which can be made explicit on the transactional analysis (Berne, 1961). In an ideal world, the aim of traditional youth work has been to get young people into a mental and physical place where they can engage in an adult-to-adult conversations (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Leah's practice seems more geared to a parent-child relationship, rather than adult-adult making explicit that it differentiates from traditional youth work and is potentially a paternalistic relationship. So, while Leah's practice does seem to contain care, at least in her expressed emotions, it appears that control is more dominant as the primary function seems to be to control NEET youth by keeping them busy. As I recognised this picture beginning to emerge in the data, I started to question some of the practitioners about the tensions between care and control. It would seem the lines are not so clear cut for them either:

> I'd say it's more about care, it's coming from a place of care for their well being, or at least that's what it is from my perspective… If they're involved in negative lifestyles and not working, it's better for them to get help with that now for their future. So even if it is about controlling them, I think it can be a good thing as long as it's coming from a place of care (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth discussed controlling young people as a form of caring. Parallels can also be drawn here with the twin discourses of youth 'as trouble/in trouble' (Hebdige, 1988; Griffin, 1993) whereby they require both care and control simultaneously, which has shaped a range of intervention within a prevent/protect framework (Fusco, 2018). Moreover, historical forms of care and welfare have often been underpinned by moralistic tones. Whilst this could potentially be a subtle form of social control, there was some data I initially found quite concerning regarding a surge in funding for healthy eating initiatives. I first became aware of this after my meeting with Sarah, the leader of the voluntary youth alliance:

> We discussed some of the funding she has at the moment which is focused on a healthy eating initiative aimed at young people in deprived areas – she said this is being pushed quite a lot at the moment. She wasn't particularly pleased about funding such as this, as generally it is contributing to the contraction of youth work with more targets and outcomes. She nevertheless believes funding such as this is a vital resource for young people and she needs to get as much money as possible in for her partner network [Field notes, 10.02.2020]

The healthy eating focus was also evident in the field notes for both Leah and Charlotte's organisations as projects they were engaging in alongside their employability training. Charlotte who worked for a large voluntary organisation, was involved in a project which included providing food parcels and vouchers to young people and families to combat food poverty:

> Charlotte said she often receives feedback from parents who really appreciate what they are doing. She said she tells them that 'I'm not giving you that food out of my pocket', but they don't care because it means so

> much to them. Charlotte said it makes her really happy knowing that it's actually benefitting young people and their families [Field notes, 18.02.2020]

I perceived this work to be about care, as it was reminiscent of historic approaches to welfare inasmuch as participants were giving food to young people and families, helping them to meet their basic needs. This was for Charlotte, however, a time-specific project, rather than a general universal focus. Leah's organisation had also recently received some funding from the council for a healthy eating project as the deprived area she works in, she claims many young people are suffering from malnutrition. Prior to this, Leah said she would cook at home and bring food in due to the hunger of young people when they come to sessions. On my first visit to Leah's organisation, I observed one of the healthy eating sessions:

> Leah and Christy brought out a box of fruit and veg and began discussions on the foods – they questioned young people about the health benefits and nutritional information of different foods, such as guessing what vitamins and minerals are in each item and what these are for. The young people seemed fairly enthusiastic and engaged well. This continued for around 25 minutes. Leah also handed out some fact sheets about different foods for young people to take home with them. Greg then arrived and was taking the young people to the kitchen to make lunch with the veg they had just discussed – they were going to make a vegetable soup [Field notes, 21.02.2020]

As I reflected on the session, I wrote in my notes regarding the healthy eating initiatives:

> Some alarm bells have gone off here. I am concerned whether there are implicit assumptions behind this initiative – such as that working-class parents don't know how to look after their children or feed them healthy food. There is nothing in this work to question why some parents might not have the money and resources to make sure their children are getting enough meals each day. I'm aware food poverty is a big issue and I know that this is well intended, but I can't help feeling that it somehow reinforces dominant discourse about working-class parents who don't budget well, spend money on drink and drugs, don't cook or don't know how to, or need parenting lessons, etc. [Field notes, 21.02.2020]

Whilst Charlotte's work was solely about supporting young people and their families, Leah's practice included an educational focus about nutrition and healthy eating. I initially perceived the latter as potentially serving to pathologise working-class families inasmuch as it could be underpinned by an assumption that they don't know how to look after and feed their children appropriately. This does seem to be about a certain form of care nevertheless as it reflects charity work rooted in Victorian notions of pity, which were often underpinned by moralistic undertones. In other words, it is reminiscent of top-down provision and doesn't actively challenge or change the situation that has created conditions in which young people are not being fed. Although the participants are not emphasising any underclass discourse here, this type of welfare has traditionally carried with it certain assumptions, as historically, it has been underpinned by different ideas over time about poor people. During Victorian times for example, poor people were judged as deserving or undeserving of charitable provision.

Upon further reflection, however, I recognise my positionality influenced my initial interpretation. As a member of the working class with something of a critical mind, I have developed suspicion about welfare and the implicit assumptions underpinning it regarding the lifestyle and behaviour patterns of the poor. I feel inclined to challenge these discourses as I am representative of the working class, and to some extent, the working-class representative of me whereby it can feel like a personal attack. I discussed this earlier in my discussion on reflexivity when exploring how I'd often get into heated debates with university colleagues regarding underclass discourse. It is important for me to be aware of this personal agenda though by continuously reflecting on myself so I can manage my thoughts and feelings and use the data openly and honestly, without steering it in a direction that fits my own bias. Blackman (2016) discusses doing emotional edgework in fieldwork – it is not bad to have feelings while conducting your research, but it is important to manage them so they don't affect the process of interpretation. To manage my feelings on this, my strategy was to look at it from three different perspectives – a critical perspective, a positive perspective, then synthesis these two into a neutral perspective. From this neutral perspective, it could be these initiatives were completely innocent and intended to provide support to those who

need it. Not all welfare carries underlying assumptions, for example, most people who use food banks now are in full time employment, meaning they are unlikely to be demonised as being lazy scroungers. On a side note, it is no coincidence that food bank usage has increased substantially since 2010, just as neoliberal policy took centre stage again and introduced austerity measures; against a backdrop of longer-term neoliberal trends, such as large-scale changes in the labour market that has led to precarious working conditions, meaning unreliable pay for a large majority of people. It is, in essence, reactive - an attempt to fill a void via a triage model and it seems some forms of youth work have been incorporated into this.

The main point here is that there have always been tensions between care and control, which have been competing in youth work over the last two centuries – so, what seems to be about care could also be about control. The lines aren't always straightforward. To help unravelling the intricacies of this tension, Noddings (2002) makes some useful distinctions between *caring for* and *caring about.* Caring about is a more general notion and doesn't necessarily require any caring actions, which means it would be compatible with social control, whereas caring for is done through a caring relationship and is not compatible with social control. To care for someone, all characteristics of the EOC are required to be present, but it is not possible for practitioners to incorporate the characteristics of engrossment and motivational displacement if their work is not primarily responsive to young people's needs but driven by external economic priorities which support social control. This so-called caring relationship the practitioners claim to have with NEET young people therefore needs further examining to determine whether all caring characteristics are present – engrossment, motivational displacement, commitment, and reciprocity. This will help make distinctions between who is *caring for* and who is *caring about*, and who is supporting social control and who is not. Put simply, practitioners are either exercising social control, or they are caring for young people via a caring relationship which contains all characteristics of the EOC, but they are not doing both, at least at the same time as they are in competition with one another. In theory, these two positions are incongruent, and so, it is not a hybrid discourse in practice as all three discourses cannot exist simultaneously.

As such, I believe going forward, the data will be better understood and theorised through a discourse continuum, which can be envisaged as:

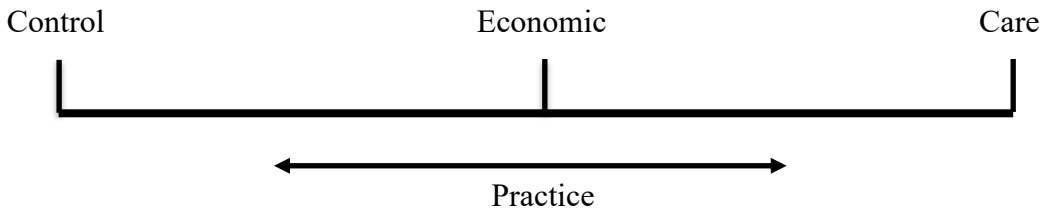

Figure 1.1: Discourse Continuum

Economic is in the middle as, essentially, all the practitioners are working towards this through targets and their employability training, in which they want to help NEET young people progress and get jobs. Based on the arguments in this chapter however, practitioners can currently be placed on the continuum in preliminary positions. Firstly, it has been argued that employability training places them here:

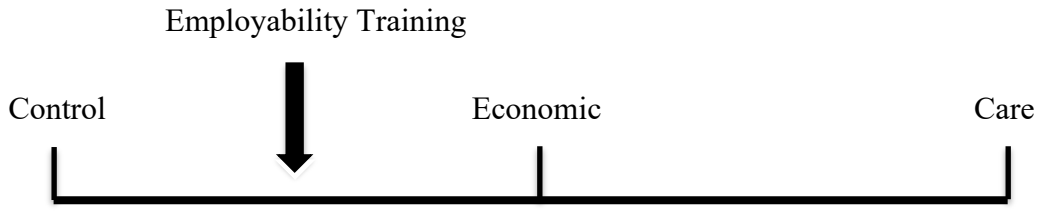

Figure 1.2: Employability Training

As discussed earlier, there is a large degree of overlap and a relationship of support between the economic and social control discourses. All the practitioners are working towards the economic discourse driven by targets based upon skill deficit views of NEET young people, but this naturally pulls them towards social control as their employability training is generally low-quality with a generic pedagogy that serves to bond young people to marginalisation. Economic and social control are nevertheless compatible to coexist, and it could even be argued that the economic discourse is a smokescreen for social control. In any case, they have not consciously positioned themselves between control-economic on the continuum, so it seems they are unwittingly contributing to social control.

As all practitioners claimed to have caring relationships with NEET young people though, significant tension arises when considering where their employability training places them on the continuum. There is seemingly a large disconnect between what they believe themselves to be doing and what they are actually doing in employability training:

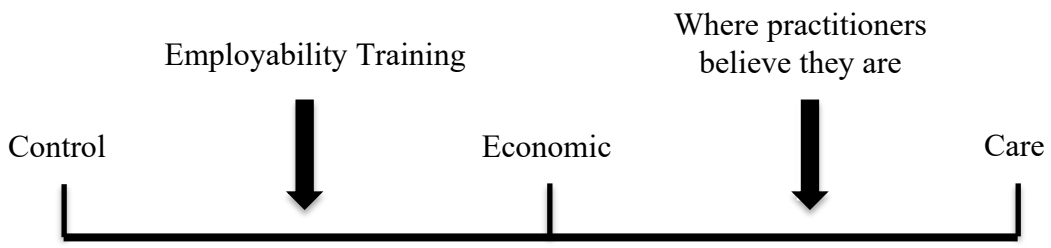

Figure 1.3: Tensions in Practice

The practitioners claim to have caring relationships with the young people they work with in their employability training which would place them between economic-care on the continuum. Economic and care do seem to be compatible as essentially they can still prioritise young people's needs while more generally caring about their futures and

wanting to help them develop skills, progress and find employment. Work is, after all, fundamental to an individual's wellbeing and human flourishing – it can provide an array of benefits, including structure, routine, purpose, social circle and networks, whilst also providing a wage to live a dignified existence (although the latter is debateable with the rise of in-work poverty and poor paid employment (Shildrick et al., 2012; Green, 2017)). Put simply, practitioners can care about young people's economic position and aim to help them via employability training. In considering findings from the economic and control discourse so far however, it can be said that not all practitioners have a caring relationship with NEET young people. All the practitioners were working towards external economic agendas associated with targets based upon skill deficit discourses, and generally, contributing to social control by bonding NEET young people to marginalisation through low-level employability provision. It would seem there are some real tensions here as care is pulling in the opposite direction – this would mean these discourses are competing.

The next two chapters uses the discourse continuum to analyse practitioners' perspectives on NEET young people and how the discourses emerge in their practice, either pulling them more towards control or care in their employability training. Essentially, the practitioners either conform to and reinforce certain discourses or challenge them and compromise in a process of negotiation.

Chapter 5: Practitioners' Perspectives and Practice

This second data chapter analyses eight practitioners' views on NEET young people and employability training. Essentially, it is argued that these eight practitioners embody views which align with deficit discourses of youth, which supports the emergence of both economic competitiveness and social control in their practice, which then reinforce one another in a mutual relationship of support. The practitioners nevertheless view themselves as having caring relationships with NEET young people, but as argued previously, care and control are not compatible so there is a considerable dichotomy in what they believe themselves to be doing and what they are doing in reality. It is suggested that the practitioners, whose views align with deficit constructions of youth, are incorporating a pedagogy of control and therefore manifesting a pseudo-care discourse, whereby they care about NEET young people, but not actually care for them within a relationship.

Practitioners' Perspectives on NEET Young People

Out of the seventeen participants in this research, eight practitioners held a range of deficit views on NEET young people. Just to note, Blackman (2016) suggests that research should be humanising. To refer to participants as embodying deficit could be considered dehumanising, but in the pursuit of knowledge and wellbeing, these views need categorising and deconstructing as they essentially dehumanise NEET young people. There is no nice way to articulate this though, it can't be sugar-coated – the practitioners view NEET as lacking in multiple areas. These practitioners include:

1. Leah
2. Paula
3. Sam
4. Elizabeth
5. Roy
6. Chloe

7. Helen
8. Tony

There didn't appear to be any pattern or links between these eight practitioners initially, such as age or experience for example. Upon further analysis though, it became evident that at least four of them came from more affluent backgrounds compared to the rest of the participants in this research. Leah, Paula, Roy and Helen discussed generally coming from middle-class backgrounds, which was part of their motivation for becoming a youth worker. They discussed how they thought it was unfair seeing friends, peers and others from lower socioeconomic backgrounds not having the same opportunities as they did growing up, feeling pity for them. I explored with the practitioners their views on the causes and characteristics of NEET. Elizabeth said:

> Some young people are seriously lacking in skills, like even basic life skills. They don't know how the world is run and don't understand life. So, they need help to develop into adulthood (Elizabeth)

As previously discussed, the skills deficit discourse has been used by the state to justify extended periods of education and the introduction of various forms of employability training under broader economic imperatives (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Some practitioners conflated life and employment skills:

> I think a lot of young people lack basic skills like cooking, cleaning, or whatever… I think if they don't have the general life skills, then they're not going to have the work skills. Like they need to be able to be organised, punctual (Sam)

The practitioners never actually explained what work skills were lacking, but focused more on the absence of general life skills and soft skills. Organisation and punctuality were mentioned numerous times. Either way, whether they believed it was a lack of work skills, life skills, or some amalgamation of both, this was generally attributed to the personal responsibility of the individual:

> I do think they do need more skills. Like when I was younger I developed my own skills, like through volunteering and stuff, so I got loads more opportunities than some of my mates. So, I think they do need more skills but they need to take the initiative. I think some just lack work ethic, lack punctuality or organisation and small skills like that. It's like they don't feel or understand that responsibility and put these skills into place now (Helen)

Claims about the benefit of volunteering have already been dismissed (Allan, 2019; Leonard and Wilde, 2019). The more ironic point here is, whilst all practitioners expressed opposition to targets for various reasons to do with pressure, preserving relationships, or as generally harmful and unrealistic to youth work as seen in the previous chapter, the views of these eight practitioners on NEET young people support and justify these targets. Official discourse has often pointed to a skills deficit as key reasons for youth unemployment (Simmons et al., 2020). The eight practitioners endorsed official discourse on the causes of NEET which means they are contradicting themselves in their expressed opposition to targets, and lack awareness that they are reinforcing the economic discourse in their practice.

What appeared more worryingly, is that some of the practitioners began to attach moralistic tones to their views of NEET young people and the reason for their lack of skills. For example, a couple of the practitioners suggested that life skills can be more important than work skills:

> You can have the work skills, but if you haven't got social skills or life skills to go bed at night and up early in the morning, it's that discipline. It's also about getting on at work as well with people. And also respecting your boss. Recognising that hierarchy (Roy)

Whilst the practitioners believed that young people are lacking in skills, this was related to personal shortcomings such as a lack of aspiration, work ethic, discipline and poor

attitudes. Helen suggested that NEET young people are not prepared to take some types of jobs:

> I think some people don't like to do certain jobs as well. Like me, I'd do anything, I'll do owt as long as I'm getting paid, but some young people won't. They should see it as a stepping stone though, they should know what their dream job is and be working towards that (Helen)

Many young people do take lower-end jobs as they are often desperate for work but end up trapped in a revolving door of low-paid, insecure, poor work (Shildrick et al., 2012). Therefore, it is not possible for every young person to work towards their 'dream job'. For other participants, working in low-end jobs was not good enough…

> …if they're not aspiring to do anything, I think that's where you get lots of problems. I think they need to aspire to do a bit more with themselves and have dreams rather than like working in McDonald's or a butty shop (Tony)

Research has demonstrated that most young people do aspire to 'normal' life, including employment, family and a stable home, but they have low expectations as they often perceive bleak and uncertain futures (Simmons et al., 2020). On the other hand, some may reject certain jobs due to low status and low pay, recognising the likelihood this will be temporary work, simply preferring to hold out for a better opportunity (Simmons et al., 2014). Roy appeared to believe this:

> I think especially in today's society, and it's a horrible thing to say, but I think some young people think the world owes them a living. When I was growing up, I was told that I had to work, and from the age of 12 I had paper rounds, I was in farms, I was in factories. I definitely have come across young people that have said they're not willing to do certain jobs. I don't understand that attitude. Because, you know, when I was growing up, I worked as a cleaner. I cleaned. I didn't care, anything just to get some money (Roy)

With the rise of a service economy, young men in particular often struggle to find jobs that offer status, value and dignity in the absence of traditional masculine employment aligned with their working-class identities (Green, 2017). Two participants also discussed social media as influencing young people's attitudes and expectations, through the glamorisation of lavish celebrity lifestyles and instant gratification:

> They see these celebrities and footballers earning lots of money for not doing much don't they. So I think with the rise of influencers and social media and all that, young people think there is a shortcut… It pressures them if they haven't got things like wearing the latest branded clothes, Gucci and whatever it is, they feel like they can't belong. Some of the young people I'm working with have nothing, they have no money and they are not selling drugs at the moment, thank God (Paula)

Briefly, they believed that social media shapes many young people's poor attitudes towards certain types of work because they want a 'quick-fix' so sometimes engage in the informal economy where the immediate rewards available may be more tempting. The practitioners' perspectives about personal responsibility, work ethic, aspiration, and poor attitudes and expectations amongst NEET young people align with broader underclass discourses promoted by successive governments since the 1980s and perpetuated alongside the rise of the NEET category, in conjunction with the demonisation of the working class more generally (Skeggs, 2002; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). As discussed in the literature review, Murray (1990) claims that an overgenerous welfare state produces moral deficiencies and cultures of dependency, which leads to family breakdown, fecklessness, drug and alcohol abuse and various other social ills. Promiscuous teenage girls, it is argued, purposefully get pregnant to settle in social housing and on benefits available to lone mothers. In the absence of respectable fathers, single mothers, or so the story goes, then raise successive generations accultured to behave in the same way and reproduce the cycle of dependency. All of the eight practitioners held similar views:

> Like my mum and dad always worked, and they taught me how to find work and I've always worked hard from the age of 17. But some of these young people grow up just knowing about the benefit system, they don't get a lot but it's enough to get them by, so it's hard to get them out of that because that's all they've known (Paula)

It is suggested by Murray (1990) that the welfare state produces a cultural underclass opposed to mainstream values. These views have often been espoused by members of the Conservative party and the Right-wing media with claims that some families haven't worked for generations (MacDonald et al., 2013). Such ideas were strongly articulated by at least six of the practitioners:

> It's a lack of role models. I'm not sure what generation we're in now, but it's either third or fourth generation of unemployed, so their fathers, their grandfathers haven't worked and lived on benefits, which isn't really a positive role model for them. And I think, obviously, it's down to just work ethic (Roy)

There were numerous accounts whereby practitioners claimed that poor attitudes towards work and a lack of aspiration have been passed down through family, friends and significant others:

> They've already got in their head what's normal for them, so like if they come from a background where their parents don't work, or their parents are against education, then they're going to be like that and expect the same. So it's hard to shift that mind frame because how we supposed to turn around and say your parents are wrong… I know loads who don't work and are on benefits. So that lack of work ethic is passed on to the young people (Elizabeth)

> They have poor attitudes, they think nobody in my family has been to uni or goes to school or work, then gaining money through illegal activities, where they think they can gain more money through that (Sam)

Such views align with underclass discourse which blames cultures of dependency for youth unemployment. So, whilst the practitioners perspectives aligned with skills deficit

explanations which have driven the economic discourse into youth work, they also conflated this with a moralistic view of young people. As unpacked earlier, NEET has often served to entangle both skill and moral deficit perspectives of youth, which conflates the economic and control discourse as NEET young people are viewed as not only needing skills, but also a change in attitude. Moreover, underclass discourse can, in some cases at least, subsume skill deficit explanations, viewing young people as lacking in skills but primarily due to their antieducation and anti-work attitudes (MacDonald, 2006; Maguire, 2015). It appears these eight practitioners place more emphasis on the latter, they are making moral judgements in which they view the young people's supposed lack of skills as deriving from poor attitudes and values. There was a substantial amount of data to suggest that many of the NEET young people the practitioners were working with came from materially deprived backgrounds. These types of backgrounds would stereotypically be associated with the underclass:

> I've learned so much about NEET young people and some of the environments that they have been brought up in here. I've seen places I've never been before. It's quite big, you don't expect it. You see a lot of poverty and you'll be like, 'that's the council estate', you know that that's kind of rough. Then I've been into houses that the whole street have no windows, are all boarded, it's like extreme poverty. One of the lads, he's got eight siblings and live in a three bedroom and sleep in the front room. You wouldn't expect that, you'd think surely social services and everything, human rights won't allow this kind of overcrowding and stuff but it's allowed, yeah, so it's been very eye-opening… Then there's another street, and then there's like, people that just stand on their doorstep in their pyjamas all day smoking and stuff like that. It's kind of just normal but that extreme level, I didn't expect it (Chloe)

Chloe had no prior experience or knowledge that these conditions exist in modern society. Evidence of poverty amongst NEET young people was apparent across the data and there was evidence to suggest that many of them were engaged in criminal activity, usually concerned with drug dealing. This data would potentially support cultural underclass discourse. Equally, however, young people were vulnerable to becoming victims of crime:

> So it's sessions we've designed to inform young people about illegal money lending and loan sharks because it's on the rise. People are not using legal avenues to borrow money because of credit or whatever, unemployment, whatever. So, it's making them aware of the risks of using loan sharks, that it's not legal, they can get in huge debts, that they can use violence and stuff to get the money back… It's really bad because they can charge whatever they want to charge as its not regulated. They're also approaching young people outside job centres (Leah)

When discussing the causes of poverty, it was argued repeatedly by the practitioners, that young people follow in the footsteps of their parents who have never worked. As encouraged by Blackman (2016), to share aspects of yourself and challenge views of participants, I questioned whether they thought there were other reasons for poverty, giving some examples of structural inequalities and alternative explanations of poverty. The majority still emphasised on the agency of individuals, with some slight mention of backgrounds and environments:

> If they're just used to seeing people on benefits, and being around that kind of environment without any aspiration, then they get trapped in it… If everyone thinks they're going to fail they then they just think 'fuck it then I'll fail. If you don't believe in me, I'm not going to believe in myself' (Paula)

> I think it has something to do with their background. Coming from a rough area, getting in with the wrong crowd or circles, and just their general behaviour and attitudes towards work and education (Elizabeth)

Leah, however, connected underclass theory to the cultural norms of the area NEET young people come from. This, she argued, contributes to producing and reproducing the cycle of poverty:

> I just feel like the young people don't have many opportunities. They grow up in this environment where, it's quite limited. I think there's a lot of areas where people don't work, so if you grow up in that environment

> where mum and dad doesn't work, you know, they're not encouraged to, that becomes they're expectation doesn't it. They'll think well my family doesn't work and just claim their benefits and get along in life, so they just drop into the same cycle of doing that. Like it's not built into them to go out and get a job like it was with us, so then not a lot of them are going to push themselves to do it (Leah)

Leah spoke about NEET young people being born into a particular environment which embodies a cultural cycle of benefit dependency, but didn't distinguish if this was primary or derivative inasmuch as whether it's a culture of poverty that reproduces social inequality, or a disadvantaged environment which is the primary causal factor. Oscar Lewis (1966) discusses the cycle of poverty – the notion that the poor have an oppositional value system and remain in poverty because of their adaptation to poverty. However, Lewis sees a two-way relationship between structure and culture – that structural poverty is primary and that culture adapts to such poverty. In contrast, Murray (1990) argues that the cultural values of the poor create poverty and disregards structural inequality, though much research challenges the underclass discourse (Shildrick et al., 2012). So, although cultural factors are important, as they are shaped and developed by deprivation and disadvantage, more weight should be given to the structures that create poverty. Either way, this can result in shrinking social space for those from the working class as their culture becomes stigmatised and devalued. This often can lead to a sense of entrapment and an embodied state of marginalisation (Simmons et al., 2020). Put simply, some NEET young people become accustomed to living on the margins as they sink further into apathy and hopelessness. They adjust to the cultural norms and internalise the dominant values of their community.

The practitioners' views alone can serve to perpetuate some young peoples' marginalisation as essentially, deficit cultural constructions individualise and legitimise broader social and economic inequality by blaming them for their own circumstances. It could be argued that these eight practitioners lack critical awareness about the processes of enforced marginalisation through economic dispossession that NEET young people have experienced (Simmons et al., 2020). Either way, it seems their work

reengaging NEET young people in employability training is justified by their perspectives on NEET as deficit, who they view as lacking in skills and aspiration due to moral deficiencies. Generally, there seems to be a rough correspondence between many of the views of various practitioners working with unemployed people, such as in employability or welfare to work, and the lens of the state - a deficiency model in which people need skills and moralising into civilised society where they are contributing, as opposed to being a drain on state welfare services (Shildrick et al., 2012). The eight practitioners starting position based on their assumptions about NEET young people can be located somewhere between control-economic on the continuum:

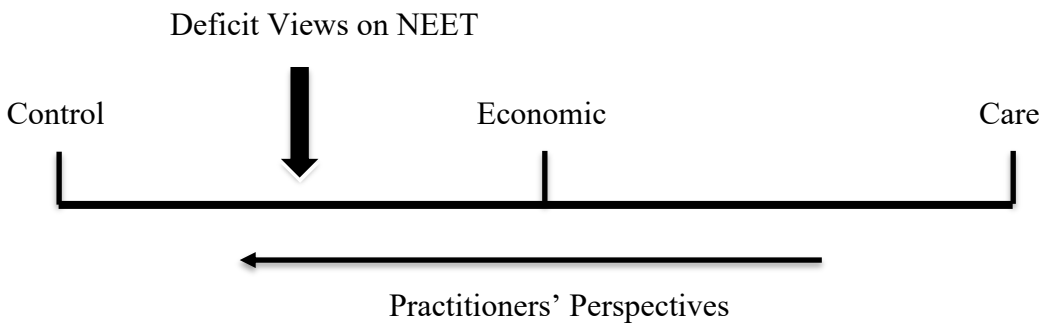

Figure 1.4: Deficit Views

The reason the practitioners are located here is because, firstly, they are legitimising youth work employability initiatives as they see young people as lacking in skills, which reinforces economic targets and aims. Secondly, their employability training, as discussed in the previous chapter, naturally overlaps and pulls them towards social control due to its low quality incorporating a generic pedagogy. On the other hand, they conflated skill deficit views with moralistic underclass discourse, which would mean young people not only need skills, but also attitude and behavioural change. Here, they seem to be significantly strengthening and reinforcing the social control discourse as they potentially view themselves as needing to remoralise NEET young people. This means that the employability training they are providing is already in equilibrium with their views on NEET.

In the section below, I investigate this further by examining these eight practitioners' perspectives on what they think they are doing in their employability training to consider whether their practice aligns with their views of NEET young people.

Practitioners' Perspectives on Practice

As discussed above, at least eight of the practitioners in this research had deficit views on NEET young people, broadly associated with underclass theory, which justified their aims of building up the employability skills and boosting the aspirations of NEET young people. These views also significantly shaped what they believed themselves to be doing in practice – practitioners believed themselves to be breaking cycles of worklessness which young people are bonded into:

> I just think that that's part of my role, to be a positive role model to show them you need to work and try break that cycle. And I think also, the benefit system doesn't help. I think that's a major downfall. The government have been saying, we want to make it less favourable to be on benefits than working. But for a young person, they get 57, or 58 pound a week, they get full housing benefit, which pays their rent. So all they've got to do then is survive for electricity, food and some of them like that lifestyle. They can survive for five or ten pounds worth of food a week, and they can survive with ten pound electric and not work. So, why would they go to work, and lose all of that free time with not much gain (Roy)

It seems that Roy has some misinformation as housing benefit changes some years ago mean that those aged under 25 can no longer claim such benefit, whilst living on benefits might not be as glamourous as it is projected to be in the mainstream media (Shildrick et al., 2012). Many families working full-time struggle to pay bills, food, childcare, and often need benefits to top up their wages. At the same time, food bank usage and in-work poverty has risen over recent years (Green, 2017). This can only be exacerbated with the cost of living crisis, rising inflation and potential future recession.

For Leah, on the other hand, part of 'breaking the cycle' involves inspiring NEET young people and reinforcing meritocratic discourse. The idea that young people can make something of themselves as long as they have talent, ability and work hard enough. Meritocracy though is another individualised discourse to overcome material disadvantage:

> Like their parents have never really been out of the area and in and out of crime, so that's like their expectations, they go around in these circles. So I think, I try to say, there's so much more out there… just explaining opportunities and connecting them with them, showing them there's more out there, you know, in deprived areas young people haven't got a lot to aim for. So it's showing them a different path, even if you grew up in poverty, you don't have to turn to crime, you can achieve and go out and make something of yourself if you work hard… it is a hard cycle for them to break, to be shown different and that there's more out there (Leah)

Since 2010, the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments have intensified neoliberalism and embraced narratives of welfare dependency and moral turpitude (MacDonald et al., 2013). As mentioned numerous times, little evidence of intergenerational worklessness has ever been found, but the underclass discourse seems to be generally accepted as it has been permeated throughout society, evidenced by some of the practitioners in this research.

Either way, much of the data makes explicit that many of the NEET young people the practitioners are engaging in employability training are bonded into marginalisation. The previous chapter argued, using the work of Putnam (2001), that employability is aimed, to some extent at least, at building bridging capital, but rather paradoxically, the data suggested that all practitioners are bonding NEET young people to marginalisation as opposed to bridging out. On the other hand, according to these eight practitioners, the reason that NEET young people are bonded to marginalisation is due to cultures of worklessness and they see their role to break this bond. In this understanding, the eight practitioners who emphasised underclass discourses for youth unemployment are not attempting to build bridging capital in line with employability but break bonding capital.

For example, despite doing employability training, some practitioners were not even attempting to help NEET young people search for jobs:

> We get a lot of 16, 17 and 18 year olds come in, there's more of an education focus. I mean, because a lot of them have been around, like the older ones they've been around, seen their families who don't go to work, they've just known benefits, so they always know that they can get something... But we try to push them away from that and teach them that's not the right way to live (Paula)

If anything, this can be considered a pedagogy of control as it is about moulding young people until they embody better attitudes and behaviours to fit more appropriately into the mainstream. As mentioned earlier, the same discourses were promoted on welfare to work programmes in which practitioners viewed the unemployed as lacking in the 'right attitude' and flexibility due to supposedly being part of an underclass and culture of worklessness. Shildrick et al. (2012) show these myths have become almost folklore amongst a variety of welfare practitioners. They also demonstrate what practitioners meant by embodying the 'right attitude' - the preparedness of job seekers to take 'poor work' which is of course detrimental to the unemployed. To put it simply, the aims for the eight practitioners in this research with deficit views, are about changing young people, by working on their aspiration, mindset and presentation:

> The immediate aim is just to get them out of the mindset of being in that life of crime, gangs, violence, because they've been in it so long. They don't even know how to speak, like speak to someone that's not in a gang. Some struggle to even speak to people on a certain level, like adults or potential employers. If they were to go for a job interview, they wouldn't probably get the job because of the way they present themselves, how they speak, like they don't know the difference (Mel)

This is, in many ways, congruent with earlier forms of youth leadership inasmuch as they are concerned with controlling and containing working-class youth, teaching them appropriate attitudes and behaviours in an effort to integrate them into existing mainstream structures and systems. In short, this is about ideological hegemony, or

more simply, propriety – what dominant groups view as legitimate. Basically, their practice based on their views of NEET is rooted in a combination of paternalism and social control. This means that their views and practice are in equilibrium, so they can be firmly rooted between control-economic discourses as anticipated earlier:

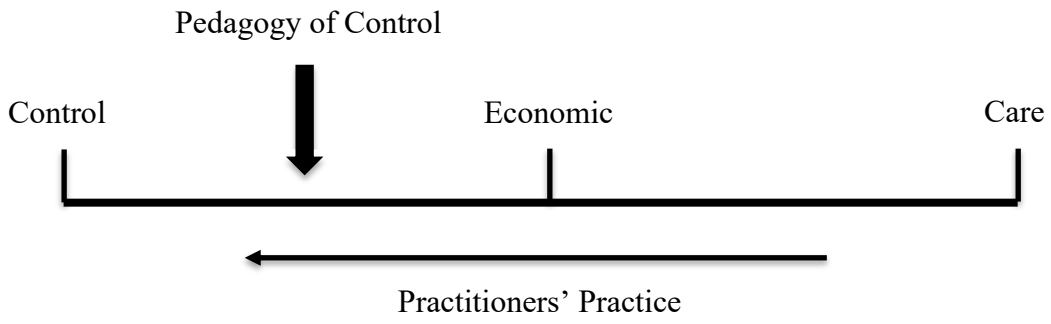

Figure 1.5: Pedagogy of Control

The practitioners, via their views on NEET which shapes their practice, are reinforcing the emergence of both the economic and control discourses in their practice. Firstly, they view NEET as lacking skills which reinforces the legitimacy of their work and contributes to the economic discourse. Secondly, and more significantly, their views on NEET young people's lack of skill are a moral judgement, in which, through their practice, they are not only trying to develop young people's skills, but primarily challenge and change their poor attitudes, behaviours and values – essentially, this is a pedagogy of control. So, whilst they reinforce the legitimacy of their economic targets, they do this within a moral hierarchy. This justifies the low-level employability provision they are providing, which already supports social control. These eight practitioners then emerge their own control discourse in which they try to regulate behaviours and rectify young people's moral defects, which then supports the economic discourse as it is aimed at breaking cultures of worklessness. This means there is some considerable overlap between these two discourses in practice due to the entanglement of skill and moral discourses of NEET young people – these two discourses are now

mutually supporting each other. In sum, the practitioners' views align with the roots of these two discourses, which they then, through their efforts, reinforce in practice.

Where Does Care Fit?

Despite earlier discussing the importance of developing good relationships and working through those to support young people's needs, this was not the case for the eight participants who reinforced deficit discourse about NEET and incorporated a pedagogy of control into their practice. So, they claimed to care, but their relationships do not prioritise young people's needs. For the relationships to be considered caring, young people's needs should be at the forefront based upon the characteristics of engrossment and motivational displacement (Noddings, 2002). The employability training they are doing is, firstly, driven by via targets shaped by external economic agendas, and secondly, includes their own aims and focuses justified by their own views on NEET as deficit, as opposed to what young people might want. Rather ironically, they believed themselves to be helping young people by being 'positive role models', trying to 'break the cycle', and aiming to 'broaden their horizons'. These eight practitioners did not view themselves as agents of control and they often expressed a lot of sympathy for the NEET young people they work with, which does exemplify that they care about them. For example, some of the NEET young people the participants encounter are severely withdrawn – they are, in effect, dehumanised, which would make them oppressed beings (Freire, 1970):

> We've had a lot of NEET young people who, you meet them and they won't look up from the floor. You can see they're so withdrawn, nervous, vulnerable, no confidence at all and it's a real shame. I find it really sad, it's heart breaking (Leah)

This might be because of negative experiences in education and work rather than being an inherent disposition. But when exploring the practitioners' perspectives, it was apparent that many of them encounter NEET young people who have a range of similar personal issues, particularly to do with confidence and self-esteem. This meant that,

alongside trying to 'broaden their horizons' and 'break the cycle', the practitioners' emphasis was also on building confidence, self-esteem and helping young people feel valued. This was generally aimed towards 'just building their confidence to feel good enough to go and apply for jobs and believe they can get it' (Sam). Such sentiments were common with all the eight practitioners perceiving young people as severely lacking in confidence and not believing they can gain meaningful employment. Practitioners nevertheless believed they are able to help build up young people's confidence back up:

> Even if they're getting rejected and knocked down from jobs, we can help build them back up and give them the confidence to keep going (Paula)

It was discussed how NEET young people in particular often believe they are not good enough to gain employment. The practitioners spoke about having to frequently offer positive reinforcement to help build their confidence and self-esteem:

> We get young people who say 'I wouldn't ever be able to do that', but we say you can do whatever you want, you can be whoever you want to be (Leah)

> They need us as positive role models around them, to support and guide them, push them and motivate them (Helen)

Many practitioners spoke about having to pick young people up after repeated knockbacks from job applications. Research suggests that the longer a young person is NEET, the more their hope and confidence falls (Simmons et al., 2020). Confidence and motivation are intertwined, insofar as the more confidence drops so does motivation, and the more motivation decreases, so does confidence. This is a two-way relationship resulting in a perpetual loss of both confidence and motivation known as the 'discouraged worker' effect. Paula's strategy is just to offer kind words of encouragement and to stay 'on top of them' every day:

> They [NEET young people] need to just feel a bit safe and that someone gives a shit about them, that could make a massive difference because they've not had that before so they've just tossed it off and not give a shit. Just a few words can help them get through the day kind of thing… some of these young people just need someone to believe in them before they can believe in themselves, because, they've never had that support and encouragement before. Others just need a bit of motivation and a kick up the back and to stay on top of them (Paula)

Superficially at least, it appears that the practitioners are supporting NEET young people within caring relations. But the basics of their relationship cannot be considered a caring relation as it doesn't contain all the key characteristics of the EoC (Noddings, 1984). For engrossment and motivation displacement to occur, the practitioners need to be able to switch from their own perspective to understand the needs and wants of young people. As we have seen, however, the practitioners' perspectives on those they work with have been shaped by official discourse, whilst the work they are doing is an imposed agenda which is generally reinforcing NEET young people's marginalisation. So, although they expressed sympathy for young people, they were not properly considering NEET young people's needs. The relationships then, cannot be considered as containing the EoC.

Moreover, although it was not explicitly articulated, it's possible to extrapolate that these personal interventions are about contributing to changing, reshaping and moulding NEET young people until they 'fit' more appropriately into the mainstream, alongside the more general pedagogy of control deployed in their employability training. As discussed in the literature review, social and economic inequality has become increasingly individualised over the past few decades, but whilst the practitioners recognised that NEET young people were often marginalised, lacking in confidence, self-esteem and motivation, they failed to embed this within any broader discussion. Their responses were focused on individualised work primarily geared towards integrating young people into education and employment, supported by their

personal perspectives on the causes and characteristics of NEET. Their practice reflects historical forms of youth work/leadership within Victorian Britain.

Incorporating the EoC into practice through caring relations is a particular moral position - supporting the oppression of NEET young people, whether consciously or unconsciously, essentially is immoral. So, those with deficit views of NEET might *care about* them, but they do not *care for* them in caring relations, meaning this work may contain some elements of care, but it does not contain the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984). What can be deduced from this discussion, is that the practitioners' relationships have been colonised in the form of an economic competitiveness discourse, deployed under the disguise of care to serve control agendas. These eight practitioners with deficit views on NEET also support this process as their views fundamentally legitimise both the economic and control discourses and enable them to emerge in practice. Essentially, these discourses are imposed, but they reinforce them through their perspectives on NEET which then significantly shapes their practice. This means that the care discourse is severely reduced and replaced with a pseudo-care discourse – something that superficially appears as care, or mimics its characteristics, but actually further entrenches NEET young people into disadvantage and deprivation:

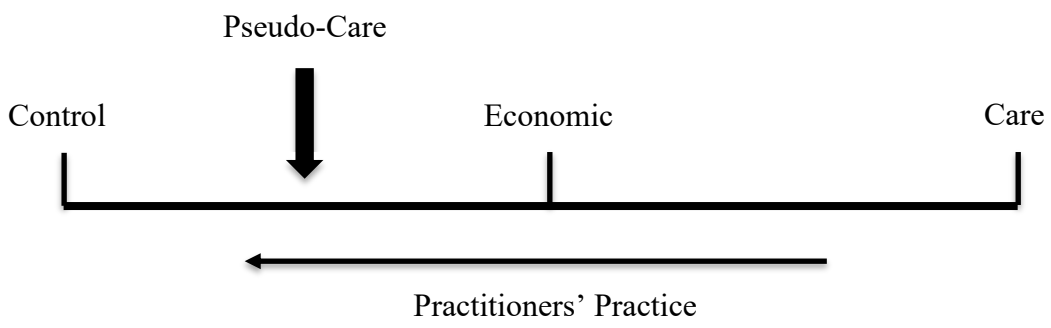

Figure 1.6: Pseudo-Care

The eight practitioners with deficit views are essentially, perhaps unconsciously, being deployed primarily as agents of control. Their position on the discourse continuum between control and economic is reinforced – this is where they start out based on assumptions about NEET, but then continue to reinforce this position through their perspectives which shapes their practice. Rather ironically though, they believe themselves to be helping NEET young people and have caring relationships with them, but the dominant discourses in their practice are economic and control, alongside a pseudo form of care. These practitioners seem to be stuck in one place between control-economic. The next chapter demonstrates how the rest of the practitioners navigate across the continuum based upon differing assumptions about NEET, whereby they negotiate their practice.

Chapter 6: The Other Practitioners' Perspectives and Practice

The first data chapter painted a rather gloomy picture of what is happening in the practitioners' employability training since it is entrenching NEET young people in marginalisation and supporting social control. This is particularly true for those with deficit views on NEET in the previous chapter as they incorporate a pedagogy of control into practice. More generally, all the practitioners' personal care is being overridden and reduced by discourses of economic competitiveness and social control, but again, those with deficit views are supporting their relationships to be colonised by control and economic discourses due to their views of NEET young people. This chapter critically explores the complicated relationship between all three discourses in relation to the other nine practitioners' perspectives on the causes and characteristics of NEET young people, seeking to also locate them on the discourse continuum. Essentially, this chapter provides further rationale to the discourse continuum as it demonstrates that practitioners are not static – they are not stuck to any particular discourses, but rather, moving around. This chapter argues that the practitioners are navigating between economic and care, as they challenge deficit discourses on NEET, which poses resistance to both the social control and economic competitiveness discourses, in which they search for a compromise to prioritise their relationships and young people's needs. Finally, providing even more justification for the discourse continuum, the last section of this chapter returns to the eight practitioners who embody deficit views to argue for a pedagogy of hope.

Practitioners' Perspectives on NEET Young People

This discussion primarily refers to the following practitioners:

1. Sophie
2. Charlotte
3. Tara
4. Liam
5. Lucy

6. Mel
7. Gary
8. Alice
9. Claire

All nine of these practitioners challenged official discourses about skills and aspiration deficit. They largely disagreed with the employability training they were doing, arguing that young people do have skills, but essentially lack in opportunity:

> Young people have the skills, it's just whether they get the chance to use them in life. They need opportunity to do that, now there's nothing for them (Tara)

The skill deficit discourse was challenged quite strongly across these practitioners. For example, Alice makes a fair point, inasmuch as it's unrealistic to say that the majority of unemployed young people lack similar skills, when they all have various strengths and weaknesses:

> Every young person is different and has different skills. So, what one may not be able to do, one may excel in, so I don't think it's fair to say that because it's not true for every young person (Alice)

The NEET category, as we know, is not a homogenous group and includes a wide range of young people, often from vastly different circumstances and varying distances from the labour market. So, to suggest that all NEET young people lack certain skills and abilities seems improbable. There was however a view that some young people do lack soft skills:

> Maybe just basic skills like accessing and using the internet, writing CVs, searching for jobs and applying, communicating in interviews, managing emails and phone calls and job times, transport, you know just the mechanics basically of all that stuff you have to do. Organisation stuff,

> just really little daft stuff like that, that young people haven't learned yet, but these are things easily picked up by most so I don't think that's the reason for NEET young people. Most people learn skills on the job, so they need the opportunity first (Lucy)

Whilst this could go some way towards justifying employability provision to help develop such skills, Lucy was adamant that a lack of 'employability skills' was not the main cause of youth unemployment, insisting it is primarily a lack of opportunity. She also believed a lot of young people haven't learned these things yet as they face more substantial material barriers to overcome related to deprivation and disadvantage:

> Some of it's just really practical, like some of our young people don't have interview clothes, don't have clean clothes, they don't have clean houses so they might smell a bit, they don't have breakfast in the morning, no one makes them tea at night. There's a young person at the moment who doesn't have a phone or an alarm clock and his mum doesn't even live there. She says she does but she doesn't, so he barely has any concept of time, no support, no one pushing him at home, he's got nothing. So just stuff like that, in this day and age these really shouldn't be problems for people (Lucy)

Basically, Lucy is arguing that material disadvantage and deprivation amplifies challenges for NEET young people and further marginalises them from the labour market, but the causes of NEET are, she believes, due predominantly to a lack of opportunity. Whilst employability training can help overcome some barriers to participation, it does not alleviate the daily poverty they face or create more demand for labour (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Others supported Lucy's views:

> No, I don't think that's true [young people lack skills]. I think they've got the skills but they just don't know how to use them. Or they don't think they've got them because they've been told they don't have them. So I think they've got the potential to have the skills but they just need the opportunity, or someone to put the time into them to show them how to use them (Mel)

Mel is suggesting that if young people don't have the skills or don't believe they have them, it's because they haven't been given the opportunity to develop or demonstrate them. There were also suggestions that, regardless of skills, NEET young people still need to be supported when entering the world of work:

> I think employers need to understand that people need to be supported when they start a job because you need to be trained up because you've got to learn don't ya, especially if you've just come out of school or college or whatever (Charlotte)

Traditionally, young people have learned work skills on the job (Ainley, 2016; Green, 2017), but the practitioners were suggesting that employers expect young people to have all the required skills, despite having limited experience, if any. Whilst some research has shown that employers don't always require hard skills and qualifications, other research has also shown that employers can frown upon chequered work history and a lack of experience (Shildrick et al., 2012; Green, 2017). Due to their age, young people's marginalisation is often compounded by their lack of experience, particularly when considering that many have to compete with increasing numbers of adults for decreasing numbers of jobs (Shildrick et al, 2012; Simmons et al, 2014).

Young people can therefore get caught in a 'catch 22' needing experience to get the job, but needing a job to get the experience. Sometimes young people can also suffer from being 'discouraged workers' whereby they lose confidence and motivation in a perpetual two-way relationship and give up hope of gaining and securing employment. This is more about a lack of labour market opportunity than young people lacking skills, aspiration, worth ethic, or other personal deficiencies (Simmons et al., 2020). Although the transition into employment doesn't come naturally to every young person, they usually pick up skills and good work habits very quickly on the job (Green, 2017). The practitioners here, it seems to me, disagreed with what they were doing in practice - focusing on the same generic skill development around CVs, interviews, applications and so on.

Whilst some practitioners acknowledged that many NEET young people lack soft skills, they still challenged this as the main reason for them being NEET – often suggesting a lack of opportunity to develop the skills is primary, and other barriers are more significant. These nine practitioners viewed young people as possessing inherent potential to learn, grow, develop, change and achieve. This is the lens through which youth practitioners should view young people (Batsleer, 2008; Jeffs and Smith, 2005; 2010; Davies, 2005). NEET is an imposed label that sees young people as inherently problematic. Claire touched on this point:

> It gives them a label and makes them a problem. I really don't like the word NEET, it's a label. It doesn't give no understanding of who they are as a young person. They're not involved, it's put on them… NEET, it's a way of labelling people, you know, if you label people, you turn them into a problem (Claire)

Whilst Gary argued NEET is a devaluing label:

> I believe that's a term [NEET] that is, I think it's being phased out a bit from language as it's seen as a bit unacceptable or negative… Yeah and it only sees them as valuable if they're in education employment or training, so purely in economical terms (Gary)

Gary is, or so I believe, right, inasmuch as NEET categorises young people by what they are not, rather than who or what they are (Furlong, 2006). Others also challenged dominant discourse about NEET:

> People listening to what the government says about NEET young people, people need to take ownership of their own opinions and think outside of the box (Charlotte)

Either way, for these practitioners, a lack of opportunity is the primary cause of NEET, rather than a skills deficit. So, basically, they view the main causes of NEET as structural, rather than agentic:

> There's not enough opportunities for young people, it's mostly zero-hour low-paid factory and warehouse work out there for them. It's like the logic of this government is, I'm going to make your life harder and harder every day to encourage you to do better. It's just complete nonsense (Lucy)

Various factors have had a detrimental effect on employment opportunities for young people. The rise of much insecure, temporary and precarious work can be traced back to neoliberal economic policies which began in the 1980s, leading to mass deindustrialisation and greatly reduced demand for young people's labour, which has not bounced back through a lack of elasticity (Simmons et al., 2020). This is, nevertheless, part of the broader neoliberal drive for a flexible workforce which has, for many people, resulted in precarious working conditions and limited prospects for progression (Green, 2017).

Related to structural economic change, there were some discussions of place detailing how particular locales can work to minimise and limit local opportunity:

> There's not a lot of jobs so people struggle. Like here, it's not a big place so jobs and opportunities are limited, so people just end up getting fed up and depressed (Sophie)

The practitioners suggested on numerous occasions that in smaller towns, there's less labour market opportunity available compared to large cities:

> I think it's down to the local labour markets. Like there's not as many opportunities as there would be in a city. But then them higher end jobs require a lot of qualifications and experience, so it's hard for young people either way. I think just getting a job is very difficult. I've even struggled

> myself. When you go for them there's so much competition, and if you get to the interview, any gap in your work or training, they want to know why. So, if you've been NEET for a while, that can really go against you if you haven't got a legitimate reason (Tara)

There was significant discussion about competition for the limited number of jobs, particularly in larger cities with better-quality opportunities. The practitioners believed that NEET young people from deprived areas are going to struggle against better qualified and more experienced candidates:

> As an employer, you're going to pick the best young person aren't you. So I think it's really difficult for them, for young people who come from deprived areas because there's not that many opportunities anyway (Liam)

> I think it depends on what they want to do. Like if they want a proper job, I'm not saying cleaning and stuff isn't a proper job, but it might be hard for them to get a career based job against someone who's got more qualifications and experience (Alice)

It would seem that a few of the practitioners were also aware that a lack of employment opportunity is inextricably tied into deindustrialisation:

> So where I live in, everyone tends to join the army and make something of themselves. Most of my family did. Everyone applies to be in the forces. Even me and my sister did but got denied on medical grounds. Aside from joining the army, there's not really much else on offer… So we live in a village with like loads of farms, and there's not a lot going on. Everyone we know, has gone into the forces… Well you'd have to commute probably to the city [for different opportunity], but no one really minds doing it. Everyone wants to do it, everyone takes it really seriously. So, it is a former coal mining town, not too far from Orgreave, and coal mining hasn't been replaced and that's why we have such a high number going into the military… Everyone used to work in the pits, and now everyone joins the army, so we've adapted to whatever will make us money (Tara)

This exemplifies how place can affect employment opportunities. Many towns and cities in this part of the UK historically relied on various industry. The demise of coal mining in this particular town, for example, resulted in much less opportunity for the working class, meaning they have to take whatever is on offer. It now for example seems to almost be a cultural norm, at least for the dispossessed working class, of joining the army. Although this entails leaving the local area, it encapsulates what Oscar Lewis (1966) discusses in relation to cultural adaptations to structural inequality. Some places have somewhat successfully adapted by creating new jobs and opportunity, whilst others have fell deep into decline, whereby the working-class have become relegated into an economically marginalised underclass (Shildrick et al., 2012). This is simply about whether there has been investment and whether traditional employment has been replaced or not though. Place is nevertheless connected to both local and national economic policy, labour market conditions, and other variables such as geography and transport.

The alternative is to move or commute to where there may be more opportunity. This is, however, unrealistic for many NEET young people who are bonded to and marginalised within a local context. Even in many former industrial towns and cities, which have managed to rebrand themselves and revitalise their local economies, economic opportunity is driven along the lines of social class (Green, 2017). The working class are found to often inhabit a secondary labour market of insecure, poor quality, poorly paid work (Shildrick et al., 2012). Data made explicit how the past has shaped current local labour market opportunities:

> I think there's jobs about but people are sceptical because of the riots that happened 19/20 years ago, so you've got more south Asian businesses being set up now. But at one point you wouldn't see many south Asian people working in Asda or Tesco and stuff because of the riots. Like the town centre just got completely destroyed and set on fire (Liam)

Whilst Liam acknowledges this segregation is slowly changing, some of the young Asian men he worked with would not want to apply for certain jobs, particularly in the city centre. Again, this seems to show how the past can haunt the present, although in this case, it has resulted in South Asian community setting up their own businesses, sometimes within the 'informal economy'.

So, in opposition to those practitioners who emphasised underclass discourses, these nine practitioners argued that young people do have skills, but face more significant problems to do with a lack of opportunity. This, some argue, has been exacerbated by changes in education policy which has, in the context of decreased labour market opportunity, served to reinforce the marginalisation of young people:

> I think the labour market is a big problem and some of the government's policies have created issues for NEET young people. So, like we were talking about before the raising of participation age when that came in, where you have to gain qualifications until you're 18, or even the cutting of EMA a few years ago, I think that was very difficult for some young people. Some young people come from less well-off backgrounds and need that money, they need to work as soon as they leave school (Lucy)

A lot of young people from working-class backgrounds need to find work as soon as possible to support themselves, but in the face of severely low demand for youth labour, this is difficult to achieve. The practitioners discussed financial strains for NEET young people:

> Money. I say that because I remember when we used to go college and get like EMA, I know people that went to college for that. That's a lot of money when you haven't got any other income at all. So it was a good incentive to encourage people. People would hang on because it was something to look forward to and it's not more there anymore so people disengage. So finance is always an issue, because a lot of them are involved in organised crime to fund themselves. And that's the reason that they are NEET, because they feel that there's a better alternative. And, you know, they might be making decent money, so they don't feel the need to be in education… It's what is the incentive of education, what's

> it going to give them, as in do they see value in it. I think it's really hard to reengage them when you look at it like that (Sophie)

EMA was mentioned numerous times and, although this has been gone a long time now, it seems its abolition has been detrimental to many young people it would have incentivised to stay on in education. Practitioners nevertheless claimed that NEET young people don't want more training if there are alternatives available for them to earn money. The practitioners often said that young people were engaged in the informal economy, meaning it was difficult to try keep them engaged in education:

> I am finding a lot of NEET young people are doing drug runs and getting a lot of money for it, and they are saying why do I need training when I'm getting thousands for it… A lot of them just want money so I think more job opportunities if I am being honest, because that's what they always want (Claire)

As explained here, most NEET young people don't have anti-work attitudes – arguably, they are in jobs, even if illicit. In the face of a lack of paid opportunity, cuts to support funding, and only more training and education available, compounded by the daily poverty they encounter, NEET young people are driven to finding alternative paths to earn a living. Two of the practitioners also believed this way of life has been glamourised:

> Definitely like social media, music, the high life, gang life, the gun life, like rap songs, they sort of like make videos and put them on YouTube and all that kind of stuff and TikTok or whatever. I've worked with quite a few of young people and they want to be rappers and stuff. So it's stuff like that, it highlights the gang life. And then when they're out there on the streets, their family are in poverty, so they just the need to be able to get money. They just want to work doing whatever they can. They don't want to go into school or college because they can work and they can get some money for it (Charlotte)

The reality is that the majority of NEET young people have quite traditional values and orientations towards work, home and family life, and just want stable employment, rather than further training (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Leonard and Wilde, 2019; Simmons et al., 2020). Some, however, find alternatives within the informal economy. For them, being involved in criminal gangs and other subcultures can offer certain rewards within a local context, such as status, value and belonging, whilst simultaneously earning money from illicit activities (Simmons et al., 2020). Much research on subcultures argues quite similar points (Hebdige, 1988; Halls and Jefferson, 1989). So, although NEET young people have a degree of free will, their choices are constrained by the broader social and economic matrix. In other words, the choices NEET young people make can be seen as an adaption to the processes of dispossession associated with neoliberal policy. This was discussed, to some extent, by Lucy:

> I think young people, and I would probably be the same, get tired of pushing a closed door do you know what I mean. Or the thought of having to push a closed door for the next 5/10 years before they get a slight bit of the pie, it's just why bother… If I didn't go to work, I'd either be sat in the house on my own, in which case is not good for my mental health or for getting back into work, or I'd develop new social circles and activities around the fact I'm off work every day. So I think for young people, if they are not in college or employment, they lose motivation, they lose boundaries and create new social groups, so they start hanging out with other young people who aren't in work and they create these new circles… I think people make judgements about that way of life when actually we are all driven by the same things, like everyone wants to survive, everyone wants to thrive (Lucy)

It seems what Lucy is saying, is in the face of 'more training' and lack of opportunity for paid employment, some NEET young people choose an alternative path to inclusion within a local context (see, Simmons et al., 2020). This can, in some ways, be seen as a cultural adaptation to structural poverty (Lewis, 1966). Recognising the financial pressures for young people, it appears some of the practitioners don't perceive more education and training as a fair expectation:

> It doesn't meet their needs. It's all based around maths, English and employability skills. That's where all the money is and that's what they want young people to do (Charlotte)

Instead, two of the practitioners advocated for a renewed apprenticeship scheme to provide genuine work experience, an income, and teach both life and employment skills:

> I think policy, like education being up until age 18, not everyone needs or wants it. I think the apprenticeship model is the best thing at the moment, that should be pushed a lot more. It's a great way of getting education and money at the same time. It teaches you real life skills, like getting up, going to work, getting paid, budgeting money, and obviously learning skills in work too. So they're getting training and experience at the same time… I feel like we could be taught a lot more practical skills like at school. But that's why I think apprenticeships are so important, because you're learning life skills and work skills at the same time. Like if you've got work the next day, you know not to be staying up late with your mates drinking, you're in bed at 10pm because you know you're up at 7 and got a long day ahead of you (Tara)

It would seem these practitioners would feel more comfortable with apprenticeships over employability training, as it's teaching real life and work skills, whilst also providing young people with an income. This could potentially also be due to recognition by the practitioner that employability training is not really beneficial to NEET young people. Either way, whilst at least five out of the nine practitioners spoke about policy changes putting undue pressure on young people, Lucy had a more nuanced argument. She related changes in education, such as extended compulsory education, to the systematic marginalisation of a certain demographic of young people:

> I also think there are certain areas particularly in certain demographics that young people would want to work in, so things like construction, mechanics. I know it's a stereotype, but I chose that for a reason because, broadly speaking, it's true. So those industries have been like not gentrified, what would be the word, academicised? Is that a word? Made more academic [credentialised], so I think it's locked a lot of young people out of it… Like when I was growing up, you could leave school at

> 16 and if you were really good with your hands and you'd helped your dad with his car you could go to a local garage and a guy would take you on as an apprentice, you'd do your time served and get paid and be a great mechanic. These days if you want to work in construction, mechanics, anything practical like that, you've got to have good GCSEs in maths and English, like all A-C's and to get those grades you will have had to put in the work from the previous 5 years and not got excluded or not been in a PRU. Most of the young people in PRUs and getting excluded today are those lads mainly off council estates that would have worked in construction and mechanics (Lucy)

The working class persistently have the lowest attainment levels in terms of qualifications (Reay, 2004; Stahl, 2015). This means that young people who would have once gone into certain industries are now facing the prospect of being marginalised from the labour market by the increase in credentialisation and increasing numbers of well-qualified applicants for even fairly low-level jobs. Others had roughly the same views:

> I don't think it should all be academically based because not everyone is academic. I feel like there should be like other kind of tests they could do. Even now if they want to learn a trade there's so much written work you need to do with it as well as have good maths and English GCSEs, it's all gone a bit too far for me and it isn't fair, some people are just not suited to school, college or university (Alice)

Whilst these nine practitioners primarily viewed youth work as an educational activity, or having an educational focus, which they saw as generally a good thing, they had some strong critiques of formal education. Many of them believed that the education system, primarily schooling, plays an important role in causing, or at least contributing to NEET status:

> Education, it's too structured so they're going to rebel against it, they rebel against the system. It's not for everybody, so they are going to misbehave, get in to trouble, get put in isolation, get excluded, then it's all downhill from there (Claire)

Here, Claire is suggesting that young people rebel against the hierarchical structure and authoritarian nature of schooling. Several other practitioners also mentioned that education was 'very structured':

> I just don't think formal education is made for everyone. Like it's very structured. So you might just go, fuck this (Tara)

It became clear that several participants' views on the nature and purpose of education aligned, to some degree, with a Marxist account, albeit perhaps unwittingly. Some, however, were more explicit. For example, Lucy said:

> I think it [education] is just to create little robots that will do what they're told and contribute to the capitalist system and feed the people at the top. I don't think it's what the true purpose of education should be, we're so far away from that (Lucy)

Although Marx never wrote about education directly, his work has inspired numerous others to apply his ideas on class struggle and conflict in education (see, for example, Hill, Anyon, Rikowski). Some have applied similar ideas to informal education, including forms of youth work and community practice explicitly concerned with social control (Belton, 2010; Davies, 2009). Althusser (1971) argues that, in capitalist societies, the main aim of education is to reproduce an efficient and obedient labour force, which he believes is achieved through ideological reproduction – firstly by training young people to become submissive to authority, and secondly by indoctrinating them with dominant ideology which serves to legitimise capitalism. This would align with certain practitioners' views:

> I'd say it's to create docile and obedient capitalist slaves (laughs) to continue the capitalist system (Gary)

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that there's a correspondence principle between education and employment; or more specifically, the relationship between the classroom and the workplace seen in the teacher and the student, the student and other

students, and the student and their work relationships. In other words, there is a structural correspondence between those of education and production, as well as the social relationships within. This correspondence can be seen across several participants' perspectives who suggested that education is…

> …To teach young people to be good citizens and go to work every day. It prepares people for work doesn't it, like working nine to five every day. (Charlotte)

Hill (2018, p.200) suggests that the 'passive subservience (of working-class pupils to teachers) corresponds to the passive subservience of workers to managers; the acceptance of hierarchy (teacher authority) corresponds to authority of managers; the system of motivation by external rewards (that is, grades rather than the intrinsic reward of learning and discovering) corresponds to being motivated by wages rather than job satisfaction'. So, whilst others were less explicit than Lucy or Gary, they still hinted towards the same functions of schooling in terms of preparing young people for capitalist waged labour:

> I think it's to set people up into work. So everything you learn is preparing you for that, like having a routine, getting up and attending something on time …It's like a 9-5 isn't it. It's giving you a schedule, tasks, organisation and all that stuff. It's getting you ready (Alice)

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that the hidden curriculum is instrumental in introducing the 'long shadow of work' which creates a labour force disciplined into accepting their role in capitalist society as the school mirrors the hierarchical structure and divisions of the workplace. The hidden curriculum is crucial in supplying capitalism with a subjugated workforce and reproducing social and class inequality – and it appears some of the practitioners believe similar. Youth work is following in these footsteps as its traditional open-ended, informal curriculum becomes more formal, overt and increasingly narrow, concerned with 'hard outcomes' (Taylor and Davies, 2018). At least five practitioners expressed a belief that the school curriculum has no relevance to young people's lives:

> I think it needs reform. It's setting them up to fail, it's not teaching them anything about life. It doesn't educate them about anything important or responsibilities, it's only worried about exams and tests. It doesn't teach any real life skills (Liam)

Most of these practitioners believed that schooling isn't teaching young people useful life skills – although what these useful skills consist of wasn't expanded on, it could be getting at the concept of Marx's 'really useful knowledge'. Anyon (2011) argues that pedagogy across different schools for different social classes varies quite drastically. Those from working-class backgrounds are, she contends, basically taught to be subordinates, whilst more affluent and elite schools focus on developing intellectual inquiry, deductive reasoning, critical thinking and leadership skills. Duffield (1998) supports the notion that students from different social class backgrounds receive different forms of teaching and learning. This suggests that there are different expectations of different social groups, and schooling sorts and sifts people to prepare them for their future roles and positions in a hierarchical society – in other words as the dominated or dominator. This would help explain some of the participants' beliefs that, for some young people, their relationship with education is often troubled:

> I think the curriculum is so outdated and needs revisiting in terms of relevance to life now. If a young person doesn't see a clear link to what they're learning to their future, they're just going to disengage and that's what's happening with a lot of young people (Sophie)

Sophie here is suggesting that the curriculum needs being made relevant to young people's future so that there's more congruence between students and schooling. Tara on the other hand, believed that schooling needs linking to young people, but through their own history, rather than the future:

> The curriculum, you don't learn anything you'll need in life. Like even history, it can be interesting but pointless… So like, we don't look at our own history in our own areas, so if people looked at their own history in their own areas, surely they'd identify with it and know what the problems are a lot earlier. So ok, there used to be a coal mine, what happened

> afterwards. So surely that's an issue. So question why, rather than just, oh, that's the way it was (Tara)

Tara believed that helping young people connect with their own history would make their learning relevant and teach them critical thinking skills to question why things are the way they are. This links with Freire's (1970) ideas on critical pedagogy and 'starting where young people are at'. Mel drew on her own experiences of schooling and connected this to NEET young people, suggesting that it doesn't teach young people critical thinking skills or how to prepare for the world:

> Like I know at school there was so many more things I wish I would have been taught. You don't get taught real life skills really, like how the world works… To learn things you don't know, so you can make better choices and think for yourself (Mel)

Again, this links to the Marxist notion of really useful knowledge. Either way, Reay (2018) argues that education is still serving the Victorian ruling classes mission, to control and pacify the working class by producing politically illiterate and socially uncritical young people. Schooling for Reay (2018) has diluted any critical pedagogy by neglecting political awareness, critical thinking and problem solving, and replaced these with control, discipline and surveillance. Similar trends are evident in youth work, as it has journeyed from its historic base rooted in social control, to informal goals concerned with holistic wellbeing, but seems to have shifted back towards being an instrument of control with overt social and economic goals (St Croix, 2017; Taylor and Davies, 2018). Either way, the general idea coming from the practitioners is that an alternative to formal education is needed:

> Some young people, education's just not for them. So it's working out what is for them, what else could they be doing to enhance their skills or capabilities. If they can't sit with a piece of paper, then what else could they do (Charlotte)

Unsurprisingly, as youth work practitioners, three participants advocated for more informal provision focused on relationship building. However, what has actually

happened is that formal education has been extended, expanded and normalised, whilst youth work is increasingly driven to mirror the mechanisms of mainstream education. Regardless, what seems clear, is that education is concerned with social class control - working-class educational experiences have always been shaped by social differentiation and division; education is designed and structured to maintain the social formation underpinned by capitalist relations of accumulation (Simmons and Smyth, 2018). And even though educational opportunity has substantially expanded, particularly over the last two decades, this doesn't change some of the primary problems for working-class youth - the same issues concerned with social class continue to persist, which at least three participants hinted at:

> Education is based on normal middle-class values, and not everyone is white, middle class, from down south. Like that's what it's based on, but it doesn't work for every person in this country (Tara)

For Tara, education doesn't work or cater for working class young people – she believes it is failing working class young people, and therefore, causing or contributing to NEET status. Much literature supports this argument (Bourdieu, 1998; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Stahl (2015) examined how the impact of neoliberalism aspiration in schools can serve to further marginalise young people from working-class backgrounds, whilst the concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital have had a large degree of popularity in analysing class dynamics within the education system (Reay, 2004). Educational structures, ideologies and practices are still alienating working-class young people and turning them against education more generally – largely due to rejecting their social and cultural identities, which are often, embodiments of their social class (Simmons et al., 2020). Just for balance, it is important to point out that students are not docile and obedient recipients of dominant ideology (Willis, 1977; Simmons et al., 2020) – they can produce the correspondence principle or marginalisation by their own rejection, meaning generally, they can engage in practices to their own detriment. Generally speaking however, class disadvantages in education can lead to disengagement and disaffection, or low educational attainment for working-class youth

(Reay, 2004; Stahl, 2015). This, in turn, increases the likelihood of being NEET for substantial periods (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Ainley, 2016).

Whilst the relationship between the working class and education has always been troubled, NEET is perhaps more to do with deindustrialisation and neoliberal policy responses. Lucy said:

> It's kind of like this moral obsession with qualifications and up-skilling has just meant that young people are actually just locked out. If a bricklayer has a C in a GCSE, what does it matter if he is good at laying bricks, like why do you care. But it's not just the qualifications it's the recruitment process isn't it. So, like now to get an apprenticeship you can't just go down to the local garage or building site, you have to go through a training provider, the trading provider is a load of corporate suits in an office who are recruiting for a bricklayer. That young person has more in common with that bricklayer than with the training provider recruitment consultant, but you can't get to that apprenticeship without going through a really formal interview process with the training provider. These trades men probably just want some young lads who are reliable, will turn up on time, put the graft in, but the training provider is probably turning a lot of hardworking local lads away deeming them inappropriate or unsuitable based on their GCSE's (Lucy)

Neoliberal policy has, through the education system, infiltrated and interfered with traditional working-class employment structures and redefined them in its own image to serve class interests. The point is, however, not everyone is academic or inclined to stay on in education. Going back many generations, young workers always played a role in bringing in money and being able to look after themselves (Thompson, 2019). Young people nowadays generally need to stay on and gain qualifications or face being marginalised from the labour market. Education has become a substitute for waged-labour (Ainley, 2016) whereby young people need to play the game and jump through more and more hoops, with the hope of achieving a waged-job at the end of it.

What is clear nevertheless is that these nine practitioners have more critical awareness of the social and economic processes of dispossession that have impacted on NEET.

They are challenging NEET as deficient in skills and morals, arguing they lack in opportunity, as well as critiquing education and policy more broadly as contributing to their marginalisation, which they believe is driving some young people into the informal economy. These practitioners have a degree of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), and based upon this, are challenging the economic discourse underpinning their employability work which also supports social control. So, whilst employability training based on official discourse about NEET tries to pull them towards control, it seems the practitioners, at least in their views of NEET young people, are trying to pull themselves back towards care. On the continuum, this means that whilst official discourse drives practice more towards social control, a critical consciousness could potentially act as a counterweight and drive practice back in the opposite direction. This would mean that these practitioners starting position are, based on their assumptions about NEET, located somewhere between economic and care. This can be envisaged as:

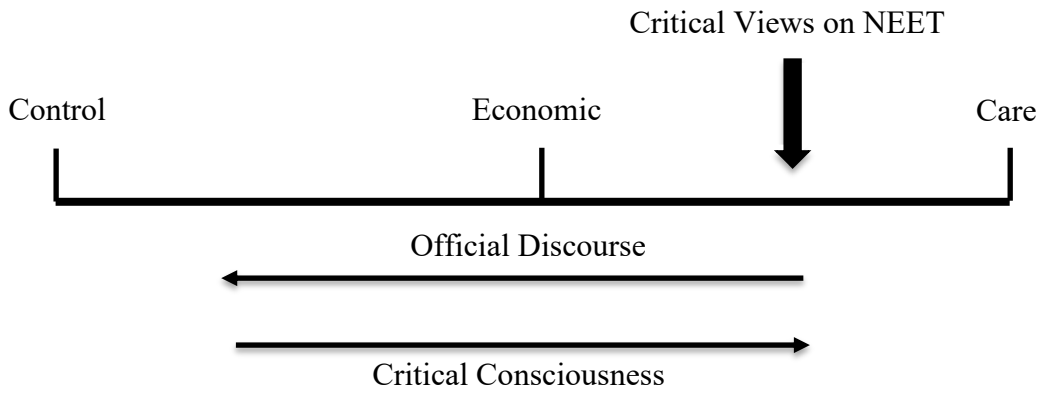

Figure 1.7: Critical Views

This is however a rough estimate. Challenging the economic discourse means that by default, they are also opposed to social control, though perhaps not consciously. Locating the nine practitioners with something of a critical consciousness on this continuum is challenging due to the conflict across discourses. In the findings chapter,

it was argued that all the practitioners, regardless of views on NEET, are working toward social control in their employability training which is essentially perpetuating marginalisation, meaning it is difficult to disentangle exactly where they are. The next section analyses how their critical perspectives shape their practice and makes a case for where their practice can be placed on the discourse continuum. In other words, the section below analyses whether their practice is congruent with their views.

Practitioners Perspectives on Practice

For the nine practitioners with critical consciousness, their practice is shaped by how they view NEET young people. Firstly, despite still doing low-level training, they rejected a pedagogy of control, in which they are being employed to reshape NEET young people and instil appropriate attitudes and behaviours, evident in their challenge of aspiration below. Tara viewed her role as…

> …Making sure that young people are able to progress to where they want to. I hate the term raising aspirations because who's to say their aspiration isn't ok. So if they want to work in Maccies all their life, let them, you don't have to change them. As long as they're happy and content, so I think it's about helping them achieve what they want to in life (Tara)

As we saw earlier, some practitioners believed that young people should aspire to do more, while others believed NEET young people are workshy and won't take certain jobs on offer, so they need to build both aspiration and work ethic. Tara however was adamant that she wouldn't tell NEET young people what they need to achieve:

> Who are we as humans to tell them what to do. Like show them different options that are possible so they can make better choices, but don't tell them that working in Maccies or retail isn't good enough… If everyone aspired for all the top jobs, who would do the jobs at the lower end. It's just not possible. Like cleaners, we need them as well as doctors. If you went in hospital you'd get the treatment you need from doctors and nurses, but without the cleaners you'd probably catch a disease and die of sepsis (Tara)

There does seem to be an expectation among those in power that all young people will follow a similar path, such as education, employment, and material aspiration. Working-class values, culture and identity have come under a concerted attack and been devalued by neoliberalism, whilst middle-class lifestyles and aspirations are promoted as the norm within society, and if young people don't aspire to these, they're not considered sufficiently aspirational enough (Stahl, 2015). Simmons et al. (2014) suggest that most working-class youth still have traditional values and particular orientations towards work, family and home-life, but many of these have now become a problematic group for aspiring to a 'normal' working-class life**.** Basically, it was argued by these practitioners that youth work employability should always put the young person first, which includes supporting their personal aspirations, rather than challenging them to change them:

> It's alright local authority saying stuff like, we want to get young people in employment, we don't want young people to be committing crime, we don't want this and that. It's not around those things, it's more about them understanding who they are as a person and being strong enough to make better choices for themselves. It's not about them having a job, them having this and that, it's about them being happy with who they are (Sophie)

There was a strong theme among these practitioners about putting young people's needs first and making sure that they are happy with their own life choices, rather than imposing life choices or external agendas on them:

> All young people [should be given] the same opportunity, but it should never assume the same starting line because youth work is meeting them in their circumstances and every individual has different circumstances, but youth work is about making everyone feel worthy and driven just to reach the full potential. That doesn't have to be going to get a degree or starting a job, it's just them being happy. It's not about aiming for the stars, it's aiming for their individual star (Mel)

These participants are not only expressing resistance to social control and the aspirational agenda by advocating for young people's needs first, but actually subverting their economic targets to put their needs first in practice. This goes against what the practitioners with deficit views of NEET believed they were trying to do – break bonding capital by building aspiration in order to abdicate the working class as an upwardly socially-mobile neoliberal subject (Stahl, 2015). Three practitioners also advocated for more investment and opportunities locally, in both public services and employment, as opposed to developing aspiration to escape.

> I think more funding rather than the reactive stuff because it would pay for like more staff and activities and resources to put in at the bottom end before they become NEET and all this stuff happens rather than, just trying to remedy it from the top end (Gary)

The argument here is that prevention is better than the cure, and therefore, that youth work needs to be based on a grassroots model and universal at point of access, rather than reactive with top-down strategies imposed on young people with instrumental agendas. The triage model of youth work is being challenged here. As these practitioners are trying to put young people's needs first in their relationships, they are covertly but consciously resisting control and economic agendas. It seems these practitioners have achieved the EoC characteristics of engrossment and motivational displacement absent among the eight practitioners that viewed NEET young people as deficient. It seems that the nine practitioners who expressed more critical views are listening and hearing what NEET young people want, understanding their perspectives, and putting their needs first. The bottom line is, they were still working towards the economic discourse, but consciously trying to resist social control by putting young people's needs first – this opens up pockets of space where they are caring for NEET young people in a caring relationship:

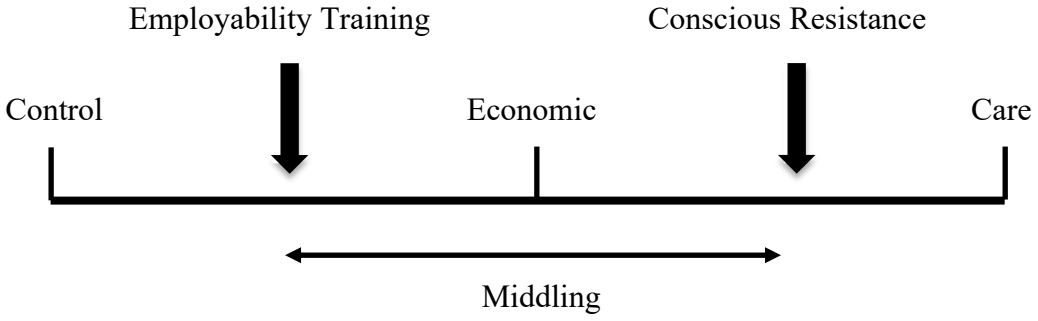

Figure 1.8: Middling

Employability training, as discussed in the first data chapter, still does pull them towards social control, meaning that, despite their critical views, they are still, at least some of the time, located between control-economic on the continuum. Their conscious resistance does however lead me to believe they are occupying a 'middling' position - interweaving between two different positions on the continuum by prioritising young peoples' needs where possible. This demonstrates that, by practitioners having more critical awareness about NEET young people, they are able to navigate and negotiate their practice for the benefit of young people.

A Critical Consciousness: Middling?

This middling position based upon a critical consciousness was given more impetus as there was a much bigger picture for these nine practitioners across their provision, both in and away from employability training. Whilst this research is focused on employability, it is important to include this data to show how some youth work practitioners and organisations are working to counteract the negative effects of control and economic discourses that are being imposed on them via targets and funding priorities. The practitioners' resistance described above came to full fruition as they tried to work more creatively and critically with targets in their employability and other pieces of triage youth work – to subvert them to prioritise young people's needs. Whilst all seventeen practitioners expressed dissatisfaction with targets for various reasons, the

nine practitioners with critical views seemed to question the legitimacy of targets in their practice more than the other eight practitioners – there is a degree of correlation between their views on NEET and targets in their practice. For example, there was often talk amongst this group of nine practitioners in relation to targets about finding a balance or advocating for NEET young people and putting their needs first, rather than simply targets putting pressure on them. For example, Claire said:

> I think it should be for the young person and their needs. So having a conversation with them and letting them decide what their needs are and then working with that, rather than going in with aims and outcomes to achieve with them (Claire)

Basically, they are questioning the legitimacy of targets which guide their work. As they are aware of agendas being imposed on young people rather than the work being responsive to young people's needs, they are trying to consciously resist these to support NEET young people. Whilst all nine talked about this, five participants demonstrated this more clearly in practice. For example, Sophie, who had become disillusioned with local government agendas, outcomes and 'ticking boxes', in the three years she worked for the council, decided to begin her own youth work organisation:

> I could be working for the council now and earning a lot more money than I do. I chose to leave the council and set up an organisation based on the fact that I really wanted to do something that was beneficial to communities. Something that wasn't just about ticking a box and saying how many we've had attend or the impact of the engagement. It's all about ticking boxes and, you know, talking about outputs and outcomes and all that sort of stuff… I believe that some of these young people need more than just help to write a CV, or they need more than just a level one or level two course (Sophie)

Sophie discussing her reluctance to 'economise' youth work left the council, and turns down opportunities with the local authority for partnership work, even when funding is available to work with NEET young people. In many ways, however, this sort of entrepreneurial and voluntary endeavour has been encouraged by neoliberalism. As the

state has contracted, the third-sector sector has grown, meaning some voluntary groups have been beneficiaries of neoliberalism. Davies and Taylor (2018) argue that there has been something of a surge in such organisations drawing on numerous funding sources through social enterprises, often via former state youth workers, particularly those who were made redundant. In this case, Sophie left her post in resistance to state agendas of control. The challenge now for Sophie is in regard to getting funding, as finances shrink and the focus becomes increasingly narrow.

There were also a couple of practitioners, including Sophie, who compromised with targets, recognising the reality of needing to get funding, but whilst trying to maintain and prioritise youth work values and principles to keep young people's needs at the forefront:

> We find when doing funding bids for specific type of targeted work, sometimes can be agenda driven and not young person led. I think they're unhelpful and difficult, especially during financially strained times because there are projects that bend to their will of the funders which might not necessarily be to the betterment of young people, so it leaves us in a difficult position and constrains the work we can do as we have to compromise. So yeah, it's difficult for independent youth projects to stay afloat financially, but if you can compromise in a way, find a compromise which doesn't conflict with your values. From experience of seeing my manager, she finds a way to cater to both fields - giving funders what they want but not allowing that to jeopardise the work that we do… I think having outcomes isn't necessarily a bad thing, or targets, it's when they outweigh the process of the work that they become problematic. As I said though, we manage to find ways to keep funders happy while still putting young people first (Gary)

Gary is critically aware of agendas within targets, but he is suggesting that there may be a way around it. Gary claims that his manager is calculating about which targets are achievable without jeopardising youth work principles and process:

> I wouldn't say our project is target driven, these are just certain pieces of work we've made a decision to go for, targets which don't really interfere with the work so targets we're willing to abide to (Gary)

So, although some practitioners spoke about trying to find a middle ground between funders/targets and young people's needs/youth work principles, it seems that this is a demonstration of this in practice – pleasing the criteria of funders but keeping young people's needs at forefront. Parallels can be drawn with Shain and Gleeson (1999) who examine three different lecturer responses to changing conditions of work in further education – compliance, resistance, and strategic compliance. Firstly, those who are willing to comply with the enterprise culture of FE for a variety of reasons, but most commonly, job security. Then there are those who resist and disengage with managerialism – which usually includes conflict and ultimately leaving the post. Finally, the strategic compliers are accepting of some aspects of reform, but critical of others. Shain and Gleeson (1999) argue that the main concern of the strategic compliers is a commitment to ensuring students received a high quality of education rather than just outputs and outcomes. In other words, 'strategic compliance is perhaps best explained as a form of artful pragmatism which reconciles professional and managerial interests' (Shain and Gleeson, 1999, p.482). Although what Sophie did was quite radical, she now also fits into this category of strategic complier. Initially, she rejected hard outcomes imposed on her, and the compromise was starting her own youth organisation, which gives some freedom and flexibility over the funding she applies for and the targets she is willing to work towards. As documented earlier in my reflexive biography, I believe this is something I also did within my practice due to concerns I encountered. I had some detailed discussion with Gary and Sophie about this and shared my concerns – it seems we both shared some similarities in this respect.

Whilst all the practitioners were working with NEET in employability training, some were also doing other forms of 'triage youth work'. Some spoke about their youth work organisation going for smaller pots of funding more concerned with soft targets, as it doesn't take them too far away from 'doing youth work'. Alice discussed soft targets

concerned mostly around social and mental wellbeing, which were much more negotiable in practice:

> Improving mental and emotional well-being seems to be the big thing at the moment, but it's supporting young people wherever they need it, we just have to link some of it to mental health. So at the youth club every week we have to try link it in to mental health issues like isolation and loneliness… Yeah we have to fill forms in about what work we're doing with them, how we're helping their mental health, and show how we've met those outcomes (Alice)

Firstly, for Alice, although the targets are concerned with mental and emotional wellbeing, they are more responsive to the needs of young people. Alice spoke about linking her work to mental health, which implied that this was done after the work had taken place, rather than going in solely to achieve predetermined targets and outcomes - as soft targets are by nature more flexible, they can support this process. The organisation Alice works for, however, draws on various funding sources, some concerned with hard outcomes such as 'reengaging NEET', providing employability training, reducing crime and so on. The funding for softer targets though, enables space to do 'youth work', which then opens opportunities to make links to hard targets afterwards:

> So last week, there was some ASB and trespassing and young people setting fires, so we intervened, stopped them and got the petrol off them, so that was an outcome because we linked it in with reduced ASB and crime reduction, and we spoke to them… as long as we can say we've intervened and had conversations with them, then we can link it to our outcomes (Alice)

Although Alice is still doing some work concerned with social control and outcomes, these outcomes seem to arise more spontaneously in practice, rather than going in specifically to achieve them. This could mean that funding for soft targets concerned with broad outcomes can enable space to work flexibly under traditional youth work principles, and then link their work to outcomes after it has already taken. There were

however similar concerns with soft targets as there was with hard outcomes. It was suggested that soft targets were, ultimately, still contributing to moving youth work away from being youth work:

> We're just being asked to do what CAMHS folk do but as I said, it is pulling us away from the youth work side of things… It got put on to us to basically save budgets due to funding cuts. So by doing this we get a bit more money. We're always talking about mental well being, anxiety, depression. It even pulls you down a bit sometimes. Like I'm having to sit there and find out information, like research suicide and all that and it's quite depressing (Liam)

It would seem, superficially at least, that these soft targets are driving youth work towards being a substitute for mental health services but, as Liam suggests, his organisation gets more money for such work. Alice pointed out there can be severe repercussions in trying to cut costs:

> I think youth work has been abused and this is just my opinion on it right. We are not mental health workers, but because CAMHS has got a waiting list of about 3 years and absolutely nothing to support them in place while they wait, we end up picking that up. A lot of young people were working with are on the waiting list, but we aren't mental health workers and we're not qualified to do that. It's like it's our job to babysit them and help them cope until they can get the professional help that they need from mental health workers. There was a young person I was working with and not long after a session she tried to kill herself. It's not right. Her mum actually had to get her down and she had all the markings on her neck where she tried to hang herself, it's terrible, she needs professional and medical help… I feel like they're using us to like do their job, not in all cases but generally yeah. Like there's another boy I'm working with and do one to ones with but he's tried to kill himself before and still on CAMHS waiting list, it's a bit of a joke because it's not really what we're supposed to be doing, it's not our job role… As part of our role as advocating and speaking up for young people as well, we should be challenging why there is a lack of support services like mental health and careers advice because these are things we're not qualified to do (Alice)

It seems that youth work is being commodified and utilised wherever it can to fill some of the voids left by austerity cutbacks in other provision such as careers advice and mental health services, at least according to dominant literature (St Croix, 2017; Davies and Taylor, 2018). These practitioners who were working more critically with targets do however recognise the reality that they need to conform to some extent to attract funding:

> It's both really [meeting targets and young people's needs], but we want what's best for the young person. Without the funding though we couldn't do any of it (Alice)

Whilst at least five out of the nine practitioners demonstrated that their youth work organisations are strategically complying, they are nevertheless being used as a triage service to mop up the debris of the neoliberal policy. Trying to maintain a balance between targets and youth work principles which put young people first is testing:

> When you're dealing with partners or funders who want to deal with a specific issue, if all youth work goes in that direction, then we might be compromising your values and principles of youth work. For example, funding from a crime reduction unit, they might say they want personal information about the young people you're working with, and if a project finds themselves conforming to that for the sake of money then you're potentially damaging your relationship with young people and undermining the values of youth work (Gary)

What Gary is saying, is that his relationships with young people, which contain an EoC, would be destroyed. It seems as though the majority of these nine practitioners with critical views are trying to prevent their relationships from being interfered with, commodified and deployed to serve social control under a disguise of concern and care. Liam said:

> So we had a meeting with the councillors a while ago, young people had been setting fire to a wasteland, and they were like you need to go down there and sort them out, on these days, at these times, and you need to do

> such and such and such, which is fair enough as that's part of our role of being reactive on the streets. But then on the back of that fire, it was young people who had been into this house which is selling drugs and they'd say go to this address, the police don't have much intel on it but they're doing stuff, so you guys need to go down there. But then at that point it's like, no that's not our role. We can go and engage, but if there's drugs and crime involved, that's not our role. So it's like they expect us to do everything (Liam)

According to Liam, who was one of very few still working for local authority, these expectations are increasingly becoming a part of practice, which is becoming progressively challenging:

> Like we got some intel the other week about 3 young lads driving around in a black Golf selling drugs, and they'd attacked the police but they've not been caught. Then they're telling us to go round and engage with young people and find out who it was, and that's when we have to say 'no we're stepping back from that, it's not our role'. If police have been attacked that's not our place, so they need to respect our role… They're not even saying try help them or get them into provision, it's like get it sorted out, that needs to be solved, end of, get it done, blah blah blah… so we get stuff thrown down at us that goes against what we're trying to do with the young people. We don't want to control them or punish them like the police do, we want to work with them and help them. So it can be hard when they say do this, this and this, we have to negotiate and explain that's not what we do as youth workers and goes against our values… when there's certain issues that pop up like that they expect us to just be able to resolve it, even if that goes against our values. So it can be a challenge sometimes when they have these expectations of us. It's like they expect us to be able to do everything and solve every issue (Liam)

There is substantial evidence in the data to support a triage model of youth work. Whilst all the practitioners were doing employability related work, some were, as evidenced above, tasked to try fill the void in other areas due to their need for funding. On a more positive note, the data does, however, also suggests that some youth practitioners are, through strategic compliance, trying to fight back against the instrumental agenda, to prioritise their relationships which contain care for young people. Ultimately, however,

it appears the practitioners need to get paid, which is pulling them away from putting young people first:

> I think all this NEET stuff is just a big con if I'm honest. I remember some time ago, chatting to someone who used to work at Connexions and he was telling me about the payment by results targets. So say you had a NEET young person and you saw them once and you got them into a job that started the next day. Your payment would be a lot less of what it would be if you saw them, you did 100 hours work with them and then got them into a job. So basically, I think some organisations are discouraged from finding young people work too quickly, because the payment would be too low to be sustainable… So he needed to do as many hours work with them and then move them into a job because that's how they got their money. How mental is that for a young person? I don't want to find you a job too quick, I won't get paid… I think organisations now are getting paid more for putting young people on courses and doing CV's and employability stuff rather than moving them into a job… Yeah, it's making money vs the needs of that young person. It's all just a big business (Lucy)

What Lucy is suggesting is that many youth organisations are being deployed to reinforce deficit views of NEET young people, which, also serves social control. Due to the practitioners' critical awareness on NEET young people and youth work more generally however, they are rejecting deficit views of young people, compromising with targets, and trying to maintain and prioritise their caring relationships which young people in all their work. Therefore, aside from trying to occupy a middling position in their employability training by subverting targets and prioritising NEET young people's needs, they were seemingly 'middling' on a bigger scale too, interweaving between triage forms of youth work and more traditional forms of youth work:

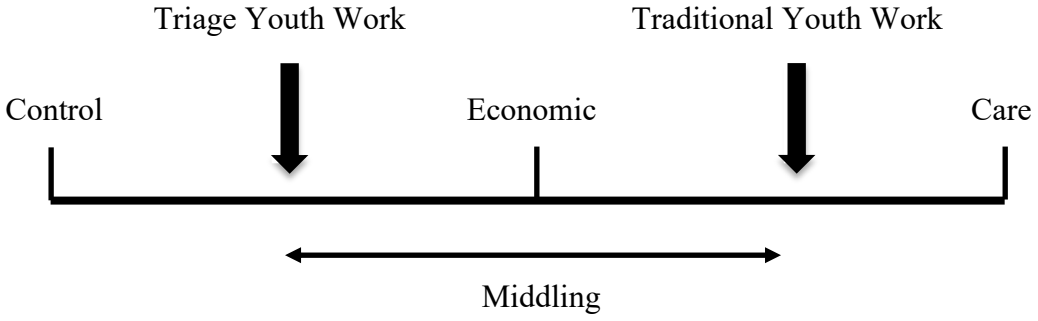

Figure 1.9: Triage and Traditional Youth Work

This middling could again be conceived as something of a hybrid discourse underpinning their broader practice as practitioners are ultimately working towards all three discourses. The reality is, however, that all three discourses are not and never can be present simultaneously due to conflict and competition between social control and care. They are therefore continuously interweaving between two different positions which are a combination of two different discourses, which cements their practice, more broadly, as a process of negotiation on a continuum. So, as these participants are working against official discourse and subverting external agendas to prioritise young people's needs, this means that their views and practice are also in alignment.

The middling position between control and care for the nine practitioners with critical views was further evidenced as some were still doing detached work, open-access youth clubs, project work and trips, alongside their reengaging NEET and employability training, and other forms of triage work. This work is more reminiscent of traditional youth work, which they view as much more beneficial to NEET young people, than employability simply aimed at supposedly preparing them for employment:

> I think youth work's really important for helping young people understand that they have value, that they have purpose and somebody gives a shit about them basically. You've got the careers services and job centre stuff and it's like their job to fix young people, but youth work, it

> gives young people relationships with adults, it gives them hobbies, activities, opportunities, it's gives them chance to discuss things, talk about themselves, their world, their problems, advocate on behalf of them. All that stuff will make them more employable and improve their life chances than any so-called employability skills course, but it's undervalued (Lucy)

At least four others out of the nine agreed with this perspective, particularly in discussing how youth work can expose NEET young people to a broad range of experiences which can assist them in growing and developing into capable, mature and competent young adults. The standout theme across these practitioners was therefore that of opportunity more broadly, which was discussed on numerous occasions. As detailed earlier, these participants argued that many NEET young people lack in opportunity, whilst they see traditional youth work as a provider of opportunities for young people:

> It's giving young people a chance they might otherwise not have. So, they might not get opportunities to do certain stuff without youth work, so it gives equal opportunities for young people to give them the skills and confidence they need. It's a bit like connecting them with those chances because without us they might not have them (Liam)

This could be interpreted as these five practitioners regard youth work as bridge building, but to informal opportunity that can potentially develop bridging social capital. Although there was no direct evidence of this, this would challenge the more formal opportunity associated with employability training which may only serve to bond NEET young people to marginalisation. Coburn (2011) discusses how youth work can be a potential site of capital building with positive results for young people, whilst there is a plethora of research on the benefit of more traditional types of youth work (Davies, 2018). In other words, traditional youth work can potentially act as a counterweight to the bonding work they were also doing through employability training, although again, this is at a theoretical level as there was no direct evidence of them building bridging capital, but they certainly claimed this is the case.

Youth work opportunities more generally, it is argued, can be particularly important for young people from underprivileged backgrounds who often have less access to legitimate cultural and material resources than more affluent young people (Jeffs and Smith, 2007; Bradford, 2011). This means that middle-class children and young people have more opportunity for social learning and cultural development, confidence building and skills development (Bradford, 2011). Lucy spoke about poverty and illustrated the financial strain that some parents may face:

> When you think about hobbies, so, you think about people taking their kids to football, to boxing, to swimming lessons, all those things cost money. Yeah, they cost five pound a time. So, if you've got a family, who's on limited income, are they going to shell out £20 a week for all their kids to do these things? So, they don't get the opportunity (Lucy)

Activities cost money that some families simply can't afford, particularly against a backdrop of inflation and rises in the cost of living. This means that youth work is a vital resource for young people, in which youth workers can be considered bridges to opportunities as some of the practitioners view the youth work role as connecting NEET young people to a wide range of opportunities. These opportunities can assist young people in various ways – for example, fun, enjoyment, building confidence, skills, and social development, which can potentially help to mitigate the negative effects of youth unemployment. It could be argued that these five practitioners in particular, whilst still doing employability training which is bonding young people to marginalisation, are paradoxically also trying to open up space to do traditional youth work and build bridging capital.

Youth work activities have however never really been considered as an end themselves, as conceptions of informal education which historically underpinned youth work, tend to favour the process rather than product. Youth work traditionally placed more value on being on a journey in partnership with young people, rather than arriving at any

particular destination, such as employment (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Three practitioners discussed the youth work process as being valuable, meaning it isn't just about opportunities and activities as tangible resources within themselves, but the implicit knowledge and learning that could be gained from youth work pursuits and activities, such as exposing young people to socially and culturally enriching experiences. For example, Sophie said:

> I saw a barrier, especially for young people that were living in some of the most deprived areas, they found it difficult to want to be in a different environment, to change their attitude, their behaviour, the way they spoke, they weren't able to change or adapt to the environment and I feel like that was a disadvantage for them… I think in life, you need to be able to go in to different situations, different groups, different environments, and still flourish. That is resilience (Sophie)

This quote suggests that she believes many young people from underprivileged backgrounds lack opportunities because they struggle to negotiate unfamiliar environments. At a theoretical level, she could mean middle-class social spaces as the young people she works with, in most cases, lack the cultural versatility to be able to 'code switch' and navigate their way through unfamiliar environments. This could signify bonding capital, whereby young people become trapped in a perpetual state of marginalisation (Shildrick et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2020). Similar phenomena were evident across at least nine of the practitioners who discussed social and cultural barriers to NEET young people's learning, development, life chances and opportunities. Many of the practitioners are working with NEET young people who are entrenched within dispossessed and marginalised working-class cultural identities in which, through their attitudes, behaviours, dress, style and speech, they find recognition, status and inclusion within a local context, although this will paradoxically further marginalise them from the mainstream (Simmons et al., 2020). Gary said:

> Some of them, they get involved in low-level illegal activity quite early, in their teens, and it's quite hard for them to break out of it once they're into that. As they get deeper into criminal activity they tend to withdraw

> even further from mainstream society and all forms of professional help regardless of how long you've had relationships with them for (Gary)

This again, can be interpreted as an indication of bonding capital which serves to limit engagement with 'mainstream' society. The practitioners that discussed youth work as a bridge to opportunities want to assist young people to overcome the barriers of bonding capital. They are suggesting that youth work can expose young people to new social realms, opportunities, and experiences, which can help develop and build bridging capital, although they were all doing the opposite in their employability training. Sophie was the only practitioner to express building bridging capital directly:

> When I think of my role as a youth worker, I see myself as that bridge, that person that, you know, if there's a barrier, I mean, I'm able to kind of help take that barrier away in some way. And that could be through our networks, our experience, our understanding, we are that in between, we can make change and connect… I'm looking for opportunities that they wouldn't normally have, experiences they wouldn't normally have… So it's about opportunity, giving them opportunities and experiences that they wouldn't normally get, which is going to help them to be able to navigate themselves, especially in the environments, other environments that they might not normally come in to (Sophie)

So, for other practitioners, similar can be said when they discussed helping NEET young people with limited resources connect to opportunity and new experiences. They are, essentially, advocating for youth work that acts as a bridge which can mitigate the negative effects of the bonding capital NEET young people embody, although there wasn't any data to suggest they are doing this in practice. This nevertheless makes explicit that, by advocating for youth work which puts young people first and is beneficial to them, they have an awareness that employability training is not beneficial to NEET young people.

The argument that strategic compliance was potentially enabling space to do more traditional variants of youth work was further evidenced by two participants who were attempting to find or create space to incorporate a critical pedagogy into their practice.

Gary used a metaphor of a rose to describe his thoughts on the youth work relationship to NEET young people more generally:

> It means seeing roses grow through concrete… So the concrete is like social environments which are, for whatever reason whether deliberately or accidental, hazardous to young people. So they find it difficult to flourish and grow with less opportunities. And the roses represent like the will of the people demonstrating the ability to break through a negative social environment against the odds and still being able to, one be planted and grow, and two, to achieve and be beautiful (Gary)

The inspiration behind this metaphor lies in a poem by Tupac Shakur who, growing up in an American ghetto, found fortune and fame through music and film – the rose represents himself. Gary likens the rose to young people growing up in disadvantaged environments which often do not nurture their natural talent and abilities. He suggests, however, that through pure tenaciousness, they can still survive and thrive even with the odds stacked against them. For Gary, youth work has a role in this because 'seeing the difficulties they face, the challenges and lack of opportunity', he wants to 'try provide an aid where that gap is'. The gap Gary perceives is a lack of opportunity as opposed to personal issues or a lack of skills and morals. Gary, therefore, views the problems for NEET young people as deriving primarily out of their social environment and, to some extent, the structural forces which shape their experiences. He has a critical consciousness, which seems to transpire into his practice. Gary claims to be…

> …Developing opportunities and work with young people and supporting them to think critically about their social surroundings and how to take positive action to change their personal life and their local community… kind of help you have a critical mind to your social environment. So being able to critique what's going on in the local community and wanting to make a positive impact from the grassroots level (Gary)

The task of liberatory education, according to Freire (1970), is to become subjects by naming the world, and then transforming it, which is achieved through praxis, a combination of dialogue/reflection and action, leading to conscientisation. This

approach which involves getting young people to explore their thinking and critique dominant ideas, beliefs, structures and systems, through conversation and dialogue is what Gary claims to do. This is where praxis begins, which will hopefully lead to transformation, or at least challenge structures of oppression. Dominant variants of contemporary youth work seem to revolve around personal interventions to help young people develop personal effectiveness for change. In other words, a degree of adaptation to enable them to integrate into the world around them, rather than challenge or change it. This version of youth work, however, at least according to Freire (1970), would make NEET young people objects as opposed to subjects, which is their natural ontological vocation. According to Sophie, who also claims to incorporate a critical pedagogy, she wants to prioritise the collective over the individual, with preferred methods of group work rather than personal interventions:

> We're helping them explore their thinking and reflection through conversation and dialogue. What's great about it is that they're working in groups. So when they're working in a group, they're getting to hear other people's perspectives. And everyone's comes from a different perspective. So, some young people will look at a situation and see something very harmful in it. Some will see nothing, so stuff like that is really good in terms of getting them thinking a lot more critically about everyday situations (Sophie)

Here again, Sophie is encouraging space for critical examination of everyday life, thinking about wider issues, with emphasis on group over individual work. For Freire (1970), this is a fundamental part of liberatory education, as he believes the oppressed are dual beings in contradiction with themselves due to their submersion in the reality of oppression. They can perceive themselves as opposites to their oppressors, but as their consciousness has been prescribed by the oppressor, they often identify with the oppressor as opposed to trying to overcome this contradiction and aspiring for true liberation. The only way to overcome this contradiction is by collective dialogue and developing a collective consciousness as members of an oppressed class. Therefore, coming together in groups and problem posing through dialogue can help facilitate this journey to critical consciousness. For Sophie:

> A big thing is to help young people see that they're much more powerful than they believe they are. And as a collective, they're very, very strong, they have a strong voice. I want young people to make a difference. A significant difference in their own communities. Just like coming together collectively and being supported, you know, using us to help bridge that gap and make a difference in the places that they live (Sophie)

In this sense, her role can be viewed as organising and mobilising young people – a sort of facilitator or animator, or even the originally intended version of the informal educator, which was underpinned by Freirean ideas (Smith, 1988). Sophie is helping to provide a space where young people can 'deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world' (Freire, 2000, p.34) – an example of such:

> We started on a project where young people didn't feel they have a voice. So a park was taken out of their local community, and they expressed the impact it had on them. They basically told us that they couldn't do anything about it, and for me, that's a light bulb moment, because I understand how democracy works, and how coming together as a collective can be powerful. So for me, it was being able to turn around and say, no, you can make a difference. I'm going to show you how you can (Sophie)

Sophie supported the young people to engage in social action and have the park re-established and, although this is a fairly moderate example of working within democracy to make change, it nevertheless incorporates principles of critical pedagogy. It appeared that both Gary and Sophie were also trying to incorporate aspects of critical pedagogy into their employability training too. For example, whilst all the practitioners wanted young people to get jobs, which they generally seen as vital for wellbeing, Gary claims he is negotiating how he works with this aim in his practice to maximise creativity and potential of his engagement with NEET young people. He wants to…

> …Help support young people think critically about the job market and how they can, not conform, but give themselves the tools and skills to make themselves employable and helping them find jobs that are fulfilling (Gary)

Although he is working to external agendas, it appears he is still trying to keep young people's needs at the forefront. Waged labour has always to some extent been concerned with social control. Whilst general notions of social control are a necessary function for all societies to abstain from descending into chaos, control exerted over social class relations, including through forms of education, is concerned with maintaining and reproducing economic and political relations of domination and exploitation (Simon, 1960). It seems Gary is highly conscious of his caring relationship in not wanting to further disadvantage young people.

Similarly, Sophie described an approach to her employability training which seeks to neutralise power dynamics by working alongside young people, rather than on or for. This is congruent with Freirean ideas - critical work should begin where people are at and seek to work with them in a journey alongside them:

> What motivates me is the fact that it's not doing to or working on them, I'm doing it with them. And it's giving young people the skills, the empowerment, to actually lead in whatever it is they're doing. And that's what motivates me, that is our approach and it is about working with their skills, their passions, their interests, and giving them the resources to be able to lead (Sophie)

Whilst both Gary and Sophie are working towards some elements of control, they are continuously trying to tip the balance back towards care cementing the idea they can negotiate their employability training and interweave between control-economic and care-economic on the continuum. More generally, there seems to be a wider recognition, at least amongst the nine practitioners, of forces beyond the young person's control that can constrain and limit their life chances, opportunities and experiences. They resist this by prioritising their relationships and the needs of NEET young people whilst viewing

them as possessing potential, as opposed to viewing them as deficit and aiming to build aspiration. Moreover, through strategic compliance, they are finding space to do more traditional variants of youth work, and at least two incorporated a critical pedagogy into practice, evidencing that youth practitioners can make space to work creatively, collaboratively, and collectively with young people. It also makes explicit that youth practitioners can potentially encourage and facilitate critical thinking in young people and foster a journey towards conscientisation, despite external constraints (Freire, 1970).

All nine practitioners espoused critical views on NEET young people and documented resistance in their employability training, whereby they try to open space to incorporate care, taking up a middling position as they negotiate their practice. More broadly, whilst employability training was their main form of triage work, five demonstrated strategic compliance in other pieces of work. The same five also discussed this opening up space to do more traditional variants of youth work, adding weight to the notion of middling between triage and traditional youth work. Two incorporated a critical pedagogy, including in their employability practice. The practice of these nine practitioners contains the EoC – the characteristics of the caring relation are all present and it is clear that they have particular moral positions on the issues they perceive for NEET young people. There needs to be some realism here however, as it is clear that the practitioners, despite how much critical consciousness they have, cannot always do work focussed solely on care due to funding constraints and external priorities. These dominant forces are inescapable but, as evidenced in this discussion, practitioners armed with a critical consciousness can go some way to subverting detrimental policy and funding agendas and navigate their way much more consciously and creatively for the benefit of young people.

These nine practitioners appear to be middling between two different positions in their employability provision, and more broadly within youth work. They were however, at least to some degree, still concerned with economic and control imperatives such as

engaging NEET in employability training and other related programmes – even Gary, Sophie and Lucy who espoused the most critical views and had a broad knowledge base on various topics. So, maybe it is not all of the time that their relations can be considered as containing the EoC, as they are still doing employability training and other triage work, but at least some of the time, when they are able to open up space and practice to 'do youth work'. They are trying to prioritise young people's needs, provide traditional forms of youth work, bridge to opportunity, as well as incorporate a critical pedagogy. So, against the push and pull forces of the social control and economic competitiveness discourses which attempt to position them, it appears practitioners still have some degree of agency in positioning themselves and shaping the way discourses play out in practice. This means that the discourses are, at least to a certain extent, mediated by the practitioners' perspectives on NEET young people, and their understanding of youth work more generally. Whether they subscribe to official discourse on NEET, or view them as young people systematically marginalised, ultimately plays a significant role in shaping their practice. They are working with the discourses or trying to find some middle ground - in other words, they either conform, or challenge and compromise based on how they view NEET young people. Therefore, it is not one discourse or another underpinning their practice, it is a process of negotiation on a continuum.

A Pedagogy of Hope?

This section will now return to the eight practitioners that earlier espoused deficit views of NEET associated with a lack in skills, aspiration and moralistic in tone. These are:

1. Leah
2. Paula
3. Sam
4. Elizabeth
5. Roy
6. Chloe
7. Helen

8. Tony

The practice of these participants, as previously discussed, is currently located and stuck somewhere between economic and control on the discourse continuum. Hopefully, this chapter so far has made explicit that all is not lost for these practitioners. Despite their current position based upon their views of NEET young people, they are not static objects, they are human subjects who have the potential to learn, grow and evolve (Freire, 1970), and therefore, they have the potential to change. Conscientization for Freire (1970) refers to the journey of a critical consciousness. It is first a personal transformation, which should hopefully lead to collective change. Freire argues conscientization is achieved through reflecting on experiences, which can lead to critical dialogue and learning, before finally, action; or, what he refers to as praxis - the dialectical relationship between reflection and action. This process can, according to Freire, facilitate individuals to understand their social and historical reality and empower them with a sense of agency and responsibility to critique oppressive structures, systems and ideologies.

Once individual transformation has been achieved, this then requires further critical dialogue to develop a shared understanding that oppression is not an individual condition or personal experience, but rather a structural issue. If such an understanding is achieved, this demands collaboration in the development of solutions, and then collective action to work towards a more just and equitable society. Conscientization is therefore fundamental for educators as it offers a framework for understanding the role of education in social transformation. Currently, the eight practitioners who embody deficit views are profoundly missing a critical awareness of the processes of economic marginalisation that NEET young people have experienced. This means that they need to go through their own journey of conscientization if they are ever able to support marginalised young people achieve conscientization by incorporating a critical pedagogy into their practice (Freire, 1970).

Freire (1992) argues that his critical pedagogy needs to be underpinned by hope – hope that change is possible, because without hope, there is no struggle. Hope is imperative to the success of a conscientization and a critical pedagogy. What supports this pedagogy of hope is that there were some initial signs that several practitioners were beginning to journey more towards a critical consciousness as they began to question aspects of their thinking and practice, such as individualised discourse on NEET. In other words, there were contradictions which caused them to reflect on some of their current views and positions – this is where conscientization often begins for Freire (1970), recognising contradictions in experiences. To give some examples of this, Helen started to engage with some broader debates about young people more generally:

> I think that people who don't work with young people, who just read what they see in the media, have this impression that it's just scallies and chavs who need to behave better. And it's not. It's kids who are doing the exact same thing those people would be doing if they'd have grown up in the same situation (Helen)

Although not explicitly stated, what can be deduced here is that Helen is beginning to critically reflect on official discourse about young people. Young people are often demonised and scapegoated for social problems, and they are usually powerless to defend themselves from the negative images of youth that saturate society, as we have seen over the last 150 years with various moral panics and construction of youth as trouble/in trouble (Fusco, 2018). Particularly working-class males who are often demonised for hanging around in groups/gangs in their local environment (Simmons et al., 2020). Working-class culture is frequently perceived as deficit, resistant and problematic (Stahl, 2015), but many teenagers, regardless of socioeconomic background, can be mischievous (Bradford, 2011). Young people can, at times, cause trouble and engage in risk taking behaviour, but this often drives adults, who often engage in risky behaviour too, into a frenzy and leads to disproportionate measures which can further marginalise young people (Fusco, 2018). Helen, however, based on her experience working with young people, is beginning to challenge some of the stereotypes about young people whilst recognising that some of them may grow up

in disadvantaged circumstances. This indicates that she is beginning to engage with some broader debates in relation to young people, although these have not yet manifested into her practice. Similar reckoning could be observed in Chloe's views in trying to understand and empathise with NEET young people:

> There's like stigma attached to NEET, so I think young people are quite ashamed or embarrassed. I think it's just seen as a negative thing. Like, it's normal to stay in education, that's the normal route for everyone and if you're not doing those things, like college, uni, I think you can feel less or like inadequate… I think there's just like a negative attachment to it. So if you do offer them help, they're embarrassed to take it so they'll be like no I'm ok I don't need your help. I think everything around NEET can be seen as quite negative by young people (Chloe)

Chloe is suggesting that both she and NEET young people are aware of the stigma and negative stereotypes of being NEET, and that NEET young people are actually demonstrating resistance to this, rather than internalising an imposed label and embodying the stigma associated with it, such as being viewed as inadequate or dependent. Young people are therefore reluctant to accept help and may reject support from practitioners because they don't want to be positioned as socially and psychologically deficient. The NEET label in this understanding, can be a hindrance to the youth work caring relationship as young people may resist due to awareness around the stigma attached to NEET, which then impacts on the relationship practitioners are able to build with them. On the other hand, Sam suggested provision for NEET is often viewed quite negatively by NEET young people:

> NEETs are all seen as being naughty or not very intelligent. Like there was a teenager at placement who was being recommended for a course and she was like I can't go to that I'm not naughty enough, there's nothing for me because I just dropped out, so these courses and stuff develop negative stereotypes (Sam)

This situation arose for Sam as she was trying to move a young person onto another form of training provision. This signifies that young people are aware provision for NEET is often of low status and has stigma attached to it which of course is problematic

within itself. Young people have always had an implicit awareness that such training provision is often low-status and stigmatised, and therefore, as made explicit by Mizen (1990) in his study of YTS in the 1980s, they are reluctant to take up places. This data from Chloe and Sam nevertheless suggests that they are both starting to question individualised discourse on NEET. Similar concerns were evident for Elizabeth. She is working with some NEET young people aged 18 and 19 who are currently engaging with the job centre.

> So they're on benefits, going to the job centre, and the job centre are saying you need to do a, b and c. Then they think, fuck sake I don't even want do this but I've gotta go on this course or I won't get my benefits. How can they expect people to turn up, be enthusiastic about it if it's something they don't want to do. It's like saying they're worthless and they don't deserve to do what they want to do because they're NEET (Elizabeth)

Elizabeth is suggesting that NEET young people are being forced to some extent to engage in provision, in which they have to sacrifice their own ambitions to do what they're told otherwise they'll lose their benefits. Elizabeth seemed quite passionate about helping the young people she works with find a job, but she is beginning to recognise a discourse of control. As expressed by Leah, there are structural barriers to helping young people find jobs:

> There's lots of NEET young people I work with seeking jobs but can't find decent ones with decent hours and decent salaries due to like zero hour contracts and low paid work, so I'm not sure what the solution is (Leah)

Although Leah didn't explicitly position these challenges as structural, she was left in a place of uncertainty of how to support NEET. Similar can be said for Helen, Chloe, Sam and Elizabeth due to recognising stigma on NEET young people and how this affects their relationship with them, and the poor quality and stigmatised provision which NEET young people don't seem motivated to want to do. This uncertainty in how to support NEET is causing them to reflect on and question their deficit views on the

causes and characteristics of NEET. Paula was also beginning to question structural factors that impact on young people and may cause them to become NEET:

> Everyone's had a different life. Like these kids who are in care and gone from home to home and placement to placement, they've had it hard. They've not been in stable education, changing areas all the time, meeting different people all the time, being let down and failed, developing trust issues. So for some it's not always their choice, it's the card they're dealt in life. They just have to try make the best out of bad situations (Paula)

Although Paula is only discussing one subcategory of NEET, she is starting to engage with the structural realities of some young people's lives. Paula is recognising some of the structural forces that affect young people, although recognising they are not completely crushed as they still have some agency but 'have to make the best out of bad situations'. In other words, there are, to a lesser or greater extent, contradictions between the reality of the practitioners' practice and official discourse which has shaped their views. More examples include Roy's suggestion that even where NEET have reengaged, this has not been unproblematic, sometimes serving to further their negative educational experiences:

> I've had a couple of young people that said, they went to college, and they did their functional Maths and English, but they felt patronised, and they felt thick, because they were in classrooms with younger people, and they've got a 19-year-old in a classroom with a 16- and 17-year-old. To them, that's horrible. It takes away their confidence because they feel that they're just completely stupid (Roy)

Research also suggests that once a young person has negative experiences of education, they tend to disengage, reject, and turn against it (Simmons et al., 2020) – which Sam reiterated:

> If they've had lots of negative experiences over so many years, I think that's massive, it just puts them off. They've been rejected so they just resent like education and stuff (Sam)

The practitioners are aware of the negative experiences that the young people they work with have had in education, and therefore, it could be argued they see it as problematic trying to reengage them in similar forms of provision. In a more optimistic reading, these contradictions may lead them on a journey to a critical consciousness, as it seems they are beginning to consider broader factors that contribute and cause NEET status. As explained earlier in the thesis, Dewey (1916) argues that thinking begins in what he calls a 'forked road situation' – a situation that proposes alternatives to the already accepted in our minds. This, he suggests, causes some unease, and drives us to reflect on our assumptions, which can lead to a journey to seek new understandings. This supports Freire's (1970) argument that conscientization begins by recognising contradictions and critically reflecting on them in relation to previously held assumptions. There seemed to be some clear evidence that as some of the practitioners are gaining more experience and working with young people, they are developing more critical consciousness and starting to explore and even challenge some of their prior beliefs and assumptions about NEET young people:

> Honestly I used to hate NEET young people (laughs). It's like, 'you've got to be in education till you're 18, get on with it, don't be an ass'. But now I work with NEET young people, it sort of makes sense why people could become NEET. So it has changed my opinion, because there are legitimate reasons, like the education system, it just couldn't provide the support they needed, it might have been mental health, or bullying, or their background circumstances, there's so many different reasons. There's usually a very good reason why people are NEET (Chloe)

Chloe is still relatively young herself and was discussing growing up and struggling through college, and because of that, getting annoyed with other young people who she perceived as not putting any effort into their education. Now she actually works with NEET young people though, her previous assumptions are beginning to be challenged by recognising some broader issues facing young people more generally. The above data suggests that some practitioners are, in fact, starting to critically question the notion of NEET, the stereotypes associated with it, and engage with structural factors as they are exposed to the realities of some young people's lives.

Either way, these practitioners are still not *caring for* young people in their relationships. If they were truly *caring for*, rather than just *caring about*, their relationships would be conflicting with the social control and economic discourses, but instead, their *caring about* is currently supporting control and economic imperatives, meaning it is conformist in nature. There was however, at least for Roy, recognition that this was not the reason he got into youth work, meaning he is beginning to recognise that he is not actually helping young people and that his care is restricted:

> I think it's hurt a lot of youth workers and why they are in it. So the reason they're in it is because they want to help young people, whereas now it's gone really set and specific, so they can be quite limited in what they can and can't do. That's not the reason they got into it, to just make sure young people have a qualification, or a job. That's not the reason I got into it… Youth work that's about fun and enjoyment is becoming a thing of the past (Roy)

Overall, this would mean that there are some disjunctures between what dominant discourse says about NEET, and what the practitioners experience, as six or seven out of the nine who espoused deficit views which aligned with official discourse are beginning to recognise contradictions in practice, and starting to reflect on their assumptions. This is hopeful as it signifies the early beginnings of a journey towards a more critical consciousness, in which they are re-examining their prior beliefs and assumptions in an effort to demystify the prevailing hegemony and reach new levels of awareness. This could hopefully lead to a renegotiation of their practice as they continue to reckon with the NEET label and policy discourse. As shown on the continuum below, a critical consciousness can take them from a starting position between economic and control, to a starting position between economic and care, enabling them to develop the potential to interweave between these two positions, like the rest of the practitioners in this research:

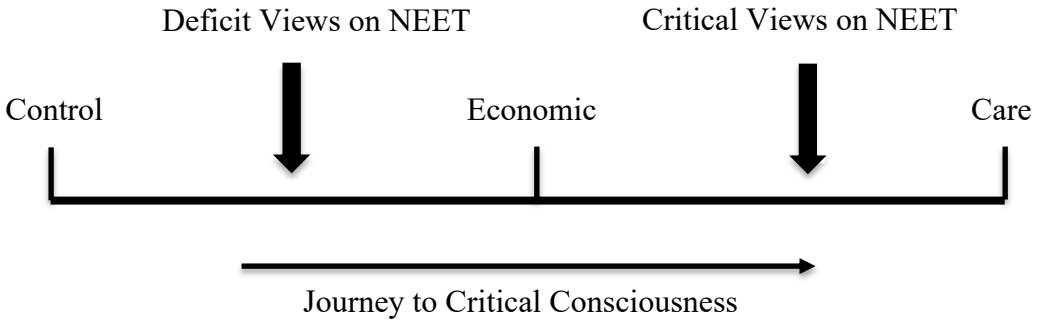

Figure 2.1 Journey to Critical Consciousness

It is important to maintain a pedagogy of hope for the benefit of marginalised young people. These practitioners, despite where they currently are, have the capacity to develop into agents for change, who can work alongside and support marginalised young people, rather than on or for them whereby they are perpetuating social control. Hope is therefore fundamental, the belief in human capacity for change, growth, and goodness. Hope is not merely embodying some sort of idealistic utopian vision, or unbridled optimism, it should be the driver for transformation in social reality (Freire, 1992). Any struggle without it, internal or external, Freire argues, will be weak, wobbly, and eventually succumb to failure and despair. Hope is therefore akin to energy and the belief that things are worthwhile.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter draws the thesis together by reflecting on each chapter and key arguments, before outlining the original contribution to knowledge. This research set out to critically analyse the changing relationship between youth work and employability provision for NEET young people. I will first discuss where current knowledge is up to, then reflect on my data chapters to exemplify how I have built upon this knowledge and made an original contribution to knowledge.

Current Knowledge

The thesis started off by acknowledging the diverse territory of youth work, recognising it is contested terrain as opposed to a coherent or a unified practice (Cooper, 2018). I therefore examined theoretical perspectives on youth work as it is concerned with both education and welfare of young people (Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Banks, 2010). These ideas were then placed within a sociohistorical context to trace the roots of youth work, which revealed competing discourses of social control and care deriving from the stresses and strains of industrialisation and urbanisation (Davies, 2009; Smith, 2013; Bright and Pugh, 2019). It was also acknowledged that education, more generally, has also been driven by twin discourses of social control and economic competitiveness, meaning that the roots of youth work share a significant degree of overlap with compulsory schooling, and other forms of social control (Ball, 2012).

The thesis then considers the political context of youth work. Current literature suggests that, whilst social democracy helped produce a progressive youth work practice and some level of unity, youth work began to be corrupted from the 1980s onwards (Taylor and Taylor, 2013). It is argued that neoliberalism essentially introduced an economic competitiveness discourse into youth work through state concerns with the skills of working-class youth, who were constructed in terms of deficit (Davies, 2019). A series of governments embraced this discourse via the imposition of targets and a commissioning and outsourcing model, which began driving youth work in an

increasingly narrow and instrumental direction (Taylor et al., 2019; Bright and Pugh, 2019). The final nail in the coffin for statutory youth work was the withdrawal of substantial state funding under a programme of austerity post-2010. These shifts have undermined youth work as a distinct practice, repurposing it to be concerned with more overt social control and economic imperatives considered appropriate to neoliberal Britain. Youth work has, since the 1980s, shifted from the public sector and now primarily survives in the voluntary sector reflecting its historic roots, although it is primarily being driven by state agendas such as meeting specific goals at the request of funders (St Croix, 2017).

The final area of the literature review examined the rise of NEET, connecting this to neoliberal policy via processes of deindustrialisation and economic restructuring (Maguire, 2015; Simmons et al., 2020). In critically considering the economic marginalisation of working-class young people, this helped produce alternative arguments to the deficit discourses used by the state to reorientate youth work to be concerned with social control and economic agendas. This understanding of social and economic processes of dispossession of working-class young people enabled a broader conceptualising of the relationship between youth work and NEET. Neoliberal policy has effectively turned youth work into a triage operation to deal with the causalities of dispossession.

The literature review nevertheless made explicit three particular discourses – control, care, and economic competitiveness – which have shaped and structured youth work practice over time. These have been used to construct a conceptual framework through which to analyse youth work employability provision. In other words, these discourses have been applied to data to develop novel understandings of the changing nature of youth work and NEET young people. This was also the justification for deploying the concept of youth practitioners insofar as this research does not want to contribute to the further erosion of youth work principles, by making claims about what youth work currently is. Rather, it is using existing ideas that have developed and shaped youth

work, to analyse a new variant of work with young people. There is, either way, a lack of research on the relationship between youth work and NEET young people, and little on youth work employability provision. This research is therefore a timely contribution, as NEET has played a large role in justifying the far-reaching changes that have taken place in youth work, such as the significant narrowing that has driven variants of youth work, with some mirroring the mechanisms of more mainstream education.

Contribution to Knowledge

Here, I will reflect on the data chapters and discuss how they build upon current knowledge, before outlining the original contribution to knowledge this research has made. The first discourse to be examined was economic competitiveness. It was argued in the literature review that the economic discourse has its roots in the 1980s associated with neoliberalism and deficit constructions of working-class youth. The economic discourse has primarily been introduced into youth work through the imposition of targets justified by such constructions. The practitioners' targets in practice were critically examined, in which all seventeen participants' expressed opposition to targets for multiple reasons, although the most common reason being, targets putting them under some pressure to get NEET young people conforming and performing in education or the labour market. Their targets were nevertheless based on skill deficit views of NEET and evidenced that there is an economic discourse shaping their practice.

The social control discourse was the next to be investigated. This was a general analysis of all the practitioners' employability training. Although they were all working in different contexts, the general remit was the same – they were tasked with building CVs, practicing interview techniques, application forms, building confidence, and other basic general skills such as organisation and budgeting. Alongside this generic pedagogy, they were also attempting to build bridges between NEET young people and unpaid work placements to supposedly develop good work skills, habits, and experience, as well as offering more general AGI to young people. This can, at least unofficially, be

understood as positioning youth practitioners as bridge builders. Either way, there is substantial research evidencing that employability training is not really of any advantage in helping NEET young people access the labour market, and more generally, is a neoliberal concept which serves to further individualise and personalise unemployment (Leonard and Wilde, 2019). Similar can be said for the employability provision in this research, as it is low-quality, dull, and repetitive, and cannot really be beneficial for marginalised young people - it is not building bridges to anywhere meaningful, with little evidence of any success in the data. Paradoxically, it was argued that this employability provision is actually building bonding capital by reinforcing deficit discourses about NEET young people and perpetuating their marginalisation. This is troubling as all the practitioners are providing employability training which is contributing to social control regardless of their assumptions about NEET young people. This also made explicit the overlap and support between the social control and economic discourse - it could potentially be argued that the economic discourse has been deployed in youth work as a smokescreen for social control of dispossessed working-class youth.

The final discourse to be examined was care. Here, all the practitioners viewed their practice as relationship based, through which they claimed to attempt to help and support young people. The data was then used broadly across all practitioners to illuminate characteristics of Noddings' (2002) EoC, which include engrossment, motivational displacement, reciprocity, and commitment. Superficially at least, based on their views and beliefs about what they are doing in their practice, it appears that at least some of practitioners incorporate an ethic of care into their practice.

The section after this considered whether there is a hybrid discourse in practice as all three discourses shown up in this initial analysis. It became clear however that it is impossible to simultaneously incorporating an EoC into practice whilst exercising social control through employability training as the two are pulling in completely opposite directions. For example, the characteristics of engrossment and motivational

displacement are not compatible with social control as this is oppressing NEET young people, rather than prioritising their needs and caring for them. Therefore, I argue it is in fact a continuum in practice and that the practitioners view themselves as located between the economic and care discourses. Based on the findings from the other two discourses however, what they think they are doing in relation to care and what they are actually doing in practice are not congruent. So, more generally, whilst all the practitioners are perpetuating NEET young people's marginalisation through poor quality employability training, it can be argued that their personal care is being overridden by social control justified by economic concerns.

These findings, in many ways, support arguments in the literature review. Not only are young people being positioned as deficit, but practitioners are also being positioned as agents of control who need to fix, contain, and control young people (St Croix, 2017). This is driving youth practitioners into subordinating certain sections of working-class young people and reshaping provision to reinforce the marginalisation of the most disadvantaged (Taylor et al., 2019). So, neoliberalism has not only systematically marginalised and dispossessed working-class youth but has also shaped provision to deal with the causalities of its economic policy. For example, youth work is being used as an attempt to fill the void left by a decline in traditional state-sponsored public services due to substantial cutbacks. In line with Crisp and Powell's (2017) argument, it would seem this is a form of 'neoliberal state crafting' – the state has used the costs incurred by the financial crisis caused by neoliberal economy policy as an opportunity to further neoliberal ideology via a retrenchment of the state, cuts to public funding and so on. All the practitioners are, in effect, fulfilling a triage model of public services. Youth work has been colonised by neoliberalism and deployed to serve economic aims, at least officially, but the reality of the practitioners' employability training is exercising social control and perpetuating the marginalisation of NEET young people.

In the following chapter, focus is on eight practitioners who hold deficit views on NEET. This was contradictory data since the eight practitioners conceived the causes

of NEET as a lack of skills, morals and work ethic, meaning that, whilst they expressed opposition to targets, they were simultaneously subscribing to official discourse. The practitioners' deficit views were interrogated, and parallels were drawn with underclass theory associated with Murray (1990), which blames cultures of dependency for social issues such as poverty and unemployment. Essentially, it was argued that these eight practitioners broadly view NEET young people through the same lens as the state, from which it can be deduced that they lack any significant critical awareness about processes of dispossession and enforced marginalisation of working-class youth. As they view the causes of NEET through an individualistic agentic perspective, it was suggested that their starting position based on assumptions about NEET locate them between control and economic discourses on the continuum. Further rationale behind this position was given in outlining the significant degree of overlap between the social control and economic competitiveness discourse.

Their practice was then considered. It was argued that their views significantly shape what they believe themselves to be doing in their employability training, such as breaking cultures of worklessness. This was theorised as attempting to break bonding capital in which practitioners view NEET young people as encultured into poor attitudes, behaviours, and low aspirations. This is a pedagogy of control underpinned by paternalism in which the practitioners attempt to lead young people into change, remoulding them to fit into the mainstream more appropriately, reflecting historical forms of youth leadership provision. In other words, their views and practice are in equilibrium, in which they embrace official discourse and reinforce it in their practice, meaning they start out between control and economic on the continuum and then reproduce this position.

Their views and practice also supported their personal care to be colonised by the economic and control discourses. Distinctions between *caring for* and *caring about* are used to make explicit that these eight practitioners appear to *care about* NEET young people, but they are not *caring for* them in practice through a relationship which

contains an EoC. This means that their practice exhibits some characteristics of care, but their work is often not responsive to young people's needs or in their best interests. *Caring for* is therefore not compatible with social control but *caring about* is. So, whilst these eight practitioners believed they were working from care towards economic objectives, they were in fact working from the other end of the continuum, from control towards economic. Put simply, they view NEET young people as deficit which reinforces the economic competitiveness and social control discourses. This, in turn, manifests a pseudo-caring discourse in which the practitioners still *care about* NEET young people, but they are not *caring for* them in their relationships. Paradoxically however, they believe they are helping NEET young people via personal interventions which aim to transform young people so they can be integrated into mainstream society – by instilling appropriate attitudes, behaviour, building confidence, motivation, and aiming to broaden horizons to break supposed cultures of worklessness and low aspiration. In reality, their relationship with young people has been commodified in the form of an economic competitiveness discourse and deployed under the disguise of care to serve control agendas.

The final data chapter analyses the other nine practitioners' perspectives and practice. Their views contrasted significantly with those who held deficit views on NEET, which also meant that their practice looked very different. The recognition that some practitioners seemed to lack a critical consciousness and were exercising social control due to their views on NEET young people as deficit was the pivotal point that helped disentangle the complexity of how the continuum is mediated in practice. Put simply, the continuum boils down to practitioners' views of NEET young people and the degree of critical consciousness they possess. Deficit views on NEET, for example, have been shaped by official discourse, which meant that practitioners who held these views are simultaneously products of, and productive of the economic discourse in their practice, which in turn, supports social control. So, although the economic and control discourses have shaped and developed practice and attempt to position practitioners, the practitioners with deficit views of NEET are also significantly contributing and reinforcing these in various ways. The salient point here is that youth practitioners do

still have some degree of agency in the extent to which they reinforce these two discourses. This means, on the other hand, they can also challenge or compromise with discourses.

Either way, it was first evidenced that the other nine practitioners come into their employability training with different assumptions about NEET young people. They all critiqued dominant discourse on NEET, which therefore poses opposition to the economic discourse. Their perspectives on NEET, it was argued, would give them a starting position somewhere between economic and care on the continuum. As they were still engaged in employability training however, they were still contributing to social control, so their practice was examined in more depth to disentangle the complexity and understand where they are on the continuum. Essentially, they rejected a pedagogy of control concerned with changing young people. These practitioners were subverting external agendas and trying to open up space in practice to keep young people's needs a priority, which I suggested, is a middling position whereby they are interweaving between two different points on the continuum.

Superficially, it would appear it is potentially a hybrid discourse underpinning these practitioners' practice, but the reality is that not all three discourses are present simultaneously. The two different positions they are moving between are a combination of two different discourses – these are control and economic, and care and economic. In other words, they are negotiating their practice on this continuum, in which official discourse and external agendas are pulling them towards social control, but they are, based upon a critical consciousness, subverting targeted agendas, and leaning back towards care by prioritising young people's needs. Generally, it can be argued that having a critical consciousness is enabling these nine practitioners to overcome the control-care conflict by opening space to work creatively and collaboratively with young people.

Whilst employability training is their main form of triage work, more broadly, it was shown they are also middling between employability and other triage youth work, and traditional youth work. They worked creatively with targets via strategic compliance, which was enabling them to still prioritise young people's needs and incorporate an EoC into all of their practice. They discussed how strategic compliance was opening up space to do more traditional youth work, which it was argued can help build bridging capital, although there was no direct evidence of this in the data. This, either way, suggests that traditional types of youth work are still clinging on in some settings. This nevertheless evidenced that their perspectives on NEET young people and practice are generally in equilibrium – they not only position themselves between economic and care discourses on the continuum, but they are also attempting to work between them, despite being pulled towards control through low-level employability provision.

To give further rationale to the middling position, I used the two practitioners who were incorporating a critical pedagogy and who espoused the most critical views to encapsulate that their practice is still a mix of both care and control. So, for example, whilst practitioners are being pulled towards social control by funding, targets, policy and dominant discourse on NEET, practitioners themselves are navigating ways around this and leaning back towards care. What was evident in the data is that some practitioners are able to find space to do traditional youth work, prioritise NEET young people's needs, and offer more critical work. They were reckoning with and negotiating their practice against a backdrop of neoliberal policy concerned with targets and outcomes. These practitioners potentially have a role to play in subverting policy agendas which are harmful to NEET young people. It appears they are attempting to do this by critiquing dominant discourse on NEET, compromising targets, negotiating space to do youth work and include a critical pedagogy, despite their practice being constrained by economic and control discourses. The discourse continuum can therefore be envisaged as something of a battleground. The practitioners seem to be caught between a rock and a hard place. Within this arena of conflict, a certain space can be created by the practitioners themselves in collaboration with young people. This also means that the uneven and varied nature of youth work can be viewed as positive, as

some practitioners can find space to work in constructive ways. If it was more structured and restricted, this would be much more difficult to achieve.

The other eight practitioners seemed to lack any significant or coherent critical awareness about how dominant discourse on NEET was contributing to and reinforcing views and actions that are generally harmful to young people. These means that, despite being well intentioned, these practitioners were significantly contributing to marginalising young people. As practice is a process of negotiation along a continuum however, this means all is not doom and gloom as exemplified in the pedagogy of hope section, whereby focus returned to those practitioners that embodied deficit views on NEET young people. Some are starting to question contradictions in their practice. They have already questioned targets as unhelpful to them, but as they view employability as necessary due to deficit views on NEET, they need more critical awareness about the processes of economic marginalisation which NEET young people have experienced. This could potentially drive their practice back towards care and enable them to take up a middling position like the other nine practitioners, in which they interweave between positions of control and economic, and care and economic. Currently, they seem to be unconsciously colluding with social control even though they genuinely believe they are helping NEET young people.

Theorising the practitioners' practice as negotiation on a discourse continuum creates the potential for a pedagogy of hope. The practitioners' practice is an ongoing struggle, with half of them already middling based on a critical understanding of NEET. The other half are not necessarily at a dead end, they do not have to sacrifice NEET young people at the expense of funding – they can resist. They are humans with the capacity to evolve, learn, grow, and change, so there is hope (Freire, 1970; 1992). The practitioners are, after all, early-career and still developing their knowledge, understanding and experience. They do *care about* NEET, but they now need to *care for* them too by working more creatively based upon a critical perspective and understanding of NEET young people. This would enable them to navigate their

practice more consciously and competently. Currently, however, they are profoundly missing a critical consciousness. As discussed however, they are beginning to recognise contradictions in practice and questioning the supposedly inherently problematic nature of NEET young people which can, hopefully, lead to conscientization (Freire, 1970).

This research contributes to knowledge in multiple ways. Firstly, it strengthens existing literature on youth work, by showing how youth work has been codified by neoliberalism to be concerned primarily with economic concerns and social control. The research suggests that youth work has been deployed as a triage operation to deal with the problem of NEET. Through targets, a bidding process, and cutbacks in state funding, the direction of travel is clear, and the future of traditional youth work appears dim. Whilst this research has not claimed to theorise youth work more generally, it can be argued that this particularly variant is a long way away from youth work based upon informal education and the principles that have traditionally distinguished it. Based upon this, the research contained within this thesis could also help contribute to debates on the nature of youth work more generally, as it is still heavily contested terrain.

This research is, as far as I am aware, the first of its kind to examine the changing relationship of youth work to NEET young people through employability provision. Whilst youth work has always engaged with marginalised young people, it has not traditionally been concerned with skills training. A significant contribution to knowledge this thesis makes is therefore one of understanding the relationship of youth work employability and NEET through a process of negotiation on a discourse continuum, as well as how this is mediated in practice. The practitioners are trying to navigate complex territory, although some are doing this more critically and competently than others. This continuum is also a hopeful way of looking at the practitioners' work as it recognises their degree of agency in shaping practice, despite external pressures and constraints that seek to repurpose them as instruments of control. For example, it shows how practitioners can find ways to work around instrumental agendas for the benefit of NEET young people.

Essentially, this research has explored and analysed the extent to which youth practitioners possess a critical consciousness and an awareness of the systematic marginalisation of working-class youth via social and economic dispossession. It has been argued that this is the fundamental factor which contributes to shaping practitioners' practice. At the same time, neoliberalism has driven variants of youth work which are shaping provision to reinforce the marginalisation of working-class youth (Davies and Taylor, 2018). Without having any critical awareness of this, some practitioners are complicit in subordinating and oppressing working-class youth. Put simply, viewing the issues for NEET young people through an agentic lens associated with dominant discourse is actually harmful to them. Such a perspective enables the youth work relationship to be repurposed and appropriated by economic and control imperatives. This research has raised some serious areas of concern, inasmuch as the employability training the practitioners are doing is, at least in some ways, actually serving only to reinforce the marginalisation of NEET young people. This is and should not be the remit of work that purports to help and support the most marginalised amongst us.

Future Research

There are several limitations of this research, some of which have already been highlighted in the methodology chapter. There is, for example, always an air of doubt about the representation of findings in qualitative research as they are based primarily on the researcher's interpretation. Secondly, the data is based largely on what the practitioners say which might not reveal a full picture. For example, it would have been useful to view them more in their practice, which would have helped provide a more comprehensive picture. It is known that there are often disjunctures between what people say and do. This then, can be considered a limitation on the representation of findings. For example, observations could have helped better understand some of the more contradictory data, such as that all the practitioners expressed opposition to targets, but at least half of them continued to conform without trying to find any

compromise. The data could have also been significantly enrichened by observing documents, such as funding bids, policies, and targets. There would have also been potential to talk to managers, other practitioners, and NEET young people themselves. Opportunities to do this were however severely limited as trying to conduct research throughout a global pandemic is challenging.

Future research could examine the discourse continuum in more depth over time. Although the research has acknowledged the practitioners' perspectives on NEET young people as key in shaping their practice, and also that these perspectives have the potential to change, this research is at a particular point in time and therefore, only provides a snapshot. It could be useful to examine how perspectives can change over a longer period of time which may help to reveal a fuller picture. The discourse continuum could also be used as a tool of conceptual analysis to apply to other welfare/education work with young people.

Whilst some of the findings are troubling, particularly in relation to NEET young people being bonded into marginalisation by low-level employability provision, a longer-term research project could investigate this further. For example, it is possible that youth work employability training may help some NEET young people over a longer period of time, although there was no evidence of this in this research. A more positive area that could be addressed, is examining how youth practitioners develop a critical understanding of their practice and the marginalised young people they try to support. If this is the direction youth work is going, then more needs to be understood about how to provide provision that is actually helpful to NEET young people. An analysis of how practitioners develop criticality could help more incorporate a critical pedagogy into their practice. This, in turn, could produce better outcomes through work that is more suitable or beneficial to NEET young people, as opposed to practitioners unconsciously colluding with state agendas of social control. This means that youth practitioners need to be politically active and critical thinkers, because without incorporating a critical pedagogy, their work is, by default, reinforcing and reproducing the current status quo

as it does not offer alternatives to a system of domination, so it is conformist in nature, although without any explicit intentions of social control or reproducing an economic system of inequality. This raises some implications for the nature of youth work training.

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Appendix one

	Care	Control	Economic
Views on NEET			
Views on employability training			
Views on Youth Work			
What they are doing in practice			
Challenges in practice			
Enjoy/dislike about role			
Views on current provision for NEET			
General views on education and training			
Views on labour market/economy			
Targets in practice			
Expectations in practice			
Motivations for doing youth work			
Views on youth work's relationship to NEET			
General info			