

Different NEETs, different needs?

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IMPACT

Objective

The main objective of this dissertation is to explain why some vulnerable young people in society are more likely to become Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) as compared with others. The NEETs concept is relevant for policy makers because NEETs are less well integrated in society and are at greater risk of long-term socioeconomic marginalization, criminal careers, unwanted pregnancies, social rejection, and serious mental and physical health issues. Subsequently, these consequences could also affect their families and the society as a whole.

While the concept of NEETs is often used in policies and academic research to identify the share of young people who are disengaged from the labour market *and* education or training, the concept is also criticized because of its vagueness. For instance, it is mistakenly confused with only joblessness or labour market discouragement, it is lumping different subgroups together, and it is often viewed as an indicator for a social group. However, reasons to be NEET could relate to different experiences, and NEETs can have very different characteristics. Moreover, not all NEETs are equally vulnerable for the long-term consequences. To overcome most of these critiques, I decided to look at three specific groups of vulnerable young people, namely young people with low literacy levels, young mothers and early school-leavers. I analyse this taking two different perspectives: the macro perspective (how institutions frame the risk to become NEET) and the meso and micro perspective (how family resources protect individuals to become NEET).

Main conclusions

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from this dissertation. The first conclusion is that skills are very important in preventing early school-leaving and becoming NEET. The second conclusion is that financial resources are important in preventing early school-leaving and becoming NEET. The third conclusion is that although we could not do hard causal analysis, our results suggest that it probably will be very hard to re-integrate young people with policy once they are NEET. These conclusions are relevant for academic research because I provide additional evidence on the underlying reasons why certain vulnerable young people are more likely to become NEET, and how the underlying mechanisms work. In addition, the results are also particularly relevant for policy makers.

Lessons for policy makers

Reducing the number of NEETs is an important social challenge in most European societies and the Netherlands. While some policies, for instance (enabling) Active

Labour Market Policies, seem effective in reducing general NEET rates, I find that this does not benefit one of the most vulnerable groups: young people with low literacy skills. There could be several reasons why policy interventions do not reach these more vulnerable groups of young people. First, if the urge for policy makers is to reduce the overall number of NEETs in a country, this could cause an incentive to focus first on the ones with the least problematic problems rather than the ones that are most vulnerable. Second, those most at risk may not always be aware of their need of extra help.

Related to this, policy makers should be aware that there are no cheap solutions for these problems. Take the example of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC). Previous research has shown that especially the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education is important for skills development at early ages. My research shows that good and affordable ECEC is important to prevent young mothers to become NEET. However, good quality and affordable ECEC is expensive.

My findings show that low skills levels and low financial resources are important factors to explain NEET and early school-leaving. Since the vulnerable NEETs and early school-leavers are often facing multiple problems to integrate in society, I suggest that a more integral and personalised programme would be most optimal. For young people who are NEET, and thus do not have access to learning opportunities at work or school, I suggest that for instance a neighbourhood coach could help. This professional worker could use different sets of tools to not only help the young people with their skill development, but also with other problems that prevent a successful integration in society. To prevent early school-leaving, I suggest a personalized programme for students at risk. For example, a buddy programme with a role model (e.g., an older student) that makes young people aware of the long-term beneficial impact of certain choices at an early age. At the same time, my research shows that the parents play a major role in educational decision making. Therefore it is important to also improve parental involvement, e.g. by organising parental meetings to improve their understanding about how the education system works and what the advantages of extra schooling are. Subsequently, this may substitute the negative effects of having low-skilled parents or living in low-income families.

Dissemination activities

I will inform researchers and policy makers about the conclusions of this dissertation. In fact, I already presented during my PhD preliminary results on several international and national conferences, an activity that I plan to continue in the future. Furthermore, I also have shared and will share my research by publishing in peer-reviewed international journals. **Chapter 2** ‘The Low Skills trap: The Failure of Education and Social Policies in Preventing Low-Literate Young People from being Long-Term NEET’ is already published in the Journal of Youth Studies. A preliminary version of **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3** are published in the ROA Research Memorandum. In the

near future, the other chapters presented in this dissertation will also be submitted to high-ranking peer-reviewed journals. To reach a wider audience I will also share my findings on social media.

This dissertation is part of the project ‘Understanding NEETS. Individual and institutional determinants of youth inactivity in France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom’. Beside the chapters of my dissertation, I also wrote three chapters for the main publication of this project *‘The dynamics of marginalized youth: Not in education, employment, or training around the world’*²⁴ to describe a general overview of cross-national comparisons of NEETs related to education systems, labour market policies and family policies.

²⁴ Levels, M., Brzinsky-Fay, C., Holmes, C., Jongbloed, J., & Taki, H. (2022). *The dynamics of marginalized youth: Not in education, employment, or training around the world*. Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group.