

The NEET concept in comparative youth research: The Nordic countries and South Africa

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The NEET concept has become widely used internationally since its emergence in the UK almost two decades ago. This article reviews the adoption of the concept in two extreme contexts in terms of NEET rates, youth opportunities and youth welfare: the Nordic countries and South Africa. The article discusses the situations of NEET young people in the two contexts, and how the concept is used in the wealthy and relatively homogenous Nordic welfare states and in relatively poorer and racially divided South Africa. While the concept has been problematised in different ways in Nordic youth research, it has been more readily accepted by South African researchers. We argue that, in both contexts, the NEET concept can be taken as an invitation to look beyond individual life situations and biographies, and to focus on how structural forces such as the political economy shape young people's lives. The NEET concept provides a way of discussing changing opportunity structures and how global social forces such as globalisation and neoliberalisation shape young people's lives in different contexts. The NEET concept is useful in comparative youth research.

Keywords: NEET, youth unemployment, youth marginalisation, Nordic countries, South Africa

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Introduction

The emergence and the adoption of the British NEET concept in the EU are well known (Eurofound 2012, 2016; Social Exclusion Unit 1999; cf. Furlong 2006; Holte 2017). It is also well known that the concept soon gained popularity beyond the EU member states in countries such as Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea (OECD 2014a). This critical literature review introduces and discusses the adoption of the NEET concept in two extreme contexts, namely the Nordic countries (more specifically, Finland and Norway) and South Africa.¹ The article discusses the NEET rates and situations in the two contexts, and how they differ between the wealthy and relatively homogenous Nordic welfare states and relatively poorer and racially divided South Africa. The article also discusses the youth policy and youth research discourses

¹ The Nordic countries are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden; in this article, we focus particularly on Finland and Norway. This comparative undertaking forms part of the theoretical background work for the team research project, 'Youth at the margins: A comparative study of the contribution of faith-based organisations to social cohesion in South Africa and Nordic Europe'. Funded under the auspices of the Finland/South Africa Research Cooperation Programme, the project formally ran from 2013-2016 in view of producing an anthology on the topical focus as the major outcome (see Swart 2013). The completion of this anthology, provisionally entitled 'Stuck in the margins? Young people and faith-based organisations in South African and Nordic localities', is presently at an advanced stage.

that the concept has become part of in the Nordic countries and South Africa. Based on this comparison, the article discusses the concept's value and utility to international youth research. We acknowledge the constructed nature of the NEET concept and the heterogeneity of life situations it describes, but argue that the concept's widespread adoption already makes it valuable for comparative youth research. In the following discussion we first recount recent developments in European research on NEET young people and related groups. We then account for the use of the concept in the Nordic countries and South Africa.

The NEET concept in European youth research

In the wake of the emergence of NEET as an indicator of social exclusion, the argument that NEET young people constitute a heterogeneous category has become an important basis for problematising the concept. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working (Eurofound) produced five, somewhat stigmatising, categories for NEET young people: conventionally unemployed; unavailable; disengaged; opportunity seekers; and voluntary NEETs (Eurofound 2012). Other researchers have pointed out how the concept incorporates 'very different young people, displaying very different characteristics, facing very different challenges, risks and transitions in their lives, and with very different potential needs for intervention' (Yates and Payne 2006, 333-339; see also Finlay et al. 2010, 854; Furlong 2006, 431; Maguire 2013, 198-200; Russell et al. 2011, 91; Serracant 2014, 404; Styczyńska 2013, 218). Not least, it has been pointed out how the category also includes 'better-off "Emerging Adults"', whose NEET situation is not so much accounted for by their lack of resources or opportunities, as by their experimentation with life-style choices and self-conscious postponement of occupational or educational commitments, for example, by enjoying a gap year or doing voluntary work (MacDonald 2011, 431; cf. Finlay et al. 2010, 854; Furlong 2006, 557).

Some researchers have attempted to refine the NEET concept to identify only those young people particularly vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion (Finlay et al. 2010, 852; Furlong 2006, 557; Serracant 2014, 406-407; Styczyńska 2013, 218). Some researchers have adopted a longitudinal approach, focusing on young people in prolonged NEET situations, as compared to young people who are in education, employment or training ('EET' young people) or in short-term NEET situations (see Bynner and Parsons 2011; Kelly and McGuinness 2013; Robson 2010; Russell et al.

2011; Thompson et al. 2014). Pau Serracant, a researcher from Spain, applied a ‘NEET-restricted’ indicator focused on ‘the central NEET group’ of young people and adults in the Spanish region of Catalonia who did not work or study, and did not ‘wish to do so’ (i.e. ‘inactive non-studying people’ who were not ill or disabled, and who did not have family commitments as their main activity; Serracant 2014, 406-410, 411). As a response to the critique, the most recent Eurofound (2016) study presented more nuanced categories: short-term unemployed; long-term unemployed; unavailable due to illness or disability; unavailable due to family responsibilities; discouraged workers; and other inactive young people.

Whilst individual characteristics, circumstances and interactions – micro-level and personal factors within the family, community and cultural contexts – have been considered as important explanations for the NEET phenomenon by some researchers (e.g. Bynner and Parsons 2011; Finlay et al. 2010; Robson 2010; Russell et al. 2011; Styczyńska 2013; Thompson et al. 2014), others have found those explanations insufficient in accounting for youth marginalisation in Europe. Serracant concluded that being NEET was ‘directly linked to structural factors’, which he argued ‘relativizes the role of the individual’s attitudes as the key issue to explain the phenomenon’ (Serracant 2014, 412-413). He argued that this was the case for those in NEET-restricted situations in Catalonia, who were influenced by a Mediterranean employment model and ‘familistic welfare regime’ that reinforces ‘intergenerational and intragenerational inequalities’ (Serracant 2014, 416-417). In short, structural factors had a direct bearing on young people’s decisions to abandon their attempts to find employment, making them the ‘discouraged’ or ‘long-term’ unemployed often considered the most vulnerable to social exclusion (Serracant 2014, 412, 416-417).

Indeed, in European NEET research the pendulum appears to have swung to an emphasis on structural factors, focusing on how economic and societal change impact on young people’s labour market transitions. ‘Transitions regime theory’ has become important to explain how young people may be better off and less vulnerable to NEET situations in certain European countries than in others, depending on models of welfare capitalism and policies related to youth transitions (see Eurofound 2012, 27-41; Robson 2010). A perspective on ‘slow-track’ or difficult youth transitions as an increasingly common problem shared across countries is also becoming more pronounced.

From this perspective, on NEET as a shared structural experience, some researchers have found the concept wanting. Some researchers see it as important to ‘go beyond NEET’ to address the problem of youth vulnerability (Cuzzocrea 2014; Furlong 2006; King 2015; MacDonald 2011, 2013; Roberts 2011). They argue that the concept is ‘too narrow’ to deal with contemporary youth vulnerability (Furlong 2006, 566), and that it has led youth transitions research to become ‘over-occupied with the problems faced by those “at the bottom” rather than with the wide range of youth transitions’ (MacDonald 2011, 432). These researchers suggest that it has become imperative to consider factors of the new globalised economic condition of ‘limited opportunity structures’ that are increasingly uniting ‘the more and less disadvantaged in the experience of underemployment’ (MacDonald 2011, 439). This recognition should lead to a broader focus that will also direct attention to two EET groups: young graduates who increasingly suffer from un- and underemployment and the so-called ‘missing middle’ (MacDonald 2011; Roberts 2011) – working class young people who neither follow NEET nor educational pathways, but who remain vulnerable to social exclusion as their ‘future prosperity is by no means guaranteed by having low-level employment’ (Roberts 2011, 23-24).

For these researchers, it is not that the ‘conditions of life of those at the bottom’ do not demand ongoing research and policy attention, ‘especially given current economic prospects’ (MacDonald 2011, 437; see also Roberts 2011, 23). However, the focus on those at the bottom should not be at the expense of ‘a more panoramic view’ (MacDonald 2011, 437) that takes into account the biographies of the ‘missing middle’ who have hitherto largely been neglected in youth research. Thus, they suggest, research should focus on the insecurities and risks facing the well educated for whom fast-track transitions from tertiary education to secure and higher-level employment is no longer a prerogative or given (MacDonald 2011, 437, 2013, 3; see also King 2015; Roberts 2011).

This literature suggests an ongoing levelling of the playing field that affects a wide range of young people. The correlation between education and training, on the one hand, and secure employment, on the other hand, seems less certain than it once was. This divergence calls for a critical questioning of the orthodoxy of the ‘skills economy’, which suggests that the ‘[p]roblems of young people becoming NEET or trapped in poor-quality jobs can be solved by “up-skilling”’ and that ‘[t]here will be more

opportunities for higher-skilled workers, such as graduates, in the coming “high-skill, information economy” (MacDonald 2011, 434; see also King 2015, 144-145; MacDonald 2013, 2-3). This orthodoxy should be contrasted with the growth of underemployment in the youth labour market, whereby the disadvantaged may be squeezed out by an ‘over-supply of well-qualified workers’ for whom non-graduate jobs may become the only source of employment. By implication, this leads to a situation where ‘non-graduates become increasingly disadvantaged in the labour market and face increasing pressure to get higher qualifications to “keep up”, even though returns diminish relative to previous cohorts’ (MacDonald 2011, 435; cf. MacDonald 2013).

The authors cited so far are largely from the United Kingdom and continental Europe. How do the same processes look when observed from the Nordic countries and South Africa, with their very different NEET rates, welfare systems and opportunities for youth?

NEET young people in the Nordic countries

The situation of and discourse on NEET young people in the Nordic countries are closely tied to their welfare state types. In Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s (1990) seminal typology of welfare states, the Nordic countries are distinguished as a distinct regime with a high degree of decommodification, or degree of immunisation from market dependency. The Nordic ‘social democratic welfare states’ provide comprehensive and universal welfare, which means that public programmes, services and transfers are designed to serve everyone living in the countries (Hiilamo and Kangas 2013). Providing tax-financed, comprehensive welfare presupposes broad tax bases and high employment rates. The whole working-age population is expected to contribute by participating in education, employment or training. In the wake of economic restructuring and rising levels of unemployment, the Nordic model is turning the focus from decommodification to recommodification, with emphasis on social investments and other programmes to increase the participation rates, especially among those populations on the margins of the labour market (see Morel et al. 2012). The shift is particularly important for young people, as research indicates that unemployment has a ‘scarring effect’ and affects future labour market opportunities (e.g. Albæk et al. 2015b, 8). One recent article noted that ‘individuals who experience unemployment at an early stage in their career face a longer time horizon until retirement, thereby making the

long-term scarring effects particularly severe' (Nilsen and Reiso 2014, 37). Non-negligible proportions of young people face difficulties in attaching to labour markets, and youth unemployment rates are much higher than general unemployment rates in the Nordic countries, as they also tend to be elsewhere (Albæk et al. 2015b).

However, youth unemployment figures are partially arbitrary. For technical reasons Nordic youth unemployment figures include large numbers of students who are also looking for work. Youth unemployment rates are much higher in Finland and Sweden than they are in Norway and Denmark, a difference largely explained by how pupils in the school-based vocational training systems in Sweden and Finland are classified as outside the labour force, or as unemployed if they are looking for a job, whilst apprentices in the apprenticeship-based vocational training systems in Norway and Denmark are classified as employed (Bäckmann et al. 2011). Such classificatory differences yield relatively large effects on some indicators, such as youth unemployment, while the countries have more similar NEET rates (Albæk et al. 2015b, 64-5). This is explained by the fact that youth unemployment only includes those young people who are active in the labour market, while NEET rates include all young people (see Albæk et al. 2015a).

For this reason NEET rates can be posited as a more relevant indicator of youth disengagement. By one estimate, NEET rates for individuals aged 16 to 24 years were 8,4 percent in Finland (conscripts were counted as NEETs) and 6,7 percent in Norway in 2012, against 12,6 percent across all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries (OECD 2014a, 103). These comparatively low Nordic rates reflect strong economies and labour markets, as well as the way that the Nordic welfare states make more interventions than most other countries to reduce the number of young people without registered occupations (Hyggen 2013). Many Nordic NEET young people are integrated into activities and programmes through welfare agencies, reducing the overall NEET rates. Although the form and content of the activities and programmes vary, they generally aim to integrate individuals into education or employment. In Finland all unemployed young people below the age of 25 who have not completed a formal vocational training or who need practical training are offered an individual plan to be followed – the so-called Youth Guarantee (Ministry for Education and Culture 2012). The idea is to assign the young people places at workshops to help them complete their education and find work. In Norway the

integrated employment and social services at NAV coordinate the services and support available to NEET young people, most of which are aimed at moving them closer to work or helping them find work, and many of which come with strict activity requirements (see OECD 2018, 123-140). Since 1994 Follow-Up Services have contacted people under 21 years of age who are in NEET situations and have not completed upper-secondary education to give them information and help tailor the services available to them (Albæk et al. 2015b, 56; OECD 2018, 99). Furthermore, the Nordic countries offer education free of charge and financial support to students, which contributes to making education widely accessible. Nearly all young people start upper-secondary educations in the Nordic countries – in academic or vocational tracks.

However, a significant proportion of Nordic students do not complete upper-secondary education, and large proportions of these young people are in NEET situations for certain periods of time (Albæk et al. 2015b; Bäckman, et al. 2011). Young people, and especially young men, in vocational tracks are overrepresented among those who do not complete their three- or four-year courses within five years.² One often-cited explanation for what many see as worryingly high non-completion rates is that young people have not acquired basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics in primary education. As prescribed in the social investment rhetoric, one solution that has been proposed is to improve basic skills starting at kindergarten and primary school level to prepare young people better for secondary education and the labour market. Another solution is to tailor secondary education more to the individual needs and skills of each student and to offer more practical training as part of the curriculum (Djernaes 2013). Furthermore, a lack of apprenticeships continues to be an important reason why some young people do not complete vocational education, especially in Norway (Bäckman, et al. 2011; OECD 2018, 103; Vogt 2017, 108). However, as the next section shows, research and the discourse on NEET young people in the Nordic

² In Finland 75 percent of young people who started vocational education five and a half years earlier had completed their qualifications by 2014. The same was true of 89 percent of those who had started general education tracks four and a half years earlier (Statistics Finland 2016). This means that one in four students in vocational education and one in ten students in general education tracks had not completed their qualifications. Similarly, 27 percent of students who enrolled in upper-secondary education in Norway in 2010 did not complete their three- or four-year education by 2015. Students enrolled in vocational training programmes had a lower completion rate than students in general studies tracks (Statistics Norway 2016; see Vogt 2017).

countries have focused less on structural factors than on the characteristics of those young people who are in NEET situations or ‘at risk’.

Discourse on NEET in the Nordic Countries

In the Nordic countries the NEET concept has been used in research on young people ‘dropping out’ of school (Bäckman et al. 2011), youth marginalisation (Halvorsen et al. 2012) and youth unemployment (Albæk et al. 2015b). However, these reports were part of already established discourses and have not formed a separate and coherent discourse on NEET young people. The concept has also been used in national research in Sweden (Svensson 2011; Niknami and Schröder 2014), Finland (Myrskylä 2011) and Norway (Bø and Vigran 2014; Grødem et al. 2014). These reports have outlined the demography of ‘young people neither in employment or education’ in Sweden, ‘outsiders’ in Finland, and ‘NEETs’ in Norway, constructing NEET young people as populations and objects of discourses. The research was commissioned by public authorities and based on data from administrative registers and representative surveys. The resultant numbers have frequently been referred to in media and by politicians. Nordic discourse on NEET young people tends to feature probabilistic and future-oriented language (Holte 2017; Vogt 2017).

As noted above, the situation of and discourse on NEET young people in the Nordic countries is closely tied to the welfare state orientation. Low birth rates and ageing populations are shifting the ratios of young and older adults to people of working age, the dependency ratios, across the Nordic countries (OECD 2014a, 95). As a consequence, the long-term sustainability of the welfare states is under pressure and the importance of integrating young people into the labour markets is emphasised. The consensus is that young people with education should be employed as quickly as possible and that those without education should start one as soon as possible – provided they are able. Against this backdrop, young people who are neither working nor participating in education or training are constructed as a problem, as neither contributing to the welfare state in the present nor gaining qualifications and experience to contribute in the future. In Finland it is often quoted that the life-course cost of NEET young people is 1,2 million euros per person (Ministry for Education and Culture 2007).

At the same time, and as in the European research outlined above, the NEET indicator is not generally understood to capture a single problem in the Nordic

countries. It is emphasised that NEET young people are a ‘very heterogeneous’ population and that the concept encompasses a variety of subgroups (Albæk et al. 2015a, 88; Hyggen 2013, 372-3). Much of the Nordic research has focused on outlining the demographic properties of these populations to establish who the NEET young people are, what they do, and what their future outcomes are likely to be. This research indicates, for example, that young people with low levels of education, young people whose parents have low levels of education, and those with an immigrant background are overrepresented amongst NEET young people in Sweden, Finland and Norway (Bø and Vigran 2014; Niknami and Schröder 2014; Myrskylä 2011). Although rates vary only slightly by gender, there is greater public focus on NEET young men than NEET young women (Berg and Aaltonen. 2017; Holte 2018). Research tends to refer to NEET young people, especially NEET young men, as facing a heightened risk of falling outside the labour market and ‘society’, especially with prolonged NEET status (Halvorsen et al. 2012, 132; Larja et al. 2016; Vogt 2018). This implies that increased likelihood of future social exclusion, rather than the ongoing situation, is the most important problem for NEET young people.

Importantly, therefore, an emerging body of research also addresses how the future-orientation and probabilistic conceptualisations in this type of youth research do not correspond well with the experiences of the people it concerns (Follesø 2015; Holte 2017; Wall and Olofsson 2008). Subjective experiences of risk do not correspond with predictions of risk based on population statistics. Some young people simply understand ‘youth at risk’ as referring to ‘others’ who are different from themselves (Follesø 2015). The same may apply to the NEET concept (Holte 2017). The young people who are constructed as ‘NEET young people’ or as ‘youth at risk’ may understand their own situation in terms of on-going problems, such as physical or psychological health issues, financial problems, or boredom, rather than in terms of potential future problems. While NEET young people are generally seen as a problem for policymakers to solve, a counter-discourse is also emerging that is critical to mainstream applications of the NEET concept and other similar concepts.

NEET young people in South Africa

In the South African debate on youth unemployment and marginalisation, the NEET concept was introduced by a study entitled *Responding to the Educational Needs of*

Post-School Youth (Cloete 2009a). The report led to a new awareness of the dismal situation of the country's youth (see Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a, 2012b, 1; Gower 2009; Kraak 2013, 81; Perold 2012, 178; Taylor 2011, 50). Based on results from the 2007 Statistics South Africa Community Survey, the study reported that almost three million young people (or 41.6 percent of those aged 18 to 24 years) were 'NEETs' (Cloete 2009b, 10-11). This category included:

- Almost 1 million pupils who left school after completing Grades 10 and 11 and were therefore in need of multiple 'second-chance opportunities' to complete matriculation;
- 700 000 young people who had matric but were not improving their education and training;
- Another million unemployed young people with a qualification of less than Grade 10 in need of training and jobs (Cloete 2009b, 11; cf. Kraak 2013, 81-82).

The NEET concept has since become firmly entrenched in discussions about the plight of South Africa's youth. More recent studies have painted an even bleaker picture. A commonly accepted figure is that the number of NEET young people in the age group 15-24 years is to between 3.2 and 3.3 million, or close to 33 percent of the age cohort (Van Broekhuizen 2013, 45; Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a; 2012b; DHET 2013a, 3; Hall 2015, 125; Lings 2013, 7; Mashilo 2012; Ramose 2014). This has in turn become the basis for the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to point out a trend of an ever-rising NEET population: the number and proportion of people in NEET situations in the age cohort 15 to 24 grew from 2,05 million (25.1 percent) in 1996 to 3,16 million (34.0 percent) in 2001, and to 3,2 million in 2011 (30.8 percent) (DHET 2013a, 3; see also Van Broekhuizen 2013, 46; Hall 2015, 125).

Despite some inconsistencies in the figures, it is clear that the NEET rates constitute a considerable challenge for South Africa. International comparisons put the extent of South Africa's problem into clearer perspective. As pointed out by the OECD, South Africa is a particularly weak performer in terms of addressing the issue. In the wake of the country's poorly performing labour market, it was found that the unemployment rate of its workers aged 15 to 24 was 51.8 percent (three times the OECD average) and the NEET rate of young people in the same age cohort was close to 32 percent (more than twice the OECD average; OECD 2014b, 1-2). A subsequent

study found that amongst 42 OECD and G20 countries, only Greece and Spain recorded higher youth unemployment rates (in the age cohort 18-25) than South Africa (OECD 2015, 1).³ On this basis, it was concluded:

The failure to integrate young people in the labour market threatens social cohesion. In particular young NEETs are at risk of having their future work career permanently “scarred” by prolonged spells of not working. Reaching out to this group and ensuring they are given the help needed to find employment or opportunities for further training is a key challenge for South Africa (OECD 2015, 2).

It should therefore not come as a surprise that South Africa’s NEET problem has been identified by commentators as perhaps the country’s ‘most urgent challenge’, a ‘national crisis’ that seriously undermines its prospects of long-term social, economic and political stability (Creamer 2013; Lings 2013; see also CHET 2012; Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a, 2012b, 1; DHET 2013a, 2; Kraak 2013, 94; Mashilo 2012; Ramose 2014). South Africa constitutes a strikingly youthful population, with more than 50 percent of its population under the age of 25 (Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a, 2012b, 1). It is especially amongst this youthful half of the population that the related problems of unemployment and NEET represent a real struggle for a considerable and indeed growing proportion of young people, leaving them with a bleak future and leading them, as one commentator puts it, to ‘disengage from society and participate in risky or socially-disruptive behaviour’ (Lings 2013, 7).⁴

At the same time, it cannot go unmentioned how race and gender define the crisis of NEET young people in South Africa: both unemployed and NEET young people are predominantly from the country’s majority black and coloured population

³ Amongst the 42 countries, Norway had the fifth lowest rate of youth unemployment in Q1 2015, somewhat below 10 percent; Finland took the 33rd place with a rate of just over 20 percent; South Africa came 40th with a rate just below 50 percent; while Greece and Spain came last with youth unemployment just over 50 percent (see OECD 2015, 1).

⁴ Cloete and Butler-Adam (2012a, 2012b, 1), for instance, point to the 2009 South African crime statistics, which showed that the average age of a house robber was between 19 and 25 years and that of the robbers arrested, 90 percent did not have matric and/or were unemployed. In turn, others point to the extent to which South Africa’s young people are also taking the lead in what has been described as the country’s ‘ongoing rebellion of the poor’, manifested in persistent waves of social protests against poor municipal and educational services (Alexander 2010; Alexander & Pfaffe 2013; Kraak 2013, 94; Mashilo 2012).

groups (Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a, 2012b, 2; Lolwana 2014, 14; Mathibe et al. 2012, 3, 5, 7; Mashilo 2012; OECD 2015). In Lolwana's (2014, 14) report, the NEET rates for black and coloured young people (at 33.1 percent and 32.1 percent respectively) are three times as high as those for white young people (11 percent). One commentator has observed that it is South Africa's black youths who, along the old apartheid lines, are the major bearers of the brunt of the country's triple vices of unemployment, poverty and inequality (Mashilo 2012). To an overwhelming degree, they are the victims of very poor schooling and an unaccommodating post-school sector (see Cloete 2009a; DHET 2013a; Gibbon et al. 2012; Hall 2015; Kraak 2013; Lolwana 2014; Spaul 2013; Van Broekhuizen 2013). They lack the necessary skills for meaningful employment and, in the case of many young black men in particular, express their frustration and anger by taking to the streets in often violent protest (Mashilo 2012; Kraak 2013, 93).

Importantly, however, while South Africa's protesting black male youths may represent the public face of the country's NEET young people, young black women are numerically the most disadvantaged group. The young black women conspicuously remain a special case, given the fact that they represent a noticeable majority also in comparison to their African black male counterparts⁵ (Lolwana 2014, 13-14; Mashilo 2012; see also DHET 2013a, 6; Hall 2015, 125). It is therefore not possible to understand South Africa's NEET problem without reference to historical, racial and genders factors.

Discourse on NEET in South Africa

The South African discourse on NEET that has developed since the landmark study by Cloete and others mentioned at the start of the previous section (Cloete 2009a) has not been met by the same kind of problematisation of the concept as in the European and Nordic contexts. In South Africa NEET has been embraced as a straightforward, standard and innovative concept to discuss the plight of the country's youth. In this discourse, as illustrated by Kraak (2013, 79-80), 'international criticisms of the concept'

⁵ Lolwana (2013, 6) points out that amongst the different population groups of youths aged 15 to 24 years, young African black women not only recorded the highest NEET rate (37.5 percent) but the "largest gender gap" could also be found between black African men (scoring a rate of 28.6 percent) and black African women at 8.9 percentage points.

do not relativise the fact that ‘NEET as an explanatory and predictive device is still very powerful and useful, particularly when applied to youth unemployment in South Africa’. The NEET concept has strengthened the debate on the endemic problem of youth unemployment and marginalisation in South Africa. It has become a complementary statistical indicator to that of youth unemployment, highlighting how a disturbing number and percentage of young people are not only unemployed, but also not engaged in any form of education and training that could remedy their situation. As a statistical indicator, the NEET concept has given weight to the thesis on an endemic social crisis in South Africa alluded to in the previous section. Much of the South African discourse on NEET young people has focused on the identification of the causal factors that have led to the current problem (cf. Kraak 2013, 82-83), but also on discussions of policy and strategic interventions to resolve the problems.

The discourse has to a great extent focused on the deficiencies of the country’s education and training system. Whereas much of this focus has been on the deficiencies of the post-school system⁶ (see e.g. CHET 2012; Cloete 2009a; Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a, 2012b; Cosser 2010; Fischer and Scott 2011; Kraak 2013; Perold et al. 2012; Taylor 2011), some have also pointed to the appalling state of the country’s primary and secondary schools (Hall 2015; Spaul 2013; Taylor 2011, 10-22; cf. also Fischer and Scott 2011, 2). These critics argue that attention should be devoted to how South Africa’s school system is failing the majority of the country’s youths. In South Africa one is confronted with the reality that there ‘are in effect two different public school systems’ that reflect the vast inequality of education opportunities across the divides of socio-economic privilege, geographic location and race: on the one hand a ‘smaller, better performing system’ accommodating the wealthiest 20 to 25 percent of pupils, and on the other hand, a ‘larger system’ characterised by its abysmal performance and catering for the other 75 to 80 percent of pupils (Spaul 2013, 6, 35-37; see also Hall 2015, 122-124; Taylor 2011, 10-22). It is especially in the larger system that young

⁶ In the South African academic and public debate about higher education and training ‘post-school system’ or ‘post-school sector’ have become commonly used terms. In the words of the Department of Higher Education and Training, the term refers to ‘all education and training provision for those who have completed school, those who did not complete their schooling, and those who never attended school’. As such, this system or sector includes on an institutional level the country’s universities and public technical and vocational education and training colleges, as well as the existing public adult learning centres and private post-school institutions (DHET 2013b, xi).

people start lives of NEET situations, unemployment and precarious job opportunities. The system leaves large proportions of pupils ‘functionally illiterate and innumerate’ (Spaull 2013, 3, 39-44; cf. Hall 2015, 123; Taylor 2011, 10) and has a very low retention rate (Fischer and Scott 2011, 2; Hall 2015; Spaull 2013, 5, 31-34):

A close inspection of school data shows that of the 100 pupils that start Grade 1, 50 will drop-out before Grade 12 (most of which happens in Grade 10 and 11), 40 will pass the NSC⁷ exam and 12 will qualify for university. Given that the NSC is the only externally evaluated, nationally standardised exam in the South African school system, grade progression in primary and lower-secondary school is an unreliable indicator of actual learning. Many pupils proceed to higher grades without acquiring foundational skills in numeracy and literacy. As the NSC exam approaches, schools and teachers can no longer afford to promote pupils who have not acquired the grade-appropriate skills, and consequently pupils fail and drop out of schools in large numbers in Grades 10 and 11 as schools weed out the weaker pupils (Spaull 2013, 5).

The connection made between educational attainment and training, on the one hand, and the prospect of employment, on the other, is another feature of the South African discourse on NEET young people. When compared to the more critical parts of European and Nordic discourses on NEET, there is a more ready acceptance of the orthodoxy of the skills economy and an emphasis on the importance of ‘upskilling’. In the South African discourse the mantra is sustained that tertiary education and training increase individuals’ prospects of formal employment and increased earnings (Branson et al. 2009; Branson 2012, 154; Cloete 2009b, 4-6; Fischer and Scott 2011, 1; Lolwana 2014, 9; Van Broekhuizen 2013, 52). This is despite the way that labour market failure, insufficient economic growth and the manifestation of graduate unemployment also contribute to the South African NEET problem (see Cloete 2009b, 5-6; Creamer 2013, 2013b; Kraak 2013, 82-85; Lings 2013; Lolwana 2014, 5, 18-27; OECD 2014; Van Broekhuizen 2013, 45, 47-48).

What is identified as a more specific challenge in the South African discourse on NEET young people is finding a way to improve the quality and relevance of higher education in the country, to equip young people more effectively with the relevant skills

⁷ National Senior Certificate.

demanded by the labour market and an increasingly knowledge-based, high-skills economy (Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a; 2012b, 2; Cosser 2010; Fischer and Scott 2011; Lolwana 2014; OECD 2014b, 2; Taylor 2011, 34-37, 56-57). It is also emphasised that the post-school sector should transform itself into a far more differentiated and expanded system providing for the needs of a far more heterogeneous group of young people⁸ (CHET 2012; Cloete 2009a; Cloete and Butler-Adam 2012a, 2012b, 4-5; Cosser 2010; Fischer and Scott 2011; Gibbon et al. 2012; Perold 2012; Taylor 2011, 35-36, 52-59).

Finally, it is important to point out that in the South African discourse involving the NEET concept, the state is both appreciated as a proactive role-player and part of the problem. So, for instance, some have appreciated initiatives such as South Africa's new National Development Plan (NDP) and the leading role of government and organs of the state in implementing a so-called Youth Employment Accord, several other accords and pieces of legislation, an Employment Tax Incentive and, not least, measures to improve the country's technical, vocational and skills development (TSVD) sector (DHET 2013a, 7; Lolwana 2014, 5-6, 30-41). At the same time, others point to the problem and challenge of ineffective policy implementation (Archer 2012; Cloete and Butler Adam 2012a, 2012b, 3-5; Lings 2012, 8; Perold 2012, 192-195). Thus, the South African discourse on NEET young people is also a discussion of the prospects of social cohesion and social stability, racial and gender inequality, weak state performance and a dysfunctional education system.

The NEET concept in comparative youth research

The NEET concept has risen to prominence in research and the discourse on youth marginalisation in many different countries and contexts. It cannot be ignored – even if it is found wanting in certain respects, as pointed out in the European and Nordic discourse. When comparing contexts as different as the Nordic countries and South Africa, a case emerges for understanding the concept contextually, for example, through

⁸ In terms of this identified need, critics point to the fact that higher education in post-apartheid South Africa has primarily become a 'university' sector (see e.g. Cloete 2009b, 1; Cloete & Butler-Adam 2012b, 3; Gibbon et al. 2012; Perold 2012). As a result, this has led to the situation where 'there are hardly any institutions offering the kinds of qualifications in intermediate skills in technical and vocational fields that are sorely needed in the labour market' (Gibbon et al. 2012, 131).

welfare theory (Cuzzocrea 2014; Robson 2010). The proportion of young people in NEET situations is so much greater in South Africa than in the Nordic countries, and the benefits and services available to them so different, that the life situations and needs of NEET young people are hardly directly comparable. This is also reflected in the differences between the Nordic and the South African discourses outlined in this article. In the Nordic countries NEET young people are primarily discussed as a problem in relation to the fiscal sustainability of the welfare state; in South Africa high NEET rates are discussed in relation to more fundamental issues such as social cohesion and social stability, racial and gender inequality, weak state performance and a dysfunctional education system. While the concept has been problematised as capturing heterogeneous populations in the Nordic countries, as in Europe more generally, it has rather been seen as capturing significant social and structural problems in South Africa.

These differences must not get in the way of a concern about how being in a NEET situation can delay or hamper individual young people's transitions to adulthood. In the Nordic countries NEET status not only hinders access to the various social rights tied to paid employment, but can also lead to isolation and come in the way of establishing independent living (Anvik and Waldahl 2017). In South Africa, being outside of education and employment can mean that one is cut off from any source of a viable income, as well as the perhaps most important means of remedying such a situation. Lives and health are at stake.⁹

At the same time, the modern labour market categories that the NEET concept is based on may not be relevant to young people who are unemployed for short periods, who are in insecure employment, in education or training that they are not motivated or prepared for, or who are travelling or engaged in other self-directed activities (cf. Yates and Payne 2006; Cuzzocrea 2014). This is true both of the Nordic countries and South Africa, but in different ways. Thus, the NEET concept opens the way to reflection on structural changes such as neoliberalisation and globalisation that render the distinction between NEET and EET young people, and between those who are vulnerable and those who are not, more flexible. The concept provides a valuable avenue to consider how global macro processes affect the lives of young people, collectively and

⁹ The research project this article forms part of investigated the welfare and social development work of faith-based organisations in relation to the different needs of NEET young people in selected localities in Finland, Norway and South Africa (Swart 2013; see also note 1).

individually, across very different contexts. In comparative youth research, we would argue, this opportunity is best grasped by using the concept to engage with opportunity structures and the global social forces that shape young people's lives in different contexts, and not by moving beyond the NEET concept, as some researchers have suggested (Cuzzocrea 2014; Furlong 2006; MacDonald 2011; Roberts 2011). For youth researchers in the Nordic countries, this implies that it may no longer be sufficient to consider the problem of youth marginalisation within the confines of the social democratic welfare states. For their counterparts in South Africa, it implies that merely getting the economy and the educational system right may not be the complete answer to the problems of youth unemployment and marginalisation in their country. For youth research and welfare research as academic fields, the NEET concept offers an invitation to look beyond individual situations and biographies to the structural forces of the political economy.

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