INTERROGATING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND NEETS
Understanding local contexts in two English regions

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Abstract: In England, early school leaving is not part of the official policy discourse; the focus instead is on reducing youth unemployment and the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). The overall aim of this paper is to examine the key issues at stake in the changing policy landscape relating to education and youth unemployment in England, and to explore the challenges facing young people in the context of localised socio-economic factors. Drawing on the academic literature, official statistics and qualitative data from our fieldwork in two English regions, we explore the differences between the concepts of ESL, NEETs and youth unemployment and interrogate the efficacy of these terms to capture vulnerability patterns in youth transitions. In addition, the paper argues that educational policies and outcomes need to be understood in relation to economic opportunity structures not just nationally but also at regional levels. Our data suggests that although educational attainment has a positive impact on labour market outcomes, it is unlikely that education policy initiatives alone will solve the issue of large-scale youth unemployment.

Keywords: early school leaving, NEET, youth unemployment, England, regional differences

S'INTERROGER SUR LA DÉSCOLARISATION PRÉCOCE, LE CHOMAGE DES JEUNES ADULTES ET NEET: COMPRENDRE LES CONTEXTES LOCAUX DANS DEUX RÉGIONS ANGLAISES

Résumé: En Angleterre, la déscolarisation précoce des jeunes adultes ne fait pas partie du discours politique officiel; l'attention se portant plus sur la réduction du chômage des jeunes et sur la réduction du nombre de jeunes sortis du processus d'éducation, de formation et d'accès à l'emploi (NEET). Le but global de cet article est d'apprécier les enjeux et solutions à apporter en matière d'éducation et d'emplois des jeunes dans le contexte d'une politique en plein changement et d'évaluer les défis auxquels font face ces jeunes en fonction de facteurs socio-économiques locaux. S'appuyant sur une

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littérature académique, des statistiques officielles ainsi que des données qualitatives de notre travail de terrain accompli sur deux régions Anglaises, nous explorons les différences entre les concepts de déscolarisation précoce (ESL), NEET et du chômage des jeunes pour ainsi nous interroger sur la pertinence du choix de ces termes afin de traduire la vulnérabilité de ces jeunes face à ces changements. De plus, selon cet article la politique éducative et les résultats qui en découlent ne doivent pas s'entendre uniquement dans le cadre des opportunités économique au niveau national mais également au niveau régional. Nos données suggèrent que même si le niveau d'éducation a un impact positif sur la capacité à obtenir un emploi, des initiatives en politiques en matière d'éducation, ne sont pas à même de résoudre les problèmes de chômage des jeunes à grande échelle.

Mots-clés: déscolarisation précoce, NEET, chômage des jeunes, Angleterre, différences régionales

INTERROGAR O ABANDONO ESCOLAR PRECOCE, O DESEMPREGO JUVENIL E OS NEET: COMPREENDENDO OS CONTEXTOS LOCAIS EM DUAS REGIÕES INGLESAS

Resumo: Em Inglaterra, o abandono escolar precoce não faz parte do discurso político oficial. Em vez disso, foca-se a redução do desemprego juvenil e do número de jovens que não estão na educação, no emprego nem na formação (NEET). O objetivo geral deste trabalho é analisar as principais questões em jogo no panorama político de mudança, no que diz respeito à educação e ao desemprego das pessoas jovens em Inglaterra. Pretende-se também explorar os desafios que as/os jovens enfrentam no contexto de fatores socioeconómicos localizados. Com base na literatura académica, em estatísticas oficiais e nos dados qualitativos do nosso trabalho de campo em duas regiões inglesas, exploramos as diferenças entre os conceitos de ESL, NEET e desemprego juvenil e interrogamos a eficácia desses termos para capturar padrões de vulnerabilidade nas transições da juventude. Além disso, o artigo argumenta que as políticas e os resultados educacionais precisam de ser entendidos na sua relação com as estruturas de oportunidade económica, não apenas a nível nacional mas também a nível regional. Os dados da investigação sugerem que, embora o nível de escolaridade tenha um impacto positivo sobre os resultados no mercado de trabalho, é pouco provável que, por si só, as iniciativas políticas de educação possam resolver o problema do desemprego juvenil em larga escala.

Palavras-chave: abandono escolar precoce, NEET, desemprego juvenil, Inglaterra, diferenças regionais

Introduction

In the last few decades, the policy landscape for secondary education in Britain has been characterised by constant change (Higham & Yeomans, 2011). Education and youth policy has featured highly on the agenda of the Labour government (1997-2010) and the Conservative-

Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015) alike. Although differences between the education policies of the two governments remain clear, both continued with the same paradigm in many aspects (Exley & Ball, 2011). In particular, there is an apparent subordination of education to the perceived needs of the globalised market and knowledge-based economy, promoting the marketisation of the education system, increasing school autonomy, and a discourse of individual aspirations, choice and responsibility (Ainley & Allen, 2013; Allais, 2012; Wright, 2012).

Nonetheless, there are also some differences in policies: while the Labour government introduced a number of reforms explicitly aimed at combating social exclusion and social inequalities in education along with neo-liberal education reforms, the Coalition government seemed to fully adopt the ideals of neo-liberalism (Exley & Ball, 2011). In this policy paradigm, education is conceived as central in solving both social and economic problems, its duty being to increase economic competitiveness and at the same time also providing social justice (Allais, 2012; Riddell, 2013; Spohrer, 2011). As will be discussed later, in the English (and more broadly, British) context, the focus of education and youth policy initiatives are young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). The concept of early school leaving (ESL) has received much less attention in the policy discourse, and as a result, in British academic research.

This paper arises from a study conducted as part of a wider research project (Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU – RESL.eu[1]), aiming to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes influencing pupils leaving school or training early. In addition, the project intends to identify and analyse the intervention and compensation measures that succeed in keeping pupils in education or training, in spite of their high risk of ESL, and ultimately, to disclose these insights and good practice to various audiences.

As part of this wider project, in 2013-2014 we conducted a comparative policy analysis across the nine partner countries. «When comparing education policies across European countries, it becomes evident that their pace of implementation and their very nature are diverse and far from converging» (Araújo, Magalhães, Rocha, & Macedo, 2014: 13). In this paper, we present data from the English context[2] and, building on previous research, we investigate the complex and dynamic relationship between education policy and social inequalities, including economic outcomes. In addition, we present qualitative data from our interviews with a diverse range of key stakeholders across two regions – London and the North East of

[1] RESL.eu is an FP7-funded research project bringing together nine partner countries and led by CeMIS, University of Antwerp. The UK team is made up of Louise Ryan, Alessio D'Angelo, Neil Kaye and Magdolna Lőrinc.

[2] The policy context in other parts of the UK, such as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is slightly different.

England. In so doing, we also highlight the importance of regional variations. A key contribution of this paper is the examination of differences between the concepts of ESL, NEETs and youth unemployment and the interrogation of the efficacy of these terms to capture vulnerability patterns in youth transitions.

Using official statistics and an analysis of qualitative data from our fieldwork, this article argues that the common terms used to depict youth vulnerability – ESL, NEET, youth unemployment –, as they are usually defined, cannot capture all young people who are in vulnerable positions. While all three have some positive aspects, neither of them gives any indication of the growing number of young people «churning» (Furlong, 2006) between unpaid voluntary work, low paid and insecure apprenticeships and jobs, and never-ending training courses with no clear employment opportunities in sight. Furthermore, we argue that educational policies and outcomes need to be understood in relation to economic opportunity structures not just nationally but also at regional levels. Our data suggest that, although educational attainment has a positive impact on labour market outcomes, it is unlikely that education policy initiatives alone will solve the issue of large-scale youth unemployment and young people becoming NEETs.

In the next section, drawing on academic literature, we consider the three key concepts of ESL, NEET and youth unemployment within the English context.

Interrogating key concepts of youth vulnerability: ESL, NEET and youth unemployment

In England (and Britain as a whole), there were considerable advances in closing the achievement gap of several groups (Whitty & Anders, 2012). For instance, the gender gap has been reversed with girls outperforming boys in most levels and subjects (although not in the hard sciences); and previously underachieving minority ethnic groups have improved their attainment levels (Biggart, 2007). However, it seems that the persistent and significant link between social class and educational attainment still exists in spite of implementing a plethora of social inclusion policies (Gorard, 2010; Levin, 2010; Reay, 2006; Vincent & Reay, 2014). Stephen Ball (2010: 155) highlights that

> as far as social equality is concerned, education policy is not working or not working very well (…). Educational outcomes and the benefits of education in terms of labour market access and income, etc. in the UK appear to be no more equal than before the current regime of educational reforms were begun in the 1980s and, indeed, by many indicators may be more unequal.

Whilst educational attainment impacts positively on labour market outcomes (see Figure 2), the relationship between them should not be interpreted in simplistic terms of «an unques-

tioning faith in the economic benefits of education» (Wolf, 2002: xi). Educational and labour market outcomes to a large extent reflect socio-economic inequalities present in the broader society; and these structural problems need structural responses alongside education policy interventions (Furlong, 2006; Levin, 2010; Pring, 2009). Devoting all attention to changing the education system in order to solve economic challenges faced by young people, in the present economic climate, diverts attention from the underlying socio-economic disadvantage they face (Furlong, 2006). Since «inequalities happen in a complex and dynamic interplay of structures and processes» (Ball, 2010: 158), Ball argues that «the school is the wrong place to look and the wrong place to reform – at least in isolation from other sorts of changes in other parts of society» (p. 156).

Thus, changing educational policies need to be understood within wider political contexts. As Ainley and Allen argue (2013), «with the return to permanent and structural unemployment», the educational section has become increasingly important in the «management» of a growing number of students (para. 3.2-4.1). They argue that young people are increasingly being «warehoused» by lengthening the period of schooling (para. 3.4), a topic we will return to later in this paper.

Current British policy discourse interprets the role of education primarily from a labour market perspective and tends to define problematic and/or vulnerable youth predominantly in terms of their labour market outcomes (Ainley & Allen, 2013). Consequently, the youth policy agenda focuses on NEETs; and statistical data is primarily collected on NEET and youth unemployment levels (see Figure 1 and Figure 3). Reducing ESL has not been the explicit aim of education reforms, and the term ESL is hardly mentioned in the policy discourse. However, this issue is not being neglected; rather, it is articulated using different terminology.

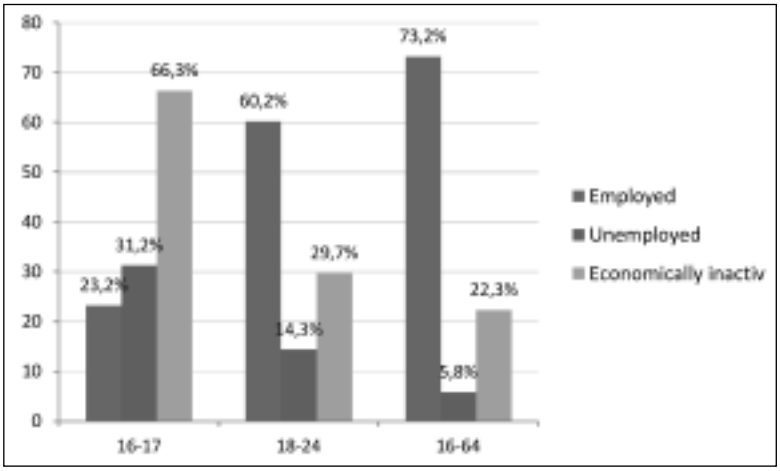
ESL, as defined by the EU, refers to young people aged between 18 and 24, who have attained no higher than lower secondary education and who are not currently receiving any education or training (European Commission, 2010)[3]. Although the term ESL is largely missing from the British education and social policy discourse, the low number of young people staying on in education after reaching the compulsory schooling age at 16[4] and leaving with no or few qualifications has been a major policy concern from the 1980s onwards (Machin &

[3] For the RESL.eu project, the working definition of ESL is «all young people who left secondary education without attaining a degree/certificate of upper secondary education or similar, equivalent to an ISCED level 3 (2011 ISCED scale)» (Araújo, Rocha, Macedo, Magalhães, & Oliveira, 2013: 18).

[4] While compulsory full-time education still finishes at age 16, participation age was increased to 17 in 2013, then to 18 from academic year 2014-2015 through the Raising Participation Age policy. Participation includes full time education, work-based learning including apprenticeships, and part-time education for those employed, self-employed or volunteering.

FIGURE 1

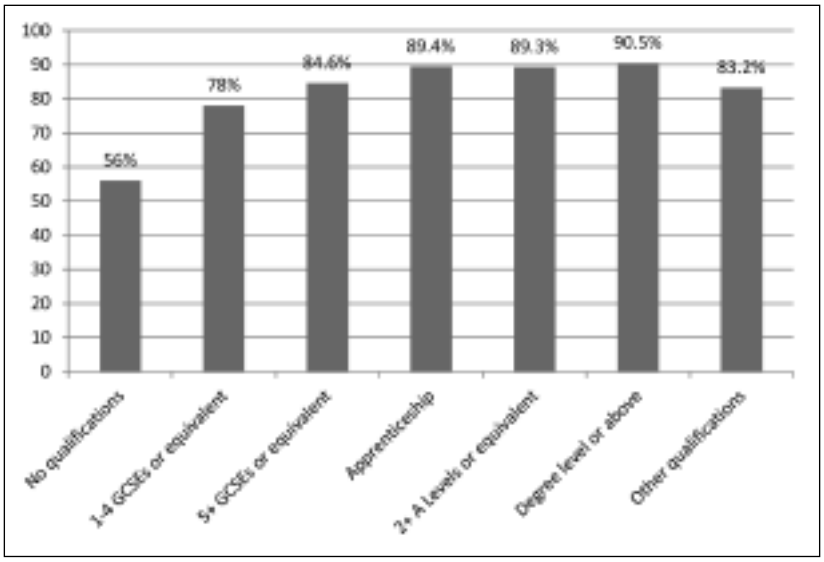
Labour market status by age group, United Kingdom (October-December 2014)



Source: Labour Force Survey (February 2015), Office for National Statistics, authors' calculations.

FIGURE 2

Employment rates by highest level of qualification, age 25-34; England and Wales, 2011



Source: Census – Office for National Statistics, authors' calculations.

Vignoles, 2006). Historically, Britain has had low rates of staying on at school after the age of 16, as the majority of young people left the education system after they reached the compulsory schooling age, and entered the labour market relatively easily. Youth transitions however radically changed in the 1970s following the collapse of the traditional manufacturing industries, which had been the main labour market destination for young people leaving school (Simmons, Russell, & Thompson, 2013). With the rise of youth unemployment and the withdrawal of unemployment benefits for those under the age of 18 in 1988, a new problem category – NEET – emerged in the policy discourse (Furlong, 2006).

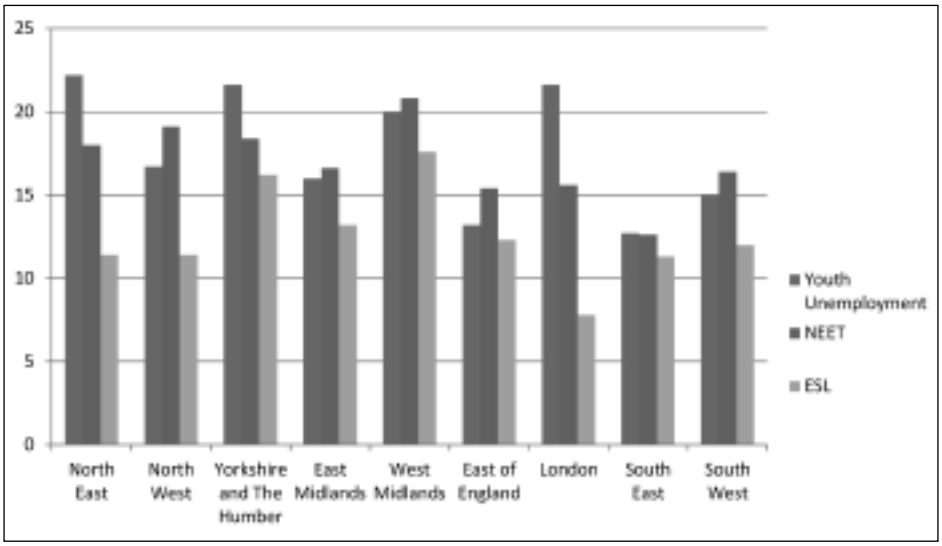
While the objective of both concepts – «youth unemployment» and «NEET» – is to define the most vulnerable group of young people, primarily in terms of labour market participation, the two categories in fact depict different groups. For instance, in the UK in the first quarter of 2015, 943,000 young people aged 16-24 were NEET (13% of the total age group), while the figure for youth unemployment for the same cohort was 735,000. The two groups differ not only in absolute numbers, but their composition too: only 45.9% of young people NEET were unemployed; the remaining 54.1% being economically inactive (Mirza-Davies, 2015).

Of the two, «youth unemployment» is the more precisely defined. In this paper, data for youth unemployment was taken from the Labour Force Survey, where «unemployed» is defined as someone not employed but looking for and available to work (whether or not studying full/part time) in the four weeks prior to the survey; including those who have found a job but waiting to start in the following two weeks. Young people between 16 and 24 who meet this definition are included in the figure for youth unemployment (see Figure 1).

The NEET category, on the other hand, lacks a commonly agreed definition in regards to the age group to which it refers, the subgroups included, and whether the concept is defined from a static (NEET at a certain point in time) or dynamic (NEET at any point over a period of time) standpoint. The NEET statistics in this paper (see Figure 3) are based on data made available by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). According to this, young people between 16 to 24 who are not «in any of the forms of education or training (…) and not in employment» are considered NEET. Therefore, by definition, all young people who are NEET are either unemployed or economically inactive (ONS, 2015: 2). The term can cover a varied range of subgroups with different characteristics and needs – such as long and short term unemployed, young people with disabilities and illnesses, those looking after children or relatives, or young people taking a gap year for travelling, volunteering or for advancing their artistic skills. The use of multiple definitions makes national and international comparisons difficult, if not impossible (Furlong, 2006).

FIGURE 3

Regional youth unemployment, NEET and ESL rates (18-24), 2013



Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey and Eurostat; authors' calculations.

As Furlong (2006) explains, the introduction of the NEET category for depicting vulnerable youth has had some positive facets, for instance including all subgroups disengaged from education, training and the labour market: e.g., carers, young mothers and young people with disabilities, previously labelled under the «inactive» category. This, however, leads to a very heterogeneous category, which combines vulnerable youth (those unemployed, with disabilities, looking after children or relatives, etc.) with those who are exercising choice, such as travelling or taking a gap year (Simmons et al., 2013). The heterogeneity of the group therefore weakens its effectiveness in policy initiatives (Furlong, 2006; Yates & Payne, 2006). From a policy perspective, this group needs to be disaggregated and distinct subgroups defined by their characteristics and specific needs, which then can be met by tailored policy initiatives.

ESLs and young NEETs have a number of similar characteristics; however, these concepts are not coterminous. While ESLs are defined by their educational attainment and highest qualification level achieved, the concept of NEET defines its target population by their educational and labour market activity or, more precisely, the lack of it. This leads to a difficult fit between the two definitions, not least because they are measuring different outcomes. While ESL is an important characteristic and risk factor in becoming NEET, it is only one of many

other factors such as disadvantaged family background, history of truanting and school exclusion, lower academic attainment (Furlong, 2006; Mirza-Davies, 2015). Therefore, it is important to be clear that not all ESLs are NEETs, and not all NEETs had left the education system early or with inadequate qualifications.

In addition, we argue that having one country-specific ESL, NEET or youth unemployment rate is misleading and masks huge differences between areas. As shown in Figure 3, not only do these rates vary enormously between regions, but also, and perhaps more interestingly, the relationship between these three concepts in any one region is also significantly different. For example, in some regions the rates of ESL, NEETs and youth unemployment are very similar to each other (see South-East), while in other regions they are markedly different (see London). In addition, it is noteworthy that the highest rate can vary between regions: for example, in the Midlands, the NEET is higher than the youth unemployment rate, whereas in the North East the opposite is true. However, ESL rates are lower than NEET and youth unemployment rates in all regions. The unemployment figures for the North East of England and London are particularly striking, as a result of which they were selected as the two regions we focused on in our research project.

The three concepts – ESL, NEET and youth unemployment – are all designed to capture youth vulnerability. They are defined using different variables; therefore, all three highlight different aspects of problematic transitions from education to employment. In this regard, ESL is a powerful and relevant concept, since both on a national and international level, ESL seems to be one of the main risk factors for becoming NEET and/or unemployed later on (Furlong, 2006; Kaye, D'Angelo, Ryan, & Lőrinc, 2014). In Britain, «young people who have achieved five or more GCSEs[5] grade A-C are less likely to be NEET than those who have not» (Mirza-Davies, 2015: 8). Indeed, 24% of those young people who did not achieve this were found to be NEET in the first quarter of 2015, as opposed to only 6% of those who had five A*-C GCSEs.

The efficacy of the three concepts needs to be understood in the context of the contemporary youth labour market. This seems to be comprised of: a disappearing middle tier (Roberts, 2011); a graduate route, which in England is becoming more expensive as a result of rising university tuition fees, without offering worthy wage differentials and stable employment – especially for working-class graduates (MacDonald, 2011); and, at the bottom, a growing precarious, low wage, low stability tier (Ainley & Allen, 2013). In an economy which is becoming «pear-shaped» (*ibidem*), the labour market for young people, especially those with no or few qualifications, is characterized by «churning» between participation in low-paid,

[5] Benchmark of satisfactory achievement: 5+ GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and Mathematics, usually taken at age 16; the equivalent of ISCED 3.

low-security employment, government training schemes and periods of being NEET (Furlong, 2006; Iles, Chapman, & Van der Graaf, 2008; Simmons & Thompson, 2011; Simmons et al., 2013). None of the categories, ESL, NEET, youth unemployment, captures those young people who are churning between low-paid and insecure jobs and training courses who might not show up in NEET and youth unemployment statistics, but nonetheless are «trapped in inferior forms of employment» (Furlong, 2006: 555).

MacDonald (2011) draws attention to the «myth of the skills economy»: contrary to official policy discourses, the number of jobs that do not need qualifications has not diminished. Therefore, up-skilling on its own without labour market interventions might not be the solution for tackling youth unemployment. Unemployment, underemployment and «limited opportunity structures» (Roberts, 2009) seem to characterise the whole youth labour market, which questions the efficiency, even the validity, of supply side youth policy initiates. Raising qualification levels without increasing the number and quality of available jobs only shifts the boundaries of disadvantage (MacDonald, 2011). The conclusion is eerily similar to that made by Hannan, Hovels, Van den Berg, and White (1995: 342) nearly two decades ago:

> None of these problems can be addressed through educational programmes (…). Until this is recognised in public policy, the educational systems are likely to be faced with insatiable demands to eliminate an «early leaving» problem which, of its nature, is ever being created anew in the labour market.

In the next section, we turn to our qualitative data to explore these themes in more detail. We begin by briefly outlining our research methods.

Research methods

As part of the wider research project, it was agreed to compare two different regions within each partner country so as to understand how local conditions may play a role in shaping the life chances of young people. The research areas identified for this project were two adjacent boroughs in North West London, and Gateshead and South Tyneside in the North East of England.

We selected London and the North East of England for research because, at the time of our fieldwork in 2013, they had the highest youth unemployment rates for 16-24 year olds in England and were among the three highest rates for 18-24 year olds too[6]. After identifying the

[6] At the time of our fieldwork in 2013, the North East had the highest youth unemployment rates in the country: 28.6% for 16-24 year olds and 28.1% for 18-24 year olds. London was the second in the country in the 16-24 age category

larger areas according to youth unemployment rates, urban areas with suitable population size were delineated.

Having identified the two research areas, we then selected a number of key stakeholders: from international and national policy makers to frontline youth workers, and from different political positions. The research questions associated with this dimension of the project were: to examine the development and implementation of education policies and instruments, as well as to explore examples of good practice, aimed at addressing early school leaving.

Fieldwork was carried out between July and October 2013 with the participation of 24 stakeholders in education and youth services. We completed nine semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, one in each research area. Research participants included a member of the European Parliament, a member of the UK Parliament with remit in education – both from opposition parties –, while the voice of the government was represented by a policy manager from the Department for Education (DfE) and a manager from a national employment service. At local level, we consulted a varied range of stakeholders including policy officers from local authorities with responsibility for education and youth services, representatives from youth charity organisations, employment and career services, and regional bodies, such as London Councils and the Greater London Authority.

The data from the interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed and analysed thematically according to the project's *a priori* research questions, although new themes were also allowed to emerge from the data. The data were then coded using NVIVO software. In the sections below, we present our findings according to the key themes which emerged from our research. The first section presents participants' assessment of the changing policy landscape. The second section focuses on vocational education, particularly apprenticeship programmes. The final data section examines socio-economic contexts and in so doing highlights marked regional variations. Thus, we emphasise the importance of going beyond national data and national policies to look at how these are experienced and enacted on the ground at local level.

Conflicting policy agendas in the context of funding cut backs

The interviews and focus groups validated our conclusion based on the initial policy review that the term ESL is virtually absent from the policy discourse. Almost every time, research participants asked for clarification on what we meant by this term, demonstrating

with 26.5% youth unemployment rate. In addition, London ranked third for the 18-24 year olds with an unemployment rate of 22.9%.

that the concept did not trickle down to the wider public, not even to stakeholders working within the education sector.

Nevertheless, while reducing ESL has not been the explicit aim of educational reforms in England, the double objective of raising the school leaving age and qualifications levels may be regarded as a means of addressing ESL despite the different terminology in policy discourse. Research participants in both regions identified «Raising the Participation Age» (RPA) legislation as the main policy initiative designed to tackle ESL in England. As emphasized by the representative from the DfE, this is a significant change as it is the first time all young people will be expected to take part in some kind of education or training after the age of 16 years.

Most of our study participants, however, seemed somewhat guarded regarding this policy initiative. Education specialists in local authorities highlighted that, while there is legislation in place for RPA, the policy is not mandated, meaning that it cannot be enforced. Therefore, those who do not comply will not be prosecuted as it is not the objective of this policy to criminalise young people. «It gives a sort of false impression», according to a schools service officer from a London council. An opposition MP even criticised RPA as a «mealy-mouthed» policy initiative (a colloquial expression for hypocrisy), which he stated was «typical» of the (2010-2015) coalition government. The perceptions of the RPA legislation among our participants mirrored the concerns highlighted in academic literature, that is, according to Ainley and Allen (2013), the policy of extending school age is less a reaction to employers demand for skills and more about managing the large numbers of 16-18 year olds who cannot find jobs on leaving school. In addition, it seems that only the traditional NEET group is specifically targeted, while those in full-time employment, even if low skilled and in low paid jobs, might be quietly ignored, because those businesses that employ young people under 17 (and 18 from 2015) on a full-time basis will not be prosecuted. As one stakeholder observed, perhaps «it felt too difficult to tackle employers» (Youth service officer, London).

The government has also introduced a new initiative to raise attainment specifically in Maths and English whereby students who fail to achieve a grade C at GCSE will be required to continue studying these subjects even after they progress on to the next stage of work or study. However, there is no mechanism in place to ensure that these young people repeat the exam and attain a grade C at a later date:

> If youngsters aren't achieving the levels that are required in terms of English and maths they are going to have to carry on studying those subjects, but they [the government] aren't actually setting any targets for those youngsters. So it could be that the school or college will provide lessons or tutorials in those subjects, but if we are not actually improving the education output for those individual youngsters, how meaningful will that be? (opposition MP)

In addition to policy initiatives, the funding that schools and different initiatives receive can shape education provision. In England, there have been severe cuts to the education budget after 2010; in fact, this has been the most severe period of cutbacks for over half a century. The 16-19 age group is one of the most affected: the very successful Education Maintenance Allowance[7] scheme was cancelled; spending on further education and youth services – including careers guidance – reduced.

The steady decline in career advice provision due to government spending cuts was a key issue raised by most of those participants who work directly with young people (in both research areas). While previously this has been provided to students by local authorities and other independent agencies, the coalition government (2010-2015) decided these services should be offered by the schools themselves. However, our participants identified problems associated with this policy change. For example, while many schools have decided to buy back this service from local authorities who had been providing it before, others, for financial reasons, have tried to supply this service internally, by their own staff members who are not qualified and, according to our participants, often lacked the appropriate knowledge and experience to do so: «Schools don't think about the wellbeing of young people; they think «we allocate a geography teacher to be the information and advice officer» and they don't give any training to keep that money» (Youth support worker).

The education participation rate among 16-17 years olds had been reasonably high even before raising participation age to 17/18. However, our research participants explained that a large number of young people drop out from the education system by the age of 18 as a consequence of receiving inadequate career advice and/or the education provision does not match their expectations. The recent reform of career guidance provision might further increase the number of those who drop out of their studies.

In the face of government cut backs to public funding (a strategy which is set to intensify under the Conservative government elected in 2015), many stakeholders are seeking out other sources of funding, including charitable organisations (such as the Big Lottery Fund), European Social Fund (ESF) and working in partnership with businesses. Two policy officers from the Greater London Authority (GLA) talked about initiatives involving partnership work between different education providers, schools and local authorities, on the one hand, and between schools and businesses, on the other[8].

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7 The EMA used to be paid directly to young people between 16-19 to help them continue their studies, depending on their financial situation.

8 Other reforms mentioned by participants included the increased autonomy for schools and colleges.

A topic discussed by all participants was the renewed government focus on apprenticeships. In the following section, we critically consider how these policies are developing in practice.

Transforming vocational education/apprenticeships

Roberts and Atherton (2011) argue that decades of successive reforms aimed at the vocational path has only created a «series of blind alleys» – training provisions that carry no value for employers and don't lead to subsequent jobs. To begin with, all types of vocational education paths so far function as a residue category created for academically less successful young people, carrying a «second rate» signal for employers. Even more significantly, there is little connection between the training courses and the labour market. Employers do not have control over the curriculum, and they hardly ever lead to actual employment (Bynner, 2012)[9]. In some cases, training provisions directly hinder young people's prospects, because they are identified by employers as courses for «no-hopers», for the «academic residue» (Iles et al., 2008). It has been claimed that vocational education functions as a substitute for the lost employment opportunities for working-class young people (Simmons et al., 2013).

Similarly, in our research, we found a tension between government policies which support the development of alternative learning arenas such as apprenticeships, and the overall perception amongst most participants that formal academic qualifications are still widely regarded in society as the gold standard that all young people should aspire to achieve. «I think in this country (…) we never had a very high profile for vocational education and we haven't got a strong tradition of seeing it as a very positive route for young people» (Youth service council officer).

There seems to be a genuine push to equip young people with in-demand skills through reform of the apprenticeship programme and other vocational offers. However, the pressure on schools to raise attainment at GCSE and A-Level appears to reinforce the privileging of academic qualifications. According to some participants, the country needs a cultural shift to value vocational qualifications, apprenticeships among them:

> It sits on an unhelpful place somewhere between employment and training, so it's neither one thing, nor the other. Young people don't know about it sufficiently, and parents and teachers don't know about it sufficiently. (…) So I think, the offer is broadening, it's just it's not yet known and is not credible enough really. (Senior officer, London Councils)

[9] However, in current phase of field work for RESL.eu – 2015-2016 –, we have identified a few very positive apprenticeship programmes. There is some initial evidence to suggest that these schemes are working more closely with employers to improve job opportunities.

While statistics show that apprenticeships have a high probability to lead to employment at least in the short term (see Figure 2), despite an increase in take-up, only a small proportion of young people opt for apprenticeships:

> What you want is actually to get the concept of apprenticeships into people's mentality to grow the offer, because there are still not many young people in London – still not many, particularly 16 to 18, who take that offer up. (Senior officer, London Councils)

In addition, there is also increasing emphasis on internships as a way for young people to gain work experience and enhance their skills and «employability» (Ainley & Allen, 2013). However, these are often unpaid and thus, it is has been argued, are the preserve of the middle and upper classes whose parents can afford to support them while they gain unpaid work experience (Ainley & Allen, 2013). Similarly, apprenticeships may not be a viable option for poorer families as the payment for apprentices is currently well below the minimum wage and considerably below the London Living Wage, for example. The minimum pay for apprentices was £2.68 per hour in 2013, at the time of our fieldwork, rising to £2.73 from October 2014[10]. For many young people these alternative options are still unaffordable:

> The central government has pushed apprenticeships massively over the last 5 years or so. (…) We also spoke to a number of young people, some of whom who have graduated, and some of who've been through internship schemes but weren't getting paid. We spoke to a few young people who were doing it for free. Actually they were being out of pocket (…). And that's quite a big issue. (Senior council officer, London)

Some of our participants expressed concern about employers abusing the apprenticeship scheme:

> There's an emerging trend at the moment, I've seen quite a lot of cases recently of people who've been given apprenticeships, hairdressing and some of the trades; and just being treated very badly, (…) people are being employed on that basis as cheap labour without any consideration of supporting the training aspect and moving toward a qualification. (Employment specialist, North East of England; all agree)

This suggests that some apprenticeships are not well regulated and so the level of training gained by young people may not be properly monitored and accredited. The lack of proper accreditation may mean that the term «apprenticeship» is being used quite loosely to cover a

[10] For young people between 16-18, and those in their first year if 19 or over. Other apprentices are entitled to the National Minimum Wage for their age, which in 2013, at the time of interviews, was: £3.72 for young people under 18; £5.03 for 18-20 year olds; and £6.31 for those aged 21 and over. However, the UK living wage at the time was calculated to be £7.61, the London living wage rising to £8.80 (2013).

wide range of different working arrangements, often low paid and with little training opportunities. As a result, apprenticeship schemes do not necessarily lead to employment. Hence, young people may be sceptical of undertaking such apprenticeships: «So young people actually aren't putting any value onto apprenticeships because some unscrupulous employers actually use apprenticeships as cheap labour» (Senior officer at youth organisation, North East of England).

This echoes the point made by Ainley and Allen (2013) at the start of this paper that programmes for keeping students in school and training may be more about managing youth unemployment rather than actually equipping young people for actual employment opportunities.

As noted at the outset of this paper, it is important to address the regional variations in economic conditions and employment opportunities. In the following section, we focus on the local specificities as many of our participants referred to the link between ESL/NEET and local socio-economic conditions.

Poverty and related socio-economic challenges

One main reason for the inefficacy of education policies in reducing economic disadvantage is that the causes of youth unemployment are rooted in wider socio-structural factors (Ball, 2010). As noted earlier, regional statistics reveal a complex relationship between NEETs/youth unemployment and ESL levels. As evidenced by the statistical data and furthermore also depicted by the stakeholders in our study, there was a stark difference between the social and economic realities of young people from the two research areas. While stakeholders in London were very much aware of the barriers and challenges facing young people, the focus seemed to be on improving their opportunities through initiatives that can help these young people to achieve in school, gain the right kinds of relevant qualifications and thus equip themselves for the employment opportunities which do exist in the city. This general underlying and understated optimism can be understood in the context of a decade-long, steady and significant improvement in London schools, and the fact that, as one participant noted, «London is a very international city» (GLA officer). Hence, London offers a wide variety of employment opportunities to those able to compete for them. However, as an international city, which attracts skilled workers from all over the world, local young people need to be able to compete. Therefore, in London, the main issues were related to making sure that young people are able to find the existing employment opportunities and equipping them with relevant skills: «we are looking at what the high growth potential industries

are going to be in the future and making sure we skill our young people to take advantage of those» (GLA officer).

Nonetheless, as we mentioned earlier, the official statistics reveal high levels of youth unemployment in London. Thus, it is clear that some young people appear to be stuck in a spiral of inter-generational unemployment within families. «It's very scary if you think what sort of world you have if you have young people at that age (18-24) no income potential, no history of work… people who are second or third generation unemployed» (Director of Youth Department, Pan-London organisation).

While in London there appeared to be pockets of deprivation, by contrast, stakeholders from the North East of England drew a grim picture of poverty and lack of opportunities for the local, indigenous population.

> But now, particularly in the North East of England a lot of young kids are beginning to have a sort of feeling of hopelessness about the future. And I think it's particularly youngsters at the lower end of the educational spectrum. (MP)

The challenges of family poverty manifest themselves in very practical and tangible ways such as not being able to afford travel expenses to attend college courses: «Some of the barriers are mainly as simple as benefits, travel expenses. Not going onto further education, to college, because they can't get the travel expenses» (Youth specialist, North East of England).

This quote provides an illustration of how government cut backs, for example, abolishing the EMA grants can impact on the life chances of young people from poor backgrounds. This point was emphasised by another example:

> I was speaking to a mother this morning who was in tears, single parent, works part-time, daughter started with a training provider and they have to self-fund for travel, lunch money for first 2 weeks they don't get any financial support and then was told to get a tunic[11] (…) She rang me saying «I don't want to drop out (…), but I haven't got the money for the tunic». We are bashing (criticising) parents, but… she said: «I haven't bought food, haven't put money in the heater, so she can go (to school)». (Youth employment officer, North East of England)

A youth counsellor described the conditions some young people have to deal with:

> Gateshead [in the North East of England] has a lot of unemployment, there are a lot of issues at home, some of the children are carers at home, they have two parents who are unemployed, they live with alcoholism, drug abuse… So it's not just an educational process.

[11] As a work uniform.

Supporting the most disadvantaged young people needs much more than improving the educational provision; the whole family needs targeted support. A youth counsellor in the North East described the outcome of a long process of disengagement: «They don't attach to anything, they are not interested in anything anyone's got to say cause they've heard it all before… because nothing has supported them before so why should they believe that this is going to work now (…)».

Then she added:

> I'm stunned that they are still standing. I'm absolutely stunned at the capacity a child has to take on board the dramas that can play out in their lives and still be standing and still kind of say to you, you know what, what (…) are you going to do for me then? Come on!

The different opportunity structures offered by London and the North East of England might partly explain the difference in how government policies were interpreted by education and youth services stakeholders from the two regions. It is important to highlight that the make-up of the two focus groups in the research sites was different: while the London focus group consisted mainly of local authority policy officers, the group from the North East of England was made up largely of youth workers directly engaged with some of the most deprived young people. Nonetheless, the differences in employment opportunities between the two sites cannot be ignored.

Keeping young people in education for longer helps to reduce unemployment figures and decreases competition in the job market, according to both an opposition MP and an MEP. However, many of our participants highlighted that the strong moralizing tone of government education policies in regards to equipping young people with skills is undermined by the current economic situation where not even a university degree is a guarantee of employment. An MEP explained that, on an international level, focus is shifting from the issue of ESL to that of youth unemployment, and the large number of graduates unable to find jobs.

> (…) how easy it's going to be to maintain that interest in the issue of ESLs because there is a question now about what people who've gone through the system, come out of it and they got their degrees and all the rest of it and even then you can't get a job. So we are looking at that sort of moralistic aspect… maybe that pulled away from ESL.

Statistical data illustrates that there is a strong link between qualifications and employment rates: those with higher qualifications are less likely to be unemployment than those with no qualifications (see Figure 2). However, it is apparent that the opportunities to find employment are also largely shaped by local economic conditions, something of which many stakeholders in the North East of England were painfully aware:

> It becomes less relevant if we try to rectify and remedy everything which is going wrong in the world of education, if for a significant number of youngsters at the end of it there are no potential jobs, and that's certainly where we are getting back into that position in places like the North of England in general. (MP)

Conclusion

In this paper, drawing on the wider academic literature and underlined by the themes emerging from our empirical study, we have presented two main arguments. Firstly, we have argued that the three main concepts used to measure youth vulnerability, NEET, youth unemployment and ESL, are not coterminous and are all measuring different variables. For example, in all English regions, youth unemployment is significantly higher than rates of ESL (see Figure 3). In fact, in London, ESL is below the EU target, yet youth unemployment remains stubbornly high. Thus, we argue that tackling ESL is not a guarantee of reducing unemployment among young people, and demand side interventions in the labour market are also necessary. Overall, the view of many of our participants is that the focus on education alone cannot address wider societal challenges. In addition, we argue that these three concepts also fail to capture that invisible group of young people who are stuck in an on-going cycle of low paid, insecure jobs and training courses that never seem to lead to stable employment.

Secondly, by adopting a regional perspective, we have illustrated the marked variation in the levels of ESL, NEETs and youth unemployment across the English regions. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, the relationship between these three concepts in any one region also differs significantly. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain all regional variations, our qualitative research data has suggested some of the issues around structural inequality and regional differences in employment opportunities. In the North East, there is high youth unemployment which our participants explained in terms of wider economic conditions resulting in particular patterns of family poverty and neighbourhood deprivation in the region. They expressed worry that this could lead to a sense of hopelessness among some young people. In London, on the other hand, the general view was that job opportunities exist, but participants expressed concerns that in this highly competitive global market some young people may not have the right skills to take advantage of these opportunities.

Our participants voiced concerns that, while much of government policy in recent years has focused on schools, in particular, raising attainment and raising the participation age, these may not have been effective in tackling youth unemployment. There are contradictions in government policies with an on-going focus on academic attainment, and the gold standard of GCSEs and A-Levels which may undermine the shift to vocational training. In addi-

tion, cut backs to funding in key areas such as career advice may be undermining the overall goals of preparing young people for the labour market.

Research participants emphasised that the changes introduced in the education and training systems by the coalition government (2010-2015) are too recent for their outcomes to be properly evaluated: «some of these changes are too new, in fact, some of the changes haven't happened yet» – explained a manager at GLA. Nevertheless, the education and training system in England is undergoing historical changes that will likely have widespread consequences – at a time of economic downturn that affects young people disproportionately. While adequate reforms of the education and training system could potentially contribute to improving young people's labour market opportunities, it is unlikely that education policy initiatives alone will solve the issue of large-scale and regionally diverse youth unemployment.

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