Learning providers’ work with NEET young people

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of the relationship between learning providers and young people who have experienced Not being in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) on the latters’ agency development. Agency is defined as not only bounded but generated by intra-action with relations of force (Coffey and Farrugia 2014), including learning providers themselves. Providers facilitate the development of individual agency in the form of self-esteem and motivation. However, they also support activation into the labour market and, in doing so, add barriers and challenges to established institutional structures and personal boundaries. Emotional labour strategies utilised by learning providers reveal the potentially negative impact of their values, backgrounds and experiences.

Key words: activation, agency, learning providers, relationships with youths

Introduction

The study of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) is commonly contextualised within concepts of isolation, risk (Lumby 2012) and
individualisation (de Graaf and van Zenderen 2013). As Coffey and Farrugia (2014) highlight, within these discourses young people’s agency is frequently explored, though the concept remains ambiguous. This paper considers how the work of learning providers engaged with NEET young people contributes to or hinders the development of agency. The approach is intended to contrast with research on NEET young people that focuses on their problems. This focus is linked to policy changes since 1988, which removed the category of youth unemployment and instituted ‘NEET’ as an individual problem (Thompson 2011, Simmons and Thompson 2011). The adoption of ‘NEET’ as the policy label was supposed to avoid value-laden associations of previously used descriptions such as ‘Status 0’ but has since come to be associated with neo-liberal approaches (Simmons et al. 2014), in particular to reduce ‘dependency’ and increase labour market participation. Emphasising the supply side almost exclusively, these approaches have far-reaching implications for young people in particular when transitioning or attempting to transition into the world of work. The affected group has grown with the raising of the participation age in education (Maguire 2013) and the extension of the NEET category to include not only 16 to 18-year olds but also those up to the age of 24 (Simmons et al. 2014a).

The homogenising effect of utilising the term ‘NEET’ is well established but there are common themes and issues experienced by young people labelled in this way. The contentiousness of the term is only in part due to the absence of ‘socially desirable’ characteristics (Nudzor 2010). As Simmons et al. (2014a) have shown, youths whose educational and employment trajectories are not linear do not all have problematic circumstances and may have good levels of education. Common polarisation between high and low achievers ignores the
‘ordinary middle’ and simplifies the problems young people face (Roberts 2012). With demand-side and structural complexities, especially in areas with a previously strong manufacturing base, youths may have “low expectations rather than low aspirations” (Simmons et al. 2014b, 584). The absence of training and employment opportunities does not mean that youths are entirely disengaged. Developing Brown’s (1987) concept of ‘alienated instrumentalism, Roberts (2012) shows that phases or aspects of disengagement can form part of ‘normal’ but ambivalent transitions into the labour market. A high proportion of NEET young people have experiences of education, training and employment. They are, in addition, often ‘churned’ through a plethora of alternative provisions, usually aimed at enhancing employability. The range and quality of such provision will be discussed below but because the outcome is not necessarily that youths settle into training or employment, there is no automatic end to their NEET status. Moreover, small-scale providers such as those involved in this research often end up with more complex cases because easy-to-place youths are ‘creamed off’ via involvement in large-scale schemes such as the (now abandoned) Youth Contract. Negative experiences with education, training and employment, including repeated participation in alternative provisions, are likely to dispirit young people (Simmons et al. 2014b). For these reasons, youths who are engaged in the learning provision discussed in this paper were often still referred to as ‘NEET young people’. Such labelling may involve problematic assumptions about the future trajectories of young people, which are discussed as one influence on agency development.

In the following two sections, the issue of young people’s agency, including a discussion of the literature suggesting a range of definitions of agency, and the
(alternative) provisions of learning providers will be outlined. The latter explores how an emotional labour framework helps to understand the aims and quality of provisions. Following this, a methodology section outlines why and how the research was undertaken. The presentation of results focuses on two areas: first, how emotional work aids the building of strong and durable relationships between young people and providers. The second focus is on the constraints to agency journeys, including a discussion of the potential barriers that learning providers themselves pose.

**Young people’s agency**

Much has been made of the problem of individualisation for youths. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) for example argue that crises are not seen as structural and therefore outside of the control of individuals but instead considered as individual failings, thus reinforcing the supply-side approach promoted by successive UK governments. Evans (2002, 2007) establishes this social determinism vs. individualisation nexus as the first of three dimensions of her structure-agency schema, with the second relating to the locus of control and the third dealing with social mobility. Taking the middle ground between the influences of structures including class, gender and/or ethnicity on the one hand and personal agency on the other, Evans (2002, 262-3) develops the concept of ‘bounded agency’, which “recognizes socially situated agency” and involves “the dynamics of multiple, interlocking sociobiographical journeys in a social terrain”. In using the journey metaphor it is suggested that agency is developed gradually and through experience. This approach is expanded in Evans’ (2007,
88) definition of agency as “a process of social engagement” which builds on the past, imagines the future, and contextualises the present. For young people, it is not always possible to have personal control (Evans’ second dimension of the structure-agency schema) of such processes rather than being subjugated to the external environment. Despite belief in having personal agency (De Graaf and van Zenderen 2013) self-determination can be constrained by personal characteristics and circumstances, local contexts and by structures such as workfare requirements and the conditionality of social assistance. Lahusen et al. (2013) show that for unemployed youth across Europe, individual responsibility is emphasised and social rights are subordinated to the functioning of the free market. Despite promises of ‘choice for all’, those at a structural disadvantage may have little freedom to choose anything other than fulfilling the required responsibilities (Duckworth and Cochrane 2012).

Evans’ (2002, 2007) concept of bounded agency has been critiqued, ontologically, for not clarifying what agency is, and conceptually, for utilising it to elucidate different facets of youths’ lives (Coffey and Farrugia 2014). Coffey and Farrugia themselves start out with a very broad definition of agency in which they refer to active subjectivity, intentional action, decision-making and self-expression (2014, 462). This chimes with the UK Coalition Government’s policy (Hutchinson et al. 2015) which expects young people to develop ‘good characters’ that are independent and autonomous (Brooks 2013) in particular in developing their employability (Lahusen et al. 2013). Positioning young people as developing and dutiful citizens (Brooks 2013) is a continuation of the workfarist approach to youth unemployment adopted by successive UK governments. The explicit supply-side orientation puts further pressure on NEET
young people to develop their agency and ‘take control of their lives’ (Evans, 2002). What is neglected in such schemes is the inter-relationships between agency and structure as espoused by Coffey and Farrugia (2014) and which have lead to young adults’ lives being described as precarious (MacDonald 2011) and NEET young people as part of the precariat (Furlong et al. 2012).

Coffey and Farrugia (2014, 470) develop further our understanding of what agency is and how it might evolve for young people when they define agency as “a generative process not located within the individual subject, but comprised in intra-action with relations of force – the outcomes of which cannot be known in advance”. Individuals’ agency in this sense envelops elements from different experiences, structures and practices and may result in reproductions of existing inequalities as well as resistance to structural or institutional elements. The agency process thus thrives on or responds to “diverse forms of social interaction, new events and changing circumstances” which Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000, 594) have referred to as central to allow learning to occur. This understanding of agency therefore directly relates individuals’ personal journey (including learning), their social interactions and their structural and institutional contexts. The following discussion focuses on social interaction and social relationships of young people as well as their agency development.

The socialisation of youths within peer groups has been investigated in some depth (see inter alia Gunter and Watt 2009; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006) but relationships with adults are also essential parts of education and development. Parents are important identity formation partners for adolescents (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman 2010) and can provide encouragement, information and active
involvement when it comes to NEET young people finding their way into education, training or employment (Simmons et al. 2014, Russell et al. 2011). However, parents may also be part of the problem for some NEET young people (Wilson et al. 2008), especially where there are issues with care responsibilities or substance abuse in the home. Relationships are also developed with teachers, though this is often compromised by the (at times understandable) absence of personal attention in large classes (Thompson 2011), which can lead to aggressive responses, physical or psychological removal from the relationship (Lumby 2012). Such difficulties mean that whilst NEET young people have relationships with adults, these are not necessarily positive. This paper questions what impact the building of solid relationships, in this case with learning providers, may have on the agency process. The argument focuses on the quality of relationships and with that on the emotions invested in building relationships.

The work of learning providers

The range of departments and institutions responsible for NEET young people is likely to result in diverse individual experiences (Hutchinson et al. 2015) and involve engagement with different organisations and support systems (PHE 2014). These include school-based advisors, colleges, employers, national schemes as well as issue-based support including social workers or the youth offending team. The range of experiences may make NEET young people jaded to establishing a personal relationship with yet another service provider. To achieve engagement, learning providers undertake a range of activities, often
working with small groups “in classrooms and workshops with one-to-one coaching, group activities and discussions; through e-learning, work placements, external visits, outdoor pursuits, and volunteering activities” (Russell et al. 2010, 3). The main aim is to complete a short course (12 weeks) or an NVQ¹ level 1 programme centred on general employability skills, i.e. numeracy, literacy and soft skills, though some providers offer industry specific qualifications. Providers’ general employability courses justify critique as supply-side oriented and without consideration of broader influences on individuals’ ability to obtain a job or progress in their career (McQuaid et al. 2005). A number of providers had thus helped young people into ‘low skill, low pay’ jobs. The quality and benefit of both (but especially the lower) NVQ qualifications (Roberts 2013) and of employability-focused provision (Simmons et al. 2014) has been questioned. There may be further threats to the quality of provision as local authority youth spending has seen dramatic cuts with a decrease of over 50% in some areas² (NCVYS 2012). The interviewed learning providers also offered (industry specific) qualifications where criticism seemed less appropriate. These specific qualifications enabled access to (niche) labour market opportunities. Some young people had found jobs with career opportunities, for example, working in the public sector (e.g. police) and in foreign tourist destinations. The provision covered by this paper is broad, both in content and in quality.

Providers operate a roll-on/roll-off system and young people are encouraged to progress onto NVQ level 2, full time employment or an apprenticeship. The

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¹ The National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework provides work-based awards from basic competencies at Level 1 to senior management capabilities at Level 5.
² These figures are indicative for this argument as the budget includes spending for all work with youths aged 13 to 19. There are additional data quality issues that make these figures difficult to interpret.
overall success rate of learning providers included in this study is at around 90% for initial short courses with progression onto longer courses at between 40% and 90%. The variation reflects the degree of specialism with industry-specific qualifications offering clearer progression routes. For general and especially lower qualifications, the existence or absence of local employment opportunities is relevant. In two specific localities (one rural, one de-industrialised city outskirts) providers reported youths struggling to find even low paid and low skill jobs, thus restricting incentives to obtain (further) qualifications.

Although the value and benefit of provisions is an important issue and contributes to the agency journeys that young people undertake, the focus here remains with the relationships that are built between learning providers and NEET young people. Learning providers’ roles entail two aspects of agency. On the one hand, they support young people in discovering their interests and realising their ambitions. These are traditional aspects of youth work in local, voluntary and independent settings and might include activities relating to building self-esteem and self-confidence. Lumby (2012, 266) argues that an agentive approach to disadvantaged youth can counter the depiction of youth as predominantly at risk because they have the “capacity, even in challenging circumstances, to lead a life they value and that others view positively.”

On the other hand, providers are part of activation structures, ensuring that youths undergo training and development that might allow them to enter the labour market. As already suggested, the quality and effectiveness of such training may be limited, as are job openings in some locations. A realistic assessment of employment opportunities is likely to undermine or at least be in
conflict with the initial agency-development activities. Youths may be compelled (Lumby 2012) to opt for unfavourable or (to them) uninteresting employment or training because of workfarist interventions of labour market and welfare institutions. This situation reflects a wider, neo-liberal approach to employment and social security in which compulsion is the norm and extends to normative decisions about (young) people’s futures (Daguerre and Etherington 2014). The dual role of learning providers, incorporating agency development as well as activation/structure requirements, reflects the necessity to “rethinking the ontological relationships between power, subjectivity and social practice” in the development of agency (Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 468). This paper considers the relationship between learning providers and NEET young people as a space where such reconceptualisation is possible.

To do so, power relationships need to be acknowledged. Adopting the learning providers’ position as a starting point for this research allows a deeper analysis of the relationship between these two groups because providers are able to explain and explore the interaction within a research interview. Yet it cannot be assumed that their interpretation speaks for NEET young people. Ideally, research should involve young people themselves (Curtis et al. 2004) but established relationships and support mechanisms between young people and adults within these provisions justify the research focus on learning providers. At the same time, the findings must be questioned in light of the power of the researcher and the learning providers and the powerlessness or complete absence of NEET young people within this research process. Following Lumby (2012, 267), the aim here is to “use what is heard to challenge, rather than to embed further, the powerlessness of many young people.”
As will be discussed in more depth in the results sections of this paper, learning providers’ make a unique contribution to the agency/structure nexus. With diverse backgrounds and experiences in education, social work and industry, they are, ideally, a “consistent and reliable source of support/advice” (Sheehy et al. 2011, 172), providing confidentiality, control, reciprocity, and empathy (Phillips 2010), which ensures a ‘safe’ space and mentor-rich setting in which young people can develop their identity and agency (Warrington and Younger 2011). In contrast, providers can form part of the problem and merely ‘churn’ young people through their provision without individual engagement (Simmons et al. 2014a). Here, the emotional labour literature (Hochschild 1983) can at least partly establish the degree of engagement by providers. It cannot measure the quality of provision (which is not the aim of this paper) but is useful in exploring how providers’ work contributes to different forms of agency. The suppressing or inducing of feeling to produce “the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild 1983, 7) can, as Colley (2006) highlights, be part of an agency journey where human bonding and satisfaction occur but may equally be exploited for the benefit of an organisation or institution (structure). Clearly, working with those whose ‘problem is unlovability’ (Hochschild 1983, 52) requires emotional labour but examining providers’ specific work requires differentiation. The ‘calm and kind’ approach, also termed ‘mothering’ in the following sections, is exemplified by Hochschild’s description of air stewardesses whereas ‘meanness and strictness’ or ‘keeping it real’ are embodied by debt collectors. What Colley (2006, 25) refers to as the ‘deployment of emotion’ becomes a matter of ‘individual choice and morality’ in learning providers’ and NEET young people’s attempts to navigate their agency journey and its
interwovenness with structures and institutions. A focus on different forms of emotional labour thus aids the exploration of the relationship between providers and young people, as well as the influence on the latters’ agency journeys.

**Methodology**

This paper reports on the results of qualitative research into learning provisions for previously NEET young people in the Midlands. The main aim of the project was to further understanding of how youths can be encouraged back into learning provisions and explore future pathways available to them. The research was undertaken in collaboration with a College contracting with third sector learning providers to offer a range of programmes and courses specifically for this group. At the time of the interviews, the College’s work was endorsed and supported by Connexions but since the scaling back of this institution (Balaram and Crowley 2012), the role of learning providers has become more independent and, arguably, more important.

Contact with learning providers was made via the College though participation was voluntary and anonymity was offered, hence only naming the region in which this research took place. The selection of organisations consists of all providers working with the College who agreed to take part in the research. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 individuals in 11 organisations. With one exception where two members of staff were interviewed together, the conversations occurred one-to-one. The interviewees were evenly split by gender and mainly white British with only one respondent being Asian British. This reflected the characteristics of the young people attending
provisions. Interviewees were teachers and usually the managers of the learning provision. Quotes utilised in this paper identify whether the provider is based in one of the region’s cities, a county town or a rural area as this has an impact on the type of employment opportunities that might be available. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2011. Following background questions about the institution and type of work undertaken by the learning providers, there were three main areas of questions: NEET young people’s journey whilst at the provision; the learning process; and the relationships, values and attitudes of the young people. Important relationships that were considered included those with learning providers, parents and peers. The in-depth interviews lasted on average an hour and a half. They were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The analysis of transcripts focussed on the story line of engagements with NEET young people because the narrative form of knowledge and communication allowed deep insights into the quality of relationships (Denzin 2001). Anecdotes of episodes with individuals formed important parts of interviewees’ responses and the analysis of possible interconnections resulted in narratives of engagement that were categorised as mothering, keeping it real and homology. Issues of agency development and engagement with structures and institutions ran through all these narratives.

**The emotions of building strong relationships**

Phillips (2010) highlights the importance of building relationships to enhance self-confidence and positive attitudes. The formation of personal relationships occurs in small groups as providers work with no more than 10 to 15 NEET
young people at any time. Most engaged additional tutors or instructors to work with these small groups. This allows trust to be developed (Sheehy et al. 2011), an essential ingredient in the building of relationships (Simmons and Thompson 2013). However, as outlined in the emotional labour literature (see inter alia Colley 2006), this comes at a price. ‘Authenticity’ requires emotions that feel and appear genuine but such deep acting may involve fusing the real and the acted emotional self (Hochschild, 1983) and can alter the true self (Vincent and Braun, 2013). The potential for burnout was a common theme in the interviews with providers. Additional pressure to develop deeply felt connections arose as a result of providers suggesting that their groups of learners would pick up any simulation or attempts at ‘faking it’.

“You’ve got to establish a relationship with these young people before you can work with them. You’ve got to like them, if you don’t like working with them they’ll soon pick it up; best move on quick. [female, City 1, FE provider, 8]

As Vincent and Braun (2013) have already suggested, however, there is a middle ground between complete alienation and complete engagement on the part of providers, which may parallel and reflect the ‘ordinary’ middle of youths considered by Roberts (2012). Different emotional labouring techniques are utilised, though their usefulness depends on individual contexts, to the extent that they may depend on whether a NEET young person is able to laugh about themselves on a particular day. Respondents suggested that a mixture of informality and structure is required (Russell et al. 2010), making it difficult to develop a coherent strategy. They emphasised the importance of instinct or gut
feeling in responding to youths as this allowed for responsiveness. As will be discussed later, such gut feeling may be more than empathy and result from the geographical and biographical proximity between providers’ and young people’s lives.

If I sat down and truly thought about what I’m doing, I think that I’m going with my guts on a lot of this, but it feels like - I think if I thought about it too much I wouldn’t be able to be who I am with them. [male, City 1 outskirts, independent provider, 22]

A key emotional strategy to developing relationships that was alluded to in all interviews is to offer care and nurture. Some explicitly stated that they had a mothering role in relation to youths, citing examples of making toast in the morning and tidying up after young people. Pemberton (2008) has speculated that emotional labour undertaken by providers makes up for possible shortfalls in family contexts and Sheehy et al. (2011, 173) use the quote “Oops, I called her Mum” to show that youths see providers and personal advisors in parental roles. Although emotional labour is usually associated with women (Colley 2006), male providers also adopted nurturing and supportive roles and the recipients of the ‘mothering’ were both male and female. As such, nurturing was not ‘common sense’ or inherently female (Vincent and Braun 2013) but part of a delicate balance between support and expectations. Statements from male providers were less explicitly about nurturing and emphasised expectations. Depending on the individual context, the requirement to ‘deliver’ might mean regular attendance, paying attention, working on the content of the programme or, more generally, engaging with learning providers and the learning process.
Whilst attendance and attention may not suggest high expectations, they were often the starting point to the learning and agency journey that will be discussed in the next section.

[...] when they’re saying they can’t do this and can’t do that, I say, “I’m not your dad, I’m not your bloody uncle and that’s why I just said that. I’m your instructor so you need to understand that you need to deliver when you come here”, it’s that kind of - it’s not always strict. [male, City 1 outskirts, independent provider, 17]

The same provider also exemplified male engagement in nurturing and support when talking about working with groups. The language utilised may be stereotypically male and influenced by past experience of working with the army but the sentiment is one of support.

You know I feel like I’m jumping the trenches with these young people and I’m prepared to get dirty with them and drag them out as a team.

The delicate balance between support and expectations and the requirement for constant adjustments in response to young people’s specific needs and requirements challenged providers, in particular in their attempts to support and nurture youths. A quarter raised questions about whether they become too involved and may act in what they consider to be inappropriate ways, common questions in the emotional work undertaken in caring professions (Vincent and Braun 2013). In two instances such scenarios involved providers lending money to NEET young people. The money was repaid on both occasions and in one it triggered an educational process about debt and decision-making. Yet providers may misjudge decisions and admitted that the risk taken could have backfired.
The durability of support and nurture during such difficulties in young people’s ‘agency journeys’ is crucial. One interviewee described herself as a stepping-stone that was available to young people until they no longer had a need. She remained in contact with a number of ‘her’ former NEET young people over years, continuing to help and support life changes. The enduring nature of the relationships may make up for the lack of such support in family and friendship circles (Pemberton 2008).

A further example of providers overstepping the boundaries can occur where support and nurture extend to help with attending and completing the course or programme. Respondents reported helping with job applications, providing access to social or professional networks and accompanying youths to meetings. In some situations NEET young people are heavily supported in achieving their qualifications.

*We can film them, we can photograph, we can write the answers in for them and they can sign it afterwards. You’ll ask them the questions and fill in the detail and they’ll just sign by it. You know, there are ways of getting the qualification for them.* [male, rural county, independent provider, 17]

This degree of involvement and “mothering” raises questions about the quality of the qualification to be awarded. Roberts (2013, 274) similarly describes ‘providing answers’ as undermining “an apparently already valueless exercise” and found few returns for holding such low level qualifications. More fundamentally, such practice portrays, at worst, an instrumental and outcome-oriented provision situated on the fringes of regulations and legality or, at best, a misguided attempt at support. Of limited pedagogical value, such actions raise
further questions about the relationships between providers, NEET young people and their agency journeys.

**Constraints to agency journeys**

There are two sides to the work of learning providers when concentrating on their relationships with NEET young people: the development of agency amongst the youths and the activation to place them in education, employment or training. In working with NEET young people’s agency, the different definitions of agency as outlined above (individual agency, bounded agency, and agency as a generative process) are important. Personal agency is necessary for decision-making processes relating to future careers and life style choices and is visible in characteristics such as self-confidence, self-trust and feelings of capability (Evans 2002). Learning providers suggested ‘starting with a clean sheet’ and consciously setting aside issues and problems that youths may have experienced. This gives young people an opportunity to overcome any issues with their agentic abilities or attitudes, which may, in the past, have resulted in ‘frustrated agency’ (Evans 2002).

> When it comes to it I tell them, “I don’t care what you’ve done, alright, you start again with me and you can be who you want to be”. And most of them actually pick up on that. [male, City 1 outskirts, independent provider, 10]

Learning providers spoke of the need for personal and social development among NEET young people. Much of the literature on NEET young people discusses the need for ‘soft skills’, including social and personal capital (Phillips 2010) or the raising of expectations as opposed to aspirations (Simmons et al.)
Although such soft skills and self-esteem cannot be taught directly (Simmons and Thompson 2011), possibilities for positive learning experiences and relationship-building provide fertile ground for such developments. The opportunity to start afresh allows the establishment of new ‘feeling rules’ in different social relations settings (Vincent and Braun 2013), though within the short timeframe available to providers ‘movement in the right direction’ is the main concern. Support also had to be provided when people ‘stumbled’ and reengaged with old habits.

In practical application, and moving to a more bounded or process-oriented definition of agency, young people explore their agency and self-esteem within the group: by finding out about different types of jobs, trying out new aspects of their personality, and maturing by making mistakes. Learning careers are thus not always linear processes (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). Feeling rules and soft skills that are required in some employment can be explored safely with the learning provider and the group. Social relationships (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006) develop as group members help each other, recognise strengths and weaknesses, learn to be tolerant, and issue rules for the group to ensure its functionality. The learning processes including the development of agency are ‘bounded’ by the group, allowing youths to ‘become somebody’.

... I see some of these ones actually getting the message and they actually become self motivated to go and be somebody even if it’s not in [industry sector] I think that through the College or through Connections I think that it’s beautiful, I think it’s fantastic. [male, City 1 outskirts, independent provider, 25]
For young people and learning providers extensive changes have to be negotiated and developed around the former’s values, ‘codes and cultures’. Providers mentioned difficulties regarding the rejection of conventional educational approaches and working styles, signifying the stereotypical assumption that all youths with experiences of NEET have negative views of education. Dependent on previous experiences, learning providers found that youths “just cannot engage with the concept of educational institutions and the conformity that surrounds it” [male, City 1 Centre, local authority provider, 11]. Youths’ perceptions of opportunities, structures and institutions, that is their intra-actions with the forces in their environment (Coffey and Farrugia 2014), lead learning providers to utilise emotional strategies to ‘keep it real’ with NEET young people.

From a safeguarding point of view, ‘reality checks’ might make it necessary to involve the police, social services, health professionals or other authorities to address issues such as crime, domestic or drug abuse, or pregnancy. Most important, though, was exploring the limited (local) jobs available with NEET young people, which necessitated addressing established perceptions and values. At the most benign level, this meant re-labelling unpopular learning content. One example provided was that talk of continuous personal development would empty the room, whereas asking youths whether they can “bang on about themselves like Katie Price does in her book” would solicit engagement [male, City 1 Centre, local authority provider, 9]. Pitching activities in the codes and cultures of young people is also required in finding employment or training opportunities, although in this area established views and values held by providers proved to be more instituted. The majority considered the ideas for
work or an occupation that NEET young people had to be unrealistic. The steer into potentially lower skilled employment combined with having an idea or imagined future rejected is likely to undermine youths’ agency development.

You know “I’m going to be a music producer”, well, you might be but I want to be honest with you here (laughs) I don’t see it at the moment so therefore what other things could you do? They don’t like that. But there are other things they could do. They can go into retail, they can work in communication skills, they can answer telephones and stuff like that. They can go and work in printing if they’ve got good art skills. [male, City 1, independent provider, 11]

There is tension between providers seemingly well-intentioned efforts to ‘keep it real’ by discussing the possibilities and constraints of the labour market and these structures becoming additional barriers. Youths’ ideas for their future employment were regularly exposed as unrealistic (Evans 2002) or at least requiring major work, lifestyle changes and usually relocation. It is difficult to disentangle the limitations of (local) labour market from learning providers’ (at times) limited ambitions for youths. The latter has resulted in justified critique of poor quality learning provisions (see Simmons et al. 2014, Simmons 2009) and may results in additional barriers as well as demotivation. Moreover, considering emotional aspects of the relationship between providers and youths, in particular in how they impact on the agency development journey, reveals additional problematic messages to young people.

The tutor-learner relationship has been discussed as one of homology (Thompson 2011) and the interviews revealed fractured and non-linear
employment biographies on the part of the providers. Experiencing unemployment and living and/or working in the (often deprived) communities that NEET young people had grown up in parallels youths’ experiences. There is a range of functions and effects of homology, in the sense of having common origins or experiences. First, it allows learning providers to empathise with NEET young people, knowing that their difficulties are real and understanding how it feels to be treated differently.

_I was born and bred on, in [name of estate], quite a notorious council estate and you know I have young people who’ve been to local schools and they’re treated differently if they’re from there and I say yes, I can relate to that, on a personal, from when I was at school... [female, City 2, independent provider, 14]_

Second, and as mentioned above, learning providers fulfil substitute parent roles, including aspects of support, guidance and ‘keeping it real’ in the attempt to influence decision-making processes. Biographical similarities between generations are a common theme in classed and location based analysis of disadvantage (Duckworth and Cochrane 2012, Vincent and Braun 2013). Subsequently and third, instances of homology are utilised to provide role models to youths. One provider’s NVQ assessor who had experienced being NEET before achieving her qualifications was explicitly held up as a good example: “that’s what you can do, she’s come from where you are” [male, rural county, independent provider, 22]. Such statements disregard structural constraints and support the supply-side focus of policies emphasising ‘what you can do’ with sufficient effort. Employability-based activities equally reflect the
lack of employment possibilities (Russell et al. 2011), let alone upward progression (Simmons 2009) for NEET young people. Instituting learning provision staff as role models may also suggest to young people that the only people teaching and interested in them are ‘failures’ like themselves. The overall result is, fourth, the potential for a vicious circle, described by Simmons (2009) as learning an economically marginal role. The employment projected as achievable via staff is insecure and with little opportunity for progression, poorly paid, working in low qualified employment, and with a high turnover of staff (Simmons and Thompson 2011). In this sense, learning providers are part of a poor quality system that trains previously NEET young people to meet their low expectations of work in low-pay, low-skilled work. Encouraging individual agency in this way can result in reproducing existing inequalities (Coffey and Farrugia 2014).

There are ambivalent implications for NEET young people’s ability to develop their agency whilst participating in learning provisions and via building relationships with providers. The interaction between providers and youths exemplify the generative process that is agency when comprised in intra-action with relations of force (Coffey and Farrugia 2014). Learning providers use and offer a range of emotional strategies to support developments with ‘mothering’, ‘keeping it real’ and homology outlined as important approaches. This mixture, often driven by gut instinct on the part of the providers, shows that emotional work requires intelligent differentiation or, as Vincent and Braun (2013, 760) suggest ‘detached attachment’, that is a “careful blend of warmth and restraint”. The current research confirms Russell et al.’s (2011) findings on the existence of progressive practices that stretch and challenge learners. Importantly, however,
this is not only the case for the classroom and curriculum but also for personal
development and agency. In fact, statements by learning providers suggested
that personal agency development underpins subsequent learning and
engagement on the practical level. Yet as Coffey and Farrugia (2014)
emphasise, analysis needs to extend beyond a simple reference to agency to
explain young people’s biographies, identities and decisions.
The restrictions of bounded agency (Evans 2002), relations of force (Coffey and
Farrugia 2014) and institutional structures may be played down as ‘reality
checks’ and ‘keeping it real’. Yet learning providers at times add limitations and
barriers for young people via their own background, experiences and values.
Soft skills, self-esteem and agency cannot only not be taught (Simmons and
Thompson 2011), they may have to be developed in adversary with the support
structures put in place to help NEET young people. Learning providers reflected
upon the range of emotions that young people explore, which one local authority
provider summarised as “you get spat at, chucked at, sworn at, cried at,
laughed at” (male, City 1 Centre). Dealing with such emotions in a safe and
supportive, though not unchallenging, environment can establish emotional
resources and reserves. Vincent and Braun (2013, 756) outline how these can
be used as “assets, to accumulate, exchange and hand on to others” and may
thus allow feelings of self-trust and capability to develop (Evans 2002). Roberts
(2013) similarly refers to soft skills that benefit emotion work and
communication in general. There is potential for the development of different
forms of agency in such contexts.
In this paper, the emotional strategies of learning providers have been utilised to explore the agency journeys of NEET young people. The dichotomies of establishing individual agency, preferences and values within the specific and complex confines of education, training and employment opportunities and limitations show that the young people attending these learning provisions are engaged with issues common to most (young) people.

**Conclusion**

There has been considerable and justified critique of learning providers who work with young people with experiences of being NEET. The main issue is the quality of provision, which opens few opportunities for participants (Simmons et al. 2014b). In addition, the low expectations of providers can result in additional barriers for young people as they may be discouraged from following their ambitions with potential implication for their agency development. However, it is important to differentiate between providers. Depending on what they deliver, providers offer progressive ideas, challenge young people and offer significant learning experiences resulting in some labour market opportunities. There are obvious interrelationships with what prospects a (local) labour market has to offer. Learning provisions generally reflect the policy emphasis on the supply side and it would be difficult for providers to support, let alone fund, learning geared towards employment that is not available. Attention to the demand side is therefore as important as improving the quality of support for supply side activities. Simmons *et al.* (2014a, b) describe the situation of NEET young people as being a modern reserve army of labour as they are ‘endlessly
interchangeable’ and churned between various forms of engagement on the margins of the labour market. Describing youths with NEET experiences as in precarious situations or as part of the precariat (MacDonald 2011, Furlong et al. 2012) follows a similar logic. Whilst learning providers contribute to such inherent contradictions of capitalism, they also provide a partial refuge with opportunities for agency and autonomy development (Simmons et al. 2014b). Given the similarities between some providers and some of the youths they work with, similar processes of alienation seem to be taking place for providers.

This adds a further aspect to the dual roles of learning providers in supporting agency whilst also contributing to activation. Provisions usually include a high degree of support for emotional and social developments, providing care and nurture in the process (Sheehy et al. 2011). The role of providers is as ‘solution assemblers’ (Simmons 2009), offering support and advice as well as general development opportunities, an approach that should allow individual youths more self-determination in their decisions. Looking at the emotional strategies utilised helps to understand aspects of the agency development journeys of young people with NEET experiences. The existent homology between providers and NEETs suggests that the conflicts between these journeys and institutional constraints are durable and have long-term implications. Providers’ narratives reflected that they have struggled with such conflicts in their own life and within their work with NEETs.
References


