

Title:

An investigation of NEET young people's outcomes in a community setting.

Project summary

This research is about NEET (Not in education, employment or training) young people in North Manchester. This research explores a particular community Prince's Trust program that aims to assist young people back into Education, Employment and Training. Since the collapse of the Social Exclusion Unit in 2011, services have been withdrawn and the state has been increasingly dependant on communities and neighbourhood in responding to the problem of young people's social exclusion (Pilkington et al, 2018), with the levels of 'NEET' young people increasing each year (17.5% in 2017 /11.5% in 2010, DfE, 2017). Groups such as the Princes Trust have attempted to help NEET young people to build networks between the local job market, the community and training providers since services such as Connexions and Educational Maintenance Allowance have been withdrawn by central government in 2011 (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013).

This project uses ethnographic methods in observing and documenting six months worth of the activities concerning this group, followed by three months of follow-up semi structured interviews, collected from the narratives of fourteen young people (aged 16-24), seven youth and community workers with a series of stakeholders such as partner voluntary organisations and work experience providers. The thesis utilises a theoretical conceptual framework that questions the attainment of working class young people's social capital and their outcomes of education employment or training post completion of program. Limited research has so far emerged on young people's social capital and social exclusion in recent times (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2015; MacDonald, 2017).

This project aims to explore how NEET young people's social networks are accessed and constructed in community settings. The second aim is to see how these networks (including youth workers, local job market, NEET peers) impact on transitioning into EET (Education, Employment or Training) status once the program is completed.

Simmons and Thomson (2011) have suggested that de-industrialisation processes have had an adverse affect on social mobility in locations where predominantly working class young people live, which only furthers isolation, precarity and social exclusion. The town in which this research is situated has experienced economic decline over the last 40 years due to the closure of local manufacturing and industrial activity. Consequently, Wigfield (2001) argues that the loss of an industrial base has resulted in working class young people losing their sense of belonging to their community. This has been reflected through policy outputs addressing isolation and social exclusion of young people (Wigfield and Alden, 2017; Savage, 2008), such as the creation of the Social Exclusion Unit, established to encourage social mobility and tackle social exclusion (Walker and Wigfield, 2004). However, since this state support has been rescinded, the strategy of local organisations tackling NEET status needs to be re-examined in both academic research and policy.

Conceptual framework

This project will methodologically utilise ethnographic approaches in understanding how social exclusion and NEET status is understood directly from young people themselves and how projects community projects offer a platform to create potential social capital networks. In doing this the research will map young people's experiences of unemployment and social exclusion experiences throughout the program and their narratives of NEET status and social exclusion once the program is completed. This project will be utilising a multi-faceted conceptual framework of social capital, communities and social exclusion. In order to understand how this framework operates as a conceptual toolkit, Elias (2001: 19) maintains that: "*it is necessary to give up thinking in terms of single, isolated substances and to start thinking in terms of relationships and functions*". This

theoretical framework will help explore the lived reality of young people who are attempting to re-enter education, employment or training. More specifically, Boeck (2009) suggests that social interactions, networks and links with institutions shape young people's social capital. Putnam's (1993, 2000) interpretation of social capital with social exclusion literature has been critiqued. The formulation of social capital through bridging (community organisations), bonding (families and neighbourhood) and linking (social policy, government initiatives) disregards how meaningful networks are built with outside agencies and how this may be of benefit for a socially excluded young person in a particular community (Ryan, 2016).

Therefore, this research will consist of the following research questions:

1. To investigate whether social capital networks built between community organisations and NEET young people increases the chances of re-entering the labour market or participation in further education, training or vocational destinations?
2. To what extent can social capital networks built during the program challenge young people's NEET status?
3. To examine how community stakeholders and local organizations help NEET young people arrive at EET (employment, education or training) destinations since the collapse of the Social Exclusion Unit.

Research design and methodology

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3) suggests the ethnographic turn: *"Involves the researcher participating [...] in people's daily lives for an extending period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents etc."* In this project I will be empirically investigating a six month Prince's Trust program in North Manchester utilising ethnographic methods, followed by a further three months of semi-structured interviewing with key community stakeholders such as partner job searching organisations, family members and work experience providers.

In my role as a researcher, I have negotiated full access to this program and the young people involved (see application support document).

During the program, an initial recruitment period of 6-8 weeks is needed with partner organisations in order to resource young people identified as NEET in the local area. I will be observing this period and interviewing such key stakeholders on their accounts of how such young people are identified and the factors of social exclusion that potentially limit young people in transitioning into the further education or training. Once the young people are identified, an induction program is held in the first week, which I will be part of. My role as the researcher will assume an overt role, to observe how job searching activities, work experience placements, and employability training from youth and community workers help build social capital networks with the young people. In the first few weeks (2-4), I will be following the young people as they construct CVs and write job applications from the skills acquired during formal workshops. During weeks 5-8 I will observe the young people conduct a work experience placement, which is supported by the programs youth and community workers to give a realistic grounding and knowledge of the local job market and economy. This exercise will give an insightful account of how young people have build horizontal networks with employers outside their locality, and how these experience may avail further sources of social capital to the young people involved. Weeks 9-11 will be dedicated to observing the young people take part in a community challenge, that is set by the Princes Trust in order to demonstrate how potential networks and organisation skills have helped the young people 'give back' to a local charity in their community. With agreement from the program directors, young people will have the option of mapping their social network with 'sociograms' and 'body mapping' social capital. The

method of sociograms has previously been used by researchers such as Ryan et al (2015) in seeing how migrant communities develop and maintain networks and sources of capital, which will be helpful in seeing how the young people's social capital networks have developed throughout the program. Due to program time constraints, young people only have 12 weeks of intense engagement with the program, so I am aware that the social capital networks built during the program may be brief for some. However, the networks made by previous participants with the local job market and people outside of their community appears to be successful. Therefore, once the program is completed, the following three months will be accompanied by individual semi-structured interviews with both the 14 young people and youth and 7 community professionals. Other stakeholders such as placement providers from the local job market, professionals from local referral agencies and partnership schools will be interviewed to see how social capital is networked between the local community, policy and key stakeholders, and how these networks are built and maintained by the young people.

➤ Project timetable:

Year one:

	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	April-Jul	Aug-Oct
Revisiting proposal proposal/ethical approval (ESRC workshops etc)				
Literature review				
Initial contact with organisation				
Second wave of contact - Necessary training with organisation				
Second wave of contact - Participant profiling – organisational sampling.				
Suprvisories (Start of each month)				

Year two:

	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	April-Jul	Aug-Oct
Revisit literature review				
Ethnogrphic work with organisation				
Interviewing young people/ youth workers. Pre-outcome/ program.				
Transcription				
Analysis				
Follow up interviewing young people post completion (outcome destination)				
Interviews with work experience providers/ job coaches/ and young people's imediate networks of support (if obtainable)				

Suprvisorios (Start of each month)				
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Year three:

	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	April-Jul	Aug-Oct
Revisit literature review				
Transcription				
Analysis				
Write up				
Networkworking conference emerging presentation of findings/ publication development				
Suprvisorios				
Viva prep				

➤ Ethical considerations:

The project will seek ethical approval through the University of Sheffield’s ethical committee and adhere to such guidelines. The research will aim to obtain written informed consent from the individuals who participate and any partner organisations. The Princes Trust manager has agreed to act as a gatekeeper to accessing young people with NEET status. I will partake in the organisations safeguarding program. I will also ensure British Sociological Association and ESRC ethical integrity guidelines and training are fully adhered to. Issues such as confidentiality, participant information, identification of participants/ pseudo names will all need to be considered before the conduct of any empirical work.

➤ Methodological positioning:

This research is a continuation of a tradition in sociological literature that utilises ethnographic methods in exploring the lived experiences of young working class lives. Skeggs (2011: 498) ethnographic work looked at how working class communities are divided and loose sense of belonging through education attainment. McKenzie (2015) also utilised ethnographic methods to understand how working class people challenge precarity and social mobility in their communities through ties of parenthood, friendship networks and the lived experiences of St Ann’s Council Estate in Nottingham. Moreover, Simmons et al (2014) work on NEET young people utilised an E2E (entry to employment) initiative using ethnographic methods to uncover risk factors of being NEET, gender inequalities in the job market and the importance of community and families in transitioning towards EET destinations. MacDonald and Marsh (2005) have also used ethnographic methods from a social capital approach, arguing that NEET young people maintain social capital networks with the help of the local community and local organisations that are designed to support young people.

My own ethnographic lens and curiosity has been sparked by my experiences of being a young working class person growing up on one of Europe’s largest and deprived council estates in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, and my undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation, which I

utilised ethnographic methods in both. Growing up I came to realise the community I lived in is saturated in stories of under-achievement of young people. I was once a NEET young person myself and have had to overcome disability related issues as well as poverty. I was told by Social Exclusion Unit service that University wouldn't be for me and I '*would be lucky to even be accepted for a job at Tesco*'. It was help by a community organisation and motivation from certain family members that helped me to tackle my own social exclusion. This has ignited a passion to understand the problematic outcomes of young people in similar situation and to mine, and an interest in the empowerment of communities and their young people.

My undergraduate dissertation explored the role performative drug use amongst working class young people and how this impacted on their sense of belonging to a de-industrialised North Manchester town, for which I won the MMU Jonathan Harvey memorial prize for outstanding achievement in research methods (£250). My postgraduate dissertation looked at the role of the voluntary sector in the probation service, whereby I utilised my experiences of volunteering at a probation centre in North Manchester helping young people in the Criminal Justice System find suitable employment or training from an auto-ethnographic prospective. My own role as a researcher is influenced by practice in voluntary youth organisations that consisted of young people who had predominantly been at risk of social exclusion because of family histories, neighbourhood and negative relationships with schooling. It was rewarding to see young people enter their first job or carrying on in education. Academia has given me a platform to highlight these issues to a range of audiences, which I hope will be enriched through this PhD project. My previous role as a senior research assistant carried out from 2014-2015 at the Manchester Metropolitan University on a FP7 EU project, explored young peoples unemployment trajectories in the UK and Europe. This has also helped shape some of the questions around social exclusion, which appears to be pan-European issue in both research and policy.

Contribution to Sociological Studies

This project has the potential to make an original contribution to research in Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. As already established limited research has emerged that challenges social exclusion in working class communities from a creative social capital approach. From my understanding, Prof Louise Ryan and colleagues have extensively researched Early School Leaving, NEET status and innovative new approaches to social capital in marginalised communities. Along with this Dr Andrea Wigfield has extensively researched social isolation and exclusion in the labour market. Such insight would enrich the PhD project, and with my forward planning and passion for research bring the PhD to a successful completion. I have also previously researched young people's social exclusion and have had some success with academic outputs.

Some of these policy concerns have been highlighted in a peer-reviewed publication I written for Youth and Policy Journal earlier in 2017. This research highlighted that a social problem has now arisen as increasing number of young people in precarious or NEET destinations are retreating from welfare or disengaging with limited government funded social mobility programs, thereby becoming 'hidden' or 'unknown' (Wrigley, 2017). These matters will be raised further in a forthcoming paper at the annual British Sociological Association Conference 2018, which I have been invited to as part of the Sociology of Education steam.

I feel this new approach with the help of this supervisory team would add to the research culture here at Sheffield and contribute to the overall research impact in the department. With this contribution, I feel I have the potential to be a successful prize scholarship/ research funded student.

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