



“At Risk” Adolescent Boys’ Engagement With an Employability Intervention: A Qualitative Exploration

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The individualization of Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) status has contributed to a culture of blame that frames adolescent boys’ transition into employment and economic independence. Drawing on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, we explored how adolescent boys categorized as “at risk” of becoming NEET engage with a school-based work-readiness intervention. We interviewed five adolescent boys aged 13–14 years about their experiences of the intervention. Using reflexive thematic analysis, three main themes were constructed: (1) challenge mediated by choice; (2) access to supportive relationships; and (3) recognizing personal development. The findings illustrate the interrelatedness of adolescent boys’ engagement with, and within, their environment; findings support a push to consider engagement as an ecological concept. We end with considerations for more ecologically sensitive approaches to work-related intervention and the assessment of adolescent boys’ “at risk” status.

Keywords: adolescent boys, NEET, Work Ready, ecological systems theory, engagement

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we explore how adolescent boys engage with a targeted intervention for those categorized as “at risk” of becoming Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). Informed by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000), we sought to consider how adolescent boys engagement with the intervention might reflect or influence their positioning within their environments. In the following sections, we outline and discuss key concepts and research relating to the concept of NEET, links between mental health (dis)engagement amongst adolescent boys and positioning within their environment, policy, and intervention relating to employability, and how ecological systems theory offers a lens through which the interrelatedness of the above can be illustrated.

The NEET acronym is a broad category used in population statistics to describe those who are unemployed (actively seeking work) and economically inactive (not actively seeking work). Over 10% of young people aged 16–24 in the United Kingdom are NEET, with nearly two-thirds of the total considered economically inactive (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). Work-ready interventions usually target specific groups within the NEET category (e.g., young parents) but fail to address the diverse barriers that render NEET young people “inactive” (Holte, 2017). Young people who experience unemployment and economic inactivity are more likely to face poor future employment prospects, mental health problems, social segregation, and difficulty

adjusting to adulthood (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Baggio et al., 2015; Ramsdal et al., 2018). Regarding mental health, research often indicates that NEET status is associated with greater risk of experiencing depression and anxiety disorders, as well as presenting with suicidal behaviors or increased substance use (Bartelink et al., 2020; Gariépy et al., 2021). People who are considered to be "economically inactive" are at greater risk of experiencing social and economic exclusion in later years (Maguire, 2015). As such, Yates and Payne (2006) suggest that NEET young people who are considered to be "economically inactive" should be appreciated as being places "at risk" of experiencing social inequality. It is therefore argued the NEET label contributes to the dismissal of widespread disengagement amongst young people and the multiplicity of environmental factors which place them "at risk" of leaving education, employment, or training.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United Kingdom, the school-to-work transition typically involves movement from the structured and predetermined pathway of compulsory education to a more uncertain and unpredictable route of employment. Lack of social support during this time can initiate a poor transition to early adulthood, characterized by long-lasting negative effects upon personal wellbeing, physical health, and economic success (Public Health and England, 2014). Individuals who possess the skills, attributes, and knowledge needed to find, gain, and maintain employment are often described as "work-ready" (Graham, 2017). In the instrumental *Bridging the Gap* report (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), risk factors statistically associated with young people becoming NEET were listed as; parental unemployment, belonging to a minoritized ethnicity group, being a teenage parent, engaging in offending behavior, and living with a disability or a mental illness. Partly in response to these findings, the *Connexions* service was introduced in 2001 to resist the social exclusion of young people across England by reducing numbers of NEET young people. To identify and make provision for those who are at risk of becoming NEET, Local Authorities (LAs) and have developed Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI) tools to support early identification. Means of disadvantage identified by Public Health England and those included within RONI tools mirror the original "risk factors" listed in the *Bridging the Gap* report and as a result, work-related interventions to date have continued to replicate much of the earlier practice, and inequalities, with little "improvement" observed.

Earlier work-ready interventions such as *Raising Participation Age* (2009), *The Youth Contract* (2012), and *Engage in Education* (2011) illustrate a pattern of difficulty in identifying, targeting, and supporting "positive outcomes" for those identified as at risk and were criticized for prioritizing practical work "readiness" over psychological "readiness" which is more likely to contribute to individual disengagement (Yates and Payne, 2006; Mawn et al., 2017). Further still, experiencing psychological challenges is considered to disadvantage young people who look for work (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Individuals who are categorized

as NEET are more likely to experience feelings of segregation and social exclusion (Yates and Payne, 2006) and negative stereotyping such as laziness and increased substance use (Mawn et al., 2017). Instead, work readiness interventions should concentrate on environmental factors which inhibit young people's participation (Public Health and England, 2014). Those which focus on the risks and difficulties young people face have proven more effective than those aiming to reduce NEET status alone (Yates and Payne, 2006; Mawn et al., 2017).

"Work-readiness" should arguably be considered in context of wider societal processes and practices that (re)produce education and employment inequalities in schools (Bešić, 2020). For example, how geographical and social conditions such as funding, resources, and policy influence how much choice and agency a young person has during the education to employment transition (Lörinc et al., 2020). Ecological systems theory appreciates the interrelatedness of individual and environmental factors to incorporate contextual factors, to consider how physical environments influence individual learning. An ecological framework can be used to illustrate individual experience at different levels of structure within the environment, including microsystem (home or school), mesosystem (family, peers, or teachers), exosystem (government or media), macrosystem (culture and beliefs), chronosystem (passage of time). An ecosystemic approach considers how relations within an individuals' environment can improve or impede individual functioning, as well as influencing how people ascribe meaning to their experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Not in education, employment, or training categorization subsumes a diverse population of young people, with NEET policy and intervention not acknowledging or addressing the barriers to engagement adolescent boys' encounter. A more holistic approach to recognize how agency, wellbeing, and economic stability are interlinked is prompt in response to the number of adolescent boys and young men who experience unemployment and mental ill-health in late adolescence and young adulthood. This is pertinent given the changing climate of education and employment during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, and Brexit within the United Kingdom, with the number of young people aged 18–24 who claim unemployment-related benefits more than doubling during the last year (Francis-Devine, 2021). This study sought to counter dominant narratives that position adolescent boys' relationship with their environment. We aimed to: (i) explore how adolescent boys engage with a targeted intervention for young people categorized as "at risk" of becoming NEET; (ii) understand how adolescent boys' position themselves within their environment and how this relation links to broader issues of social inequity; and (iii) make recommendations for more effective and efficient future work-ready interventions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Principles of social constructivism inform this research, with qualitative enquiry enabling a collaborative process in which the researcher and the interviewees co-construct new articulations of

knowing. A qualitative inquiry challenges positivist empiricism, by prioritizing sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance (Yardley, 2000). As such, the researchers sought to understand how young people make sense of their experiences.

“Work Ready” Intervention

The Work Ready intervention is part of the HeadStart Wolverhampton programme. Work Ready encourages young people to develop their job awareness, career motivations, aspirations, employability skills, and goal setting *via* work experience, advisory contact, and a record of participation. It sought to support a cohort of young people scored four or more using a RONI tool; this score was taken to be indicative of a substantially higher risk of becoming NEET. Work Ready aims to: (i) increase confidence and career aspirations; (ii) reduce numbers of NEET young people; and (iii) increase potential earnings. It sought to increase young people’s contact with employers earlier than employment programmes are usually introduced in secondary school and supports a cohort of young people from Year 7 through to Year 10. Participants have access to career goal support, 100 h of work exposure, and at least four contacts with advisors, mentors, or leaders.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted for this research by the University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee (ID Number: 7963/002). A parent/carer and a young person’s information sheet supplied study details. Written consent was obtained from parent/carers and participants provided written assent before being interviewed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw during the interview, or their interview data from the process until 6 months after interviews took place. Interview data was securely stored, participant confidentiality maintained, and identifying details were omitted from transcripts. In developing pen portraits, we also sought to avoid risk of identification of participants by pseudonymizing their accounts.

Participants

Participants were five boys in Year 9 (ages 13–14) who participated in the same Work Ready intervention at two secondary schools across one city in England. All participants of the intervention had been (1) scored 4+ by their school using a RONI tool, or (2) referred by their school based on their punctuality and behavior.

A gatekeeper from the local authority recruited schools, who then identified and recruited willing participants. A total of nine participants were initially recruited; two of whom had not received consent from parents to have their interview recorded, and two more opted out on the day because they did not feel they had participated sufficiently in the intervention to comment on their experience of it. Although the small sample size limits the extent to which results can be generalized to broader populations, the study did not seek to provide “finalized” or “generalizable” results, but to capture exploratory data. Pseudonymized pen portraits were developed from interview

data to: (i) offer some insight into who participants, and (ii) contextualize their experiences.

Pen Portraits

Amrit. Amrit found out about Work Ready from a teacher and liked that taking part meant he could miss some lessons; he took part around once a month. He will usually ask his older siblings for help and prefers to work with peers that he already knows. Amrit described the Work Ready group as “like a family.” He aspires to work in engineering but had previously thought about a career in the army. After taking part in Work Ready, Amrit said he feels more positive in class and knows what job he wants to do.

Paul. Paul was encouraged to take part in Work Ready by a teacher and feels that more people should take part because it would benefit them too. He spoke of the type of person he wants to be when he is older and aspires to follow in the footsteps of his grandparent to join the army. Paul shared that thinking about the football team he supports winning helps him feel positive. He mentioned that finds it a bit difficult to think when put on the spot but feels proud when he completes the task, particularly when encouraged by his peers.

Arthur. Arthur described that he was chosen by a teacher to take part in Work Ready and feels that taking part has helped him to recognize his feelings. He describes himself as adventurous. Arthur spoke about enjoying history and science and aspires to work in a career related to these subjects; he particularly likes the idea of working in science because of the opportunity to have a big impact on the world. Arthur described Work Ready as ‘perfect.’

Kiran. Kiran spoke about his aspirations to work in business and likes the idea of being able to design things. He found out about Work Ready after some people came to visit his school and he took part in it once a week. Kiran shared that sometimes the tasks made him feel a bit pressured, but he was surprised to realize that he was good at them. After Work Ready, Kiran notices that he uses the skills he developed through the intervention when taking part in P.E. lessons.

Jake. Jake found out about Work Ready from a letter that he was given and found that the opportunity to develop his confidence and teamwork skills as appealing to him. He took part once a week but felt that more sessions during the week would be better to meet new people and build friendships. Jake said that he is unsure about his career aspirations but is interested in mechanics and that this is influenced by the subjects that he has studied in previous years of school.

Data Generation

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to explore how “meaningful” the intervention was for participants. Meaningfulness relates to perceiving one’s work as significant and valuable (Fletcher, 2019). Individuals who consider their work to be meaningful are more likely to be engaged, as well as experience positive wellbeing and increased productivity (Soane et al., 2013; van Wingerden and van der Stoep, 2018). The questions were not designed to evaluate Work Ready *per se*, but participants were encouraged that their responses could be used to understand how to improve the programme in future rounds.

Interview questions were designed and grouped across seven dimensions to explore the meaningfulness of the intervention. These dimensions were: (i) engagement, (ii) fulfillment, (iii) challenge, (iv) ability, (v) connection, (vi) growth, and (vii) future and developed from existing measurement tools that explore meaningfulness and or engagement in life and work. These tools include: (i) the Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (Steger et al., 2006); (ii) the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003); and (iii) the Survey measures of work and work environment (Mirvis and Lawler, 1984). A full list of interview questions are presented in **Supplementary Appendix 1**.

The interviewer used a guide approach to ensure discussion across all seven dimensions of the interview schedule were covered in all five interviews. However, the questions were worded differently and asked in different orders each time, following the flow of the interviewee. Interview sessions were recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone, with participants' consent, and audio files were stored on a secure network. Interview recordings were between 14 and 22 min in length and were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Participants' accounts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2020) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis in which the researcher adopts an active role in the analytic process. Reflexive thematic analysis embraces the researcher's subjectivity as an "analytic resource," influenced by their standpoint and affords space to acknowledge, navigate, and unpack the theoretical assumptions which underpin the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Ecological systems framework guided the coding process to explore how individuals contextualized their experience within their environment. NVivo software (version 12) was used to facilitate the analysis. (1) Audio files were listened to and transcripts read several times to increase familiarity. Notes were taken to summarize each interview, with ecological systems theory guiding this process at the latent level. (2) Inductive coding at the latent level was employed as the researcher was interested in what participants said, rather than what they might mean. Full transcripts were coded for patterns and the data compiled under each code reviewed to ensure consistency throughout the data set. (3) The finalized codes were explored and integrated into themes across the sample that represent a coherent and shared meaning. NVivo software supported a visual exploration of the data, linking codes together by word similarity to explore these connections. (4) Themes were developed and reviewed, (5) refined, defined, and named; each theme is presented and explored in the following section. Finally, (6) the findings are reported in the following section and extracts of data are drawn upon to illustrate and exemplify the themes.

About the Researchers

The authorship team are adolescent mental health researchers who are interested in identity and inequality, risk and resilience, intervention and social emotional and mental health needs and development. (FIRST AUTHOR) has worked with children and young people across the 0–25 age range in both

formal and informal education settings including specialist support and youth work.

Reflexivity

PC-M conducted the interviews and the analysis, with supervision from OD and NH. Upon reflection, access gained to participants through the gatekeeper and positioning of the interviewer as "researcher" within the school likely reinforced implicit power hierarchies. This perhaps influenced how openly participants responded to questions; for example, each participant sat across from the interviewer, who was wearing a visible visitors badge and being referred to politely as "Miss." PC-M entered the school in a formal sense, requesting information as an unfamiliar person, PC-M did not try to force the interview or push for more than was shared, and this is likely reflected in the shorter one-sentence answers and short interview recordings. By taking part in interviews, some participants were "missing out" on a lesson they enjoyed, so it was important for the interviewer to explicitly appreciate their time and effort to take part. After the interviews, participants were provided with a certificate of recognition for their contribution to the programme. This was a token of appreciation to acknowledge their time, efforts, and contribution which also formed part of their personal records of achievement relating to the programme. Upon further reflection, it would have been purposeful to explore adolescent boys' motivations to participate in an evaluation of the project and their experience. This contributes to engaging adolescent boys' voice in a more representative way *throughout* the process. Member checking was considered an ideal second step to work toward this, but restrictions to both research and schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic make this unworkable at present.

FINDINGS

Three themes were developed to illustrate participants experiences of the intervention: (1) challenge mediated by choice, (2) access to supportive relationships, and (3) recognizing personal development. These are explored next, with illustrative excerpts from participants' accounts.

Theme 1: Challenge Mediated by Choice

Participants spoke about future challenges in education and work that centered around competition concerning achievement of qualifications and development of employability skills:

Arthur: Because there's always someone there that is with your same scores but if you have like a tiny little thing over them then, therefore, you're more likely to get chose for things.

Paul: In the future they might, they might be suffering with issues with not being able to get a job and stuff, but this could have, this helped us.

When talking about the future, Kiran shared that they were apprehensive of the uncertainty surrounding General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level study:

Kiran: A bit nervous, because you don't know what's going to come up and I've never done some of the subjects so it's a bit new for me.

The majority of participants did not describe challenge as a negative, but as something to be overcome. When participants spoke about challenge this was often accompanied with a reflection on how the experience had been beneficial for them:

Paul: First, I was a bit dodgy about it but when I started doing it, it was like it was okay then.

Paul: And I find it a bit difficult to speak to others in case they judge me, but I speak to them a lot now. So, it's helped me with that as well.

Almost all participants felt that having access to a wider variety of choice, including greater prompts and opportunity to seek support from peers, could help mitigate the negative feelings associated with taking part in a group or a difficult activity. Amrit and Kiran suggested that difficult tasks would be achievable with access to prompts that generate initial ideas:

Amrit: Like um, ideas. Like what is it about? Like questions and then like, you can find answers out easier and then break it down.

Kiran: It wasn't interesting to make an app because I didn't know what to make an app about and I had no ideas.

Along with prompting, the majority of participants expressed that greater choice would make activities more enjoyable and improve their satisfaction with the overall quality of activities:

Arthur: I would like to have made more decisions about which kind of activities you want to do for the specific roles that we're doing that day.

Kiran: We should all have a vote of which one we should do. That's what I think we should do.

Theme 2: Access to Supportive Relationships

Participants spoke about the benefits of seeking or receiving help, support, or advice from others. Who participants approached varied depending on what the "problem" was and whether this required practical help or emotional support, and whether this was of a personal or professional nature. Someone who has prior experience in the area of interest was likely to be approached for advice. For example, an older sibling would be approached for help to develop presentation skills, or a teacher for help with safeguarding concerns. Arthur highlighted that long-term friends were more likely to be called upon for "personal problems":

Arthur: Probably like personal problems. Say like if you had, if I had a problem in a relationship then I wouldn't go to the teachers over it. I will go to my friends, cause they would probably sympathetic 'cause they'll probably be more sympathetic about it.

Arthur and Amrit indicated when and why they might prefer to seek guidance from a teacher over a friend:

Arthur: Because like you don't just go to your friends on a subject like molecular expansion cause then they might not know

what it is. But then most teachers most likely know what it is because they had to go for their GCSE's and molecular expansion is actually in GCSEs.

Amrit: Like do you know, sometimes when you're working, then you don't get something, then you can just ask the adult if you want to.

Participants shared that they were more likely to seek support from, or engage and collaborate with, another person if they were familiar:

Amrit: I would have known that person so I would have been comfortable talking to him and asking him questions.

Paul: Like it's okay because you know them. So, you feel comfortable around them, say you was with a stranger you wouldn't feel comfortable talking with them.

Arthur: Depending on the adult, then yeah but some adults that are new to school I can't do that cause I don't know them. They haven't taught me in lessons, so I've got no trust in them.

Participants were more likely to seek support from, or engage and collaborate with, someone they felt could more personally relate to their problem:

Arthur: She usually puts herself in your shoes as well instead of just like, I mean cause most times out of 10 she can relate to the sort of the problems that you have. So, she knows how you feel in that situation, so therefore she can help you the ways from her younger self.

Paul spoke about the presence of peers in the environment as having both a negative *and* positive impact upon his confidence:

Paul: I felt like, basically, it was like a, you're on the spot. So, say you write something that's not good about you, you might be judged by it.

Paul: Like when you answer your question, everyone claps, and it gives you support to answer questions again.

However, to feel confident when working with peers and adults, a sense of trust both in, and from the other person was considered beneficial:

Arthur: It was good because I knew most of them, so therefore I had some trust in them but there was like a couple of people that I didn't know. So therefore, it was a bit, I don't know, it was a bit weird cause you didn't know whether to fully trust them or not in the trust-building exercises. So, I was like a bit reluctant, so yeah.

Kiran: Like you, you respect them, and they will let you do stuff and they can let you do stuff, they will trust you to do something, like a task. Even though it might be say, if it was outside, they would trust you to do it outside.

Theme 3: Recognizing Personal Development

All participants spoke about the intervention activities with positive regard, with one describing it as "perfect overall." The majority of participants reflected explicitly about how taking part had had a positive impact on their personal development. They reflected upon its impact on their sense of self, ability to trust,

relate to and communicate with others, everyday wellbeing, and positive outlook about the future:

Kiran: It's kind of hard but, cause I'm not really a talkative person and I like, it is like kind of nervous for me. And I did it and I had a bit more confidence than before I did.

Arthur: I barely used to trust anybody in this school because like only six people came from my primary school, so I didn't trust anybody else in school. But now I trust more people than I came into the school with.

Participants shared several reasons for wanting to take part in the activities and the programme. Arthur felt that taking part in the activities would benefit him in a future competitive job market:

Arthur: I mean, the same boy from a different school like [school name] might have the same scores as me but if I have like the tiny little bit more experience with the work. Therefore, I will probably have a little advantage over him, so, therefore, the company will probably want to employ me more.

Whilst Paul shared that taking part appealed to aspirations of who they wanted to be in the future:

Paul: I thought like, I wanted to opt, take part because I want to, I want to do something when I'm older. I don't, I don't want to be like a nobody.

Paul: Like I don't want to be someone that won't help people out and just be bothered about by myself.

All participants were introduced to the programme by an adult at school. One felt like they were "selected" based on merit, two mentioned being "given" letters, whilst one received explicit encouragement from a teacher to take part:

Paul: It was like encouragement basically because it said its, it's an opportunity. So, I took the opportunity whilst I've got it.

Participants highlighted the benefits of taking part as: feeling more positive in class; realizing their abilities; learning from others; and, developing trust in others and confidence in self. However, the perceived benefits participants spoke about did not always relate directly to qualifications or employability, nor the school or employment environment:

Paul: I feel like it's ok because I'll get to learn about their cultures and religion, apart from my own.

Arthur: Yeah, cause around my neighborhood I used to barely trust anybody. But now like, but now I put a bit more trust into them so that helped me really.

All participants shared that they developed an understanding of, and relatability to, others:

Paul: I felt, I felt like ok. It was like 'ok I trust people now.'

Amrit: I learned how to work in a group and like talk to other people that I didn't know.

Jake: I found it alright because then at least I could get more friends off of it.

Arthur: It made me feel quite like sympathetic for other people and the jobs because you didn't know that they needed these specific skills to be in that job.

Kiran: Teamwork. Cause like I'm not very good at teamwork when I was back then but now, I'm really good at it.

DISCUSSION

The collective data reflect the experience of five Year 9 adolescent boys who took part in a work-ready intervention at their school after being identified as "at risk" of disengaging from education and/or work. Informed by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000), we explored how adolescent boys engage with, and develop meaning from a "work-ready" intervention. Findings indicate that adolescent boys' engagement is interconnected with and affected by their environment in ways that NEET interventions fail to acknowledge or address.

Challenge Mediated by Choice

The findings showed that for participants, challenge is not always perceived as a negative, but something to be overcome. This is not to downplay the significance of access to support or help when challenge is met. Participants described low confidence and fear of judgment as perceived challenges to take part in activities. By viewing engagement and agency as situated within structural conditions, how it is restricted or inhibited by external factors can be explored which is more likely to acknowledge when disengagement may be a reasonable outcome of, or response to, certain life circumstances (Gracey and Kelly, 2010). Instead of focusing solely on the outcome (NEET), the process and factors which restrict engagement or result in disengagement are more likely to be identified. Despite feeling uncertain, some participants would have liked opportunities to demonstrate leadership and presentation skills, indicating that greater choice in activity and available resource would not only help them to overcome challenges but offer opportunity to exert and show agency. This compliments literature in which young men describe curriculum choice as a challenge of the transition to economic independence (Youth Employment UK, 2020) and those which describe relevance, accessibility, interactivity, appeal, and feeling challenged as likely to improve adolescent engagement in interventions (van Tilburg and Igou, 2012; McLean et al., 2017). The literature suggests that education, employment, or training provisions at present fail to engage "NEET" youth in meaningful ways. Perhaps then, it could be inferred that for adolescent boys, employment opportunities and work-related intervention may not be engaging, or challenging, *enough*.

Access to Supportive Relationships

Findings suggest that access to supportive relationships has a positive effect on individual engagement. In this sense, participation was somewhat contingent upon external encouragement as all participants were encouraged by or introduced to the intervention by a teacher. Interestingly,

Ryan et al. (2019) found that feeling personally supported was more important for young people than the availability of support measures. As such, being encouraged to engage with available activities by teachers may be less likely to be effective in the long run, if participants do not feel individuals supported throughout their participation. Despite feeling uncertain, praise and verbal recognition from peers supported participants to continue taking part in activities. Participants shared that they felt proud or confident when they were celebrated for their achievements in front of their peers, this sometimes was a round of applause or a prize. Findings corroborate literature that emphasizes the vital role that interpersonal interactions have in individual development when feeling supported, trusted, connected, and valued (Kahn, 1990; Fletcher, 2019); nearly all participants described feeling trusted by and trusting of, adults and peers as important for them. Findings contradict the positioning of adolescent boys as avoidant of social support (McKenzie et al., 2018), but given that they can experience difficulty in feeling secure or with personal disclosure, perhaps findings suggest that they seek support of a reciprocal nature.

Social relationships have been undervalued as a resource, arguably because they are intangible and thus, immeasurable in a standardized way. Work-ready interventions should be challenging enough to support individuals to reach their potential, but this should not be tried without appropriate support in place. Adolescents boys should be encouraged and supported to recognize their personal development, but of equal importance, is to consider how adults and peers can support this process. Access to support should be sustained (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998), so it is important to consider how long individuals have access to supportive relationships. This is significant given that access to supportive relationships is often negatively impacted during transitional periods such as out of education and into employment (Lörinc et al., 2020). The teacher or another meaningful adult may play a significant role in adolescent boys' development, but there is a staunch lack of literature around the importance of "teacher connectedness" (García-Moya et al., 2019). Findings suggest that teachers can help mediate adolescent boys' perceived challenges by supporting individual choice and agency, and to support adolescent boys' and their peers to recognize and celebrate a range of personal developmental outcomes. This need not be positioned in a way that teachers' already growing workloads are increased, but to think about how environments could better support or enable teachers to support adolescent boys, and to facilitate interactions and learning of the individual.

Recognizing Personal Development

Findings show that adolescent boys' recognize personal development in ways that are not supported or recognized by the intended outcomes of the work-ready intervention. By working solely toward the outcome, to reduce the number of individuals categorized as "NEET," recognition of how individuals engage with and encounter their environment is lost and the opportunity to unpack personal development as an individualized process is devalued. Participants felt that being able to relate to other people was a significant benefit

of the intervention for themselves. McKenzie et al. (2018) suggest that men have trouble forming social connections and this is often influenced by gendered stereotypes which indicate how or when men should seek out support. Failure to consider how social expectations impact negatively upon individual perception of development, including the social desirability of work-readiness, is likely reflected in the lack of progression to reduce youth disengagement from education, employment, or training.

Ecologically Sensitive Interventions: Dynamic Interactions

Ecologically sensitive interventions promote access to resource in line with developmental need (Ungar, 2013a). By viewing engagement as an ecological construct, and development as "ability to navigate resources, as well as the capacity of the individual's environment to provide resources" (Ungar, 2013b, p. 331), assessment highlights contextual influences and environmental quality. During adolescence, the individual is highly susceptible to environmental and emotional experiences and developmental milestones such as economic independence and autonomy intensify (Wilton, 2019; Lörinc et al., 2020). Seeking to develop an holistic understanding of the dynamicity between contexts, the intention is not to downplay developmental outcomes, but to be critical of their "ecological and social validity" (Kwon et al., 2012, p. 130).

"Disengagement" is both a process and an outcome, but NEET terminology only recognizes the latter. This positions NEET as a "problem" and deflects attention away from causes of disengagement such as: curriculum offer, peer influence, school transition, quality, and consistency of careers guidance (microsystem), expectations and prejudice, societal pressures (macrosystem). There is no space to consider *how* or *why* individuals disengage, or *when* disengagement may be a reasonable response to environmental challenge (Gracey and Kelly, 2010). Lack of change at the structural level (macrosystem) is likely why insufficient progress on addressing youth inequalities have been made (McLean et al., 2017; Lörinc et al., 2020). Without conscious efforts to acknowledge and address how structural conditions contribute to "at risk" status, work-ready interventions perpetuate the individualization of the "NEET problem" and are likely to reproduce social inequality.

Attainment and attendance have typically been used to describing participation and engagement in education but these measures offer little insight into the mechanisms which underlie engagement and disengagement (Holmes et al., 2019). Decontextualized metrics and a standardized approach to development fail to consider how access to resources, support, and agency (exosystem) can young people's transition to autonomy and economic independence. It is important not to downplay the agency of the individual, or how this changes across time (chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). For example, individual demonstration of agency in disengagement is often not appreciated in standardized practice. Instead, flexible measures which are adaptive to local circumstance (exosystem) are required (Filmer-Sankey and McCrone, 2012).

The macrosystem carries information to individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), but without unpacking how cultural values govern experience, no understanding of their impact at the individual level can be addressed. There is a lack of recognition of how careers education can marginalize from within (Moote and Archer, 2018). For example, NEET as a deficit-based label positions individuals within social discourse, perpetuates stigma and often results in gender-stereotyped career guidance (Lawy et al., 2009). Using gender to *predict* men's health and behavior, rather than help *explain* their experiences how structures and gendered experiences shape individual health (Hankivsky et al., 2014; Hunting, 2014). Policy and practice (exosystem) which reduces and oversimplifies health inequality to gendered characteristics only serves to perpetuate the social conditions which inhibit adolescent boys' engagement.

Policy change influences social expectation (macrosystem), dictates demand for resources in schools (exosystem), and changes the teachers' role (microsystem) (Hanley et al., 2020), which in turn determines what is expected from the individual. Youth-adult relationships play an important role in adolescent development (Ungar, 2013b; McMahan et al., 2016), but the literature suggests lack of clear guidance alongside growing pressure on the role and expectations of the teacher to provide careers guidance (Moote and Archer, 2018) means teachers are not always equipped to deal with the causes and contributors to disengagement and poor mental health. Instead, NEET as a statistic could be valued as an indicator of the labor market and opportunities for youth (Holmes et al., 2019), not of youth "ability" or "potential" as often perpetuated. Repositioning the statistic in this way is particularly pertinent since careers education in its current state often fails to inform and guide young people about labor market trends (Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012; Moote and Archer, 2018).

Likely, social expectations (macrosystem) do not align with the often disjointed reality of young peoples' experiences (individual) during the transition from education to employment (Lawy et al., 2009). It is possible that the prevalence of poor mental health amongst the NEET population is a culmination of growing social pressures (macrosystem) and a lack of effective structural support (exosystem). For adolescent boys specifically, perhaps their disengagement represents a conscious detachment from societal pressures, rigid life trajectories, deficit labeling, and gendered norms encountered.

The chronosystem was introduced and engaged with later in Bronfenbrenner's works, and often interaction at this level is underthought or overlooked (Eriksson et al., 2018). This paper demonstrates the need for recognition of how individuals interact with and at the chronosystem level, concerning normative life transition experiences and opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Rapid change to social structures and the physical environment is intensifying pre-existing barriers to employment and economic independence, restricting individual agency when engaging with education, employment, or training. Young people are dealing with the consequences of austerity measures, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these have potential to exacerbate lack of educational resource; assessment awarding

gaps; oversubscribed health provision; limited careers support; intermittent school closure; housing crises; and a dwindling job market and growing unemployment. Recommendations for ecologically sensitive interventions are pertinent, given that in light of the pandemic the Local Government Association (2020) strive to support economic recovery by reducing NEET numbers and employing RONI tools for identification. Also, given the Department for Education's shift toward, and evaluation of, a Contextual Safeguarding system (Amin et al., 2018; Firmin and Lloyd, 2020), now is arguably the time to reevaluate and rehaul how we work to "safeguard" young people and support them to develop work-related skills. This is not simply to add to the already growing workload of teachers across schools but to highlight the need for a more integrated approach that recognizes their needs to support adolescent boys effectively.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The research has potential to inform education policy and practice relating to "work-readiness" by highlighting how dominant ideologies can influence adolescent boys experience within their environments. Although the small sample size limits the extent to which results can be generalized to broader populations, this study contributes exploratory data that captures some of participants experience of an intervention for "work-readiness" in the United Kingdom context. Given the rate of participant withdrawal, the opportunity to interview these participants could have offered insight into what did not work so well. As such, the opportunity to understand the experience of individuals who did not engage with the intervention was lost. This is likely to present a bias the data, with participants more likely to speak positively about their experience.

CONCLUSION

A more holistic approach to the assessment of adolescents' "work-readiness" is necessary and this study has illustrated the importance of attuning to how environments shape and influence health during a broad timepoint of the lifespan. Although the interviews were conducted before the pandemic, now is an ideal time to build upon these findings as the employment market shifts and circumstances and opportunities for young people change. Of particular significance moving forward, is the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employability prospects for younger workers who are most negatively impacted by the pandemic; particularly being more likely to be furloughed and experiencing job loss. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rates for young men were double those for young women (Powell, 2020) and during the pandemic, unemployment amongst the youngest populations has increased due to them being less likely to be employed in roles that can be worked from home (Francis-Devine et al., 2020). However, younger workers were more likely to experience unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic due to being more likely to be employed

in "insecure" roles such as non-permanent contracts as well as sectors such as retail and hospitality that were significantly impacted by the pandemic (Powell et al., 2022). The latest figures from the Office of National Statistics suggest that the number of economically inactive men aged 16–24 year had risen in the last 3 months of 2021 by 38,000, whilst numbers of economically inactive women in the same age bracket was at a "record low" (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021).

Now is perhaps time to take stock, revise, and intervene in ways that do not automatically adopt existing tools and measures and continue to recreate the challenges encountered by adolescent boys. Drawing on ecological systems theory and the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000) as a framework and lens, social development within the context is unpacked to consider how individual agency, potential, wellbeing, and experience are influenced by and interconnected with the environment. Although adolescent boys and young men face unemployment, economic instability, and mental ill-health during the transition from late adolescence to young adulthood, NEET categorization ignores the social determinants of health and wellbeing which increase the likelihood of individual (dis)engagement from education, employment, or training. Moving toward a more contextual approach to the assessment of *how*, *when*, or *why* someone is categorized as "at risk" of disengagement should open up space for more critical approach to policy, practice, and intervention. This has potential to not only improve work-related outcomes for not only adolescent boys, but other young people who experience the transition from education to employment. In line with ecologically sensitive interventions, future policy and practice must consider the role of the person, processes, and context during the transition between social settings and over time. Assessment of individual ability should focus less on what the individual is (or is not) doing at that moment in time, but on what they are (or could be) capable of with resource, support, and space to recognize and reflect on personal development. By viewing engagement as an ecological construct, acknowledgment of the interrelatedness of individual development within their environment is more likely to address social inequality by emphasizing what individuals do not have access to.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because publication of the dataset would compromise anonymity of participants. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to PC-M, Parise.carmichael-murphy@manchester.ac.uk.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted for this research by the University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee (ID Number: 7963/002). Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

PC-M conceptualized and designed the study, conducted the interviews, completed the analysis, and wrote the drafts of the manuscript. OD and NH supported the analysis and with manuscript drafting. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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