



**“They’re all worth a chance, they’re all worth
a couple of chances actually”:
An exploration of factors contributing
towards young people being categorised as
Not in Education, Employment or Training**

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“They’re a human at the end of the day. They’re not a statistic, they’re not a number.”

Declaration

This thesis is submitted as part of the award for Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology. This work is my own and does not include the work of material of others without acknowledgement. This work has not previously been submitted for any other purpose.

Zoë Lindsey Dodd (May 2023)

Overarching Abstract

The transition to early adulthood and post-16 education, employment, or training, is a significant one with long-lasting impacts on an individual's personal wellbeing and future employment status. When the transition is not successful young people (YP) can experience being Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). This thesis aims to explore factors which contribute towards YP becoming NEET and the potential role for educational psychologists (EPs).

A systematic literature review explores what is known about factors which influence NEET status for YP aged 16-25 in the UK. A narrative synthesis of six quantitative papers is presented in the form of a model. Findings suggest that educational attainment, attitudes towards education and experiences of behavioural difficulties are all factors associated with NEET status. It is acknowledged that individual factors are relevant and influential to NEET status. However, there is an emergence of systemic factors and educational experiences which appear to be associated with NEET status.

The empirical research explores the views of Local Authority progression workers in the North East of England, who support YP who experience being NEET. A focus group was conducted with five participants and data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings suggest that a combination of individual and systemic factors may contribute towards young people experiencing being NEET, which can also be influenced by the relationships they have with adults around them. The results suggest these factors appear so intertwined it is challenging to consider one without acknowledging the potential impact of another. However, the importance of early intervention and preventative approaches to support YP, who may be at-risk, is emphasised. The results provide insight into factors which can support YP who are experiencing being NEET, such as taking a person-centred approach, developing strong relationships, and providing appropriate opportunities. Implications for EPs are considered, in light of their statutory responsibilities to support young people up to the age of 25, as well as their relevant skills and experiences supporting young people with educational transitions.

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Chapter 1: Systematic Literature Review

What is known about factors in the microsystem, relating to education, which influence NEET status for young people aged 16-25 in the UK?

1.1 Abstract

Transitions are acknowledged as being significant for young people (YP) and educational psychologists (EPs) are regularly involved in supporting transitions from primary to secondary school. However, EPs are less involved in later transitions, such as the progression to post-16 education, employment, or training (EET). For YP who struggle to make the transition, or when the transition is not successful, they experience being not in education, employment or training (NEET). Through this systematic literature review (SLR), factors which contribute towards NEET status are considered, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). A narrative synthesis was conducted, and six quantitative papers were included. The current review aims to explore factors in the microsystem, relating to education, which influence NEET status for YP aged 16-25 in the UK. Three factors were identified: educational attainment, behavioural difficulties, and attitudes towards education. These factors are presented in a cyclical model as the relationships between factors are acknowledged as being complex and related. It is suggested that further exploration is needed to establish where and how EPs can influence these factors.

1.2 Introduction

Current Context

The transition from primary to secondary school has been conceptualised as a particularly challenging period and EPs are often involved in supporting YP, staff and families through this process (Zeedyk et al., 2003). However, transition support for YP leaving compulsory education is variable and it has been suggested that a lack of professional support during this period is associated with increased negative outcomes for YP (Craig, 2009; Mallinson, 2009).

The five core functions of the EP role are consultation, research, intervention, training and assessment (Scottish Executive, 2002). These core functions, working at the individual, school, and systemic levels, are equally relevant for YP aged 16-25 as for those below the age of 16. Due to legislative changes, introduced under the Children and Families Act (Department for Education, 2014) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015), EPs are required to work with YP up to the age of 25. These changes have resulted in EPs having the potential to work in a range of contexts, specific to this older population, such as further education (FE) settings, adult services as well as other education and training providers (Morris & Atkinson, 2018). EPs are well placed to work collaboratively with various agencies and offer continued support as YP transition to early adulthood (Craig, 2009). Despite the legislative changes, it is not common for EPs to work with 16–25-year-olds, outside of statutory requirements or those with SEND (Cockerill & Arnold, 2019). However, an ongoing area of importance, relevant to 16–25-year-olds, regardless of SEND, is those who are NEET.

Defining Key Terms

Many of the key terms used throughout this SLR are open to interpretation. The definitions used are outlined below, to provide clarity and understanding within the context of the current review.

Young People – EPs work with children and YP aged 0-25 (Department for Education, 2014). Across the UK, school leaving age is 16, however, in England YP are required to stay in full-time education, begin an apprenticeship or traineeship, or be in paid or voluntary employment alongside part-time education or training until age 18 (Education Act, 2011; Education and Skills Act, 2008). Much of the data from the Office of National Statistics refers to 16–24-year-olds (Office for National Statistics, 2023). However, as the upper limit for EP involvement is 25, for the purposes of this SLR, YP refers to those aged 16-25.

NEET – NEET refers to those aged 16-25 who have experienced a period of being not in education, employment, or training for at least six months. There are some arguments that the term NEET is problematic and reduces YP to what they are rather than who they are and doesn't acknowledge the experiences or complexities that have led them to being NEET (Sadler et al., 2015). Despite some disagreements regarding the definition, it has been suggested that the term can be used to raise awareness for this group of YP (Brown, 2021; Furlong, 2006). For the current review, the term NEET is used with the acknowledgement and recognition that the individuals this term refers to are far more than their status or inclusion in this group. It is also acknowledged that there are a variety of circumstances in which a YP could be defined as NEET, however, the term may not be appropriately used to describe their circumstances. For example, YP who take extended breaks from employment or education for leisure purposes (e.g., 'gap years'), or those who are being financially supported by families. Similarly, YP may take on unpaid caring responsibilities for children or family members. For these YP, the level of support required to re-engage in EET and the long-term impacts, are likely to be lessened in comparison to those YP more commonly associated with the NEET term. It is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of this group and that not all YP who are categorised as NEET require support or are disadvantaged.

Educational Attainment – This refers to the level of education completed, or grades obtained for particular qualifications, such as GCSEs and Key Stage (KS) assessments (e.g., Pemberton, 2008; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).

Behavioural Difficulties – Throughout the review this umbrella term is used to refer to difficulties associated with YP’s behaviour. It includes individual actions (e.g., stealing, lying) and sanctions enforced upon them (e.g., exclusions), as well as witnessing the aggressive behaviour of others (e.g., fighting at school). The term is not succinctly defined in the papers synthesised in this review and the studies measure various facets of behaviour. It is acknowledged that the term does not solely refer to individual aspects of behaviour and that there may be underlying causes or triggers which may be out of the YP’s control. There are also issues with the subjectivity of understanding and measuring behaviour difficulties (e.g., by parents and teachers rather than YP) using tools such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). Whilst acknowledging these problematic aspects, behavioural difficulties was deemed to be the most appropriate term to encapsulate the findings of the studies synthesised in this review. However, it is used with the understanding that behaviour is not necessarily an individual issue, and it is challenging to compare and generalise behavioural difficulties.

Background

YP who leave school with few, or no qualifications face further challenges in the labour market. Periods of youth unemployment have been found to have varying and significant negative effects, such as future wage penalties in adulthood (Gregg & Tominey, 2005), repeated incidence of unemployment (Stevens, 1997) and social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). Consequences of youth unemployment led to a more focused effort to tackle the challenges facing YP under the New Labour (1997 – 2010) government (Sadler et al., 2015). In a government report, titled *Bridging the Gap*, they sought to establish the number of 16-18-year-olds who were not in education, work or training, analyse the reasons for this and make suggestions as to how this number could be reduced (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). Various strategies were introduced including the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which provided YP from low-income backgrounds with financial support to access EET, and the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP), which encouraged partnerships between schools, colleges, and employers to facilitate vocational learning. Since the publication of this

report, the term NEET has been formally used and established at a political level (Pemberton, 2008). More recently it has been suggested that the term NEET not only refers to levels of youth unemployment but it also captures youth disengagement and social exclusion (Maguire, 2015a). However, this has also resulted in the term being associated with negative assumptions and stereotyping of YP which has led to further discrimination and influenced government policies (Yates & Payne, 2006).

Following publication of the *Bridging the Gap* report (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), subsequent governments have been less focused on the NEET agenda. YP have been subject to spending cuts, such as the withdrawal of the EMA, which has placed them at a greater risk of unemployment and poverty compared to previous generations (Crisp & Powell, 2017; MacInnes et al., 2014). Simultaneously, in recent decades there has been an 'expansion of education' (Lőrinc et al., 2020, p. 412), where more YP are accessing secondary and higher education. As a result, qualifications and level of educational attainment are becoming increasingly important when YP are entering the labour market (Lőrinc et al., 2020). Although it has also been noted that higher qualifications alone are not protective in a precarious economic climate (MacDonald, 2011). The Education and Skills Act (2008) increased the age YP have to be engaged in some form of EET from 16 to 18. The intention was to widen participation in FE, but for those YP who have disengaged from academic learning the legislation changes may be associated with further disconnection and limit employment opportunities (Arnold & Baker, 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2016). The legislation changes triggered an increased pressure on YP to achieve a minimum qualification level in GCSE English and maths. An over-reliance on academic grades continues to perpetuate the perception that vocational courses are inferior, further alienating YP from EET (Chankseliani et al., 2016). This has shown to be a barrier to progression, particularly in vocational courses, if YP are unable to achieve required standards in English and maths and if they have to complete mandatory resits (Allan, 2017). As a result, YP can become disillusioned with EET and may be directed to courses or employment which fits their academic achievements rather than aspirations. They are also then limited as to the progress they can make on

vocational courses, resulting in YP being practically over-skilled, but unable to progress due to academic requirements (Allan, 2017).

Prevalence

The majority of YP transition from school and enter the workforce or go on to participate in further education or training. However, current estimations of YP who are NEET are around 11.5%, which is 788,000 YP aged 16-24 (Office for National Statistics, 2023). These numbers have increased following an initial drop in figures following the Covid-19 pandemic (10.2%, October-December 2021) and compared to pre-pandemic levels (11%, October-December 2019) (Office for National Statistics, 2023). It has been suggested that monitoring numbers of NEET YP can be problematic due to fluctuations throughout the year and because the definition does not accurately capture differences between long-term and short-term NEET experiences (Audit Commission, 2010; Pemberton, 2008).

Psychological Underpinnings

The NEET agenda involves various government departments, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Education. Consequently, the accountability for NEET YP and the responsibility for strategies and policies is split (Maguire, 2015b). Due to the range of government departments involved in addressing NEET agendas, social policy and economics are often prioritised. Whilst the socioeconomic impacts of NEET youth are pushing agendas, it often means that professionals with an understanding of psychology and behaviour are excluded from the research and decisions being made regarding NEET policy (Mawn et al., 2017). However, it has been suggested that the exploration of psychological theory may facilitate the development of further intervention and support for NEET YP (Yates & Payne, 2006).

Various theoretical models and frameworks can be used to consider the underlying processes and risk factors that lead to YP experiencing being NEET. Crafter and Maunder (2012) suggest that transitions should be considered

through the lens of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), due to their complex nature and the influences of cultural, institutional, individual and social factors. Communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) is another framework which can support understanding around YP becoming NEET. In this framework the learner is central whilst also acknowledging the impact and importance of communities, practices, meanings and identities (Crafter & Maunder, 2012). Raffo and Reeves (2000) suggest that NEET status may be influenced by social capital through the limited access to or culturally inappropriate social resources.

A further theory, through which risk factors for NEET status can be considered, is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theory recognises the continuous interactions between humans, within a complex world of interconnecting systems. In Bronfenbrenner's model (1979), an individual is placed at the centre surrounded by interrelated systems, such as families, schools and communities, which vary in proximity to the individual, from the micro to the macrosystem (Schoon, 2006). Siraj et al. (2014) adapted the model, to include systems and risk factors specifically relating to YP who experience being NEET, see Figure 1.

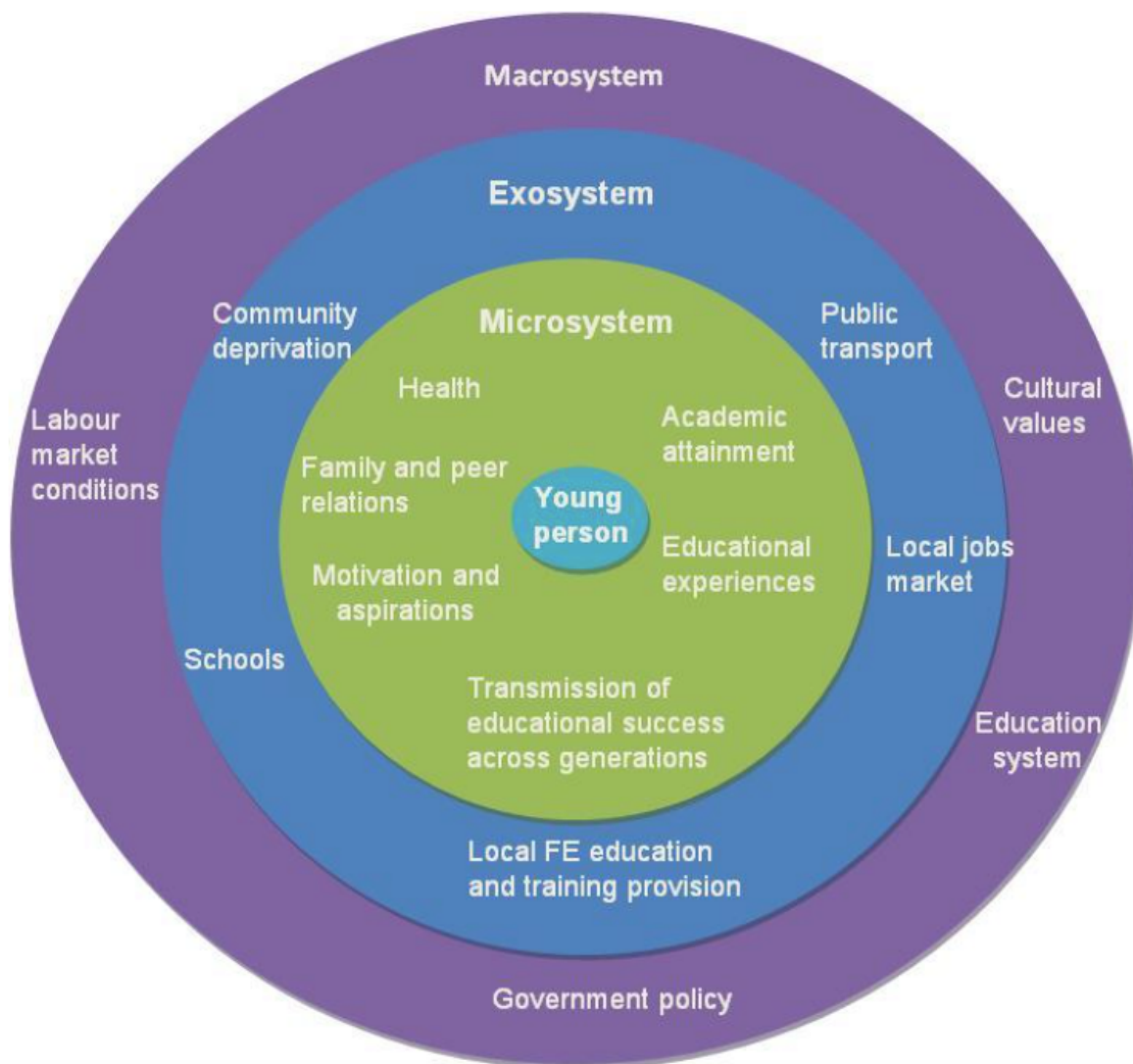


Figure 1. An adapted model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, including risk factors for being NEET.

The adapted model demonstrates the influence and complexity of factors relating to YP who experience being NEET and prompts consideration as to how these factors interact with each other. The microsystem is closest to the YP and includes educational experiences and academic attainment as well as motivation and aspirations and family and peer relationships (Siraj et al., 2014). The exosystem includes factors which may impact a YP more broadly, relating to their local environment, including transport, local job markets, post-16 provision and community deprivation. The final system is the macrosystem which includes national and international factors which may impact YP, such as government policies, the education system and national labour markets. It suggests that the

factors influencing NEET status are not merely individual but in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original theory, the influences between the environment and individual are bi-directional. It has been suggested that relationships between factors in the microsystem (e.g., educational experiences) and the individual need to be considered within the broader context of the exosystem and macrosystem, as relationships may be impacted by factors such as government policies and funding cuts (Lőrinc et al., 2020).

Aim and Research Question

It has been suggested that YP becoming NEET may be the result of negative experiences prior to the post-16 transition and educational disillusionment (Allan, 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2016). Consequently, policies and agendas relating to NEET YP should address and consider earlier experiences and be integrated with recommendations aimed at 14-16 year olds (Allan, 2017). Therefore, through this SLR I will aim to answer the following research question: what is known about factors in the microsystem, relating to education, which influence NEET status for YP aged 16-25 in the UK?

It is hoped that through answering this question, education professionals (including EPs) will be able to better identify and work towards preventing YP experiencing being NEET in the UK. The review is focused on the risk factors relating to education, in the microsystem, due to the relevance for EPs and the potential to influence these risk factors and evoke change.

1.3 Method

In conducting the current SLR, ten key steps were followed, as recommended by Boland et al. (2017), see Table 1.

Table 1. Systematic review process outlined by Boland et al. (2017).

1) Planning the review
2) Performing scoping searches, identifying the review question, and writing the protocol
3) Literature searching
4) Screening titles and abstracts
5) Obtaining papers
6) Selecting full-text papers
7) Data extraction
8) Quality assessment
9) Analysis and synthesis
10) Writing up, editing, and disseminating

Systematic searches were conducted between September and October 2021 using the following data bases: Education Resources Information centre (ERIC), British Education Index (BEI), Web of Science (WoS), Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), SCOPUS. Databases from a range of fields were chosen in acknowledgement of the broad implications of being NEET.

Initial scoping searches highlighted that broad search terms were more successful in identifying relevant papers. Final key search terms were “NEET” OR “16-25” AND “risk factors”. Titles and papers were screened according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria featured in Table 2.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Published between 1997-2021	To ensure that the most recent and relevant papers were selected. The intention was to include papers from the last 10 years in the review but the inclusion criteria for searches was from 1997 to identify relevant papers published following the <i>Bridging the Gap</i> report (1999)
Peer reviewed academic journal articles	Quality control
English language	Accessibility
UK based	Relevance to question
Articles that report primary and secondary data	Quality control: to include primary and secondary data rather than data which has previously been synthesised.
Quantitative study design	Relevance to question

Further searching took place via handsearching, including scanning reference lists of papers which met the inclusion criteria and returning to papers discovered through initial scoping searches. The systematic search process followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), which is demonstrated in Figure 2 (Moher et al., 2015).

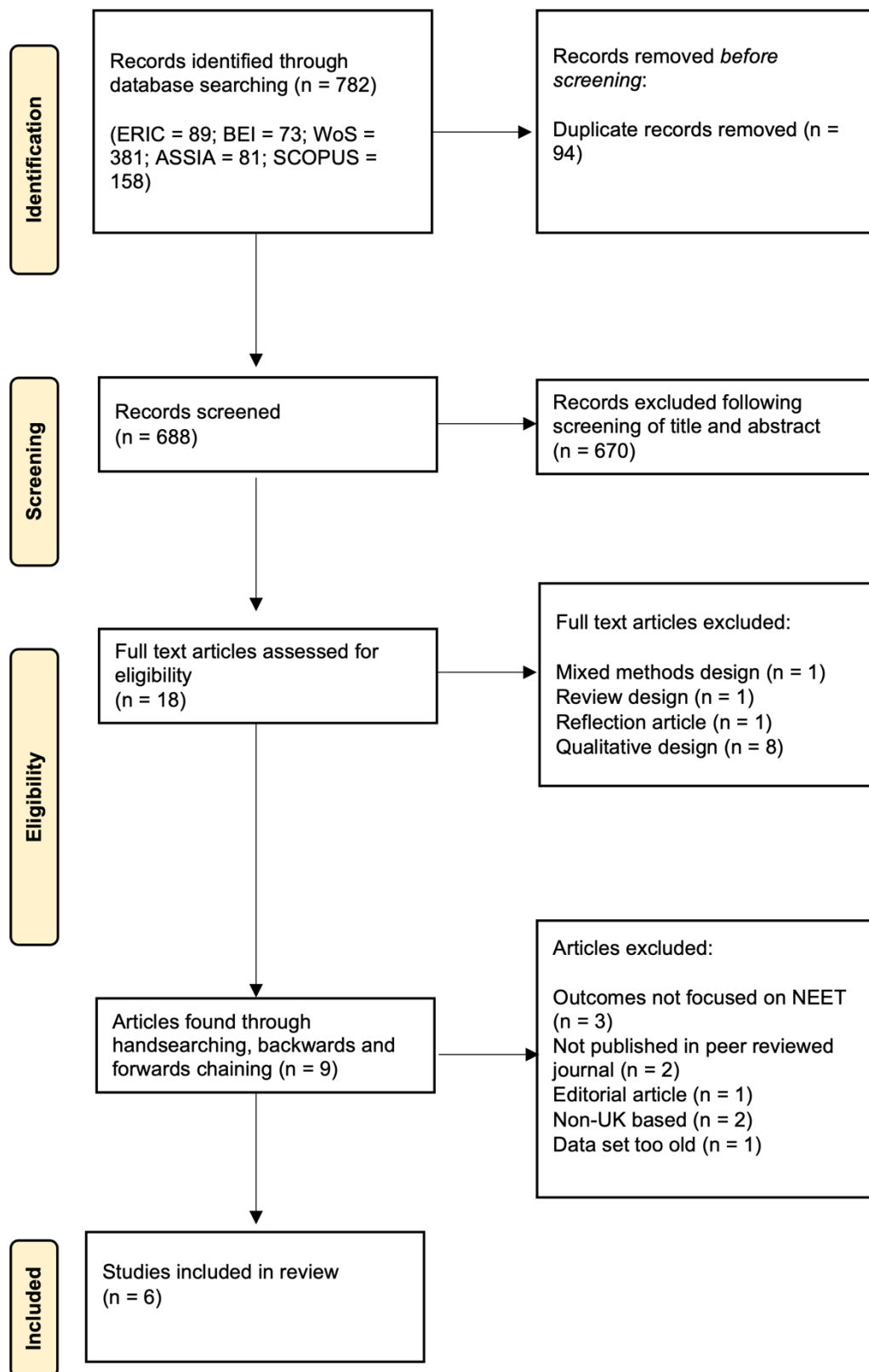


Figure 2. PRISMA for systematic search process.

Following screening of titles and abstracts, 18 papers were obtained and assessed for eligibility and a further nine papers were screened after being found

through handsearching. Six papers were found to meet inclusion criteria and included in this review, all of which were conducted in the UK and published since 2012.

In line with step seven of Boland et al.'s (2017) method, data was extracted from the final six papers and collated into Table 4. Extracting the data and collating it in a table format allowed for the data to be compared across the studies, prior to synthesising. Following data extraction the Weight of Evidence tool (Gough, 2007) was used to assess the quality of the studies. Using this quality assessment tool facilitated greater in-depth re-reading of the studies and ensured the relevance of the papers to the current research question. Although the Weight of Evidence tool requires an element of subjectivity, a perceived strength is the identification of an overall judgement of the paper, supporting cross-study analysis. Details of the Weight of Evidence assessment are given in Table 3 and demonstrate that all six papers met the quality criteria to be included in the review.

Table 3. Weight of evidence assessment.

Study	Weight of evidence A: Quality of the study	Weight of evidence B: Appropriateness of the study design in relation to this review	Weight of evidence C: Relevance of the study in relation to this review	Weight of evidence D: Overall judgement
Duckworth and Schoon (2012)	High	High	Medium-High	High
Hammerton et al. (2019)	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium-Low
Holmes, Murphy and Mayhew (2021)	Medium	Medium-High	High	Medium-High
Karyda (2020)	High	High	High	High
Karyda and Jenkins (2018)	High	High	High	High
Sadler, Akister and Burch (2015)	Low-Medium	Low-Medium	High	Medium-Low

1.4 Findings

Following data extraction, a meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate due to the heterogeneity of the data. A narrative synthesis was conducted, using the method described by Petticrew and Roberts (2008). A narrative synthesis involves organising the data (see Table 4, for data extraction), analysing findings within the studies and then synthesising the findings across all the studies included in

the review. Petticrew and Roberts (2008) suggest that the within study analysis involves creating a narrative description of the findings of each individual study, effectively summarising, whilst the purpose of the cross-study synthesis is to provide an overall summary of the findings, as well as explore any differences between the studies.

Table 4. Summary of findings.

Study	Sample	Aims	Method	Outcome measure	Findings
Duckworth and Schoon (2012)	The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), a panel study where data was collected at age 13-14 and follow up data at age 18, between 2004-2010 (n = 9,872, 52% male).	To assess the effect of multiple independent socioeconomic risk factors on transitions from school to work and identify potential protective factors.	National pupil database; self-report.	NEET status, including a binary indicator of whether the YP had been NEET for six months or more, between the ages of 16 and 18.	<p>Protective factors for those not NEET at 18, and those not NEET for six months or more, with one or more social risk factor, included high attainment in maths at KS2 ($p < 0.001$); YP wanting to stay on at school post-16 ($p < 0.05$); school motivation ($p < 0.001$); YP not truanting ($p < 0.001$); proportion of pupils at the same school NOT eligible for free school meals ($p < 0.001$).</p> <p>Protective factors for those not NEET at 18, with three or more social risk factors, included: YP wanting to stay on post-16 ($p < 0.05$); YP not truanting ($p < 0.01$); proportion of pupils NOT eligible for free school meals ($p < 0.001$).</p> <p>Protective factors for those not NEET for six months or more between 16-18, with three or more social risk factors, included: YP wanting to stay on post-16 ($p < 0.05$); school motivation ($p < 0.001$); YP not truanting ($p < 0.01$).</p>

Study	Sample	Aims	Method	Outcome measure	Findings
Hammerton et al. (2019)	<p>The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC; n = 5,079).</p> <p>Participants were born between 1st April 1991 to 31st December 1992. Data was collected during pregnancy and perinatally, with follow ups at age 11, age 22 and age 24.</p>	<p>To examine associations between childhood behavioural problems with criminal behaviour, emotional disorders, substance use and unemployment in early adulthood.</p>	<p>Self-report: Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire.</p>	<p>NEET status.</p>	<p>7% classified as having conduct/behavioural problems (a high probability of all items); 29% classified as high probability of endorsing items related to oppositional problems.</p> <p>After adjusting for potential confounders, those with childhood 'conduct problems' were at higher risk of being NEET in adulthood compared to those with 'no problems' ($p < 0.001$; risk ratio = 3.04).</p> <p>Evidence for an interaction between study and latent classes of behavioural problems in predicting NEET ($p < 0.003$).</p>

Study	Sample	Aims	Method	Outcome measure	Findings
Holmes et al. (2021)	UK Labour Force Survey where data was collected between 1985-2015.	To examine factors which increase the chance of being NEET and what factors have influenced the change in size and composition of this population over time.	Self-report.	NEET status.	<p>Incidence of NEET was higher for those with few qualifications, especially for women. Higher qualifications than GCSEs were protective against being NEET. For men, holding a degree was not statistically significant from 1992-2015. For women, there is no reduction in NEET risks for those with A-levels and those with a degree, once health and family variables are included. Completing a trade apprenticeship was associated with a higher chance of being NEET for women.</p> <p>NEET risks were higher for males between the age of 19-22 and decreased with age. The likelihood of being NEET increases with age for women. Once care and living arrangements were included, this age effect almost entirely disappears for women over the age of 21. Conditional of having a child, the NEET risks are much greater for under 22s. Being a parent increased NEET risks for women of all ages.</p> <p>Living with parents was associated with higher NEET risks for young men.</p> <p>Mental ill health was associated with increased risk of being NEET.</p>

Study	Sample	Aims	Method	Outcome measure	Findings
Karyda (2020)	Data from LSYPE (n = 8,931), independent variables measured at age 13 (2004) and outcome variables measured at age 16-19 (2007-2010).	To examine the association between crime in neighbourhoods and YP's transitions. To investigate the effect of educational attainment, exposure to aggression in school and risk behaviour on YP's outcomes.	KS2 data; self-report.	<i>NEET status</i> : NEET if inactive for a period of six months or more between Sept 2006-Dec 2009.	<p>Lower attainment at KS2 increased the chance of NEET status (odds ratio: 2.3).</p> <p>Exposure to aggressive behaviour increased NEET by 1.28 times.</p> <p>Involvement with the police increased the chances of being NEET by 2.07 times.</p> <p>Those who engaged in risky behaviour were associated with 57% higher probability of becoming NEET.</p>

Study	Sample	Aims	Method	Outcome measure	Findings
Karyda and Jenkins (2018)	Data from LSYPE (n = 5,883), independent variables measured at age 13 (2004) and outcome variables measured at age 16-19 (2007-2010).	Exploration of the impact of neighbourhood deprivation on YP's outcomes.	KS2 attainment data.	<i>NEET status:</i> NEET if inactive for a period of six months or more at ages 18-19.	<p>Low education attainment was significantly associated with an increased probability of being NEET ($p < 0.001$). With other things being equal, being in the lowest quartile of attainment at KS2 doubles the odds of subsequently being NEET (odds ratio: 2.03).</p> <p>Negative attitudes towards unfavourable experience of school were associated with becoming NEET: Playing truant – $p < 0.001$ Counting minutes until the end of the lesson – $p < 0.05$ YP perceives themselves as not very good at maths – $p < 0.05$.</p> <p>Variables to reflect peer groups and anti-social behaviour associated with NEET: Being excluded from a group of peers at school – $p < 0.05$ Police got in touch with main parent regarding YP's behaviour – $p < 0.01$.</p>

Study	Sample	Aims	Method	Outcome measure	Findings
Sadler et al. (2015)	<p>For NEET data: Data from the LSYPE, waves 4, 5, 6 (2007-2009); Youth Cohort Study (DfE, 2010), cohort 13 and sweeps 1, 2, 3 (2007-2009); Total of 14,713 participants.</p> <p>Fenland data from NOMIS (Official Labour Market Statistics)</p>	To apply knowledge of risk factors for NEET status to a specific area of rural deprivation in the UK using survey and census data.	Educational attainment (5+ A*-C at GCSE including maths and English).	NEET status.	<p>Educational attainment at GCSE level was low in Fenland (41.2%), compared to the rest of the region (56.2%) and to England (50.9%). Those with higher attainment at GCSE were highly unlikely to become NEET (82%) or did so for less than 12 months (17%). Those achieving 1-4 GCSEs at grades D-G (current equivalent grades 3-1) were more likely than those with higher grades to remain NEET for more than 12 months (39% vs. 1%).</p> <p>Nationally, the percentage of YP who experience between 1-12 months of NEET and occasionally truant was higher than those with no record of truancy (30% vs. 20%). The percentage of YP who were permanently excluded by Year 11 and subsequently NEET for 1-12 months, was higher than those who have not been excluded (35% vs. 21%). Those who had been permanently excluded and were NEET for longer than 12 months accounted for 40% of the sample (LSYPE data), compared to 6% of YP who were categorised as NEET for more than 12 months and had not been permanently excluded.</p>

Cross-study Synthesis

This section will provide an overview of the cross-study synthesis of findings. This was an iterative process which involved re-reading the papers, checking summaries, and seeking out similarities and differences in the data presented in the papers. Three themes were identified as factors, in the microsystem which relate to education, which are associated with NEET status: educational attainment, behavioural difficulties, and attitudes towards education. Table 5 provides an overview of the original findings and how this relates to the overall theme.

Table 5. Key themes relating to risk factors for YP becoming NEET.

Finding	Explanation	Theme
KS2 attainment	Higher attainment in KS2 maths was found to be a protective factor against becoming NEET	<i>Educational attainment</i>
Level of qualification and attainment	Individuals with higher qualifications (e.g., A-level and degrees) were found to be less likely to become NEET. A higher attainment at GCSE was also associated with a lower chance of NEET status	
Number of qualifications	The incidence of being NEET was higher for those with fewer qualifications, particularly for women	
Trade qualification	Completing a trade apprenticeship was associated with a higher chance of being NEET, but only for women	
Behaviour difficulties	YP who were reported as having behaviour difficulties at age 11 were more likely to be NEET in their early twenties	<i>Behavioural difficulties</i>

Exposure to aggressive behaviour	Individuals who were exposed to aggressive behaviour at school had an increased chance of being NEET	
Police involvement	YP who had had police involvement by age 13 were more likely to be NEET, and similarly those who engaged in risky behaviours (e.g., vandalism, shoplifting and fighting) had a higher association with becoming NEET	
Incidence of exclusions	YP who had been excluded by year 11 were more likely to be NEET when compared to those who had not been excluded	
Motivation at school	Individuals who felt motivated to do well and wanted to stay in education post-16 were less likely to become NEET. Whilst counting down until the end of lessons and perceiving themselves as not good at maths were associated with being NEET	<i>Attitudes towards education</i>
Truancy	Truancy amongst YP was associated with a higher likelihood of being NEET	

The themes are presented visually in Figure 3. The cyclical nature of Figure 3 seeks to represent the way in which the themes may influence NEET status in a non-linear manner, and the potential impact the themes may also have on each other. For example, if a YP is not motivated to do well this may impact both their educational attainment and their behaviour in school.

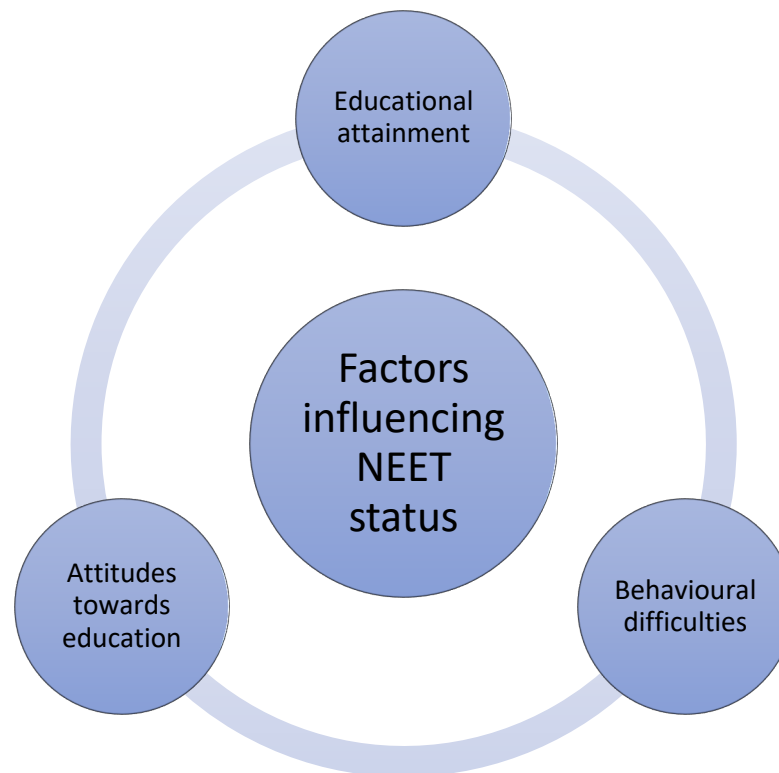


Figure 3. A model of factors influencing NEET status for YP aged 16-25 in the UK.

Educational attainment

When examining risk factors for NEET status at ages 16-19, low educational attainment at KS2 accounted for 31% of the NEET population, compared to 14% who had achieved a higher level of attainment at KS2 (Karyda, 2020). Karyda and Jenkins (2018) also found that low educational attainment at KS2 was significantly associated with an increased probability of being NEET ($p < 0.001$) and when all variables were controlled for, being in the lowest quartile of attainment at KS2 doubled the chance of subsequently being NEET. Duckworth and Schoon (2012) also reported that higher achievement in KS2 mathematics tests was a protective factor against not being NEET at 18-years-old.

The incidence of being NEET has been found to be higher for YP with fewer qualifications, particularly for females (Holmes et al., 2021). Individuals with higher qualifications were less likely to be NEET but there was no significant

difference between those with A-Levels and a degree. This suggests that educational attainment at a higher level can act as a protective factor against NEET status. However, Holmes et al. (2021) reported that, for females, higher qualifications were not associated with lower NEET risks when health (e.g., mental ill health and physical mobility limitations) and family (e.g., care responsibilities) variables were included (Holmes et al., 2021).

Sadler et al. (2015) found that those with higher attainment at GCSE were highly unlikely to become NEET (82%) or were NEET for less than 12 months (17%). YP who achieved 1-4 GCSEs at grades D-G (current equivalent grades 3-1) were more likely than those with higher grades to remain NEET for more than 12 months (39% vs 1%). When examining data for a rural population (Fenland), Sadler et al. (2015) reported that the percentage of YP who achieved 5 or more A*-C grades (current equivalent grades 9-4) at GCSE was lower (41.2%) than both the county (Cambridgeshire; 56.2%) and English (50.9%) averages. Between 2007-2009, the NEET population in Fenland ranged from 7.5%-8.1%. These rates are higher than both England (consistent at 6.7%) and Cambridge (5%-5.4%) during the same period. This suggests that the rural environment may have some influence over NEET status for YP.

Completing a trade apprenticeship was found to be associated with a higher chance of being NEET for women, but not for men when health and family variables were included. This suggests that women who follow vocational pathways are more likely to be NEET than those follow academic pathways, but this difference is not seen in males (Holmes et al., 2021). It may be that further factors in the systems around an individual may influence the support they receive to enter the workforce (e.g., gender stereotypes for women in vocational roles).

These results, regarding educational attainment, are in-line with previous research which has found that YP struggle to access FE courses of their choosing due to low maths and literacy attainment levels, impacting the accessibility of EET as well as motivation to engage (Allan, 2017). An association has also been identified between low educational attainment, depressive

symptoms, and NEET status (Veldman et al., 2022). There is a suggestion that YP add to their social capital (e.g., problem solving abilities, ability to generate ideas) through education, and so higher educational attainment may be a protective factor (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, Siraj et al. (2014) reported that low educational attainment was the most significant educational risk factor contributing towards NEET status for YP. They reported that low GCSE grades limit the options available to YP when entering FE or the workforce. In their research with YP, reasons given for low educational attainment included poor mental and physical health, having Special Educational Needs and a lack of personal motivation. Although the theme of educational attainment lies within the microsystem, the links with other systems are evident.

Behavioural difficulties

Behaviour difficulties at age 11 were found to place YP at a higher risk of being NEET at age 22 (Hammerton et al., 2019). Behavioural problems were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and included items such as 'often has temper tantrums or hot tempers', 'generally obedient, usually does what adults request', 'often fights with other children or bullies them', 'often lies or cheats' and 'steals from home, school or elsewhere'. Hammerton et al. (2019) reported that of their sample of 5,079 YP, 29% were classified as having a high probability of endorsing items related to oppositional problems. After adjusting for potential confounders, participants with childhood conduct problems were at a higher risk and three times as likely to be NEET at age 22 compared to those with no conduct problems. A limitation of these results is that they were rated by parents, rather than YP themselves and the ratings are, therefore, subjective.

Exposure to aggressive behaviour in school was found to increase the chances of being NEET by 1.35 times (Karyda, 2020). Exposure to aggressive behaviour was measured on a scale of six items: whether the YP was upset by name-calling, excluded from a group of friends, made to hand over money or possessions, threatened with violence, or bullied over the previous year. Similarly, police involvement at age 13 has been found to double the chances of being NEET at age 16-19 and risky behaviour (e.g., vandalism, shoplifting,

fighting) was associated with 57% probability of experiencing NEET (Karyda, 2020). Karyda and Jenkins (2018) also found that variables reflecting peer groups and antisocial behaviour were significantly associated with being NEET, including being excluded from a group of peers at school and police contacting a parent regarding a YP's behaviour.

Not truanting was found to be a significant protective factor for those not NEET at age 18 and for those not NEET for a period of at least six months between the ages of 16-18 (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). The effect was present even when YP had increased socioeconomic risk factors, i.e., more than 3 risk factors including low parent education, low parent social class, lone parent family and living in social housing. For YP who were not NEET for a period of six months or more, between ages 16-18, and with three or more social risk factors, not truanting was a more significant protective factor than prior academic attainment (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). Sadler et al. (2015) reported that truancy was associated with NEET status and the percentage of YP who experience between 1-12 months of being NEET and occasionally truanted was higher than those who have no record of truancy (30% vs 20%).

Regarding exclusions, Sadler et al. (2015) reported that the percentage of YP who were permanently excluded by Year 11 and were subsequently NEET for 1-12 months, was higher than those who have not been excluded (35% vs. 21%). Those who had been permanently excluded and were NEET for longer than 12 months accounted for 40% of the sample, compared to 6% of YP who were categorised as NEET for more than 12 months and had not been permanently excluded.

Although a range of behavioural difficulties have been identified as being associated with NEET status, it is evident that a range of other factors may be relevant and impact the type and frequency of behavioural difficulties. The complexity of factors in the microsystem is acknowledged and it is suggested that behavioural difficulties may be influenced by their cultural and social environments and YP's behaviours should not be considered in isolation (Raffo & Reeves, 2000).

Attitudes towards education

School engagement, including being motivated to do well, has been found to be more important than prior academic attainment in protecting YP against subsequent NEET status (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). The significance of these protective factors is evident as their effect remains, despite an increase in socioeconomic risk factors (i.e., more than 3 risk factors including low parent education, low parent social class, lone parent family and living in social housing) (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). For individuals who were not NEET for a period of six months or more, between the ages of 16-18, wanting to stay on at school post-16 and being motivated to do well in school were protective factors against being NEET (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). Similarly, Karyda and Jenkins (2018) reported that YP counting the minutes until the end of lessons and the YP perceiving themselves as being not very good at maths were significantly associated with being NEET.

Although such attitudes towards education are related to individual YP, it is evident how they can potentially be influenced by other factors in the microsystem. Siraj et al. (2014) suggest that educational disaffection may be a result of negative experiences at school, which could include both behavioural difficulties and educational attainment. During semi-structured interviews, YP reported that they found work challenging, did not receive appropriate support or had negative relationships with staff which impacted both their educational attainment and attitude towards education (Siraj et al., 2014). This finding supports the results of the current review and provides a possible explanation for the underlying relationships between the risk factors. It also highlights a possible link to self-determination theory, in which competence, relatedness and autonomy are considered essential factors to foster personal motivation, growth and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There is a suggestion that although risk factors for becoming NEET might appear to be related to an individual (educational attainment, behavioural difficulties, attitudes towards education), factors in the micro-, exo-, and macrosystem are also important to consider and may be influential.

1.5 Summary

This SLR aimed to explore what is known about factors in the microsystem, relating to education, which influence NEET status for YP in the UK aged 16-25. Findings suggest that educational attainment, attitudes towards education and experience of behavioural difficulties are associated with YP becoming NEET. It has been proposed that these factors interact in a non-linear manner and have the potential to be co-influential.

1.6 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge my role as a single researcher and the assumptions and beliefs I have brought to the research. As a result, it is possible that others may have synthesised the data differently or made different interpretations. I have sought to be clear regarding the methods used and the decisions made during the reviewing process which have led me to these results and conclusions.

I acknowledge that the current review is based on quantitative data and, therefore, does not consider personal experiences or views, e.g., YP or educational professionals who support them. Similarly, an assumption is made, based on previous research, that YP are negatively impacted by being NEET. This may not be the case, but space is not given in the current review for this alternative view.

The factors relating to NEET status for YP are varied and complex. A further limitation of the current review is the exclusion of factors which impact YP which do not relate to education or are not positioned in the microsystem. It may be that there are other significant factors which influence NEET status, or influence the factors and themes presented here. Similarly, the review was conducted through the lens of the adapted model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siraj et al., 2014). The findings of this review may be

impacted by the choice to use this theory rather than another, such as sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

1.7 Conclusions and Implications

Factors relating to YP being NEET are often considered on an individual level, placing personal responsibility with YP (Lőrinc et al., 2020). The aim of the current review was to explore factors in the microsystem, relating to education, which influence NEET status for YP aged 16-25 in the UK. The three themes presented as a model of factors relating to NEET status are: educational attainment, behavioural difficulties, and attitudes towards education. Whilst the themes can be considered on an individual level, through this review they have been considered in the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is acknowledged that the themes are complex and mutually influential, and further research is needed to try and develop a greater understanding around the relationships between these factors. The findings suggest that responsibility for NEET status does not lie solely with individual YP but that there are systemic factors in the microsystem, and beyond, which contribute to YP experiencing being NEET, which may be identifiable prior to the end of compulsory school age.

The findings suggest that there are various potential areas of involvement for educational professionals and EPs. EPs are well placed, within the microsystem, to enact change through working collaboratively with schools at a preventative level, as well as YP in the 16-25 age range who are experiencing being NEET and professionals who support them. Further research is needed to establish how professionals currently support YP at-risk or who are NEET, and what potential changes could be made. However, involving relevant parties (e.g., YP or educational professionals) in future research would help develop an understanding of the potential role for EPs. The results of this review are based on quantitative data so it would be beneficial to explore the views of individuals directly impacted by them, e.g., YP or those who work closely with NEET YP, and establish whether they align with the current findings.

Chapter 2: Bridging Document

2.1 Introduction

Throughout this chapter I aim to provide an understanding of why I have chosen to research this area, as well as the rationale for the empirical study, which arose from the findings in the SLR outlined in Chapter 1. I consider the methodological decisions I have made through the research process and how these have been influenced by my own ontological and epistemological positions as a researcher.

2.2 Personal Motivation

At the start of this doctorate course, I reflected on my own journey and experiences that brought me to training as an EP. I considered the factors that had supported me to get to this stage and how this differed to some of the YP I had previously worked with as a graduate psychologist and learning support assistant. Reflecting on previous casework and YP I have been involved with, I wondered what they may be doing and had assumptions that some may have experienced being NEET. I was curious about what else could be done to support YP and how current education systems may influence YP's experiences and outcomes.

I was also interested in the role of EPs with YP, and our responsibilities outside of SEND. As a trainee EP (TEP), I noticed that it was rare to work with YP in post-16 settings, and after discussing this with colleagues, I was prompted to consider why this was the case. A significant amount of EPs' time is spent on statutory work or service level agreement (SLA) work with schools, but I have noticed that it is rare for colleges to have SLAs. It may be a combination of FE lacking sufficient funding as well as EPs not promoting their work in post-16 settings, which again may be due to Local Authority (LA) or funding restrictions. I wondered how we as a profession can support YP, either proactively or reactively, who are at-risk or experiencing being NEET. My interpretation of the EP role aligns with that outlined by Fallon et al. (2010, p. 4) who state that EPs utilise 'psychological skills, knowledge and understanding through the functions

of consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training, at organisational, group or individual level across educational, community and care settings'. Campbell and Green (2022) also suggest that EPs are well placed to provide a link between research and educational practice. They highlight that EPs understand research, and theoretical knowledge, and can apply this to real-world contexts. Cameron (2006) noted that a challenge when linking research to practice, is ensuring that it is done so in a transparent and coherent way, to enable individuals, without a background in psychological theory and research, to understand. This aligns with my own conceptualisation of the EP role, as a research-practitioner, who uses consultation, assessment, intervention, and training to evoke change based on research and evidence. Similarly, the broad contexts within which EPs work led Loxley (1978) to suggest that as a profession our observations should be 'of value in facilitating the responsiveness of the education service to the community's needs and in particular to the needs of the underprivileged' (p. 103). In my opinion, these definitions highlight the relevance of the EP role in supporting YP who are NEET. However, as previously mentioned, NEET refers to a heterogeneous group. Whilst some YP who experience being NEET may be underprivileged, there is an acknowledgement that not all YP who experience NEET are and that in some cases NEET refers to YP who have voluntarily and intentionally chosen to disengage from EET.

2.3 Moving from the SLR to Empirical Research

This research aims to explore the views of professionals who support YP who are at-risk or are currently experiencing being NEET, and to further develop an understanding of risk factors which contribute towards YP becoming NEET. Current figures suggest that 11.5% of young people, aged 16-24, are classified as NEET (Office for National Statistics, 2023). The long-term consequences of experiencing NEET status include an increased risk of unemployment in later life and a range of disadvantages that are associated with unemployment, which can have life-long impacts (Arnold & Baker, 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2016; Ralston et al., 2022). On an economic level, cohorts of NEET YP are estimated to cost billions of pounds in public finance and have, therefore, also become an area of

concern for policy makers in the UK (Audit Commission, 2010; Hughes, 2013; Yates & Payne, 2007). However, a growing concern is that professionals actively exploring issues around NEET youth are often focused on economics and social policy. Professionals who have experience working with these YP and with an understanding of behaviour, including psychologists, are often excluded (Mawn et al., 2017).

Due to the economic and potentially life-long impacts of being NEET, understanding the risk factors are important to act preventatively, altering policies and working styles. It is important to explore the risk factors to understand the potential role for EPs in supporting schools and YP and in addressing issues associated with becoming NEET (Selfe et al., 2018). Longitudinal cohort studies have been used to identify factors which are associated with an increased risk of becoming NEET, such as poor educational attainment (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), childhood behavioural problems (Hammerton et al., 2019), poor mental health (Holmes et al., 2021), living in an area of high crime (Karyda & Jenkins, 2018) and discord between young people's aspirations and the realities of an ever-evolving labour market (Yates et al., 2011). These factors are diverse and are evident across the various levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. For example, poor educational attainment occurs at the individual level, whilst living in an area of high crime occurs in the exosystem as does the labour market. Through the SLR, three key factors influencing NEET status were identified, relating to YP's school experiences: educational attainment, behavioural difficulties, and attitudes towards education. These factors all occur in the microsystem, which is the level at which EPs and other educational professionals work. The model, created through the SLR process, was developed using quantitative, longitudinal, cohort study data. However, Arnold and Baker (2012) suggest that screening tools, to identify YP who are at-risk of becoming NEET, fail to appreciate the diversity of experiences amongst YP. This is a consideration and a limitation of the model developed from the SLR. Therefore, the aim of the empirical study is to establish whether the results of the SLR reflect professionals' experiences and are representative of the factors they see influencing NEET status. Furthermore, the empirical study aims to explore

professionals' ideas around what factors can support YP who are at-risk or have experience of being NEET.

This research project will highlight the perspectives and ideas of professionals who work closely with YP who experience being NEET, so that EPs can work with schools to improve transition processes already in place and establish if earlier interventions would be appropriate. The professionals included in this study work to support YP back into EET, as part of a particular LA's agenda. However, it is acknowledged that not all LAs have capacity to facilitate such support from professionals and so consideration will be given as to whether EPs are well placed within the microsystem to offer support to individuals, families, and schools.

Research questions

The aim of the current research is to explore LA progression workers' views regarding factors which contribute towards YP becoming categorised as NEET and their views around support for these YP. An inductive form of reflexive thematic analysis was used which resulted in the final research questions being developed following data analysis. The research questions are:

- What factors do progression workers believe contribute towards YP experiencing being NEET?
- What factors support YP who experience being NEET?
- What works and what changes are needed to support staff in their roles supporting YP who experience being NEET?

2.4 Ontology and Epistemology

How a researcher understands the world, and the philosophical stance they take, underpins and influences their methodology and research decisions (Grix, 2002). Specifically, ontology refers to 'what we may know' whilst epistemology is concerned with 'how we come to know what we know' (Grix, 2002, p. 177).

During this research process, I have identified and established a stance as a critical realist. Critical realism is a popular philosophical framework for social scientific research and combines aspects of both positivist and constructivist paradigms, in order to seek out explanations for 'social events and suggest practical policy recommendations to address social problems' (Fletcher, 2017, p. 181). As critical realism is in the middle of the ontological continuum, it accepts that although there is an underlying truth, it can only be partially understood through exploring experiences and interpretations (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Willig, 2013). Central to critical realism is the understanding that events can be measured and seen as humans experience them, whilst events also occur whether or not they are experienced or interpreted and finally, causal mechanisms exist which can produce or trigger events (Fletcher, 2017). Ultimately, that what is real and can be observed is not reducible to what we know (Bhaskar, 1998). This aligns with my understanding of social issues, and that there are real and existing factors contributing to YP becoming NEET, such as social exclusion, and the subsequent negative impacts YP experience relating to their NEET status (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). However, I acknowledge these factors can be mediated through the different social and cultural realities and experiences of participants (Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Willig, 2013).

Critical realism is also a methodological framework, from which various methods can be used to explore the research question (Fletcher, 2017). I felt that a critical realist stance was the most appropriate due to its flexibility and the understanding that a variety of methods can be justifiably used to answer certain questions. I chose to complete a quantitative SLR to establish what is known about factors, relating to education in the microsystem, on a broad scale for YP in the UK who experience being NEET. However, I acknowledge the diversity and nuances which impact individual experiences and seek to triangulate my SLR findings with human experiences through a qualitative empirical study design. Adopting a critical realism stance has enabled me to explore my questions using both quantitative and qualitative methods and allowed space to consider causal factors, such as social issues, as well as individual experiences.

2.5 Design and Methodology

Sampling

The LA where I am on placement, has a large department who work directly with YP who are school age and have been identified as being at-risk of being NEET as well as those who are aged 16-25 and currently experiencing being NEET. Professionals who work in the service include engagement and tracking officers, progression workers, and team managers. I contacted several of the managers of this service and met with them to discuss the varied work the department does as well as to get a better understanding of how the LA are able to identify young people at-risk of being NEET, when they are still in education. After meeting with two of the department managers, I attended a team meeting where I discussed my aims and hopes for the research. This enabled me to speak directly to the team members who I hoped to recruit. I was then able to arrange a date and time, suitable for those interested in participating, to conduct a focus group. Both convenience and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants for this study (Andrade, 2021).

Data collection

Due to my stance as a critical realist and having conducted an SLR using quantitative data, I chose to use a qualitative design for the empirical research. The aim was to explore human experiences and develop an understanding of how professionals in this area make sense of issues for YP experiencing NEET status (Clarke & Braun, 2013). I considered using individual, semi-structured interviews with LA staff, however, as the subject matter being discussed was not sensitive I ultimately chose to conduct a focus group (Willig, 2013). My decision to use a focus group was partly driven by time constraints and pragmatism around the most effective method of data collection for my research questions, but also from conversations with the LA team managers. The service is busy, and team members have high caseloads, so in terms of facilitating an accessible meeting, I was advised that a group meeting would be preferable for prospective participants. As well as being practically convenient and time efficient, I

considered how a focus group would support participants to feel listened to and the dialogue between colleagues could support new ideas to be presented. Krueger (2014) suggests that a focus group 'possesses the capacity to become more than the sum of its parts, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone don't possess' (p. 24). A strength of focus groups is that ideas are sparked from what other participants say and can trigger thoughts or contributions, developing the range of topics that can be discussed (Krueger, 2014). A further strength of a focus group is that the moderator acts as an active listener, who gently steers rather than controls the conversation. This seemed to potentially reduce any perceived power imbalance (Willig, 2013). Focus groups have been identified as beneficial when the purpose of research is to elicit opinions and how people understand a certain topic (Wilkinson, 1998). Similarly, a focus group is a useful tool when researchers want to collect qualitative data to enhance understanding of quantitative data, and develop an understanding of attitudes and views (Krueger, 2014; Willig, 2013). This was one of my aims moving forward to the empirical research from the SLR results. A limitation of focus groups is that participants may feel compelled to share contributions which will be perceived as socially desirable from other members of the group, and may not be an accurate reflection of their views (Barbour, 2018; Maxwell, 2012). I took this into consideration and encouraged participants to share experiences and views regardless of whether they matched or were different to the other group members (Krueger, 2014). I was aware that the participants were familiar with each other and members of a wider team so hoped this familiarity would encourage a sense of openness and trust. However, this remains a limitation of a focus group methodology.

Although my questions had foundations in the SLR findings, I wanted them to be open ended to enable participants to share their own ideas and concepts, and not be limited by ideas I had imposed (Kallio et al., 2016). As I had no previous experience in conducting a focus group, I chose to use a questioning route, rather than a topic guide, to lead the conversation. The questioning route suggested by Krueger (2014) includes opening, introductory, transition, key and ending questions. I chose to only use opening, key and ending questions to be efficient and mindful of participants' time (see Appendix C). The aim of

introductory and transition questions is to begin to introduce the topic, and for participants themselves to begin to explore the views of the group. However, the participants for this study were a homogeneous group of colleagues who had an interest in this area, in that they all worked in the same department and, through their various roles, offer support to YP at-risk or who experience being NEET. Therefore, it felt appropriate to exclude these categories of questions and instead move from the opening to key questions.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2020) acknowledge that there is rarely one ideal method for a research project. Instead researchers must choose the one that best fits, ensuring that whichever is chosen works cohesively with their theoretical assumptions and research questions (Willig, 2013). Throughout this research process, I was aware of my position as the researcher, and prior experiences, as well as how both had the potential to influence my methodological choices. Therefore, the need to be reflexive throughout was important and contributed to my decision to use reflexive thematic analysis, a method which aims to explore patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis was designed to be theoretically flexible, with a focus on the researcher's engagement with the data as well as their reflexive contributions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). It also involves identifying patterns in data, and an understanding that themes can be multi-faceted, conceptual and meaning-based (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). These values sit at the core of reflexive thematic analysis and align with my own values as a researcher, as well as my intentions with this research.

I considered using coding reliability and codebook thematic analysis; however, neither of these methods aligned with my position as a researcher or my research aims. Coding reliability uses qualitative data but with an emphasis on both reliability (i.e., a lack of bias) and quantitative concerns (such as the amount a topic is discussed) (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Codebook thematic analysis was also not suitable for this research as there is an expectation of themes, resulting in the researcher being more likely to confirm pre-determined themes, rather than

being open to or challenging themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). In contrast, reflexive thematic analysis is iterative and acknowledges the researcher as an active participant in the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I chose to use an inductive form of reflexive thematic analysis to ensure that coding and themes were driven by the data rather than theory, acknowledging the views of the professionals participating and ensuring the themes were based on their meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This research project was approved by the Newcastle University Ethics Committee and throughout the research I adhered to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2021).

I sought verbal consent from all participants and verbally reiterated, prior to agreeing to participate and prior to beginning the focus group, that they were under no obligation to answer questions and could withdraw from the research at any point. Participants were informed as to how the data would be safely and anonymously stored in line with GDPR guidelines. These details were also provided in the information sheets which participants received prior to giving consent. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, in order to avoid deception (Willig, 2013). During the transcription process, I ensured that no identifiable data was included, and participants were given pseudonyms to ensure their privacy and anonymity.

It has been suggested that, when conducting research, there should be an ethical exchange between the researcher and participants, not merely the taking of information for research purposes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017). Taking this into account, following the focus group I spoke with the department managers about how I could disseminate and feedback my research to the team. It was agreed that I would attend a later team meeting to feedback my findings through a presentation.

2.7 Summary

This chapter provided an opportunity to outline a rationale for my empirical research, from a personal perspective, as well as in the context of the SLR findings and existing research. I have considered my position as a researcher and how my world views influenced the methodological choices I made, including using a focus group design and reflexive thematic analysis.

Chapter 3: Empirical Research

An exploration of progression workers' views regarding risk factors for YP becoming NEET

3.1 Abstract

This research aimed to investigate LA progression workers' views around factors which impact YP aged 16-25 becoming categorised as NEET. A focus group was conducted with five progression workers, who work with YP aged 16-25 to support reintegration to EET. Data was analysed using an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Research questions address factors which contribute towards YP being NEET, factors which support YP who experience being NEET and factors which support or restrict progression workers to effectively do their jobs. Six themes are discussed to address these questions. The findings suggest that a range of factors are associated with YP being NEET, which often begin at a younger age and can then be compounded by individual or systemic factors. Factors include negative school experiences, individual circumstances, the inaccessibility of EET and the strength of relationships YP have with adults in their lives. Factors which support YP who are NEET include developing strong relationships with adults, using person-centred approaches, and having access to opportunities. Progression workers found being part of a strong, collaborative team supported their roles, whilst funding and target expectations were restrictive. The findings suggest that EPs are well positioned and trained to contribute to this area and collaborate with YP and other professionals to improve outcomes regarding post-16 transitions.

3.2 Introduction

In this section, a brief background is given regarding NEET YP as well as an overview of relevant psychological underpinnings. The research questions and the rationale as to why this area is relevant to EPs are presented.

Context

Following legislative changes, it is compulsory for YP to be in some form of EET until the age of 18 (Education and Skills Act, 2008). Post-16 options for EET include 6th form, college, training providers and apprenticeships as well as employment (Arnold & Baker, 2012). By increasing the age of compulsory education, it was expected that the numbers of YP leaving education with appropriate qualifications would increase, thereby better equipping them for employment (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Continuing with post-16 EET has been associated with more positive life outcomes and reduced social exclusion, whilst YP who are categorised as NEET are more likely to experience life-long disadvantages (Arnold & Baker, 2012; Maguire, 2015a; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). However, government policies have been criticised for focusing on individual factors, rather than systemic issues which contribute towards YP becoming NEET (Hutchinson et al., 2016; Pemberton, 2008).

The findings of the earlier SLR identified educational attainment, behavioural difficulties, and attitudes towards education as factors in a YP's microsystem which may be associated with NEET status. It was suggested that although these factors can be considered as individual, they are likely to be the result of various intertwining factors in a YPs' life which they may have little control over.

Psychological Underpinnings

Various theoretical approaches could be considered relevant and useful when exploring the factors influencing NEET status, such as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and the communities of practice framework (Wenger, 1999).

These perspectives relate to factors which impact YP in society and their local environment. Further perspectives relevant on an individual level include self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the concept of risk and resilience factors (Schoon, 2006) and sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Self-determination theory suggests that for individuals to feel motivated, develop and grow personally, they must experience a sense of competence and autonomy whilst also feeling connected to others around them (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These factors relating to motivation can arguably be impacted by others, e.g., giving people space and freedom to feel autonomous, although the outcome (motivation) is regarded as a personal one. Schoon (2006) suggests that resilience factors have the potential to mediate effects of risk factors. For example, there is an acknowledgement that not all YP who experience risk factors (such as trauma or adverse situations) will experience subsequent negative effects (including becoming NEET). It is suggested this may be due to the presence of protective factors which strengthen their resilience (Brown, 2021; Schoon, 2006). Resilience is defined as a 'two-dimensional construct defined by the constellations of exposure to adversity and the manifestation of successful adaptation in the face of that risk' (Schoon, 2006, p. 7).

A further theoretical perspective is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Through this theory it is understood that individuals exist within a complex world of interacting systems which impact their experiences. Previous research used Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) as a framework when considering risk factors for YP becoming NEET (Siraj et al., 2014). Siraj et al. (2014) sought to explore reasons why YP became NEET, 6 months after finishing compulsory education. Various background characteristics were highlighted as being associated with NEET status, including coming from a low socioeconomic family and low parental qualification. Other risk factors were categorised as educational, personal, or structural. Educational risk factors related to low educational attainment and the subsequent restrictions of options available to YP, as well as educational disaffection. Personal risk factors included physical and mental health, family circumstances (including caring responsibilities), negative experiences of transitions and a lack of advice and support from adults. Structural barriers referred to the cost of EET, a lack of professional support, labour market

conditions and access to transport. These factors were mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's original model and an adapted version relating to NEET YP was produced (see Figure 4)(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siraj et al., 2014). For efficiency and usability, Siraj et al. (2014) have synthesised the factors which are presented on the model. Due to the relevance, this adapted model has been used as a theoretical grounding from which to consider the current study.

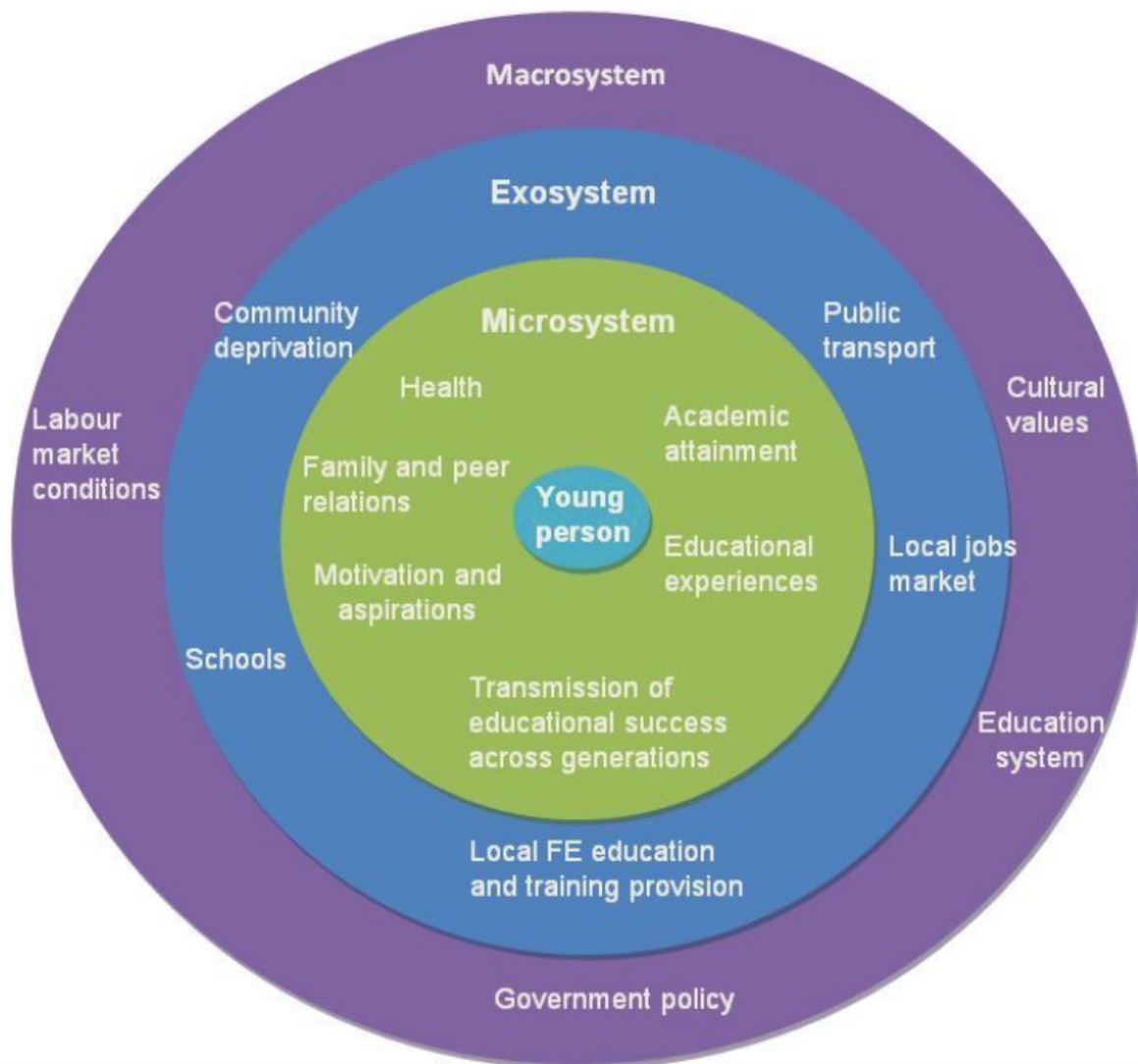


Figure 4. Application of NEET risk factors, projected on to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model.

Relevance to Educational Psychologists

It has been suggested that those leading policy change in this area do not have an appropriate understanding of behaviour and underlying psychology (Mawn et al., 2017). To address this, more research is needed to better understand the potential role for EPs in supporting YP who are at-risk or experience being NEET (Mawn et al., 2017; Selfe et al., 2018). It has also been acknowledged that screening tools could identify around 50% of YP who may be at-risk of becoming NEET, prior to reaching compulsory school leaving age (Arnold & Baker, 2012; Currie & Goodall, 2009). However, such screening tools are unlikely to capture a holistic view of what is happening for YP, and a one-size-fits-all approach based on screening tools may be inappropriate. EPs, who already work collaboratively with schools, families and YP, are well placed to provide support and training to facilitate a person-centred approach. This is already part of the EP role with other groups, who may be perceived as vulnerable, such as international new arrivals, looked after children and those with English as an additional language. It has been suggested that the role of EPs is to facilitate the 'responsiveness of the education service to the community's needs and in particular to the needs of the under-privileged' (Loxley, 1978, p. 103). Therefore, by working with YP, up to the age of 25, who are NEET, EPs would be fulfilling their statutory duty whilst also responding to the community's needs.

Progression Workers

Within the LA, where this research was conducted, there is a specific service comprising of progression workers who support YP who are at-risk of being NEET or are experiencing being NEET. The progression worker role involves engaging with and supporting YP to enable them to progress, remain in or re-enter EET. Progression workers are also required to mentor YP, as well as assess their needs and establish potential barriers to EET. In the context of the LA where this research was conducted, progression workers are required to have a minimum of a Level 2 qualification in Information, Advice and Guidance, Youth Work, or a relevant subject. Essential experience for this role includes working with YP, their families or other professionals, as well as experience planning and

delivering group work activities and providing information, guidance, and support. Training opportunities are provided, and progression workers are offered support through supervision.

The progression worker role as well as the minimum requirements and title, differ across LAs in the UK. Similar roles in different LAs and charity organisations include, progression coaches, careers advisers, NEET leads, youth engagement progression co-ordinators and NEET workers. The role itself is not regulated, hence differences across services in both the minimum requirements and duties. For example, the minimum requirement for a NEET worker role, in a neighbouring LA, is a Level 4 qualification in Information, Advice and Guidance, as well as Level 2 qualifications in English and maths. Whilst these roles are similar in their goal to re-engage YP with EET, the levels and type of support offered to YP can, therefore, vary across different LAs. The future of these roles, within LAs, is also currently uncertain as many are funded by the European Union Social Fund, which will no longer be in place, following the UK's exit from the European Union in 2020.

Original Contribution

There is variation in the type and amount of support offered to YP depending on the LA context, as well as which professionals deliver support. As previously discussed, there is a limited understanding of the role of EPs in relation to post-16 work and YP who experience being NEET. The current research sought to develop an understanding of factors which may contribute to YP experiencing being NEET as well as the potential role for EPs. To date research exploring both the EP and progression worker roles in this area is limited. Previous research has explored young people's experiences of being NEET (e.g., Lőrinc et al., 2020) or used quantitative data to identify patterns and associations between risk factors and NEET status (e.g., Sadler et al., 2015). The current research seeks to explore progression worker's views; as professionals who work with YP, they may be well placed to provide a holistic overview of YP's experiences, with a greater depth than quantitative data may allow. Similarly, their experiences with a range of YP in different individual circumstances may enable a greater

understanding of systemic influences. The current research also aims to further develop an understanding of risk factors relating to NEET status, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. This theory has previously been used in relation to risk factors relating to NEET status, however, the adapted model is based on longitudinal, quantitative data (Siraj et al., 2014). It is hoped the current research can contribute to the development of the adapted model and understanding of risk factors in relation to the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siraj et al., 2014).

Research Questions

The current research aims to explore LA professionals' views regarding factors that contribute towards YP experiencing being NEET. Following an inductive, reflexive TA, the research questions were finalised based on the responses from participants. The research questions are:

- What factors do progression workers believe contribute towards YP experiencing being NEET?
- What factors support YP who experience being NEET?
- What works and what changes are needed to support staff in their roles supporting YP who experience being NEET?

3.3 Method

This section outlines the context, participants, materials, and data analysis used in this empirical paper as well as ethical considerations.

Context and Participants

This research was conducted within a service in a LA in the North-East of England. There are dedicated progression workers within the service who work with 16–24-year-olds with SEND, as well as members of the team who work with school age YP who have been identified as at-risk of becoming NEET. Progression workers offer various levels of support, at both individual and group

level. Convenience and purposive sampling were used to recruit staff working in this service for participation in the study (Andrade, 2021). After liaising with team managers and attending a team meeting, prospective participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix A and B). Five members of staff provided consent and agreed to participate in the study. Information about participants is provided in Table 6. At the time of participating in the study, none of the five participants were working in the service aimed at YP with SEND. Although this was not intentional, it supports the transferability of the results and enabled a greater exploration of systemic factors which contribute to NEET status, rather than a focus on individual factors.

Table 6. Names and job roles of participants.

Participant Name	Job role
Max	Team manager of progression workers
Bridget	Progression worker (post-16)
Lucy	Progression worker (post-16)
Chloe	Progression worker (school age)
Daniel	Progression worker (post-16)

Focus Group

A focus group was organised; four participants chose to join virtually, through Microsoft Teams, and one participant joined in-person, with the researcher, at the team's office. The service is familiar with hybrid working and given their busy schedules, this format worked best for the participants. A focus group setting can be considered less artificial than a one-to-one setting, and enables participants to interact as they would outside of the research context, particularly if the participants are already familiar with each other as they were in this situation (Willig, 2013).

Participants provided written consent prior to the focus group, and I gained verbal consent after re-iterating information about the research and outlining how the

focus group would run. Participants gave consent for the focus group to be audio-recorded using a Dictaphone.

The aim of the focus group was to generate a collective understanding through social interaction, with the topic pre-determined by myself, the researcher (Wilkinson, 1998). The broad subject matter was exploring the factors which influence YP becoming NEET, however, I was aware of my position as the moderator in the focus group and did not want to influence the discussion. This was important as I was aware of my own assumptions due to the SLR. Questions were open-ended to enable participants to shape the conversation based on their own experiences. Prompts referred to the findings of the SLR, however, I intended to only use these if participants did not independently refer to them. The question schedule can be found in Appendix C. In my role as the moderator, I asked pre-planned questions and encouraged interactions through non-verbal cues and active listening (Hennink, 2013) but otherwise the conversation developed through interactions between participants.

Analysis

An inductive form of reflexive TA was used to analyse the focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2020) suggested six phases, see Table 7. The analysis was conducted in a hybrid manner, using both manual methods (paper and pen) and supportive technology (NVivo; QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020). NVivo was used to record annotations and memos through initial readings and develop codes. This was primarily due to the volume of codes produced and using the technology to help manage them. Following this, codes were printed so they could be manually moved and grouped together into initial themes. Once themes had been developed, the analysis returned to NVivo for refining and naming of themes. This hybrid method allowed for multiple readings of the transcript as well as more in-depth checking between stages.

Table 7. Six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Phase	Description of the process
1 – Familiarisation	Listening to the data, transcribing, re-reading the transcript and making notes through the annotations and memo functions on NVivo
2 – Coding	Coding interesting features of the data; generating new codes where necessary or adding to existing codes; development of an initial codebook
3 – Generating initial themes	Gathering similar codes into potential themes and mapping this out using paper and sticky-notes
4 – Reviewing and developing themes	Checking the corroboration between themes and coded extracts; re-reading the dataset to ensure all relevant codes are included in themes, or developing more themes as well as removing themes; developing concept maps using NVivo
5 – Refining, defining and naming themes	Refining the meaning of each theme and capturing the story of it; developing clear definitions for each theme; generating names which go beyond description and capture the essence of the theme
6 – Writing up	An opportunity to report the findings of the analysis; selecting appropriate extracts from the dataset which best represent the themes; relating themes to the research questions and literature

The analysis was an iterative process, with phases being repeated several times. During each phase, codes and themes were considered as prototypes, which could be altered or eliminated. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest this helps to position the ongoing analysis as tentative and promote reflexivity as well as an authentic inductive approach.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted from Newcastle University Ethics Committee and the study adhered to ethical guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2021). Written information sheets were provided, and I attended team meetings to speak directly with potential participants and provide an opportunity for them to ask questions. A focus group was arranged, and potential participants were invited. Participants provided written consent when agreeing to take part and also gave verbal consent prior to beginning the focus group. Participants were informed there was no requirement to take part and that they could withdraw at any time.

3.4 Findings

This section includes the findings from the reflexive TA. The data, and identified themes, will be presented in relation to the three research questions. Themes will be presented, with a definition as well as supporting quotations from the focus group data. Themes are titled using participant quotations, to accurately capture their responses and keep their views at the forefront of the analysis.

Research Question 1: What factors do progression workers believe contribute towards young people experiencing being NEET?

Four themes are presented, in relation to this question. These themes relate to the negative impact of school experiences, individual factors, the inaccessibility of EET and challenges posed by relationships with others. Themes and theme definitions are presented in Table 8. The themes and sub-themes will be presented, followed by a discussion in relation to the research question.

Table 8. Themes and theme definitions for research question 1.

What factors contribute towards YP experiencing being NEET?	
Theme	Theme definition
'They feel like they've been let down' – the impact of negative school experiences	This theme identifies a range of educational experiences which LA progression workers believe contribute towards YP becoming NEET. They expressed how the long-term impacts of some of these experiences prevent YP from re-engaging with EET once they have passed school-leaving age. Sub-themes included individual experiences, such as being permanently excluded as well as a more general lack of support being offered in schools. There is a suggestion that the lack of support offered when YP experience difficulties in school creates a sense of mistrust and barriers to systems and departments related to education. Ultimately YP are left feeling let down and their past experiences of education hinder their present or future outcomes.
'It's all person centred' – individual factors contributing to NEET status	This theme refers to the various individual factors that progression workers feel contribute towards YP becoming NEET. This includes mental health, SEND, willingness to seek support and unstable life circumstances. This theme refers to factors which may be fixed or where progression workers can have less impact due to the individual nature of the circumstances. This theme also identifies YP's attitudes as a factor impacting their NEET status. YP's attitudes to employment can vary and even for those who want to engage in EET, they may still face barriers. Progression workers referred to a lack of understanding amongst YP regarding expectations when they are in EET, in terms of professional behaviour.

<p>'There's those prohibitive elements that are hidden' – the inaccessibility of EET</p>	<p>This theme identifies some of the systemic barriers which prevent YP from accessing EET, even when they receive support from the LA and progression workers. The standard of education needed to access EET is often high, which progression workers suggest is both justified and unnecessarily high in some situations. This is combined with complex application processes, for which YP often need support to be able to access. Childcare, particularly the expense of it, is also viewed as a barrier to EET. Progression workers expressed that increasingly YP are missing out on opportunities, which then hinders their ability to gain employment. It was acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted some of these opportunities, which haven't been reinstated, such as work experience and the ability to visit colleges and universities on open days.</p>
<p>'We can be the best adviser we can possibly be and then they walk out the office...and all that work is undone' – relationships in the microsystem</p>	<p>This theme identifies various relationships within the YP's microsystem which can contribute to them becoming NEET or hinder their ability to access EET. The central concept of this theme is relationships with other people. In terms of family, the type of relationships (e.g., healthy or abusive) themselves may impact whether a YP is NEET, as well as a family's background and their attitudes towards EET. For example, progression workers identified generational unemployment as a contributing factor for YP who become NEET. Societal views of YP and negative perceptions were also suggested as contributing factors. There was a suggestion that some friendships can be influential in a negative way, which may dominate or overshadow more helpful relationships. The presence of such relationships and a lack of consistent support combine, placing YP at risk of experiencing being NEET.</p>

'They feel like they've been let down' – the impact of negative school experiences

The thematic map for this sub-theme is shown in Figure 5.

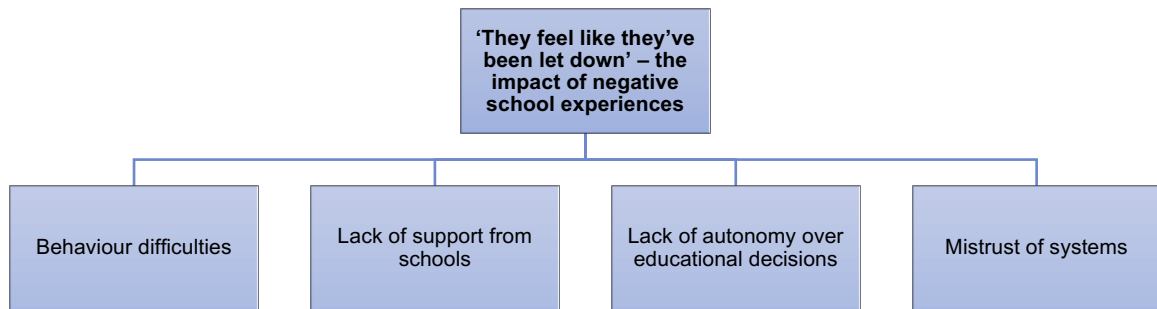


Figure 5. A thematic map for "They feel like they've been let down' - the impact of negative school experiences'.

Behaviour difficulties

This sub-theme relates to the impact of behavioural consequences, such as exclusions. LA progression workers perceived such experiences as detrimental to YP as they have gaps in their education and aren't properly supported through the transition to a new setting, or back to their original school. This can result in a loss of learning time and impact how YP feel about educational settings.

Lucy: "Because of the traumas that they've suffered at school which has then led to them being excluded, they find it really difficult to sit in the classroom environment"

Lack of support from schools

There was a perception amongst participants that schools are often highly focused on outcomes and destinations for YP who are academic and due to limited

resources, they are unable to offer an appropriate level of support for YP who may be at-risk of becoming NEET.

Bridget: "School hasn't got the resources, they haven't got the time and because the league tables and statistics and things they do focus on the achievers because they're the ones who go to university, they're the ones who do A-levels...they haven't got, I guess the time it takes"

Lack of autonomy over educational decisions

Progression workers expressed views that YP are often led down particular educational pathways, based on school perceptions of their academic abilities, rather than their own interests. As a result, this can leave YP struggling to identify what they would like to do in terms of further education or employment routes.

Bridget: "If they've been in school and they've been told that this is what we've got to do and you know sometimes they just take options for staying in school's sake, when actually when they leave, they're like 'I didn't even wanna do any of that'"

Mistrust of systems

This sub-theme relates to the mistrust that YP develop of education or employment systems due to negative school experiences. Progression workers felt that YP often view them as having a similar role to school staff which impacts the level of support they are receptive to.

Daniel: "[YP] in turn said that we are in the same department as schools, so we'll mistreat them as well and we won't help and I think it's just like...the misunderstanding of being mistreat by the education department across the whole instead of just the school"

'It's all person centred' – individual factors contributing to NEET status

The thematic map for this sub-theme is shown in Figure 6.

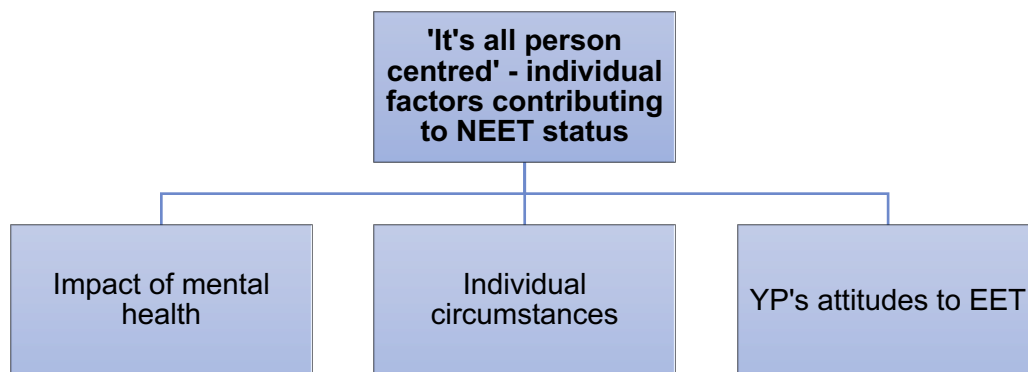


Figure 6. A thematic map for "It's all person centred" - individual factors contributing to NEET status'.

Impact of mental health

This sub-theme encompasses a range of difficulties that YP may face in relation to their mental health, including anxiety, recurrent triggers, low self-belief, and substance abuse. Progression workers expressed an understanding that mental health can greatly impact YP and their ability to seek or maintain EET and recognised the limitation of their role regarding this.

Bridget: “In relation to their mental health...whether it's sexual abuse, domestic violence, whatever they might then have childhood trauma linked to PTSD, linked to schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, whatever but they can all then be triggered so we can do what we can do, other services can do what they can do, you know they can have all the therapies, they can have all the coping strategies and all it takes is a click of your fingers...to bump into the wrong person and that's it they're triggered and then if they're not in the right headspace, they go backwards”

Individual circumstances

This sub-theme relates to the various individual circumstances which impact a YP's ability to access EET. Such circumstances can include abusive relationships, instability in their home or living situations and any additional needs or disabilities they may have.

Chloe: "Obviously we work with a number of people who might have additional needs and different, you know, things going on the back, whether it be mental health, learning disability, physical disability, erm maybe family issues"

YP's attitudes to EET

YP's personal attitudes towards EET was also highlighted as a factor contributing towards NEET status. Progression workers identified that many YP have a strong work ethic. However, there was also an acknowledgement that some YP don't have a desire to work or have unrealistic expectations about the demands of working life. A lack of responsibility or ownership over their progression in EET was highlighted, suggesting many YP have an over-reliance on the adults who support them. The progression workers identified that the Covid-19 pandemic may have influenced or heightened some of these factors and attitudes.

Bridget: "I think kind of the idea they've got in their head about what they want to do and actually what's required of them are two different things."

Many YP also have some ambitions which are deemed unrealistic due to missing qualifications. Misunderstandings around the expectations of EET and the level of education required to access certain jobs or courses, was identified as a factor relating to NEET.

Bridget: "I spoke with one of my clients yesterday for 60 minutes, trying to get her to understand why she needed her maths and English. She wants to work for the council, well your application is going to be looked past if you haven't got your maths and English because the requirements are the requirements"

'There's those prohibitive elements that are hidden' – the inaccessibility of EET

The thematic map for this sub-theme is shown in Figure 7.

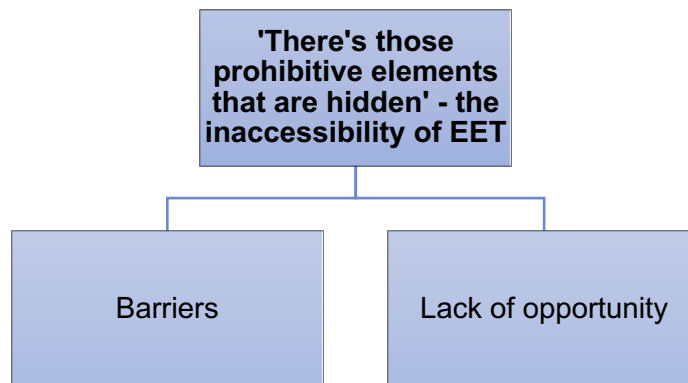


Figure 7. A thematic map for "There's those prohibitive elements that are hidden' - the inaccessibility of EET'.

Barriers

Progression workers identified some specific barriers which prevent YP from accessing EET and contribute to their NEET status. Examples of such barriers included the expense of childcare, complex application processes and high standards of education or qualifications needed for EET.

Bridget: "Some of the application processes are massively overwhelming"

Max: "I see a large percentage of our NEET young people who I think are more than capable of getting through a national standard in say motor vehicle or brickwork or whatever, but they're not allowed to progress if they don't pass their maths and English"

Lack of opportunity

Progression workers discussed how YP are missing out on opportunities for work experience, which then influences their ability to access EET. They suggested that this is becoming increasingly common following the Covid-19 pandemic and work experience opportunities are not yet routinely back in place.

Bridget: “They've had that [work experience] taken away from them so those skills you develop in year 10, in year 11, doing your work experience or going to different universities and having like little welcome days and things like that, they haven't had those opportunities.”

‘We can be the best adviser we can possibly be and then they walk out the office...and all that work is undone’ – relationships in the microsystem

The thematic map for this sub-theme is shown in Figure 8.

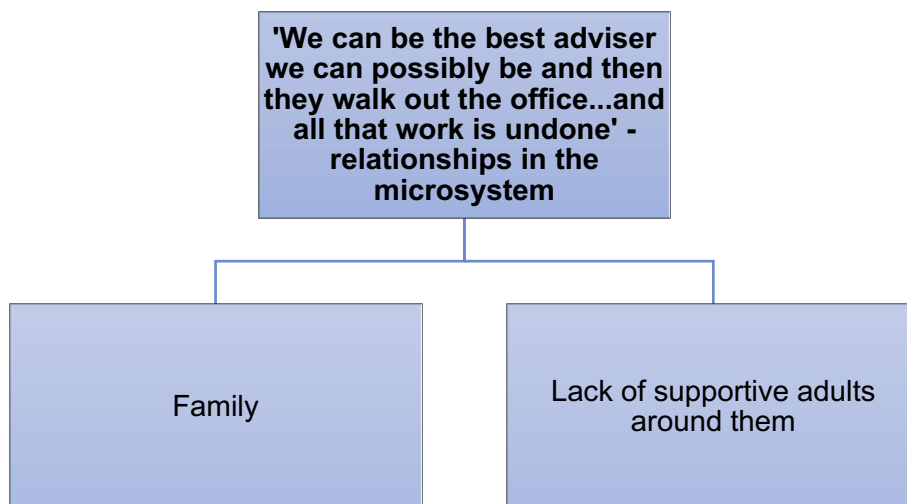


Figure 8. A thematic map for "We can be the best adviser we can possibly be and then they walk out the office...and all that work is undone' - relationships in the microsystem'.

Family

This sub-theme refers to the impact that a YP's family can have on their NEET status. This includes unstable or abusive relationships between family members, family attitudes to EET as well as generational unemployment and the family's class status.

Bridget: "Historical unemployment within the family unit it usually like transcends down"

Chloe: "If parents haven't got that support as well and haven't got that, you know, have never been through the process of supporting a kid into post-16 education it can be quite overwhelming for them"

It also includes the impact of parental substance abuse and the impact of a YP's NEET status on family benefits. These are all aspects of relationships between family members which progression workers feel impact YP's experiences of being NEET.

Bridget: "The parents wanted the child to go back into education because it affects their benefits so that has a massive influence on kind of how they engage like whether they're in employment, education or training"

Lack of supportive adults around them

This sub-theme refers to the difficulties YP have in accessing EET due to the lack of adult support available to them. This includes a lack of supportive adults in education settings, their home environment and socially.

Max: "Now I know that erm not all NEET young people don't have responsible adults in their lives but by and large I have found over the years that they don't"

Bridget: "They might not be getting it at home, so then they kick off at school because maybe they need some support"

This sub-theme also includes societal negative perceptions of YP who are experiencing being NEET and how such negative judgements can impact the support YP receive.

Max: “When we talk about NEETs it's easy to slip into erm you know the ones that have been sort of, had a hard time at home, hard time at school...but there are some, there's a lot of kids that we get who are NEET who are really good kids”

Discussion

Responses from participants highlighted factors which contribute towards YP becoming NEET are often dependent on individual experiences and circumstances. However, factors relating to the systems around YP, including the social and economic climate, are often more significant and influential. Even within the theme titled *‘It’s all person centred – individual factors contributing to NEET status’*, it can be argued that the ‘individual’ factors can be influenced by the systems and support around YP. For example, it has been suggested that many YP who are NEET have experienced mental health difficulties in childhood or adolescence (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016) and whilst mental health can be considered an ‘individual’ factor, access to mental health support is a wider systemic issue.

Due to their experiences in supporting YP who are NEET, progression workers were able to provide insight regarding barriers to EET. Braun and Clarke (2020) suggest that in reflexive TA quantity does not indicate significance. However, I interpreted some themes as particularly meaningful due to the time spent discussing this topic and the passion progression workers expressed during the discussion. This was the case with the theme *‘They feel like they’ve been let down – the impact of negative school experiences’*. Progression workers expressed concerns that YP are mistrusting, and avoidant, of professionals or systems designed to support them, because of negative school experiences. This echoes previous research which identified this post-16 transition period as the start of a cycle effect of unemployment and disengagement (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Mawn et al., 2017). There has been

a suggestion that early intervention and support from schools is important in preventing YP becoming NEET and facilitating the post-school transition (Cockerill & Arnold, 2019; Siraj et al., 2014). However, this is not something that progression workers are routinely seeing and instead they had a perception that schools are less interested and have fewer resources to offer to YP who may not be aiming for further or higher education. An association has been identified between lower academic attainment and incidence of NEET within previous research (Sadler et al., 2015; Siraj et al., 2014) and the earlier SLR. It is possible this may have resulted in educational disaffection from YP as well as educational settings stepping back and avoiding accountability (Cockerill & Arnold, 2019). There was a suggestion that YP who receive support are often encouraged to take certain courses which go against their wishes, or which may not lead to feasible employment. This is also something that has been previously presented in research (Allan, 2017) and is in-line with the suggestion that YP's views are often not central, when adults support them with future planning (Morris & Atkinson, 2018).

For YP whose relationships with schools break down (e.g., due to exclusions), there is a sense that they may get lost in the system and fail to transition (Brown, 2021). Behaviour difficulties were also identified in the SLR as risk factors for YP becoming NEET and the possibility of subsequent exclusions impact the likelihood of YP transitioning to post-16 EET (Sadler et al., 2015; Yates & Payne, 2006). A lack of autonomy and support as well as the mistrust of systems, relate to the facets of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ultimately, the motivation and self-belief of YP may be impacted by these negative school experiences and the idea that they are feeling let down by the systems around them. Allan (2017) conducted interviews with key workers who support YP to re-enter EET and one commented 'it's all too little, too late. We try but they're just not interested. And I don't blame them'. Despite this research being conducted several years prior and in a different region of the UK, the sentiment echoes that of the progression workers who participated in the current study. There is a sense that these adults who work tirelessly to support YP are facing an uphill battle from the start of their involvement due to previous situations.

A further barrier, relating to the inaccessibility of EET, was educational attainment. This echoes previous research, such as Allan (2017), who highlighted the

government's focus on maths and English, and the position of GCSE qualifications as a 'gold standard' (p. 8). As a result, the divide between academic and vocational achievements deepens and YP who do not achieve a higher standard of qualification are positioned as vulnerable, as vocational learning is often perceived as inferior (Chankseliani et al., 2016; Lőrinc et al., 2020). In a questionnaire study with 84 YP aged 16-21, 79 reported that the college course they wanted to pursue wasn't available due to their English and maths attainment (Allan, 2017). This highlights a coherence between YP's experiences, and the views expressed by progression workers.

A lack of work experience and financial restrictions also add to the inaccessibility of EET. The cost of education, including transport, equipment, and childcare can all impact YP (Siraj et al., 2014). Simultaneously, a reduction in government support, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance, exacerbate the inaccessibility of EET.

The themes and sub-themes, which are presented and seek to answer the research question, overlap, and are interlinked. It is challenging to unpick them or to consider which is most significant/influential. Instead, it is more helpful to acknowledge the overlap and present the themes, and sub-themes, as interrelated and co-influential. This is demonstrated in Figure 9.

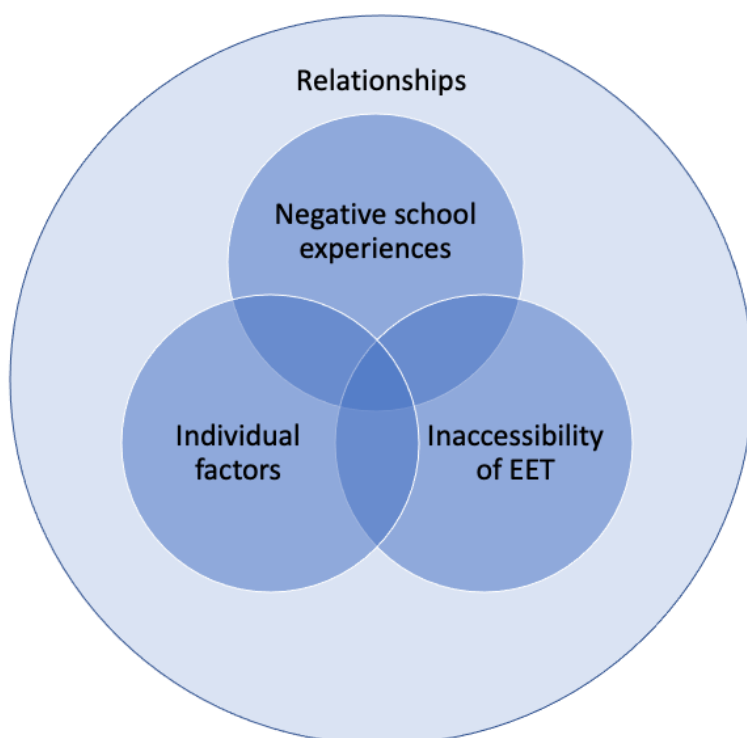


Figure 9. A model demonstrating progression workers' views regarding factors which may influence YP becoming and experiencing being NEET.

Within this model, three of the themes are presented in a Venn-style diagram, acknowledging how each theme may impact another. Relationships are presented as a surrounding, or overarching, influence as they have the potential to impact all other areas. The intersecting areas on the model are where various sub-themes can be found. For example, barriers resulting in the inaccessibility of NEET could also be considered as individual factors, such as having children, or a lack of qualifications. Similarly, mental health (e.g., anxiety) may be an individual factor but it can simultaneously impact or be impacted by negative school experiences. A lack of autonomy over educational decisions may appear to be a negative school experience but it may also impact accessibility to EET if YP do not have appropriate qualifications for a subsequent career path. It is acknowledged that the associations are not fixed or inevitable, but they are presented as influential risk factors which may contribute towards YP being NEET. This model reflects some of the ideas presented in the adapted Ecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siraj et

al., 2014) and emphasises the co-influential nature of factors spanning the microsystem, exsosystem and macrosystem.

Research Question 2: What factors support young people who experience being NEET?

One theme identifies factors that progression workers consider to be important in supporting YP to re-engage with EET. The theme definition is provided in Table 9 and the thematic map is shown in Figure 10.

Table 9. Theme and theme definition for research question 2.

What factors support young people who experience being NEET?	
Theme	Theme definition
‘Whatever path that they need help with is ok, like they’re a human at the end of the day’ – promoting change	This theme encompasses the factors which LA progression workers consider to be important to instigate change and result in YP re-engaging with EET. Strong relationships with adults were identified, as well as specific aspects of relationships which can facilitate this such as listening, offering nurture, a non-judgemental approach and being able to give YP a significant amount of time. A person-centred approach was considered to be central and for progression workers to be able to judge outcomes and ‘success’ in relative terms for each YP, rather than working to arbitrary targets. Providing YP with more opportunities and having professionals, and systems, acknowledge and seek to reduce the barriers YP face, was also discussed in relation to promoting change. Professionals remaining hopeful and acknowledging the experiences of YP, valuing them as more than numbers and statistics, seemed to motivate these professionals to not only work in the area they do but to promote and enact positive changes for YP who experience being NEET.

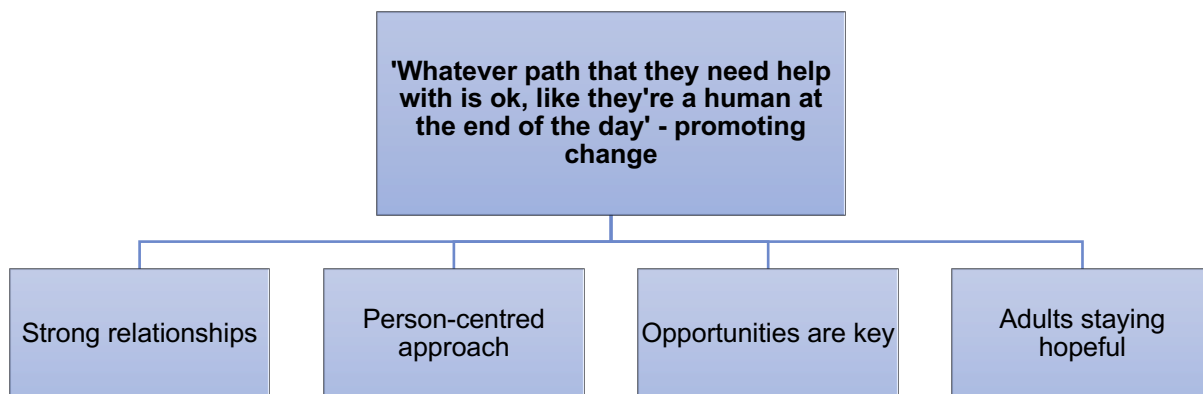


Figure 10. A thematic map for "Whatever path that they need help with is ok, like they're a human at the end of the day' - promoting change'.

Strong relationships

Progression workers identified the need for strong, supportive, non-judgemental relationships with YP. They suggested that they could offer YP “nurture” (Bridget) which they may not have experienced before and placed value on giving them time and a supportive adult to listen to them.

Bridget: “Some of them haven’t got anything stable in their life so sometimes we are the only stable factor and making sure we keep that continuity of support is really important”

They also discussed how, as part of their roles, they may provide a higher level of support than is expected or allocated due to the needs of the YP.

Bridget: “Some of my clients, yeah we’re only maybe supposed to see them once every two weeks but some of them I will personally make the time every week because that's what they need”

Person-centred approach

This sub-theme identifies a person-centred approach as being important to support YP who are NEET. Progression workers suggest that seeing YP on a “one-to-one basis” (Bridget) and getting to know them so they can “remove the barriers depending on their needs” (Bridget) is key. They also expressed that when the focus is on YP, the impact can be “really powerful” (Max). There was a suggestion that the outcomes for YP should be person-centred, recognising that progress can look different depending on the YP and their needs, but it might not result in re-engagement in EET:

Max: “What I managed to do is I’ve managed to get him out of his bedroom, I’ve got him to manage, to engage with the progression worker”

Opportunities are key

This sub-theme highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for YP, in relation to EET as well as increasing their independence and responsibility more generally.

Max: “The more opportunity there is, the more options there are”

Adults staying hopeful

Progression workers were keen to convey the importance of hope, for adults who work with or support YP who are NEET.

Max: “I think that if I was telling somebody that didn't know anything about NEETs, I would tell them to remain hopeful because they are, they're all worth a chance, they're all worth a couple of chances actually.”

Bridget: “We've all got different paths and whatever path that they need help with is ok, like they're a human at the end of the day. They're not a statistic, they're not a number.”

Discussion

The four sub-themes identified here can be regarded as a reflection of the model presented in research question 1. The model presented risk factors for YP becoming NEET, whereas in this question, similar factors are presented but they are viewed as having a positive and protective function for YP. Together they can be considered as risk and resilience factors (Schoon, 2006). Resilience factors include adults remaining hopeful and acknowledging that risk factors should not automatically be associated with long-term negative outcomes, such as NEET status. It also suggests progression workers believe that outcomes for YP can be influenced by their professional input.

A lack of strong relationships was identified as a risk factor for YP becoming NEET in the previous question. However, when considering what supports YP who are NEET, strong relationships can help facilitate a return to EET. Various research has suggested an association between YP developing positive relationships and increasing self-belief (Borrett & Rowley, 2020; Lawson & Parker, 2020) and this connection was also established by progression workers.

Whilst inaccessibility to EET was identified as a risk factor, using a person-centred approach, and providing YP with opportunities, were both regarded as helpful and protective when supporting re-engagement with EET. Following advice outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015) and in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), person-centred approaches are commonly used in education settings to ensure YP contribute to decisions made about them, are listened to and are consulted about the services they receive. Person-centred approaches also support YP to identify their strengths and support needs, as well as facilitate relationships and foster a sense of autonomy and control over their lives and decisions (Corrigan, 2014). Progression workers expressed a sense of frustration that they are unable to adopt person-centred approaches or utilise them as much as they feel is appropriate, due to restrictions placed by external influences, e.g., funding bodies.

The factors identified in this theme also relate to aspects of self-determination theory which suggests that competence, relatedness and autonomy are essential to facilitate motivation and encourage growth, development and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It could be argued that providing YP with opportunities could increase their feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation, as well as a sense of autonomy over their situation. Strong relationships mirror relatedness within self-determination theory, which suggests that feelings of belonging and connectedness to others is also important to facilitate motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The findings suggest that strong relationships, a person-centred approach, having opportunities and adults remaining hopeful are all important factors which support YP who experience being NEET. These factors refer to people or actions which could be implemented in the microsystem but are often out of YP's control. Progression workers viewed these factors as important in relation to supporting YP and facilitating their re-engagement in EET.

Research Question 3: What works and what changes are needed to support staff in their roles supporting young people who experience being NEET?

Progression workers provided insight into various factors which support or restrict their roles. The thematic map is presented in Figure 11 and the theme definition is presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Theme and theme definition for research question 3.

<i>What works and what changes are needed to support staff in their roles supporting young people who experience being NEET?</i>	
Theme	Theme definition
'You're only as strong as the team you're in'	This theme identifies factors which can facilitate and restrict the support that LA progression workers are able to offer and deliver to YP. Factors which facilitate support and are beneficial to them include continued professional development (CPD) opportunities, professional peer support and multiagency working. These factors suggest a desire to improve, both personally and collaboratively, for the benefit of the YP who use the service. There is an acknowledgement that professionals need to be willing to try different things, as a team, to trigger different, and improved outcomes. Progression workers identified factors which restrict their role, such as time restrictions, expectations and targets, which are primarily enforced by their funding bodies. Further suggestions to improve professional support offered to YP included employing more staff and being more flexible in terms of whether standardised or individualised support is offered.

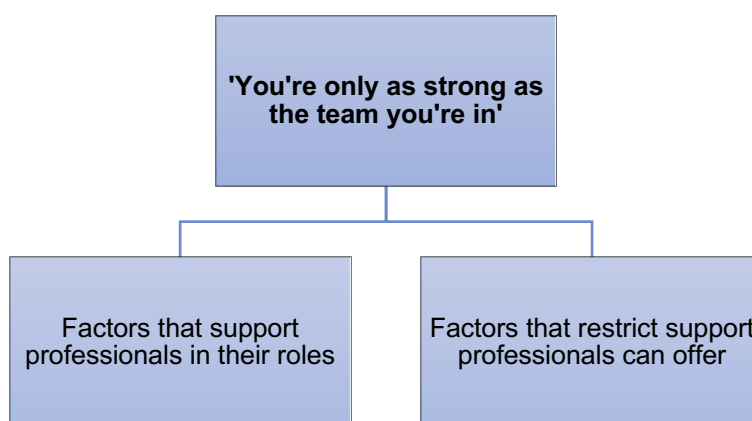


Figure 11. A thematic map for 'You're only as strong as the team you're in'.

Factors that support professionals in their roles

Progression workers were able to identify various factors which they felt enabled them to do their jobs and support YP who are experiencing or at-risk of being NEET. These factors included opportunities for CPD and collaborative relationships with other professionals.

Bridget: “I think it's also about...continuous professional development like you know you can only be as good as what you know”

Chloe: “A big thing which helps me especially...is the relationships they [YP] have with other professionals”

They also expressed gratitude to colleagues, placing value on the peer support they experience and the benefit of working within a varied team with different skill sets.

Daniel: “I found most of my support has come from other colleagues.”

Bridget: “I think everybody having like different personalities within the office as well is like massively important because we all have different skill sets...you’re only as strong as the team you in.”

Chloe: “We are a canny little team and we all do pull together, and you know if someone is struggling in one area, we’re there to help them out and vice versa yeah.”

Factors that restrict support professionals can offer

Progression workers also identified two factors which hinder the support they can offer YP: the expectations and targets imposed by funders and associated time pressures. The funding for the progression worker roles within this LA, comes from a European Union funding stream which imposes specific targets for re-engaging YP in EET. This seems to cause some tension for progression workers, who would rather take a more person-centred, individualised approach.

Max: “We are funded by the European fund, you have massive targets...we put the young person at the centre of our practice, we try to do that, but we’re always, always from a strategic management perspective, having to satisfy pay masters”

Max: “Over the last five to seven years it's been very target driven and, and the young people that we deal with are labour intensive and the two don't go together”

Bridget: “I think it can be exhausting as well can't it...but then the needs of the business have got to be met at the end of the day”

When considering how progression workers could enhance the support they offer, they suggested they would benefit from more staff, more time and offering more individualised support.

Chloe: “Get some more staff and reduce the caseloads”

Max: “I think time’s a key, key factor...I think we could do so much more if we were allowed the time to work with the young person”

Discussion

Factors that support progression workers in their roles included CPD opportunities, collaborating with different agencies and strong relationships with colleagues. Engaging in CPD opportunities enables workers to update their knowledge, reflect on what they know and what happens in their roles as well as collaborate with colleagues in a supportive way (de Vries et al., 2013). In relation to teacher participation in CPD, it has been suggested that CPD opportunities have the potential to change beliefs and attitudes, facilitate development of teaching skills and contribute towards the achievements and developments of their students (Rutherford et al., 2017). Although progression workers have a different role, there are overlaps in working with YP so it is plausible that these benefits of CPD would also be relevant, particularly the potential impact of CPD on their work with YP.

Participants identified peer support and collaboration with colleagues as beneficial to their roles, which is in-line with previous research (Li et al., 2022; Simbula et al., 2011). Multi-agency working has previously been identified as important in influencing the appropriate time and type of support given to vulnerable YP (Craig, 2009; Mallinson, 2009). However, in terms of working with YP who are NEET, uncertainty around the roles and responsibilities of professionals can impact the effectiveness of multi-agency working (Currie & Goodall, 2009). One potential cause for this uncertainty is the temporary nature of funding for roles/programmes which support YP in post-16 EET (Brown, 2021). It has been identified that there is a financial advantage when preventative measures are in place to support YP at-risk of becoming NEET, compared to reactive measures to re-engage YP with EET (Arnold & Baker, 2017; Audit Commission, 2010; Cockerill & Arnold, 2019). However, preventative measures can be regarded as more challenging to evaluate, less newsworthy, and therefore less attractive, to funders (Cockerill & Arnold, 2019). Participants expressed that the restrictive nature of their funding streams and the associated “massive

targets” (Max), limited their role as they are not able to provide the person-centred, flexible approach they would like to. It has previously been suggested that such targets limit the access disadvantaged YP have to support, as professionals can struggle to justify spending time and effort on YP who are disengaged and, therefore, won’t contribute to their targets or quotas (Arnold & Baker, 2012). A criticism of focusing on performance and meeting such targets, is that there is a lack of acknowledgement of the systemic factors influencing YP becoming NEET (Pemberton, 2008).

As with influences on YP, the factors discussed here also relate to the features of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The desire to engage in CPD opportunities relates to having a sense of competence, while strong collaborative and peer relationships addresses relatedness. The constraints posed by external funding requirements also result in a perceived lack of autonomy over their roles. These factors are all occurring within the macrosystem for a YP and therefore, impact not only the progression workers’ experience of their roles but YPs’ abilities to access the support they need (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Siraj et al., 2014).

3.5 Contribution of Findings to Existing Knowledge

The current findings highlight four areas which progression workers perceive to be influential and may contribute to YP experiencing being NEET: negative school experiences, inaccessibility of EET, individual factors and relationships. These findings support the adapted Ecological Systems Theory model, developed by Siraj et al. (2014) and they also reiterate the complexity of factors. The current findings build upon the adapted model, by triangulating the data with the real-world experiences of the progression workers. It is also suggested that a greater emphasis should be placed on YP’s experiences of relationships with adults. Rather than being a co-existing factor in the microsystem, relationships have been presented here as dominant, with the potential to influence other factors. The current research further expands on the knowledge base by identifying resilience factors which may support YP who experience being NEET, based on the experiences of progression workers who support YP to re-engage

with EET. These findings mirror the risk factors and can also be related to the adapted Ecological Systems Model (Siraj et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the current research highlights that factors which may be perceived as relating to an individual (e.g., attitudes to EET) are better understood within the context of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is suggested that the three facets of self-determination theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are further influenced by factors in the microsystem, rather than solely relating to the individual. The findings demonstrate that systemic factors interact simultaneously and the co-influential nature of interactions between factors are far more complex than previous research has suggested.

3.6 Summary

The current research identified four factors which progression workers consider to be important influences associated with YP becoming NEET. These factors are negative school experiences, individual factors, inaccessibility of EET and relationships. The factors can be considered as mutually influential, and it was suggested that relationships are an overarching theme which has the potential to impact and mediate other factors. When considering factors which support YP who are NEET, progression workers highlighted the importance of strong relationships with adults, using person-centred approaches, providing YP with opportunities and adults remaining hopeful. For progression workers themselves, ongoing CPD as well as peer support and collaborative relationships with other professionals were all identified as factors which support their role. The expectations and targets imposed by external funding bodies were identified as restrictive to the support progression workers can offer YP.

3.7 Limitations

The current research project was limited to a small group of professionals in the North-East of England. A future study could include a variety of professionals who work in this area to represent a wider range of views. This would be particularly beneficial in LAs where there is no progression worker role or a

different system in place to support YP who are at-risk or who do experience being NEET.

A focus of quantitative research is generalisability of data and it has been suggested that qualitative research is instead focused on exploring 'uniqueness' (Cohen et al., 2018). The use of qualitative methods in the current study could, therefore, be viewed as a limitation as it is not appropriate to generalise the findings more widely. However, the current findings offer transferability, rather than generalisability. Transferability suggests the results may be relevant or applicable to other LA contexts or services who support YP who experience being NEET. It is acknowledged that variation within the progression worker role, as well as potential differences due to a LA's geographical position and socio-political concerns, may themselves be factors which influence YP becoming NEET. However, from the outset the intention with the current research was to consider risk and supporting factors on a systemic level, hence using professionals as participants rather than YP. Therefore, the current findings may provide LAs, progression workers and EPs with some understanding of factors which may contribute to YP experiencing being NEET. They can be considered with the knowledge of local contexts and provide a foundation from which to develop further research. Similarly, reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used rather than a method which focuses more on an exploration of individual experiences, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2011; Willig, 2013).

A criticism of the focus group methodology is that they might elicit socially desirable responses from participants rather than accurately reflect their opinions (Barbour, 2018; Maxwell, 2012). Participants of the present study were a pre-existing group of colleagues, which may have lessened the impact of social pressure and ground rules were also established at the beginning to reduce the likelihood of this. However, to ensure this was not the case, individual semi-structured interviews could be conducted in future.

3.8 Implications for Educational Psychologists

The findings presented in the current research have the potential to impact EP practice in various ways. EPs utilise psychological skills, knowledge and understanding through five functions outlined in the Currie matrix: assessment, consultation, intervention, research and training (Fallon et al., 2010; Scottish Executive, 2002). The implications for future practice have been considered in relation to the Currie matrix in Figure 12.

Many of the suggestions made in Figure 12 are currently part of EP practice when working with YP of school age. However, the role of the EP and involvement in transition activities is significantly reduced at the post-16 level. EPs are well placed and appropriately trained to carry out such activities (outlined in Figure 12). For example, gathering YP's views is a long-standing interest of EPs (Atkinson et al., 2015). Working closely with YP and families to ensure outcomes are co-constructed is also a familiar aspect of the EP role and EPs regularly use person-centred techniques to support YP in planning next steps as well as personal construct and coaching psychology (Damali & Damali, 2019; Hayton, 2009). However, as EPs do not routinely work in post-16 areas, it has been suggested that EPs may benefit from further training on the range of employment pathways available to YP which could be facilitated by greater multi-agency working within LAs (Damali & Damali, 2019).

Figure 12. Areas of potential input for EPs with post-16 provision.

Assessment

- Appropriate assessment to support transition and ensure suitable support is identified
- Work with schools to identify YP at risk and contribute to processes to identify those at-risk

Consultation

- Explore YP's views around transitions
- Ensure YP are involved in planning, using a range of appropriate tools
- Support LA staff who work with NEET YP and provide supervision
- Use person-centred approaches to develop an understanding of YP's views and planning their futures (e.g., Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope)

Intervention

- Therapeutic support through facilitation of groups (e.g., anxiety, worries about transition)
- Continue to work with schools to ensure early intervention is in place for at-risk YP

Research

- Evaluation of transition processes currently in place, including gathering YP's perspectives
- Evaluation and monitoring of transition processes, particularly any changes made to preventative measures for those at-risk

Training

- Ongoing training with school staff to raise awareness around anxiety and worry, as well as challenges YP face which may put them at a higher likelihood of experiencing NEET
- Dissemination of current and ongoing research relevant to school and LA staff
- Develop links with other agencies who work with NEET YP to provide psychological input
- Promote an ethos of person-centred practice

3.9 Conclusions

The aim of the current research was to consider professionals' views of the factors which contribute towards YP becoming NEET. Further aims included identifying factors which help YP to re-engage with EET and how support LA professionals offer can be enhanced. Following a focus group with LA progression workers and a reflexive TA of the data, a range of intersecting risk factors were identified which contribute to YP becoming NEET. These were presented in the form of a model including negative school experiences, the inaccessibility of EET and individual circumstances, with relationships impacting all factors. In terms of support for YP who are NEET, participants reported that they benefit from strong relationships, person-centred approaches, opportunities, and adults around them who remain hopeful. Peer support and regular CPD opportunities were found to support progression workers in their roles whilst restrictions placed on them by external funding bodies were inhibitive. The current results highlight the importance of systemic factors when considering the reasons why YP experience being NEET as well as systemic changes that could contribute to positive outcomes and re-engaging YP with EET. EPs are well placed to use many of their existing skills to support YP, education staff and LA professionals who work in post-16 transitions.

Chapter 4: Reflective Synthesis

In this chapter I aim to provide a reflective account of the research skills I have developed as well as consider the impact of the research on my practice as a future qualified EP. I will consider the potential wider implications of this research and how I aim to disseminate my findings as well as limitations due to my role as a research practitioner.

4.1 Research Skills Relevant for Practice

Throughout the research process I have acquired and utilised various research skills which will be relevant to my practice as a qualified EP. The research process involved identifying an area of interest as well as establishing a rationale and research question (Willig, 2013). The SLR involved using databases to explore and search the wider literature, as well as selecting appropriate papers and synthesising the findings to address my own research question (Howitt & Cramer, 2020). These skills are relevant to EP practice, as we are regularly required to collect, and synthesise, information from a range of sources (e.g., schools, families, other professionals) to address a question. Often, we must work through the information to establish what the question is and identify methods to answer it.

During the reflexive thematic analysis, I kept a research journal, documenting my thoughts and ideas throughout the process. In doing so, I was able to explore my assumptions and biases which had the potential to influence my findings (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Being aware and curious about my assumptions is also an important aspect of EP practice and aligns with the ethical principles of respect and integrity (British Psychological Society, 2021).

Furthermore, flexibility and adaptability have been essential throughout the research process, which are both key skills for the EP role. I had initially considered talking to YP who are NEET and discussing their views and experiences. However, it proved difficult to make the research inviting for YP and there was little interest from YP themselves. This made me question whether I was the right person to be conducting

such research. Whilst I still believe that it is important to understand the views of YP, the difficulties I faced in recruiting YP highlights the outsider role of EPs. I was forced to acknowledge that whilst researching YP's views is important, EPs are well equipped but perhaps currently not best placed to access their views and we need to develop relationships with YP or work within their current support systems (e.g., progression workers, youth workers) to do so. Consequently, I was required to re-consider my approach and plan for my empirical research. This relates to the ethical principle of competence as I can identify an area of need but accept that other professionals may be better placed, at the current time, to conduct that piece of work. This is also an important area of practice as there may be cases where it is more appropriate to involve or signpost to other professionals.

4.2 Implications of the Research on My Practice

Throughout doctorate training, I have considered the importance of both research and practice-based evidence underpinning my own work (Fox, 2011). Conducting the SLR and empirical research has highlighted the importance of EPs being involved in research and continuing to evolve our role and practice based on this. Moving forward as a qualified EP, I want to ensure I stay up to date with relevant research but also contribute to the research base. I would like to do this through being involved in research activities within my LA.

During the focus group, one of the participants, Max, commented: "I think that if I was telling somebody that didn't know anything about NEETs, I would tell them to remain hopeful because they are, they're all worth a chance, they're all worth a couple of chances actually". This quote resonated with me and through writing up this research as well as my time on placement, I have held this comment in the forefront of my mind. At times I have felt lacking in hope; writing reports for YP who themselves lack hope, when I feel constrained by the system in which I practice and unable to offer the support I feel I should be able to give. It is often challenging to remain hopeful when collaborating with school staff who often appear to have written off or given up on YP. Although I recognise the constraints that school staff are under which may impact their personal values and wellbeing, as well as the support

they can provide. However, Max's statement has been a source of comfort and motivation. I chose to use it in the title of this thesis due to its importance to me and it summarises the key message I would like to convey about YP who are NEET. I wholeheartedly agree that all YP are worth a chance and the findings of the empirical research highlight the importance of strong, supportive adults, who remain hopeful. I will use this to motivate me in my own practice and with individuals who I work with, but I also feel motivated to do what I can to share appropriate research and contribute to systemic changes for the benefit of all YP.

As an applied EP, I feel that it is important to share the knowledge and understanding I have developed because of the current research. I intend on disseminating the current findings in various ways. I have agreed that I will feedback the empirical results with the wider team of progression workers in the LA where the research was conducted. I will also deliver a presentation to EPs within the service and share with them my suggestions for next steps, on both an individual and organisational level. I hope to publish my findings in academic research journals, such as Educational Psychology in Practice or British Journal of Educational Studies. I will seek to publish in journals with a diverse readership as I feel that an understanding of this area, and the potential role of the EP, is needed amongst a range of educational professionals, as well as EPs.

4.3 Wider Implications of the Research

Following on from the current research, further exploration is needed regarding the views of YP and their ideas about how to improve post-16 transition processes. The Children's and Families Act (2014) states that LAs should consider the views, wishes and feelings of YP but also that their views should influence decision-making. To listen to their views but not include them, or facilitate changes based on their views, would be merely tokenistic (Hart, 1992). EPs have the skills and resources to develop an understanding of YP's views as it is already a significant part of their role (Damali & Damali, 2019). However, EP services are currently struggling to meet service level agreement (SLA) demands on top of statutory workloads. It is difficult to

comprehend, therefore, how EPs could currently have the capacity to develop their work with the 16-25 age range.

It has been acknowledged that EPs have a unique role as applied psychologists and are well placed to trigger organisational changes (Boyle & Lauchlan, 2009; Cameron, 2006). It has been suggested that EPs do so by using knowledge of psychological theory to inform their practice within educational contexts (Campbell & Green, 2022). EPs must, therefore, support and engage with research, as well as promote it through their practice and through the core functions of the EP role (consultation, training, assessment, intervention, research). Within the profession it is acknowledged that EPs must be flexible and reconstruct, reformulate and refocus their role, based on the ever-changing socio-political context (Fallon et al., 2010). The current research suggests there is a role here for the EP and there are systemic changes which EPs could be involved in to improve the outcomes and post-16 transition experiences for YP. In 2009, Gersch commented that 'educational psychology requires a stronger voice to those in government...there is currently little acknowledgement in government circles of the potential value of involving and funding EPs' (2009, p. 17). Following legislative changes (Department for Education, 2015), the EP role was extended to include working with YP up to the age of 25, yet nearly a decade after these changes, and Gersch's comments, it appears there has been little change. EPs are in a challenging position where their role is not fully understood or utilised by current government policies and so within the current context it is difficult to enact systemic change on a national level.

After publication of a green paper and subsequent consultations, the government has recently announced their intention to publish guidance to support effective transitions 'between all stages of education and into employment and adult services' (Department for Education, 2023, p. 11). However, they have not outlined who will be involved in the development of this guidance. The government has also outlined a role for an Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce, which includes speech and language therapists, youth workers, mental health therapists and youth justice workers. The exclusion of EPs from these areas suggests that the EP role and our potential impact remains misunderstood by policy makers.

The findings presented in this thesis are pertinent considering a recent suggestion, by current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, that YP should study mathematics until the age of 18 (Francis et al., 2023). Although findings from the SLR suggest there is an association between educational attainment and NEET status, it is acknowledged that risk factors are unlikely to exist in isolation. Further risk factors identified through the SLR, and empirical research, include attitudes towards education, behavioural difficulties, negative school experiences, individual factors, the inaccessibility of EET and relationships with others. It is suggested that these factors have the potential to impact each other, as well as NEET outcomes. Consequently, the current findings suggest that targeting one area (e.g., educational attainment), without acknowledging or addressing the others, is likely to have minimal impact. Similarly, the over-reliance on minimum grades in mathematics and English, was identified as a barrier to progression on apprenticeships and further education courses.

There are various ways EPs could enact change based on the findings of the SLR and empirical research. Without wider government support or funding, this may mean individual LAs and EPs taking steps to address factors which contribute towards YP becoming NEET. For example, EPs who have SLAs with secondary schools could work together to identify YP who may be at-risk and develop training and intervention packages to support YP. EPs could also seek to attend reviews of Education, Health and Care Plans for those approaching the post-16 transition, from year 9 onwards. Through attending such reviews, or when working with individuals identified as at-risk, EPs could ensure that appropriate time and planning is given to the four outcomes of Preparing for Adulthood (paid employment, good health, independent living, community inclusion; 2013). This would also be an opportune time to use person-centred tools to support YP to express their views and wishes for the future, such as Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH; Pearpoint et al., 1993). As well as providing YP with autonomy over their decisions and the planning, a PATH is also intended to involve adults who can support YP on their journey and to meet their goals. As an example, this piece of work would then target three of the risk factors which may influence YP becoming NEET (relationships, negative school experiences and the inaccessibility of EET; see Figure 9).

Given the context for EPs and restrictions on time, it may be that we are well placed to deliver training to other educational professionals who can facilitate person-centred approaches, such as a PATH. Person-centred tools and approaches could be used by professionals who work closely with YP who are NEET, or at-risk, such as progression workers. EPs are well trained and positioned to develop transition programmes at the post-16 level. These could be research based and either delivered by EPs or other educational staff, with training provided by EPs. Training and intervention are both aspects of the EP role outlined in the Currie matrix (Scottish Executive, 2002). This would mirror transition support EPs offer at earlier educational stages, such as with the Smart Moves programme between Key Stage 2 and 3 (Watling, 2018).

4.4 Limitations

Whilst conducting this research, I was on placement in a LA EP service. I have seen first-hand the difficulties EPs face in delivering SLA work due to funding demands and time pressures due to an increased statutory workload. I acknowledge that this may have influenced my approach to this research and my interpretation of the data. I am also aware that I have approached this research with an assumption that generally YP benefit from engaging in EET, which may be influenced by my own participation in further and higher education. Although this is also backed by research (e.g., Arnold & Baker, 2012; Gregg & Tominey, 2005), it does not account for individual situations and aspirations. Whilst these can be considered limitations, they also contributed to my decision to use reflexive TA. Reflexive TA acknowledges the researcher as an active participant in the process and that they bring biases and assumptions based on their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By engaging with reflexive TA and keeping a reflexive journal throughout the process, I sought to be aware of my position and limit the impact of my experiences and biases.

4.5 Summary

Through this chapter I have reflected on the research skills I can embed in my practice as an EP and the influence this research has had on me. I have considered how I will disseminate the research findings and potential wider ramifications for EPs

in the current socio-political context. The research has highlighted the importance of early identification of risk factors and intervention prior to the post-16 transition. This is a significant area of interest which I believe will shape my future practice with YP in the lead up to post-16 transitions and beyond.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet



Newcastle University

School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to take part in a research study: *What experiences contribute to young people becoming categorised as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)?*

Thank you for your interest in taking part. This information sheet aims to give you a summary of the purpose of the study and details about taking part.

Please read this document carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

- The study is being conducted by Zoe Dodd of the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University.
- This project is supervised by Dr Rachel Hayton, Academic & Professional Tutor at the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University.
- This study aims to explore the views of professionals who work alongside young people who are NEET and the factors which they feel have contributed to people becoming NEET.
- If you agree to take part, you will be asked to attend a focus group with the researcher, Zoe Dodd, and a small group of participants to discuss your experiences of working with young people who are NEET and consider the factors you think lead young people to becoming NEET. The focus group should last around 45 minutes – 1 hour.
- Once the research is completed, you will have the option to receive a summary of its findings via email or post. The researcher will also arrange to feedback the findings to you, if that is something you are interested in.
- You are free to decide if you want to take part or not. If you agree to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time for any reason. You can also choose not to answer any questions asked in the interview.
- To ensure accurate recording of your answers, the focus group will be audio-recorded. This recording will be kept in a secure, password-protected

folder and tagged with an anonymous ID number. Identifying information, e.g., your name and contact details, will be kept separately, meaning that anyone with access to the recordings will not be able to identify you. These recordings will be deleted after the research is complete. Your contact details will only be kept so that you can withdraw your data from the study at any time up until the data collection is complete, and for sending out the research summary at the end. You will not be identified in any report or publication resulting from this research.

- Your data will be managed under UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Only the minimum personally identifiable information will be used.
- You can find out more about how Newcastle University uses your information at <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/data.protection/PrivacyNotice> and/or by contacting Newcastle University's Data Protection Officer (Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk).
- This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences Ethics Committee at Newcastle University (Date of approval: 27/06/2022)
- If you have any questions about this research, please contact me on z.i.dodd1@newcastle.ac.uk.
- My supervisor can be contacted at rachel.hayton@newcastle.ac.uk

If you would like to take part in this research, please sign and return the Declaration of Informed Consent and email me at z.i.dodd1@newcastle.ac.uk stating that you are interested. I will then get in touch with you to arrange dates and times to meet for the interview.

Many thanks again for your interest in taking part in this research. I hope to hear from you soon.

Zoe Dodd

Trainee Educational Psychologist and Doctoral Student

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

Declaration of Informed Consent

- I agree to participate in this study, the purpose of which is to explore professional's views regarding factors which have contributed to their status as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).
- I declare that I have understood the nature and purpose of the research.
- I have read the participant information sheet and understand the information provided.
- I have been informed that I may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study, at any point, without penalty of any kind.
- I have been informed that all my responses will be kept confidential and secure, and I will not be identified in any report or other publication resulting from this research.
- I have been informed that the researcher will answer any questions regarding the study and its procedures. The researcher's email is z.i.dodd1@newcastle.ac.uk and they can be contacted at any time. The research supervisor can be contacted at rachel.hayton@newcastle.ac.uk.
- I will be provided with a copy of this form for my records.

Any concerns about this study should be addressed to the School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences Ethics Committee, Newcastle University via email to ecls.researchteam@newcastle.ac.uk

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

Category of question	Question	Prompts
Opening questions	1. Can you tell us your name, role and how long you have worked in the service	
Key questions	2. What do you think are the factors that contribute towards young people becoming NEET? 3. Of those factors that you have discussed, which do you think you, as professionals, can have most influence on? 4. What changes could be made to improve the support offered to young people at risk of being NEET?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you seen an impact of educational attainment on NEET status? If so, how? • Have you seen an association of behavioural difficulties on NEET status? If so, how? • Have you seen any association between young people's attitudes towards education and NEET status? • What is working well in terms of the support you can offer NEET young people?
Ending questions	5. Imagine there was a person here who didn't know a lot about young people who are NEET or their experiences, what do you think it would be important for them to know? 6. Is there anything else you would like to add or talk about which hasn't been covered?	