

**'NEET' or left out?**  
**Disadvantaged young people, everyday  
experiences of marginalisation and  
'accelerated' transitions in urban  
Scotland**

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## Abstract

While social, economic and political transformations inscribed in current neoliberal capitalism have significantly changed contemporary young adulthood, social divisions continue to shape young people's lives and transitions. A considerable body of research has linked socio-economic inequalities with experiences of a group of young people often described as being 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET). Yet, comparatively little is known about the everyday lives and transitions of young people identified as NEET from their own perspective and in a distinctive Scottish policy context. This thesis aims to address this gap by exploring: (1) young people's everyday lives and circumstances, and their relationships with place, institutions and others; (2) their school experiences and impact of these experiences on their transitions; and (3) their practices of looking for work and learning. Moreover, the role technologies play in lives and transitions of young people identified as NEET is critically examined. This additional dimension to youth transitions was of particular interest because it has been so far underresearched in relation to this group, while policy responses frame technologies as a panacea for erasing socio-economic inequalities.

The thesis employs narrative inquiry methodology and adopts thinking tools from Pierre Bourdieu. The data from qualitative interviews with 22 young people aged 16-24, who were predominantly white and identified as NEET allowed for the intimate study of their everyday lives and transitions, how they understand and relate to the world around them. The Bourdieusian framework positioned young people within unequal power structures and broader socio-economic and political contexts. Interviews with 11 service providers overseeing youth transitions offered an additional dimension into how the policy agenda is implemented and exercised 'on the ground' in Scotland and what consequences this has for young people's trajectories.

A number of significant findings emerged from the study. Participants' everyday lives and circumstances were complex and diverse, and so were the ways they made sense of themselves and the world around them. Yet, the thematic analysis also identified a set of commonalities in the young people's lives and transitions through and into

employment, and in their labouring subjectivities (the way the self is constructed and performed in relation to the labour market). Particularly, participants relationship with schooling was that of unease and struggle, resulting in most cases in 'accelerated' transitions towards vocational pathways. Furthermore, segregation processes embedded within the education system and the post-16 transitions policy and practice landscape were found to strongly shape their trajectories. Concurrently, uncertainties about the rules and presuppositions of the realm of work, the 'proper' ways of conduct and of performance of the self, constituted a strong feature of the young people's labouring subjectivities. Consequently, seeing the labour market as an 'alien' environment was also reflected in the ways the young people engaged with technologies while looking for opportunities.

Specifically, while the young people described complex patterns of technology use in their everyday lives, their engagement with technologies for accessing opportunities was underpinned by uncertainties and struggles that derived from their distinctive (classed) social identities. However, even when participants acquired (digital) employability skills through engagement with numerous skills initiatives, these had very little impact on their career choices, transitions and chances of accessing secure employment. Once again, social divisions combined with other external factors proved to be of much stronger influence. Consequently, the findings provide significant evidence on the real challenges faced by young people who find themselves not in education or employment from a relatively young age and identifies recommendations for policy and practice, in addition to future opportunities for research.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Genesis of the thesis

This thesis is a narrative study which explores the everyday lives, transitions and technology use among young people identified as NEET in urban Scotland. Before I engage with the detailed discussion that situates my participants and their lives within the broader contexts they lived in, I address the genesis of this thesis. Be(com)ing a narrative researcher means I need to explore my own stories and lived experiences (Chase, 2011), as doing so is inscribed in the ongoing process of reflexivity that helps to explain how the researcher's personal history has shaped the research process (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, the questions of what drove me towards conducting this particular project, how the project has changed since its outset and what issues I argue are most important, need to be addressed first.

The story of my doctoral project starts when I was a 15 year-old young girl living in a small Polish town, when I volunteered on the national mentoring programme 'Big Brother, Big Sister' and in a day centre for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a member of a small team consisting of young people like myself, I was mainly responsible for helping children with their schoolwork and organising a range of leisure activities, often involving learning through play. I had not known back then that these experiences would have shaped who I have become, what I believe in or how I think about our social world. Nor had I known that I had already been engaging with the sociological questions revolving around the impact of social divisions on people's lives, processes of labelling or issues of social justice.

Back then, I was really puzzled by the way the children I was supporting were perceived by others. Children I worked with, despite facing many adversities in their lives, were curious, reflective, funny, creative and engaged. I can still recollect how they eagerly got involved in a drama project over one summer holidays. They spent weeks practising their roles, made their own costumes and props, and performed at one of the children's festivals, where they won an award! While I also got to see what the constraining impact poverty and disadvantage had had on these children's everyday

lives, including everyday stigma associated with growing up in a run-down social housing estate, locally coined as the 'Royal palace', they nevertheless wanted to be liked and respected, they wanted to play, learn and belong.

Yet, in the school context the same children were constructed as deficit learners, often as disruptive and problematic pupils disrespecting teachers' authority. Only years later, when I was writing my MSc dissertation, I discovered the sociological explanations for the processes I observed and questioned as a young girl. I found out that childhood and youth can be understood as socially constructed, while the state and its dominant agents continue to construct, reinforce and replicate ideas about the 'proper' or even 'ideal' child(hood), that have significant implications especially in relation to one's background (class; Szpakowicz, 2013). I further observed that binary understandings of children/young people as victims or threats result in a mixture of interventions, from welfaristic to controlling, depending on the 'professional' judgment. As such, the children whom I used to support, were ascribed by their schools to the latter category and dealt with accordingly. Their strengths, uniqueness, curiosity or resilience were not recognised. Their voices were not heard nor respected by the professionals overseeing their education, not were their additional needs met by their schools. I further reflected that if only a different lens was adopted, these children would have not been constructed in terms of deficits or as in need of discipline and control.

Having completed my MSc dissertation, I was thus committed to further engage in academic research and was looking for a project that would be meaningful, both to me and at a societal level. It is when I came across the PhD opportunity that was set up as a Strategic Technology Partnership between the University of Strathclyde and Capita, entitled: 'NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) young people in Scotland and their reintegration with help of technologies'. As the primary focus of the project was on disadvantaged young people, I instinctively felt it was the 'ideal fit' for me, as a researcher and as a person. However, my engagement with a range of critical scholarship and my own lived experience made me question the main assumptions on which the project was initially based at the early stages of my doctorate. These assumptions stated that: a) some young people can be described as 'what they are

not'; b) 'NEET' young people are disengaged, due to their own failures and deficits, thus require to be reintegrated; and c) technologies have potential to change lives and transcend inequalities.

As this thesis will demonstrate, however, all the above assumptions have been erroneous and harmful. The NEET category for example, has been found to be a cornerstone of the neoliberal processes, allocating the causes of non-participation to deficits and personal attributes within young people and their families rather than the structural inequalities in society (France, 2016). Moreover, young people ascribed to the NEET category, despite public and political misconceptions, remain far from being disengaged or disaffected. Rather, as the title of this thesis suggests, they are left out, marginalised and silenced, and misconstrued as the threats to the social order, thus in need of control and discipline, while the impact of one's background (class) is argued to remain at the centre of such processes. The empowering potential of technologies is also challenged, as it fails to recognise their socially constructed nature.

Consequently, this thesis is particularly committed to hearing the silenced voices of disadvantaged young people, capturing their uniqueness, hopes, needs and meaning making practices, alongside highlighting the harmful impact of the socio-economic divisions on their lives, belonging and transitions.

## **1.2 Situating the study**

With the global economic crash, austerity measures<sup>1</sup>, widespread youth poverty, underemployment and precarious work in a polarised labour market (McDowell, 2009), young people are said to be living in the world based on new risks compared to previous generations (Beck, 1992). It is argued that such risks are combined with the new work opportunities, deriving from the shift from heavy industry towards knowledge economies, based on the production and exchange of knowledge, information and capital (Castells, 1996, 2001; Facer, 2012; Powell and Snellman, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Austerity measures have been a fiscal policy response to the 2007 – 2008 global economic crisis; they encompassed significant cuts to the welfare and public spending that marked further neoliberalisation of the UK (France, 2016; Wiggan, 2017).

As members of new knowledge societies, young people are expected to invest more than ever in knowledge, education, skills development and lifelong learning (Facer, 2012; Furlong and Cartmel, 2009) to successfully participate in the new forms of employment (Valentine et al., 2002). Contemporary young people are thus further required to cultivate the active, flexible, creative and entrepreneurial selves, so they can prove they are the 'subject of value' to the neoliberal workforce (Farrugia, 2019). Those who fail to succeed are made to believe this is due to their own lacks and deficits. In this sense, the neoliberal discourse places the responsibility for one's transitions on young people and their families, while reinforcing individualism, competitiveness and choice whilst presenting the existence of classless societies (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

However, as a significant body of scholarship indicates, young people are far from being free from the structural limitations (Connolly and Healy, 2004; France and Haddon, 2014; Hey, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012). The old social divisions continue to unequally shape young people's lives, lifestyles, leisure, access to resources, experiences of education and educational outcomes, and their transitions (Furlong, 2013; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Reay, 2017; Smyth and Wrigley, 2013). Youth subjectivities (forms of personhood) also remain differently shaped by social divisions; both in everyday lives and in relation to the labour market (Skeggs, 2004a; Farrugia, 2019). Those, who do not possess the right forms of personhood (middle class like), continue to be (mis)represented as valueless, pathologised and constructed as objects of mockery and fear (Jones, 2012; Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2004a, 2011).

Such constructions materialise in the ways the state designs and justifies its interventions, especially the ones directed at the dominated groups (Hendrick, 1997). For example, in Scotland young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who leave education early and struggle with their transitions were assigned into the pejorative Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) policy category (Scottish Executive, 2006). Under the pretence of the focus on vulnerable groups, such categorisation is nevertheless underpinned by the fears that certain young people may not become productive and 'useful' members of society and may pose a threat to the

social order (Fergusson, 2013; Nudzor, 2010). The emphasis put on getting these young people into employment also silences the variety of their adverse circumstances that may need to be addressed first (Finlay et al., 2010; Whittaker, 2008).

The Scottish policy interventions to tackling NEETness remain shaped by dominant neoliberal thinking, with so called 'risk factors' for becoming NEET understood as personal characteristics, such as: deprivation; financial exclusion and debt adversity; negative school experiences, for example school exclusion, truancy or bullying, lack of basic numeracy and literacy skills and low attainment; weak family and other support networks; poor or lack of soft social skills (Analytical Services Division; 2015; Cusworth et al., 2009; France, 2016; Nudzor, 2010; Scottish Government, 2015a). Thus, public and policy understandings of issues such as poverty, unequal attainment, socio-economic marginalisation and NEETness have moved from structural analyses towards the responsabilisation and blaming of individuals (Adams, 2012; Dumbleton and McPhail, 2012). This thesis aims to challenge such erroneous and harmful perspectives, which fail to resolve intrinsic contradictions underpinning the NEET agenda. This is achieved by adopting a qualitative approach that allows for the intimate study of everyday lives, educational experiences and transitions of young people identified as NEET and from their own perspective. Adopting a critical theory, in turn, seeks to position young people and their experiences within unequal power structures and broader socio-economic and policy contexts.

Moreover, the changes brought by technological transformations have resulted in optimistic claims that contemporary youth have now become expert users of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT; Prensky, 2001; Valentine et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, many scholars, educators and policy makers have turned to digital technologies, encouraged by their perceived potential to empower young people by improving their educational attainment, social mobility and life chances (Scottish Government 2011, 2015b, 2016d; 2017d). However, critical scholars have warned against viewing technologies as a panacea for erasing social problems and inequalities. By exploring the critical body of ICT related research, as well as the ways

'NEET' young people engage with technologies, the thesis contributes to more critical understandings of the role technologies play in their everyday lives and transitions.

The following section briefly discusses the policy context directed at children and young people in Scotland and highlights its main challenges.

### **1.3 Policy context**

It has been widely argued that the Scottish policy landscape differs from its English counterpart (Bruce, 2016; Sweenie, 2009), as its policy making, focusing on children, young people and their families, has been long rooted in socio-democratic traditions and progressive Kilbrandon's principles (Roberts, 2014; Wiggan, 2017). Specifically, the Kilbrandon Report (Kilbrandon Committee, 1964) is considered a cornerstone of the Scottish child welfare system, that has been since committed to the philosophies of meeting children's socio-emotional needs and their best interests through informal social education, rather than with the use of punitive criminal justice interventions, still prevailing across other UK regions (Lightowler, 2020; Robertson, 2014). It is the Kilbrandon Report that first introduced 'the whole-child approach' that emphasised the broader contexts to lives of children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system and the importance of multiagency working (Coles et al., 2016)

A similar picture can be seen in relation to the dominant rhetoric and policy making surrounding youth transitions, unemployment and NEETness, and welfare support. The Scottish Government has distanced itself from the stigmatising and punitive welfare reforms and cultures of welfare dependency rhetoric of the successive UK Governments since the 2008 economic crisis (Slater, 2014; Wiggan, 2017). Instead, it has emphasised its commitment to the principles of social justice, social wage and investment, erasing inequalities (Wiggan, 2017), developing human capital and supporting young people towards sustainable and meaningful positive destinations (Ridell et al., 2008).

For example, in the employability area, while the Jobcentre Plus sustains its authority over the adult job seekers, additional approaches, unique to the Scottish context, have been put in place. Skills Development Scotland, a national skills body created in 2008,



was tasked with employability support, developing and administering work-based learning provision and strengthening the links with the employers and offering Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG; Riddell et al., 2008). This approach aspires to put young people at the centre of advice, support and guidance, prioritises their needs, interests, and strengths in finding suitable and sustained positive destinations, either in shape of further education, apprenticeship or employment and provides after care to sustain them (Riddell et al., 2008).

While a similar solution was introduced in England in 1999 in the form of the universal Connexions service, offering career advice and guidance, as well as personal support to young people, especially those identified as NEET, it became scrapped in 2008 and integrated into the schools instead (France, 2016; Murden, 2018). Similarly, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a means tested grant of maximum £30 a week, aimed to support disadvantaged young people to stay in the post-16 education, introduced by the Labour Government, was scrapped in England by the Coalition Government in 2011 (Murden, 2018) and replaced by other unpaid and at times even coercive programmes (see France, 2016 for a detailed overview). Scotland, however, continues to provide EMA to young people living in low income households, and even extended it to the part-time students in non-advanced courses in colleges<sup>2</sup>. Scottish Government also introduced and has continued to develop a package of reforms aimed to mitigate the impact of welfare cuts on the most disadvantaged<sup>3</sup> and has remained committed to ending child poverty by 2030 (Wiggan, 2017), in contrast to the UK Government that abandoned such a target in 2015 and focused instead on tackling non-financial measures of disadvantage<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, the Scottish approach can be understood as in a clear contrast to the 'work first' model promoted by the UK successive governments and based on the rationale that coercion, mobilisation and strong disincentives will result in getting people into work (Bussi, 2014; France, 2016;

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.mygov.scot/ema/can-i-get-ema/> (Accessed 10 May 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/protecting-scotlands-future-governments-programme-scotland-2019-20/pages/2/> and <https://www.gov.scot/news/mitigating-uk-government-welfare-cuts/> (Accessed 10 March 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://sourcenews.scot/uk-government-abandons-child-poverty-target-for-non-monetary-measures-of-disadvantage/> (Accessed 10 May 2020).

Wiggan, 2012; Wright, 2016), while the work itself, its quality, appropriateness, security and sustainability are not being prioritised (Wiggan, 2012).

The Scottish education system also differs from its English counterpart. In contrast to market driven English educational model, the Scottish Government has adopted a limited market-oriented approach, by investing more public funding in Higher Education, avoiding student fees, giving a higher priority to widening access and offering a wider range of flexible routes towards Further and Higher Education (Bruce, 2016; Raffe, 2011, 2013). Further differences relate to the more comprehensive school system in Scotland that rejected school diversity (school segregation), which contributed to the lesser inequalities between schools in Scotland than in England (Ainley, 2016; Raffe, 2011, 2013; Reay, 2017). Finally, Scottish colleges continue to play a more significant role in a delivery of Further Education than south of the border (Raffe, 2013), where a suite of constantly changing welfare to work programmes have been delivered by a growing private sector (France, 2016).

Over the last two decades the Scottish Government has also emphasised its commitment to progressive and inclusive education, where every child and young person 'can develop to their full potential' (Scottish Executive, 2004:13). The range of policy interventions have included: improving early years education and outcomes, delivering a progressive curriculum 'of tomorrow', developing post-16 educational and work-based training provision and enhancing employment strategies, and placing young people at the heart of policy making and service delivery (Coles et al., 2016; Nudzor, 2010; Riaz, 2014; Scottish Executive, 2004, 2005b, 2006; Scottish Government, 2008; 2010, 2012, 2014a, 2014b). Crucially, these policy developments have been a part of the Scottish Government's wider commitment to tackling such structural problems as youth unemployment, health inequalities, financial exclusion and childhood poverty, and improving community cohesion and educational equality (see Nudzor, 2010 for an overview).

The introduction of the *GIRFEC* framework in 2005 marked further development in the child welfare approach in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2005b), pioneered by the

Kilbrandon Report. The main objectives of *GIRFEC* have been to ensure that all children and young people's needs are met, their rights respected, and wellbeing and safety secured (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2005b), through implementing early intervention and prevention measures, and multiagency working (Adams, 2012; Robertson, 2014; see Coles et al., 2016 for an overview). To achieve these objectives, all the existing policy, legislation, strategies and practice directed at children and young people were brought together under general principles that understand children and young people's lives in a holistic way and position them within the contexts of their family, schools, neighbourhoods, peer groups and communities (see My World Triangle framework)<sup>5</sup>. The *GIRFEC* approach was further strengthened by incorporating the United Nation's 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' (UN, 1989) and legislation on child protection and vulnerable children (Aldgate, 2013; Thorburn, 2014).

At the heart of *GIRFEC* policy makers placed the wellbeing of children and young people, to enable them to be(come) 'successful learners, responsible citizens, effective contributors and confident individuals' (Scottish Executive, 2005b:3). The concept of wellbeing itself has been underpinned by eight indicators (domains): for children and young people to be safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included (*SHANARRI*)<sup>6</sup>; Scottish Executive, 2005b). Policy makers have thus also emphasised the collective responsibility of the whole nation for its children and young people (Robertson, 2014). Additionally, to accelerate the implementation of the *GIRFEC* approach across Scotland, its selected provisions have been incorporated into the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2014; Thorburn,

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<sup>5</sup> See My World Triangle framework at:

<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/factsheet/2017/08/shanarri/documents/my-world-triangle/576e22ba-314a-4c4a-add2-b752a9b80f69/576e22ba-314a-4c4a-add2-b752a9b80f69/govscot%3Adocument/SHANARRI%2B-%2BMy%2Bworld%2Btriangle.pdf> (Accessed 19 March 2020).

<sup>6</sup> See the SHANARRI wellbeing wheel at:

<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/factsheet/2017/08/shanarri/documents/wellbeing-wheel/1d61e4a3-19ad-4959-a7be-97d7b757b0ab/1d61e4a3-19ad-4959-a7be-97d7b757b0ab/govscot%3Adocument/SHANARRI%2B-%2BWellbeing%2Bwheel%2B-%2Bfull%2Btext.pdf> (Accessed 19 March 2020).

2014). Specifically, wellbeing of a child and holistic approaches to understanding the child's world, have been put into the statute level.

Furthermore, to strengthen the linkage between the *GIRFEC* approach and education, *SHANARRI* wellbeing indicators were placed at the heart of the curriculum (Scottish Executive, 2004). Concurrently, the advancements of the school curriculum were focused on ensuring its coherence, high levels of flexibility and pupils' progress, so it would facilitate children and young people's personal growth, relationships with others and undertaking activities of their interest (Scottish Executive, 2004). This was done through introducing interdisciplinary, integrated and technology-enhanced learning and teaching, interwoven with the active learners' engagement in those processes (Riaz, 2014; Scottish Government, 2016d; Thorburn, 2014). The delivery of the *CfE* has been supported by a number of skills initiatives, designed as partnership models with businesses and directed at all young people in the transition period from school into further education, training or employment, but with particular focus on those most disadvantaged (see Crisp and Powell, 2017 and Sweeney, 2009 for a comprehensive overview of the skills initiatives since the 1980s). For instance, two new policy initiatives, the *16+ Learning Choices* (Scottish Government, 2010), followed by the *Opportunities for All* (Scottish Government, 2012; 2014b), have aimed to support the effectiveness of the senior phase of the curriculum, in particular through offering young people more opportunities, both educational and vocational (Adams, 2012). Concurrently, the *More Choices More Chances* agenda (Scottish Executive, 2006), was tasked with reducing the numbers of NEET young people by offering every 16 to 19 years old a place in training or learning for 6 months, so they could gain the work experience and develop a range of hard and soft skills (Scottish Government, 2014b).

A similar approach to *GIRFEC* was also rolled out in England and Wales in 2003. The *Every Child Matters* policy framework (UK Government, 2003), aiming to ensure children economic wellbeing, development to their full potential and safety through multiagency collaboration, was introduced and followed by the important changes to legislation regarding children protection (UK Parliament, 2004; see Straker and Foster, 2009 for an overview). However, there was a significant shift away from such an

approach to supporting children and young people's lives, especially in the educational context, under the Coalition Government, heralded by a return to health checks done by social workers and health visitors (Parton, 2011). Such changes and inconsistencies, further deepened by rolling out and scrapping numerous welfare to work schemes, welfare support and services aiming to support youth transitions (France, 2016), have not been observed in Scotland, whose policy making relating to its children and young people has been more uniform and progressing steadily.

Despite delivering such a holistic and (at least prima facie) consistent policies for children and young people's welfare, wellbeing, education and transitions under the *GIRFEC* framework, Scotland nevertheless continues to struggle to be 'the best place to grow up in' (Scottish Parliament, 2013:1). High levels of child poverty (1 in 5 children in 2018) and deprivation, especially in the old industrial regions, unequal educational outcomes and transitions between the least and most disadvantaged, youth unemployment and NEETness (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, n.d; MacDonald et al., 2014; Scottish Government, 2015a, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2019a) continue to be a strong feature of contemporary Scotland.

For example, the NEET rates<sup>7</sup> for 16 to 19 year olds over the last decade were stubbornly stable and high (between 8% and 10% excluding post-economic crash peak of 13%) and were usually only slightly lower than the UK average (DfE, 2020; OECD, 2020a; Scottish Government, 2016c, 2017c). These levels, however, were much higher than the average among the OECD countries (6.3% in 2018; OECD, 2020a). Youth unemployment rates<sup>8</sup> were at around 12% between 2004-2007, started to rise before the crisis, with a peak at 22% in 2011, and then decreased again to 12% in 2016 (Scottish Government, 2016c) and 9-9.5% between 2017-2019 (Scottish Government,

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<sup>7</sup> NEET rates in Scotland include young people age 16 to 19 who are not in Education, Employment or Training and are either seeking work (economically active) or not (economically inactive, e.g. due to caring responsibilities, temporary illness or long-term health problems, disability, imprisonment etc.).

<sup>8</sup> Youth unemployment rates in Scotland include young people age 16-24, who are ready to work and have been actively seeking work in the last four weeks (economically active), and some of whom may also be in education (e.g. students). Importantly, the NEET category started to replace the youth unemployment category within the UK and across Europe, as it was perceived to be more inclusive due to providing (aggregated) data not only relating to unemployed, but also to those economically inactive (France, 2016). Section 2.2 will problematise these issues further.

2019a). Crucially, youth unemployment rates continue to be much higher (around 2.5 times) than for the entire working population in Scotland, slightly lower than the UK average rate (e.g. at 13.3% in 2016 and down to 11.1 in 2019), and close to the OECD average (between 12% in 2016 and down to 11.7% in 2019; OECD, 2020b; Scottish Government, 2016c). Finally, child wellbeing in Scotland remains among the poorest in Europe (Arnott and Ozga, 2012).

Furthermore, educational policy, already hampered by broader socio-economic inequalities, also suffers from a range of shortcomings. The *GIRFEC* approach itself is argued to be problematic, as for example no critical analysis of *SHANARRI* was undertaken (Stoddart, 2015). Rather, it 'was accepted as unequivocally valuable' without any scrutiny or clarification (Stoddart, 2015:111). Consequently, uncertainty and ambiguity were reported to underpin *SHANARRI*'s key concept of wellbeing, which remains a complex philosophical idea embedded in the new pedagogical models of learning, still in development (Coles et al., 2016; Stoddart, 2015; Thornburn, 2014). Differences and inconsistencies in the implementation and assessment of *GIRFEC* were also reported across Scotland (Coles et al., 2016; Holligan et al., 2014; Robertson, 2014). The *GIRFEC* approach was further found to be underpinned by the inherent tensions that served to mitigate the effectiveness of data sharing and ensuring confidentiality, alongside balancing child wellbeing with protection (Coles et al., 2016). Critics have also warned that such an approach can be easily used as a justification for increased state surveillance into family life (Stoddart, 2015). As middle classness functions as a norm (Lawler, 2005), working class families are at the highest risk of excessive invigilation and further stigmatisation (Stoddart, 2015).

The delivery of the new curriculum was also met with critique. It was argued that the *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)* does not meet its own goals of being a progressive and transformative curriculum (Priestley and Humes, 2010). Rather, as Priestley (2011, cited in Thornburn, 2014) contends, the *CfE* continues to reflect the Anglophone ways of policy making, where neoliberal interests are being pursued under the guise of educational reform and progress. In such a climate, the *CfE* was thus accused of strengthening the role of education in the service of economy (Arnott and Ozga, 2012;

Pierrie and Hockings, 2012), rather than being based upon the principles of social justice, democratic participation and critical citizenship (Ainley, 2016; Arnott and Ozga, 2012; Pirrie and Hockings, 2012; Reay, 2017). For example, a shift from the provision of learning and widening participation to an emphasis on employability and development of skills required by employers was clearly visible in the Scottish education system with the introduction of even more vocationally focused curriculum underpinning the new *Developing of the Young Workforce* policy (Scottish Government, 2014a). In this sense, educational provision has been underpinned by the visible contradictions, between educating for wellbeing (Thorburn, 2014) and educating for the future of the service economy (Pierrie and Hockings, 2012), that also limit the effectiveness of welfare initiatives directed at children and young people. However, despite a shift towards strengthening the links between education and employment, especially for those following vocational routes, spending on primary and secondary education in Scotland has significantly decreased between 2010-2017 (Improvement Service, 2017). Specifically, a reduction in real cost per pupil in primary and secondary education since 2010 has stood at -9.65% (or £513) and -2.9% (£205) respectively (Improvement Service, 2017). Such significant cuts to spending on education demonstrate yet another contradiction underpinning the Scottish policy making relating to its children and young people, as well as some lack of consistency, also observed in England, that further serve to undermine the impact of such initiatives as *GIRFEC* and *SHANARRI*.

Furthermore, the so called progressive reforms of educational provision in Scotland were accused of being insignificant as, instead of taking any new and radical turn, they continue to merely mitigate the exclusionary processes embedded in the education system and act as 'a smokescreen for the maintenance of educational homeostasis' and societal inequalities (Lumby, 2012:276). For example, despite introduction of the so called curriculum of 'tomorrow', Scotland's performance measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been far from extraordinary and perhaps even satisfactory. While the scores in reading were slightly above the OECD average in 2018 (and improved in comparison to 2015), pupils'

performance in Maths and Science was at the OECD average and these scores were lower than recorded in 2009 and 2006. In comparison with the rest of the UK, Scotland performed slightly better in reading, similar in Science and lower in Maths (Scottish Government, 2019b). Crucially, the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on pupils' underperformance was similar to the OECD average, thus indicating barriers to more equal educational outcomes and transitions remain key challenge for education and social policy in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2017a, 2017b, 2019b).

The Scottish education system itself also remains unequal, hierarchical and fragmented (Raffe, 2011, 2013). The vocational pathways, promoted as the best and effective option available to disadvantaged young people, such as those identified as NEET, continue to offer very little symbolic value in the labour market (Adams, 2012; Keep, 2015; Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Wolf, 2011). Skills initiatives in particular have been long argued to resemble the initiatives of the 1980s, which attempted to reduce youth unemployment with help of similar short-term solutions focused on fixing the individual (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Roberts, 2005), instead of tackling complex structural factors adversely affecting unequal youth transitions. After leaving work placements, many young people continue to be in the same situation as before (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Thompson, 2014). The low value of such placements, underpinned by poor learning provision have been further found to fuel the negative effect of churn and has continuously had little impact on improving young people's chances for more stable, better quality employment and labour market progression (Ainley, 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Shildrick et al., 2012; Wolf, 2011). This pathway of low-level training leading to low-ranked qualifications and poor labour market outcomes has been widely reported and critiqued (Adams, 2012; Ainley, 2013, 2016; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). However, despite these reservations, the Scottish Government (2010, 2014b) still expresses its commitment to offer a place in learning or training to every 'NEET' 16-19 years old, with "little sense of lessons learned and with a strong whiff of 'policy amnesia'" (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:88).

This section has shown that neoliberal forces continue to hamper the social justice principles that would underpin truly comprehensive, progressive and equal education



for all (Reay, 2017). Emphasis on the development of a globally competitive knowledge economy undermines the principles of children and young people's wellbeing and welfare (Adams, 2012) and meeting their socio-emotional and developmental needs and rights (Robertson, 2014). Building the youth workforce of tomorrow responsive to employers' needs (Scottish Government, 2014a) raises a further question as if children and young people are humans in making, whose present lives are important only in relation to their futures as adults, or human beings whose needs and individuality matters here and now (Lee, 2001). Constructing children and young people as an 'economic asset' and 'human capital' that will serve the state's neoliberal interests while they grow up (Lister, 2006; Prout, 2000) seems to suggest they are indeed human 'becomings', thus further undermining Kilbrandon and *GIRFEC*'s principles. At the same time, however, the cuts to spending on primary and secondary education undermine the very same efforts to provide more vocationally focused education and skills for young people deemed as the future of the economy. Similarly, the changes to curriculum seem to be insufficient in their attempts to improve young people's outcomes and closing the attainment gap, while vocational training suffers from poor learning provision and low symbolic value in both, education system and labour market. Consequently, the Scottish policy landscape continues to be contradictory and underpinned by a range of shortcomings. Under such a context, it thus remains even more crucial to further investigate the educational experiences and transitions of disadvantaged young people categorised as NEET, especially as most evidence comes from other regions of the UK.

## **1.4 Overview of the thesis**

This thesis explores the everyday lives and transitions of young people categorised as NEET, from their own perspective and in a distinctive Scottish context. It adds to narrow and mostly quantitative NEET-focused scholarship, challenging dominant neoliberal rhetoric which emphasises individual deficits and personal characteristics as the key risk factors for NEETness. To do so, this thesis examines young people's lives and transitions from a multidimensional perspective, an approach that has emerged through a critical evaluation of the key debates in the fields of youth studies and

education. Specifically, the transitional approaches have long been interested in how young people's trajectories and transitions to and through employment are shaped by the socio-economic inequalities and changing labour market conditions (Farrugia, 2019; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Yet, due to the narratives of change brought by socio-economic and technological transformations to contemporary young adulthood, these approaches were accused of failing to incorporate young people's meaning making practices (Wyn and Woodman, 2007) and their subjectivities, e.g. in relation to the labour market (Farrugia, 2019). In response, this thesis aims to capture both youth subjectivities and the broader structures that shape their lives and transitions. This is done by combining transitional approaches with a metaphor of belonging to place, others and institutions (Furlong et. al, 2011).

Crucially, the impact of the old social divisions on young people's lives, class and gender in particular remains at heart of this study. In other words, the thesis is concerned with uncovering continuity in unequal patterns of youth transitions (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), even though the processes behind them have changed over time (Furlong et al., 2011). By doing so, the extent of change to young adulthood can be critically examined and understood as perhaps not as significant as the current dominant narratives promulgating the emergence of the knowledge societies, widespread of the new employment opportunities (McDowell, 2009) or Higher Education becoming 'a mass experience' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009) would suggest. Moreover, by exploring the views of practitioners and policy makers overseeing youth transitions, the thesis aims to examine the extent to which the post-16 transitions policy initiatives have been progressive and transformative, an issue underresearched in the Scottish context.

Concurrently, changes to young adulthood deriving from the widespread use of technologies have been widely debated. The dominant rhetoric and a significant body of scholarship have been underpinned by the 'administrative gaze' that scrutinises digital competencies and requires beneficial and purposeful usage of technologies, e.g. for learning and digital upskilling in service of knowledge economies (boyd, 2014; Davies, 2015; Davies and Eynon, 2018; Lesko, 2012). However, little attention has been paid to the complexity and richness of young people's engagement, their meaning

making practices and subjective experiences of using technologies. Moreover, the roles technologies play in how young people look for and access learning and employment opportunities have been rarely explored (see e.g. Lee, 2008; Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016). This thesis seeks to fill these gaps by examining young people's engagement with technologies. Once again, subjective and objective dimensions to social life are brought together to provide a more youth-centred, yet theoretically driven and a critically informed understandings of young people's technology usage. To achieve those goals, this thesis had four main objectives:

- (i) to explore the realities of NEET-labelled young people's everyday lives, educational journeys and post-16 transitions;
- (ii) to situate young people's practices, meaning making and performance of the self within the broader social, political and economic context of neoliberal capitalism and its requirements to cultivate oneself as enterprise;
- (iii) to explore the ways young people use technologies and the roles this engagement plays in their everyday lives and transitions; and
- (iv) to critically examine the current policy context to youth transitions in Scotland and challenge policy makers and practitioners' thinking about the ways of supporting young people into positive destinations.

To achieve the above objectives, the study adopts a qualitative approach in the form of narrative inquiry. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 young people living in Glasgow, aged 16 to 24, who were predominantly white and identified by services as NEET, were conducted. Adopting a qualitative approach allowed me to capture rich accounts of young people's everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies, based on their lived experiences and from their own perspectives. Semi-structured interviews with 9 practitioners overseeing youth transitions and with 2 policy makers in education, lifelong learning and employability provided me with the data on policy processes and how these impact upon youth transitions in Scotland.

A review of existing literature demonstrated the need to take a 'middle ground' approach to researching contemporary young people, that brings together 'structural, historically specific conditions and young people's subjective experience of the times in which they live' (Furlong et al., 2011:360). In response, Bourdieu's theoretical framework was adopted, as it allows for reconciling the individual experiences, perceptions and subjective meaning making with the objective structures, allowing for their coherent analysis (Costa and Murphy, 2015). The Bourdieusian thinking tools thus provided me with much needed double lens to researching contemporary young adulthood.

## **1.5 Contributions to knowledge**

The strength of the current study lies in its multidisciplinary character, as it brings together findings from several fields, including youth studies, technology studies, education and social policy. Moreover, social class and gendered approaches to researching contemporary young people remain at the centre of this thesis. By doing so, the complexity of young people's lives, transitions and engagement with technologies is captured from multidimensional and critical perspectives, so that a more holistic understanding can emerge.

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge in numerous ways. Firstly, it provides original empirical evidence on everyday lives and transitions of young people identified as NEET in urban Scotland. This was done because only few studies have engaged with young people identified as NEET in the Scottish context (Nudzor, 2010; Whittaker, 2008) and these tended to adopt quantitative approaches seeking to categorise and quantify young people into different groups and sub-groups and according to their background or educational attainment (Sweenie, 2009). Instead, adopting a narrative methodology puts young people forward as narrators, knowledge bearers and meaning makers, the first interpreters of their experiences (Barkhuizen, 2008). This commitment to hearing the voices of marginalised young people and emphasising meanings they ascribe to their experiences and relationships with others, the place and institutions 'implicated in the processes understood as transitions'

(Furlong et al., 2011:360), contributes to the debates in the field of youth studies by taking forward the calls for the renewed approaches to researching young people (Cuervo and Wyn, 2012, 2014; Furlong et al., 2011; Gangneaux, 2018). This is achieved by reconciling transitional and cultural perspectives in youth studies and adopting a 'middle ground' approach that brings together youth subjectivities and meaning making practices and the objective conditions of the neoliberal capitalism (Furlong et al., 2011).

Secondly, as Bourdieusian thinking tools are applied in a novel way, whereby the concept of *habitus* is adopted as 'theory-method' (Costa and Murphy, 2015) to achieve the above objectives, the study also contributes to the broader debates on agency and structures, as well as continuity and change in young people's lives and transitions. Particularly, it examines the extent of young people's agency in constructing their own lives and how structural inequalities, limited access to resources and the *fields'* forces (educational, policy and economic) influence their practices and shape their transitions. The questions of how much control young people have over choices they make and how independent their selves 'as enterprise' can be, remain at the centre of analysis (Kelly, 2006). This is achieved for example by looking at how young people perform the self in relation to the labour market, what strategies they use to navigate their transitions and what consequences such practices have on their trajectories.

Thirdly, by examining young people's everyday lives, school experiences and transitions in urban Scotland, this thesis engages with a distinctive policy context that differs from its English counterpart. Moreover, interviews with service providers offer an additional dimension on how the post-16 transitions policy agenda is implemented and exercised on the ground and what consequences it has for young people's agency and transitions. In particular, the thesis pays close attention to the processes of segregation that 'discipline' young people assigned to the NEET category into the lowest roles available in neoliberal capitalism.

Finally, the thesis provides an original analysis of the role of technologies in 'NEET' young people's everyday lives and transitions that have been neglected in the field of

youth studies, despite extensive claims about the changes ICT have brought to young adulthood. The original contribution of this thesis does not only lie in this interdisciplinary approach, but also in exploring the extent to which technologies are everyday, embedded and embodied for this group of young people (Hines, 2015). Moreover, it positions young people's personal experiences of and meanings they ascribe to technologies within economic, social and cultural contexts influencing how such relationships develop (Cranmer, 2010; Davies 2015; Selwyn, 2012). This, in turn, allows us to examine how young people's engagement with technologies is shaped by the interplay between their distinctive social identities and a range of external influences.

## **1.6 Thesis outline**

Chapter 2 critically analyses and synthesises the literature relating to contemporary young adulthood and youth transitions in late modernity. It pays particular attention to the main debates in the field of youth studies, education and the NEET-focused scholarship.

Chapter 3 analyses the dominant body of scholarship and key digital inclusion policies on young people and technologies. It then introduces the newer developments and empirical body of research in the field of technology studies and proposes the holistic and youth-centred understandings to young people's technologies' use.

Chapter 4 outlines the theoretical framework adopted in the current study and explains the reasons for its application. It then offers a critical overview of the Bourdieusian thinking tools and how they are employed to analyse empirical data collected during fieldwork.

Chapter 5 outlines the methodological underpinnings of the study, such as its ontological and epistemological stance, methodology and methods adopted, alongside addressing ethical considerations and explaining process of data analysis.

Chapter 6, the first empirical chapter, provides insights into the young people's everyday lives, subjectivities and sense of belonging to place and others, in order to capture the unique persons beyond a deficit NEET label.

Chapter 7 examines participants' educational experiences prior to leaving compulsory education and provides insights into how limited sense of belonging to education has shaped their learner identities and transitions.

Chapter 8 analyses the young people's pathways, experiences and choices after leaving compulsory education. Specifically, it explores the opportunities participants wanted to pursue and meanings they attached to them; their experiences of further education, employment and training and their symbolic value in the labour market and for further career progression. Additionally, the impact of the policy *field* on youth transitions is examined.

Chapter 9 explores the roles technologies play in the young people's everyday lives and transitions. In particular, it provides insights into the extent to which technologies are everyday and embedded in lives of this group. It then analyses the meanings participants attach to technologies and seeks to explain how and why such meanings develop and materialise in their patterns of ICT usage. The final section scrutinises how technologies are utilised when the young people look for work and learning.

Chapter 10 concludes the thesis. It starts with reflections on the main debates in the fields of youth and technology studies, before readdressing this study's own stance, findings and their implications. The chapter then reflects on the limitations of the study and ends with discussing directions for future research and policy recommendations.

## **Chapter 2 Young people and youth transitions in late modernity**

This chapter reviews the literature relating to contemporary young adulthood and youth transitions in late modernity, with a specific focus on young people labelled as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). The first section critically examines the body of scholarship and ongoing debates in the field of youth studies relating to agency and structure, objectivities and subjectivities, as well as continuity and change brought by socio-economic and political transformations to young people's lives and transitions. This is done in order to a) position the current study within the youth study discipline, b) provide a justification for theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study and c) position my participants' lives within their broader socio-economic context. The second section explores the NEET-focused policies and literature and identifies numerous problems associated with the NEET label. It demonstrates how the NEET category has been inscribed in the broader neoliberal processes, aiming to responsabilise disadvantaged young people and their families for the difficulties they face during their transitions. The last section summarises the literature review and identifies the gaps this thesis aims to address.

### **2.1 Narratives of change and continuity**

It is widely argued that the socio-economic, political and technological transformations and processes of individualisation and modernisation inscribed in the late neoliberal capitalism significantly changed the lives of young people over the last three decades (Beck, 1992). Such changes have affected various aspects of their lives including education and work, relationships with family, friends and romantic partners, leisure, consumption and lifestyles (Furlong, 2013; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Holland, 2007; Livingstone, 2012). In particular, it has been argued that 'institutions such as the family, employment and community potentially [have] become more fragmented, and personal life comes to appear less predictable' (Furlong et al., 2011:359). In this context, processes traditionally understood as transitions from education to employment, and more broadly from being a 'dependent' child or adolescent to



independent adult, have become more complex, non-linear, fragmented and extended, involving many reverse movements and prolonged dependency on family in comparison with the previous generations (Furlong, 2013; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). As a consequence, youth scholars have concluded that normative understandings of 'adulthood' as the state of completeness and certainty have now become more blurred (and some argue invalid) and caution us to critically reflect on what transitions towards adulthood in contemporary Western societies mean (Furlong, 2013; Lee, 2001; Wyn and Woodman, 2007). For example, Shildrick and colleagues (2012) documented how labour market uncertainties constituted a part of everyday lives for young people not only during their young adulthood but far into their late thirties. They concluded that many disadvantaged young people may become trapped in a cycle of low-level employment, punctuated by periods of unemployment ('low pay, no pay') while they continue to progress towards other 'markers' of adulthood in other aspects of their lives (such as having their own family, even though often later than previous generations).

Furthermore, changes to young people's lives, when compared with earlier generations, have been ascribed to the emergence of a political economy of risks (Beck, 1992), encompassing the spread of insecure, temporary and polarised employment and the growth of youth unemployment and underemployment, as well as other threats such as environmental degradation (Ainley, 2016; Beck, 1992; Refrigeri and Aleandri, 2013; Roberts, 2005). The proliferation of these new risks and uncertainties became a basis for an argument that contemporary youth live in a 'risk society' in which predictability of the Fordist order was replaced with a variety of new opportunities, but also new dangers young people must now face (Beck, 1992). In order to do so, they are expected to actively manage their lives and transitions by constructing themselves as an 'enterprise' or an ongoing and endless project (Giddens, 1991; Kelly, 2006). Such expectations are argued to derive from the dominant neoliberal discourses emphasising choice, personal achievements and self-fulfilment, while placing responsibility for failures on individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Resultantly, according to Beck (1992), young people's lives and lifestyles, as well

as risks and uncertainties (even though unequally distributed) have become highly individualised while class constraints have lessened and have now little impact on their life chances under this 'new reality'.

Youth scholarship has been strongly influenced by Beck's (1992) theory of modernisation and individualisation. In particular, it focused on young people's agency, individual choice and independent acting in a reflexive way, especially at moments of transitions that became understood in terms of choice biographies (du Bois-Reymond 1998, Furlong, 2013; Woodman and Wyn, 2007). While a much needed development in terms of highlighting youth subjectivities, overemphasis on an individual agency and choice has received significant critique for removing class from analyses of young people's lives (France, 2007; Furlong, 2009, 2013; Skeggs, 2019) or for failing to acknowledge that some young people may lack the resources needed to draw upon to actively construct their biographies (Connolly and Healy, 2004; Farthing, 2016; Hey, 2005).

Furthermore, the concept of 'risk society' itself has been challenged on the same basis, i.e. its rejection of the structural limitations that continue to unequally shape young people's lives, relationships with education and consequently their transitions (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Specifically, a great deal of evidence has demonstrated continuous statistical differences in the school attainment, access to and progress within Higher Education (HE), the status of courses studied and the prestige of universities attended, as well as the type and symbolic value of the opportunities pursued after completing secondary education between pupils from the most and least advantaged backgrounds (Blackburn et al., 2016; Friedman and Lauriston, 2019; Grisprud et al., 2011; Raffe and Croxford, 2015; Reay, 2016, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Scottish Government, 2017a; Sutton Trust, 2009).

Numerous empirical studies have further examined the impact of the old structural inequalities on various aspects of young people's lives and transitions. Furlong and colleagues (2005) found that contemporary youth transitions (complex, prolonged and fragmented), were more often followed by disadvantaged young people. Analogously,

MacDonald and Marsh (2005) demonstrated how the intersections between one's background (class), patterns of residence and experiences of multiple deprivation continue to adversely affect young people's relationship with education, housing, access to broader social networks and resources that result with their 'accelerated' transitions towards insecure and precarious work punctuated by periods of unemployment. A comparative case study of middle class and working-class young boys living in Belfast by Connolly and Healy (2004) examined the impact of social structures and processes of inequalities on their educational and career aspirations. Based on 'the presence of resources and opportunity' (p. 29), middle class boys developed a strong sense of freedom and choice and enjoyed high levels of (social and spatial) mobility, both in their everyday lives and for their future education (university) and career (professional) opportunities. On the other hand, for the working class boys, the socio-economic disadvantage and lack of resources to draw upon resulted in localised existence and attachment to territory (territorialism), combined with disaffection with education and aspirations restricted to low level work, typically done by working class people like them. Finally, France and Haddon (2014) examined the subjective impact of class on young people's educational and occupational choices and their everyday reflexivity. They demonstrated that young people were highly aware of their own classed position in the social world they inhabited and while the 'choices and opportunities available to them [were] highly structured and influenced by their access to resources' (p. 317), they also derived from what was subjectively felt and understood as possible (or impossible) for the 'likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56).

Another strand diversifying young people's lives, experiences and transitions relates to their access (or lack of it) to different forms of resources (Furlong, 2013). For example, young people make their choices and progress within education and towards employment with the use of information embedded in their social networks of family, friends, schools and wider community (Atkins, 2017; Catts and Allan, 2012), which remain bounded however with their socio-economic background and locality (Hey, 2005; Savage, 2015). Middle class families continue to be more likely to have access to relevant information ('hot knowledge') and navigate and use education system more

easily for their advantage (Devine, 2004; Reay, 2017). On the other hand, lower income parents reported struggling with supporting their children's education and being less aware of opportunities available and/or of how to achieve them (Treanor, 2017). Similarly, disadvantaged young people reported poor access to high quality advice and information regarding post-school pathways and opportunities (Atkins, 2017; Scottish Government, 2017b). As such, access to social networks, knowledge and information continues to be deeply embedded within unequal social relations and class divisions (Savage, 2015). While one's networks are not the only thing that matters when it comes to youth transitions, they remain one of its important components (Savage, 2015). However, despite these contributions, gaps remain in our understandings to 'what happens to disadvantaged young people during the transition period' in the Scottish context (Scottish Government, 2017b:10; see also Raffe, 2013), which is where this thesis aims to make a contribution.

Furthermore, poverty continues to strongly diversify young people's lives, transitions and experiences in the UK and worldwide (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013). Poverty has a long-term negative impact on individuals' physical and emotional health and subjective wellbeing (Atree, 2004). It has also been linked with lower educational outcomes and poorer employment prospects (Griggs and Walker, 2008). Reay (2013) argues that poverty remains one of the greatest barriers for educational inclusion and equality, as family wealth is the single biggest predictor of success in school. Experiences of poverty were further found to affect relationships with family and friends by diminishing their supportive and protective qualities, especially if poverty is long lasting (Atree, 2004) as well as acting as a main barrier to accessing wider social networks (Leonard, 2005; Matthews and Besemer, 2014). Finally, according to Tierney (2015), being born into poverty brings a 40% chance of living in poverty as an adult. As a consequence, the widespread persistence and the increase in childhood poverty since the introduction of austerity measures (Cooper and Whyte, 2017) and their damaging effects on young people's everyday lives, experiences and transitions, has been widely documented and condemned, most recently by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Alston, who stated after his visit to the UK:

14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty. Four million of these are more than 50% below the poverty line, and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials. The widely respected Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts a 7% rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2022, and various sources predict child poverty rates of as high as 40%. For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one (Alston, 2018:1).

On the other hand, more linear and straightforward pathways, often straight to the university, continue to be more common among more affluent, middle class and better educated young people (Atkins, 2017; Burke, 2015; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Furlong et al., 2005; Reay, 2016), even though underemployment and precarity of work has now become a widespread feature of young people's lives, regardless of their background (Beck, 1992; Shildrick et al., 2015). In consequence, while the broader socio-economic and technological transformations significantly changed many aspects of young adulthood, socio-economic inequalities continue to shape and diversify young people's lives and transitions, shielding the most advantaged youth from the uncertainty and precarity of a neoliberal order (Allen, 2018; Connolly and Healy, 2004; France and Haddon, 2014; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Gunter and Watt, 2009; Hey, 2005). In other words, the old power relations and socio-economic and educational inequalities continue to be reproduced amongst the young generation, even though 'the processes behind patterns of inequality' have changed (Furlong et al., 2011:357; see also Section 2.1.2). In particular, the United Kingdom remains one of the most unequal countries in Europe with continuously low rates of social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Access to high-status occupations, as well as progress within these occupations, continues to be strongly associated with coming from the most privileged backgrounds (Friedman and Lauriston, 2019). It is therefore argued that social structures are far from being fragmented and so, the contemporary UK can be understood as a classed society (Furlong, 2009), while also

having some of the new characteristics of Beck's risk society, unknown to the previous generations, as evidence below will demonstrate.

Recently debates around Beck's scholarship have been revived. Woodman (2009) argued that as a theory of modernisation, Beck's work has been profoundly misunderstood by youth studies scholars as a theory of agency. Rather, he pointed towards its intention and applicability to capture both, how rapid change on the institutional levels has affected young people's lives over the last three decades and why old patterns of inequality continue to exist and potentially deepen. Correspondingly, Thompson (2011a:788) argues that a notion of individualised risks should be understood as 'a structural product of capitalism in late modernity, and therefore as a process to be critiqued'. In this sense, it is the dominant political and public discourses that misrepresent and legitimate unequal patterns of youth transitions as deriving from 'psychological dispositions and personal attributes [of an individual]' (Thompson, 2011a:788), rather than from structural inequalities (Smyth and Wrigley, 2013).

These ongoing debates have led Furlong and Cartmel (2007) to propose the concept of 'epistemological fallacy' in an attempt to reconcile dichotomies underpinning class vs agency scholarship in the field of youth studies. This was done by arguing that contemporary youth have been subjected to broader discourses emphasising individualism in falsely classless and individualised societies. Such discourses create a 'false reality' for young people that remains in contradiction with the 'ontological' reality in which structural inequalities continue to unequally shape their lives and opportunities. Young people are therefore led to believe that they have a variety of choices and control over their lives, but also that they are solely responsible for their successes and failures. The concept of 'epistemological fallacy' influenced some of the methodological underpinnings of the current study as it led to: a) positioning young people's narratives within the larger institutional narratives, b) analysing young people's practices of looking for opportunities through the 'epistemological fallacy' lens and c) examining whether/how epistemological fallacy discourses are mobilised

by professionals operating within the post 16 transitions policy *field* that my participants encountered after leaving school, and how this affected their transitions.

### *2.1.1 Reconciling transitional and cultural approaches*

#### *(mis)Constructing and governing youth*

The modern concept of young adulthood emerged at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the ongoing reformatory processes guided by the professional members of the middle classes that successfully imposed their norms, values and understandings (adult centred and classed) of what is meant by and expected from a young person (Hendrick, 1997). In such a climate, psychologist G. Stanley Hall defined youth as a life-phase between childhood and adulthood, a form of transitions from the state of dependency to independence, from education to employment, often marked by experiences of instability and emotional disturbance (Hendrick, 1997; Muncie, 2004). Since then, youth has become a category of constant interest, expertise, interventions and ‘administrative gaze of teachers, parents, psychologists, play reformers, scout leaders, juvenile justice workers’ (Lesko, 2012:75). The historically conflicting images of children and youth understood as innocents (angels) vs sinners (devils) or more recently as threats vs victims have further shaped their understandings as either in need of surveillance, discipline and correction or in need of care, protection and support. Such conflicting representations have had significant implications for young people’s lives, as they have underpinned a mixture of state interventions directed at them, varying from welfaristic and paternalistic to controlling, repressive and punitive (Souhami, 2013).

Some subgroups however continue to be targeted by the state and its dominant agents and institutions more often than others – those who do not comply with the middle class norms or morality (Hendrick, 1997) or, in other words, those who do not possess the *cultural capital* (see Section 4.1.3 for a detailed discussion) recognised as valid or desirable by the members of dominant classes. For example, a significant body of literature has documented how the widespread cultural, political and popular (mis)representations of working-class youth have constructed them as an object of

mockery, disgust and fear (Allen and Taylor, 2012; Lawler, 2005; Jones, 2012; Nayak and Kehily, 2014, Raisborough and Adams, 2008; Skeggs, 2004a, 2011). The working class young men came to be labelled as ‘chavs’ or ‘neds’ (non-educated delinquents), young or single mothers – as ‘troubled’, ‘failed’ or ‘pramfaces’, the unemployed – as coming from intergenerational cultures of worklessness (MacDonald et al., 2014). These negative representations have affected the lives of many working class young people, while their everyday practices often encompass a management of feelings of shame and stigma (Nayak and Kehily, 2014) or painful attempts to construct themselves as ‘respectable’, to escape ostracism and the contempt of not having the right sort of body, taste, style or behaviour (Skeggs, 1997).

On the broader level, processes of (mis)representation and understandings of youth contribute to the ways the state designs and justifies its policies and interventions. Yet, they also differentiate the ways in which young people complying or not with dominant middle class norms continue to be constructed and treated by the state and its agents overseeing youth transitions, where discretion is employed and distinctions between deserving vs undeserving youth are often made (Fergusson, 2013; France, 2016; Shildrick et al., 2012; Zacka, 2017). In this sense, young people’s lives remain inscribed in mechanisms of domination and unequal power relations embedded in contemporary societies (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As a result, these processes are argued to diversify the lives and experiences of young people, depending on the position they occupy within the social structures. These mechanisms will further serve as a reference point when examining the policy context directed at young people identified as NEET (Section 2.2); the body of digital inclusion scholarship and interventions (Section 3.1) and the empirical evidence from the professionals and policy makers interviewed, who were working within the post-16 transitions policy *field* (Section 8.3).

#### *Taking a ‘middle ground’ approach*

Young people and various aspects of their lives thus continue to be a matter of state interest, as well as the focus for in-depth research and practice across disciplines such as psychology, education, criminology and sociology. In the academic field of youth



studies, there 'has been a long-standing separation (and on occasion a tension) between cultural and transition perspectives' to researching youth (Furlong et al., 2011:356). Transitional scholars have been particularly interested in how young people's trajectories and transitions to and through employment are shaped by the socio-economic inequalities and changing labour market conditions, often in the disadvantaged locales (Farrugia, 2019; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Roberts, 2005). By contrast, scholars adopting the cultural perspective have been interested in youth cultures and subcultures (Furlong, 2013), in relation to, for example, music, style, dance or leisure (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). Importantly, the focus here has been on the individual, subjective and unique. While transitional approaches tend to be large scale, quantitative and longitudinal, studies inscribed in the cultural perspective are more likely to be ethnographic (qualitative), small scale and localised (Furlong et al., 2011).

Both approaches have been inscribed in the ongoing sociological debates about the role of individual agency and structures on people's lives and experiences. Unsurprisingly, their criticism has derived from tensions embedded in this dichotomy (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014). Cultural approaches were accused of failing to incorporate the impact of broader socio-economic and political contexts in which youth cultures have developed and as a result of producing individualistic accounts of young people's lives (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). By contrast, transitional approaches have been criticised for failing to capture the complexity of young people's lives and experiences under late modernity, especially due to neglecting their meaning making practices and how they contribute to identity formation (Wyn and Woodman, 2007), as well as gendered inequalities of the 'time economy' (Woodman et al., 2017). Moreover, the predominant focus on socio-economic inequalities and labour market conditions has been argued to silence the practices through which young people construct themselves as labouring subjects in relation to the realm of work (Farrugia, 2019) or how their subjectivities are mobilised and performed within the growing service sector demanding certain modes of self-presentation and affective type of labour (Farrugia et al., 2018; McDowell, 2009). Finally, due to the changing 'contexts where jobs, family

responsibilities and independent forms of residence have become elusive for sections of the population', the relevance of the concept of transitions itself has been questioned, 'transition to what?' ask Furlong and colleagues (2011:362). In consequence, the calls for renewed approaches to researching youth that reconcile transitional and cultural perspectives have emerged (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; Côté, 2014; Cuervo and Wyn, 2012, 2014; Furlong et al., 2011; Gangneux, 2018; Wyn and Woodman, 2007) and become the basis for the current research, as well as for further critical analysis.

Notably, three new frameworks to researching youth have been proposed: youth as a social generation (Woodman, 2017; Wyn and Woodman, 2007); the metaphor of belonging to place, institutions and others (Cuervo and Wyn, 2012, 2014; Furlong et al., 2011) and a political economy of youth (Côté, 2014, 2016).

A social generation perspective proposes to think of and understand youth as:

a relational concept linked to social, economic, political, cultural and ecological currents that form the experience and consciousness of a generation (...). [It further] views social conditions, such as patterns of family formation, educational processes and labour markets, as creating the framework which shapes the options that individuals work with (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014:907).

In other words, young people are argued to belong to a distinctive generation living under previously unknown conditions of late neoliberal capitalism (see Section 2.1.2) that has created new opportunities, but also new challenges (Cuervo and Wyn, 2012). This has further highlighted the central importance of subjective perspectives of young people and their own interpretations of their lives embedded in these new times (youth as global generation), in contrast to the concept of youth transitions focusing on the age effects on young people's lives or assuming that there is a starting and ending point (Woodman, 2017; Woodman and Wyn, 2007). Rather, a metaphor of belonging that 'brings into focus the nature and quality of connections between young people and their worlds' has been later incorporated to overcome such limitations of

transitional approaches (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014:905). In particular, the emphasis has been put on young people's belonging to place, understood as 'a sense of rootedness and a form of attachment', to people that 'matter to them', such as family, friends and community members, and to institutions (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014:906-907) which provided the additional and much needed dimensions to their lives.

By contrast, Côté (2014) criticised such increasing emphasis on youth subjectivities as apologetic, or even a source of legitimation, for the neoliberal capitalism and its harmful economic and social policies prioritising market processes and the interests of capital and consequently economic elites (Harvey, 2005; Skeggs, 2019). Instead, he called for a revival of the 'political-economy-of-youth' perspective that can be traced back to the neo-Marxist analyses of youth activism and countercultures in 1960s. The focus, according to Côté (2014), should return to the entire youth population, due to their global and 'systemic proletarianisation' by governments and businesses in their pursuit of the 'conquest of youth' over the last decades (p. 527). Such processes, as he further argued, have been fuelled by intentionally unsupportive and disempowering policies directed at youth cohort, leaving them 'open to exploitation by dominant economic interests' inscribed in the ongoing processes of neoliberalisation (p. 528). Resultantly, many young people now constitute a significant proportion of the 'precariat' whose working and everyday lives have become increasingly insecure and unstable (Standing, 2012, 2014). Based on such analyses of worsening material conditions, for example in terms of earning power and increasing inequalities between youth and previous generations, Côté (2014) concluded that young people should be understood as a class and researched as such.

Undoubtedly, all three perspectives have significantly contributed to the ongoing debates in the field of youth studies by offering new insights into researching youth. In particular, the metaphor of belonging captured the significance of relationships to people, place, institutions and to the times in young people's lives. The political economy of youth brought to the centre of analysis the political processes targeting youth inscribed in the neoliberal pursuit of profit, their worsening material and work conditions and economic inequalities between youth and adult populations, and

consequently the impact of these processes on young adulthood. Yet, all three perspectives have also suffered from a range of limitations. The main critique comes from neglecting the impact of persistent inequalities and power relations on young people's lives and unresolved problems inscribed in agency vs structure dichotomies.

Specifically, treating all young people as a social generation fails to effectively account for the key difference that the experiences within one generation may vary even more than across generations (Holmes, 2011), as they are shaped and constrained by unequal power relations existing within the broader society (Allen, 2018) and globally (Roberts and France, 2020). As uncovered throughout this chapter, the impact of social divisions, poverty, deprivation and spatial inequalities on the Scottish young people's relationships with education, their access to resources and social networks, and the possibility of spatial and social mobility, significantly diversifies their lives and transitions (Furlong et al., 2005; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; France and Threadgold, 2016; Taylor and Addison, 2009). Moreover, experiences of young people in the Global North remain heavily understood as the default, thus ignoring the realities of everyday lives and transitions among the majority of the world's youth population that resides in the Global South (Roberts and France, 2020). In this sense, young people could be better understood in terms of (intra)generational units, stratified by class<sup>9</sup>, location and culture (Pilcher, 1994), rather than as a global social generation. Consequently, as Roberts and France (2020) conclude, it is also crucial to think of such units as merely existing 'on paper', as well as to acknowledge that it is the researcher (and other dominant institutions/agents) who make claims on how such units are defined and divided.

Moreover, the policies directed at young people in the UK are argued to unequally benefit those already advantaged. For example, the longitudinal study by Blanden and Machin (2004) demonstrated that the expansion of tertiary education combined with widening participation policies directed at groups traditionally under-represented in

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<sup>9</sup> It needs to be highlighted that (intra)generational units should not be treated as an equivalent of class, as such understanding could facilitate the reductionist approaches to the population under study; see Roberts, 2018 for a detailed discussion).

Higher Education, such as those from low income families and low-participation areas, disproportionately benefited middle class youth (see also Raffe and Croxford, 2015; Reay, 2017). Similarly, France (2016) showed that the best internships, allowing progression to secure, well paid and good quality employment, were disproportionately accessed by youth from higher socio-economic backgrounds, due to their access to economic and cultural resources, thus undermining Côté's (2014), claims of 'systemic proletarianisation' of the whole youth population by the governments.

Another critique centres on the fact that young people's meaning making practices, lived experiences and subjective understandings of the world around them and their place in it, of what is or is not possible, are shaped by social divisions. Skeggs' (2004a) influential work 'Class, Self, Culture' demonstrates how the construction of selfhood (identity) differs between the members of social classes. A middle class 'subject of value' is spatially and socially mobile, 'future-facing, self-oriented, positioned with many possibilities for accruing value' (Skeggs, 2011:509), which corresponds well with the dominant neoliberal requirements to cultivate oneself as enterprise or an ongoing project in order to succeed in the labour market (Farrugia, 2019; Giddens, 1991; Kelly, 2006). Working classes are argued to be excluded from such elite forms of subjectivity due to '[d]ifferent material conditions [that] offer different possibilities for value accrual' (Skeggs, 2011:509). However, it is not to say that the working classes lack value, as they develop a different value system in which 'value practices are made [...] through the gift of attention to others over time and space' (Skeggs, 2011:509), rather than through the constant accrual of *cultural capital* (Skeggs and Wood, 2011). These claims also resonate with the research in the psychology of social class demonstrating that working class members are more likely than their middle class counterparts to develop an interdependent concept of the self or score higher in the empathy measures or willingness to help others (Manstead, 2018). However, they continue to be constructed as valueless and, in consequence, pathologised for not possessing the right forms of personhood legitimated through culture, political rhetoric and even academic theory (see also Lawler, 2005 on pathologising working class practices and

middle 'classness' functioning as a norm). These cultural processes continue to reproduce class relations and promote differences between young people, including the subjective dimensions of their lives. As these differences have been neglected by both, the social generation and transitional approaches, this thesis aims to fill such a gap by utilising the concept of 'subject of value' as one of its key analytical tools.

The final critique of the above perspectives to researching youth derives from unresolved theoretical and analytical problems inscribed in agency vs structure binaries (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; France, 2015; France and Threadgold, 2016). To overcome them, this thesis adopts a 'middle ground' approach that brings together 'structural, historically specific conditions and young people's subjective experience of the times in which they live' (Furlong et al., 2011:360). Thus, the concept of youth transitions can be simultaneously revived and reinvigorated. This has been achieved by adopting a number of theoretical and methodological solutions. The *metaphor of belonging* was incorporated to capture how young people's relationships with place, institutions and others constitute and shape the processes understood as transitions. This allowed me to see into young people's everyday lifeworlds, as well as to examine who and what mattered to them and why (see Chapters 6 and 9), despite the main focus of this project being on their experiences of education, training and employment. By doing so, it seemed possible to keep the 'value in a concept that captures the inherently transitional nature of youth as a life-phase without prejudging what the nature, content, direction, form or length of what that transition might be' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:74). Instead, *temporality* was found to be another useful concept to researching young people's transitions, as it allowed to capture them as not fixed in time and space but as evolving and changing up (Bourdieu, 1977; McNay, 1999). This, in turn, allowed me to make claims about their everyday lives and consequently transitions, even though these transitions were unfinished and still in progress.

Taking a middle ground approach to researching youth led to adopting Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework because its strength lies in the possibility of reconciling the individual experiences, perceptions and subjective meaning-making with the objective structures (socio-economic, political and cultural processes beyond

the influence of individuals; Costa and Murphy, 2015). Additionally, the narrative methodology was chosen as it emphasises the importance of the intimate study of individuals' everyday experiences, how they understand, make meaning of and experience the world around them as well as the temporal, spatial and social contexts for making sense of such experiences (further addressed in Chapters 4 and 5). This allowed me, once again, to capture objective and subjective dimensions of young people's social lives. Overall, the concepts adopted (*transitions* without determining its starting and ending point, *temporality*, *the metaphor of belonging*, *subject of value*, *self as enterprise* and *epistemological fallacy*) serve to distance young people from the arbitrary age boundaries and move towards understanding them as socially situated agents actively shaping their lives, selves and now de-standardised transitions (Davies, 2015), yet within the circumstances of not their own making. These circumstances will be critically examined in the following section.

### *2.1.2 Socio-economic, political and educational contexts*

#### *Neoliberalism, dominant rhetoric and neoliberal selves*

It is impossible to talk about contemporary young adulthood and youth transitions without situating them within the broader context of neoliberalism – a theoretical lens and ideological project underpinning the global economic and policy model that has gradually replaced and dismantled the liberal Keynesian state inscribed in the social democratic and welfarism traditions (Chomsky, 1999; Rowe et al., 2019; Sweenie, 2009). Since 1970s onwards, the UK has seen a shift towards the principles of free markets as the most effective way to redistribute goods, services and education across the population, the promotion of entrepreneurial culture, choice and consumerism, freedom of trade and capital, as well as strong private property rights and minimal state interventions in economic and social issues (Blackmore, 2019; Chomsky, 1999). Yet, as critical scholars such as Harvey (2005:7) pointed out, '[t]he freedoms it [neoliberal capitalism] embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations and financial capital'. Rather than an effective 'engine for economic growth' and a socio-economic equalizer (Harvey, 2007:21), neoliberalism has led to the unprecedented global mobility and concentration of

capital in the hands of economic elites. As a result, the rising levels of socio-economic inequalities and the widening (wealth) gap between the richest 1% and the rest of the global population, as well as the increase in the global deprivation amongst the poorest countries, can be observed (Bourdieu, 1998b; Chomsky, 1999; McDowell, 2009; Piketty, 2014). In this sense, processes of neoliberalisation have been often argued to aim 'from the very beginning [...] to achieve the restoration of class power' thus inscribed in the class struggle (Harvey, 2005:16; see also Ainley, 2013) and achieved with the help of expanding, increasingly punitive criminal justice system disproportionately penalising the poor (Wacquant, 1999).

Notably, neoliberalism has also become a dominant and powerful discourse that has been orchestrating every aspect of not only economic but also political, social and cultural life under late modernity (Bourdieu, 1998b; Harvey, 2005; Wacquant, 1999). Despite its arbitrary and ideological nature, it presents itself as the truth and is misrecognised as such (*doxa*; Bourdieu, 1998b). Neoliberalism further implies there is no other alternative. Despite its prominent problems and failures, the belief in the strength of the free markets to regulate themselves or in its inherent inequality levels serving economic growth and consequently poverty reduction in the long and absolute terms, continues to work as a justification for the neoliberal paradigm as the only possible system to follow (Chomsky, 1999; Hills et al., 2019). For example, '[t]he bursting of a financial speculative bubble in 2008, that led to a crash in financial markets and the subsequent global banking crisis' proved 'the apparent inherent failures in the system of financial capitalism' (Bjørnholt and McKay 2014:8). Yet, the global response did not lead to challenging or even rethinking such failures, but to the introduction of austerity measures that aimed to protect the neoliberal model and, consequently, economic elites and the interests of capital, at the expense of the wellbeing, security and quality of life amongst the vulnerable populations globally (Bjørnholt and McKay 2014; Farnsworth and Irving, 2012; Piketty, 2014). For example, Cooper and Whyte (2017) have documented the painful consequences of austerity measures in the UK, demonstrating the state violence that has inflicted a measurable harm on many of the dominated groups.



Through such pervasiveness, neoliberalism has become the ‘part of the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world’ (Harvey, 2007:21). As such, the neoliberal subjects, and young people above all, are now expected to cultivate active, flexible, creative and entrepreneurial selves (‘self as enterprise’; Kelly, 2006) in order to succeed in the increasingly insecure and competitive labour market. In other words, young people are expected to become the subjects of value that constantly seek to better themselves, develop and actively shape their futures (Skeggs, 2004a, 2011). Yet, as demonstrated in the previous section, due to different conditions of existence, the possibility or even desire to develop certain forms of personhoods varies and diversifies young people’s subjectivities, with significant consequences for their transitions (Farrugia, 2019; McDowell, 2009, 2012; Skeggs, 2004a).

Hand in hand with the ethics of ‘self as enterprise’ goes the strong emphasis on individual responsibility for the failure to succeed. Dominant neoliberal rhetoric continues to construct unemployment and poverty not as collective problems, but as results of personal deficits and shortcomings, such as poor motivation and work ethic, lack of relevant skills and/or experience, lack of aspirations and disengagement (Berry, 2014; Bussi, 2014; Dumbleton and McPhail, 2012; Fergusson, 2013), only strengthened by the allowances of a so called too generous welfare system supporting ‘cultures of worklessness’ and welfare dependency in the allegedly ‘broken’ Britain (MacDonald et al., 2014; Slater, 2014).

Such negative and individualised (mis)representations of the unemployed and welfare claimants have been further used to justify the introduction “of a package of policy reforms encompassing public spending reductions (austerity), liberalisation of public services and intensification of ‘work first’ reforms to social security and employment services” after the global financial crisis in 2008 (Wiggan, 2017:639). In consequence, the approach to tackling unemployment has further intensified its focus on the supply side of the labour market. In particular, this has led to the proliferation of low cost, short term, low-quality training courses, with low symbolic value in the labour market, which focus on individual deficiencies and increasing (digital) ‘employability’ skills (writing CVs, personal statements, filling in job applications) and on intensive job

searching (Bussi, 2014; Thompson et al., 2014). These solutions have been further combined with the increased means testing, conditionality and punitiveness of the welfare system, all based on the rationale that coercion, mobilisation and strong disincentives will result in getting people into work (Wiggan, 2012; Wright, 2016). In this 'work first' model (Bussi, 2014), the work itself, its quality, appropriateness, security and sustainability, as well as structural causes of unemployment, the state of the economy or the spatial concentration of worklessness in the 'Old Industrial Regions' negatively affected by de-industrialisation, were given little attention (Keep and James, 2012; MacDonald et al., 2014; Wiggan, 2012).

In Scotland, however, the employability and welfare support agenda has been constructed rather differently, with the Scottish Government openly criticising punitive approaches, acknowledging the structural causes of unemployment and poverty and committing itself to provide people with better social security support and ending child poverty by 2030 (Wiggan, 2017; see Section 1.3 for a detailed overview). These differences in the construction of youth unemployment, as well as the scarcity of research on youth transitions in Scotland, provide a strong rationale for the current study to explore how young people's transitions look like in the Scottish context and whether/how they differ from the other regions of the UK.

#### *Deindustrialisation and the (not so) new economy*

The economic processes deriving from the neoliberal paradigm have led to the significant changes in the labour market and the working lives in the contemporary UK and the western world. A vast range of literature points to the shift from the heavy industry and manufacturing towards the emergence of new economic conditions of the late (neoliberal) capitalism (Furlong, 2013; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Maguire, 2010; Thompson et al., 2014). Dominant visions of contemporary developed countries, that have prevailed amongst economic theorists as well as in the public and political discourses, embrace the notion of the 'knowledge economies' driven by technological progress and the widespread use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) that is based on the production and exchange of knowledge, (financial) information and capital rather than production and manufacturing goods (Castells,

1996, 2001; Facer, 2012; Furlong, 2013; Powell and Snellman, 2004; Scottish Government, 2014b, 2015b, 2017d). Such new economic conditions have been further linked with the proliferation and dominance of the new forms of high-tech employment in finance, global trade, ICT, business and legal sectors, understood as:

producer services which typically are the input to a further stage in the production process, and essential to the operation of the economy as a whole [...] [and often argued to provide] the leading edge to the British economy and essential to its global competitiveness. (McDowell, 2009:31)

As members of these knowledge societies, young people have been expected to invest more than ever in knowledge, education, skills development and lifelong learning (Facer, 2012), in order to become the 'adult of tomorrow' that will successfully participate in and benefit from these new forms of employment (Valentine et al., 2002:306). As such, the deindustrialisation processes were accompanied by a steep decline in the youth labour market and the significant expansion of the education system and the marketisation of HE aimed to prepare young people for the new demands of knowledge societies (Catells, 2001; Priestley and Humes, 2010; Ward and Steele, 1999). These developments have been thus inscribed in the narratives of change – of 'the radical break with the past' heralding emergence of the new, postmillennial reality (McDowell, 2009:32). However, these narratives cannot be fully upheld when faced with the critical and coherent analysis of the socio-economic contexts in which young people live.

In particular, the notion of the new knowledge societies has been called into question. Fuchs and Sandavol (2014), for instance, argued that it has been a non-critical and descriptive label that serves only to pursue the neoliberal interests and policies. Indeed, statistical evidence clearly demonstrates that there has been no radical shift towards the knowledge economies. Rather, the expansion of the service sector has been observed. In Scotland, services represent 75% of all employment and they also account 'for more than 90% of economic growth since devolution' (Liddell et al., 2014:5). Moreover, the fastest growing jobs have not been amongst 'the hyper-

rational and high-powered “knowledge workers”, as theorists of post-industrial society predicted’ (Reay, 2013:669), but rather amongst ‘sales assistants, checkout operators, cooks, waiters, bar staff, youth workers, telephone sales, and security guards as well as [...] nurses, ward assistants and care workers’ (McDowell, 2009:30; see also Ainley, 2016 and Wolf, 2011). High tech employment accounts for less than 30% of all jobs, employment opportunities in the middle have been shrinking, while the low level, often temporary and low waged work has significantly proliferated across Europe (Furlong, 2013; McDowell, 2009; Maguire, 2010; Reay, 2013; Refrigeri and Aleandri, 2013; Thompson, et al. 2014; Wolf, 2011). Extensive economic analysis further led Keep and James (2012:224) to the conclusion that ‘the reality – for the foreseeable future – is that about a quarter of all jobs in the UK labour market will remain low paid and difficult to progress out of’.

As such, contemporary UK would be better understood as ‘an information society according to the state of its forces of production [...] [yet] capitalist in its relations of production’ (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014:2). By adopting a Marxist lens, the neoliberal ‘ideological illusion’ of information society can be therefore easily shaken, especially as information sources of production constitute a much smaller proportion of the forces of production (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014:3), while services constitute the overwhelming majority of employment. Moreover, the forces of production based on the information work continue to be mediated by class relations and other intersections (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014). A high polarisation of the labour force inscribed in social divisions, as well as feminist analysis of gendered labour market relations, can further serve as examples and link the not so radical changes with the past.

A strong and growing division between highly educated and skilled workers in top level jobs and poorly educated workers in low level, low paid employment can be observed in contemporary Britain (Salvatori, 2018). This polarisation of the workforce also accounts for the growing inequalities in income, wealth and earnings, as well as in the quality and security of employment (McDowell, 2009; Savage, 2015). Such processes

have been further accompanied by growing youth unemployment and rising levels of poverty. Currently, approximately 30% of young people aged 14-24, about 2.7 million, are reported living in poverty in the UK (NPI, 2015), leading to their increasing socio-economic marginalisation (Banerji et al., 2014; Refrigeri and Aleandri, 2013; Yates and Payne, 2006). Yet, as Shildrick and colleagues (2015) argue, unemployment, relatively rarely experienced long term, is not the main problem young people face. Rather, precarity, devaluation of credentials and underemployment are claimed to be the defining features of contemporary life (Roberts, 2005), increasingly affecting also more privileged youth. As Roberts (2005) and Standing (2012, 2014) point out, many young people, even though better educated than ever, tend to undertake jobs well below their qualifications. For example, according to the OECD report *'Education at a Glance'* (2018), 1 in 3 graduates in the UK work in the jobs not requiring a degree. As such, the state of the economy fails to reflect the changes brought by the massive expansion of Further and Higher Education. Rather, the 'education without jobs' phenomenon can be observed (Ainley, 2013:47). Consequently, many young people are argued to constitute a significant proportion of the precariat who experience on an ongoing basis 'a life of unstable labour and unstable living' (Standing, 2014:969). Thus, being employed does not necessarily shield one from the experiences of poverty (Maître et al., 2018).

Undoubtedly, young people have been experiencing worsening work, material and living conditions by comparison with their parents' generation, despite being the most educated generation themselves (Cotê, 2014; Standing, 2012, 2014). However, the importance of social divisions as diversifying forces to young people's lives should not be ignored, as argued throughout this chapter. Evidence demonstrates that middle class parents encourage and 'push' their children to succeed academically by mobilising a range of resources (emotional, practical and material), to ensure their children's advantage in education and beyond (Reay, 2017:141; see also Friedman and Lauriston, 2019). Consequently, middle class youth remain relatively shielded from the precarious and insecure labour market and unstable living conditions (Allen, 2018; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), unlike many of their working class counterparts. It is young

people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are at the end of the vocational queue, often with little or no formal qualifications, negative school experiences, and with little *economic, cultural and social capital* to draw upon (Crisp and Powell, 2017).

They constitute an (intra)generational unit most affected by the growing polarisation of the labour market, pushed into the most insecure, least prestigious and low-skilled training and jobs, often without opportunities for further development and job progression (Keep and James, 2012). They thus face the highest risks of unemployment punctuated by periods of economic activity, while living insecure lives and experiencing poverty and marginalisation under (not so) new socio-economic conditions (Furlong, 2013; Roberts, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012). This study aims to further explore how precarity and insecurity have affected everyday lives and transitions of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds identified as NEET, in order to contribute to the ongoing debates in the field of youth studies about continuity and change, as well as similarities and differences in contemporary young adulthood.

The continuity with the past can be further uncovered by adopting a feminist framework to understanding not so new labour market relations. Following McDowell (2009:6), it is argued that:

the rise of service employment is neither new nor a significant transformation [...] [but rather the result of] the commodification of many of the types of work that were previously undertaken mainly in private homes and 'for love' – in the sense not for wages. Because participants of these activities – the care of children, sexual relationships, caring for elderly bodies, meeting leisure needs – were not financially recompensated, they were not recognised as work and so excluded from economic analyses.

As such, while the nature of waged relations has changed due to women entering the labour market en masse since 1970s onwards, gender divisions continue to underpin

contemporary labour market relations. Also, as McNay (1999:103, 112) highlights, women continue to carry 'the burden of emotional responsibilities' in family life, such as 'child-care, domestic labour, division of resources', as well as in parent-child relations, thus unequally affecting their employment, wages, career progression and pensions (Perez, 2019; Woodman et al., 2017). Moreover, women remain disproportionately overrepresented in sectors such as health and social work, education, caring, leisure and other service occupations, as well as in administrative and secretarial occupations (Scottish Government, 2016c). Importantly, these types of jobs continue to be constructed as low status and consequently less-well paid, due to the dominant understanding that they are 'particularly suitable for women' (McDowell, 2009:6; see also McNay, 1999; Perez, 2019). Indeed, traditionally 'feminine' attributes such as empathy, friendliness or caring, as well as certain embodied characteristics encompassing the right type of language, style and good or perceived as appropriate looks (e.g. sexy, desirable, youthful and white) are constructed as an ideal for many service jobs (Farrugia et al., 2018; McDowell, 2009, 2012). Young people who do not fit such prioritised and valued embodied modes of self-presentation, in particular young unskilled working class men, experience an additional disadvantage in a labour market dominated by service work and in which the jobs in manufacturing, construction and other traditionally male dominated sectors have now significantly declined (Liddell et al., 2014; McDowell, 2009; Gunter and Watt, 2009; Scottish Government, 2016c). These relations are important when thinking about contemporary youth transitions, how class and gender structure choices in relation to work opportunities young people want to pursue (Evans, 2002) and barriers to employment that young, low educated working-class man may now face (McDowell, 2012).

The next section will look in more detail at the educational context of contemporary young adulthood. Particular focus will be paid to changes brought by the expansion of the education system under neoliberal capitalism, but also the continuity inscribed in existing social divisions that reproduce educational and wider socio-economic

inequalities through complex processes of segregation within unequal educational institutions (Reay, 2016).

*The 'miseducation' of the working classes*

Processes of deindustrialisation and the alleged shift towards the knowledge economy have been accompanied by a significant expansion and marketisation of the education system over the last three decades (Irwin, 2018; John and Fanghanel, 2016), however market principles have been less influential in the development of education sector in Scotland than the rest of Britain. For example, the Scottish Government has adopted a limited market-oriented approach by investing more public funding in education, avoiding student fees, and giving a higher priority to widening access to HE (Bruce, 2016). While such developments have been considered progressive, at least by comparison with the English model, seen by some as a 'textbook example' of a market driven education (Bruce, 2016:57), they did not escape processes of neoliberalisation. Specifically, a further shift towards education in the service of economic interests, global competitiveness and prosperity can be observed in Scotland (Arnott and Ozga, 2012; Scottish Government, 2014a, 2014b). Consequently, a tightening relationship between education and the economy has further undermined the principles of education as a right and a public good that should underpin a socially just, comprehensive and equal education for democratic participation and citizenship (Ainley, 2016; Arnott and Ozga, 2012; Pirrie and Hockings, 2012; Reay, 2017; see Section 1.3 for details).

Under these new conditions, engagement with post-compulsory education, particularly amongst traditionally underrepresented groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, students from low SE backgrounds and/or low participation areas (Blackburn et al., 2016; Furlong and Cartmel, 2009; Johansson and Hojer, 2012), has become the norm, marking a significant break with the past. Specifically, youth scholars have pointed towards the transformation of Higher Education from 'an elite' experience reserved for the privileged minority to 'a mass experience' and a relatively common feature of contemporary young adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). Yet, the changes brought by such expansion and the widening participation to HE have not



resulted in a more equal education system or managed to eradicate the impact of social divisions on educational and wider socio-economic inequalities (Furlong et al., 2011; Reay, 2017; Raffe and Croxford, 2015).

In particular, findings from the Scottish School Leaver Destination Survey clearly show ongoing significant statistical differences in the school attainment and post-compulsory education pathways between pupils from the most (20%) and least (80-100%) deprived areas in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2017a). In 2009/10, only 30% of young people from the most deprived areas achieved 1 or more exam results at SCQF level 6 or above<sup>10</sup>, as opposed to 80% pupils from the least deprived areas. In 2015/16, the numbers stood at 43% and 81% respectively. While there has been a significant increase in the number of disadvantaged pupils leaving school with higher qualifications, the socio-economic attainment gap has remained. Moreover, the chances of being in so-called 'positive destinations' after leaving secondary education also remain relative to one's background (Scottish Government, 2017a). For example, in 2015/2016, 1 in 5 school leavers from the most disadvantaged areas were not in positive destinations (identified as NEET), in contrast to only 1 in 30 from the least disadvantaged areas. Moreover, the most disadvantaged were also most likely to pursue further education, employment, training or activity agreement, while the majority of their more affluent counterparts followed the HE routes (Scottish Government, 2017a).

There is a similarly unequal picture in relation to young people's access to higher education, the status of university and courses attended and the experiences of HE, which continue to be 'powerfully' classed despite the increasing participation of working class students (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009; Irwin, 2018; Reay, 2016, 2017; Reay et al., 2010). Pupils from the most advantaged areas are four times more likely to enter university than their most disadvantaged counterparts, as an expansion of education and widening participation benefited middle class youth the most, often at the expense of the more academically able working-class pupils (Blanden and Machin,

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<sup>10</sup> See the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework at: <https://scqf.org.uk/interactive-framework/> (Accessed 10 March 2020).

2004; Reay, 2016). Furthermore, only 1 in 5 students at highly selective universities in Scotland come from the lower socio-economic (SE) groups. Yet, this trend has been reversed for the less prestigious, less well-resourced post '92 universities where students from lower SE backgrounds remain clustered (Blackburn et al., 2016; Croxford and Raffe, 2015; Reay et al., 2010). This means that even though when they make it to university, these students are at the highest risk of obtaining a devalued degree that offers little advantage in the labour market (Bourdieu, 1999; Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). Finally, three quarters of school leavers from independent schools have been concentrated in the four most prestigious Scottish universities, a trend which has not changed for decades (Blackburn et al., 2016). Their university degrees are still most likely to lead to high status, more financially rewarding and secure jobs (Friedman and Lauriston, 2019; Raffe and Croxford, 2015).

As such, social class remains the most powerful factor that differentiates the experiences of HE between young people from different socio-economic backgrounds (Furlong, et al., 2011; Kenway and Koh 2013; Raffe and Croxford, 2015). Socio-economic constraints alongside '[u]pper- and middle-class exclusivity and working-class self-exclusion are part of the reason why students from working class background are poorly represented in higher status, old universities' (Reay, 2016:133). Based on such evidence, the continuity of the old patterns of educational inequalities has been maintained, even though the processes behind them have changed (Furlong et al., 2011) 'from those of straightforward exclusion of working classes to more complex processes of being excluded within a highly differentiated university sector' (Reay, 2016:131).

Concurrently, there are still many young people who leave school early with little or no qualifications, yet often with scarred learning identities (Irwin, 2018; Maguire, 2010; Raffe, 2011; Reay, 2017; Scottish Government, 2015a; 2017a; Shildrick et al., 2012; Simmons and Thompson, 2013). These young people are more likely to be from the lower SE groups and at risk of experiencing periods of NEETness – of not being in education, employment or training (Scottish Executive, 2005, 2006; Scottish Government, 2015a, 2017c; SDS, 2015). Such continuous patterns of educational

underachievement of the working class youth have been widely documented in the literature over the last five decades (recently by Reay, 2017). As summarised by Shildrick and colleagues (2012:102-103), this continuity has been a result of:

the perceived irrelevance of the curricula (and, for some, of educational qualifications per se); of being bullied and victimised (by pupils or teachers); of problems in their wider lives not being recognised or appropriately cared for by school; of pupil cultures that encouraged educational disengagement and truancy; and of poor-quality teaching and educational provision in schools that failed to provide a successful education comprehensively to all pupils.

The reasons behind such unequal educational experiences and outcomes amongst working class youth who are either leaving school early or, if continuing with HE, often join the lower status institutions and courses, can be further sought in the now expanded and marketised education system itself, which continues to serve the interests of a dominant group (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Hendrick, 1997). Historically, the establishment of educational institutions was guided by members of professional middle classes who imposed and legitimated their own *cultural capital*, norms, values and types of knowledge, which Bourdieu called 'symbolic mastery' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Hendrick, 1997; Reay, 2016, 2017). Consequently, the contemporary education system remains deeply embedded in the processes that have aimed to maintain and reproduce the privilege of the elites. A key mechanism through which such reproduction takes place can be further linked to the *symbolic power* underlying the education system since its inception (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

Such *symbolic power* has been exercised not only on a material level through access or lack of it to different forms of resources, but first and foremost on a symbolic level – through a *symbolic violence* that has continued to impose cultural dominance of the dominant classes (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; France, 2015), while not recognising but further marginalising and devaluing working-class culture and learners' identities (Ingram, 2009; Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 1997). *Symbolic violence* is further argued to

successfully operate through two logical fictions inscribed in the education system: the unequal power relations, as well as the culture, knowledge and styles valued by educational institutions function as objective truths, while de facto they are arbitrary and exist only by choice (*doxa*; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Friedman, 2009). Yet, by being presented as truths, they become understood as such, also by members of dominated groups, who consequently internalise and accept their own position within existing unequal social structures (Friedman, 2009). In this sense, *symbolic violence* 'is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:167).

Moreover, even though the reproduction of inequalities occurs through cultural means, it has a social reproductive role (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) because knowledge and access to it continue to be unequally distributed between dominant and dominated members of society, in order to maintain the unequal social and economic order (Duckworth and Schoon, 2012; Croxford and Raffe, 2015; Reay, 2017; Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Skeggs, 1997). In consequence, the highly hierarchical, selective and competitive nature of the now expanded education system acts as a sorting mechanism that continues to direct young people into different educational and post-educational trajectories (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 1997). Such mechanisms have been further argued to be reinforced by educational policies that have not taken any radical turn and only serve to mitigate exclusionary practices and act as 'a smokescreen for the maintenance of educational homeostasis' (Lumby, 2012:276; see also Section 1.3) and more broadly – a societal homeostasis (see Reay, 2017; Priestley and Humes, 2010, Skeggs, 1997 and Thorburn, 2014 for similar conclusions on the intentional 'miseducation' of the working classes).

For example, Skeggs (1997) in her longitudinal ethnography with young white working-class women argued that her participants have been born into structures of inequality that limited their access to different forms of resources. Their unequal positions were demonstrated to negatively affect their relationship with, and experiences of, the education system which further worked to allocate them into certain roles within the labour market (low level and gendered work) and societal relations (e.g. unpaid labour

within family). On the other hand, young people from higher SE backgrounds were found to be equipped with qualities, habits and dispositions valued by educational institutions, which in result facilitated their academic performance. Because of that, they also developed an 'internal locus of control', understood as a sense of confidence, feeling in control of their lives, but also as having 'a sense of entitlement' (Bodovski, 2015:49), while they navigated the education system and the labour market, unlike many of their working class counterparts and their families (Burke, 2015; Grisprud et al., 2011; Lauriston and Friedman, 2019; Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 2004a).

Moreover, vocational routes continue to be even less valued/valuable within a highly unequal, stratified and fragmented education system in the UK (Atkins, 2017; Adams, 2012; Keep, 2015; Keep and James, 2012; Raffe, 2011; Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Wolf, 2011). For example, Swift and Fisher (2012) found that the school curriculum still prioritises 'academic' routes over vocational training, which has been perceived as a secondary option for the low achievers. Young people themselves were found to accept these classed stereotypes surrounding vocational courses and their status as a route to employment that is less valued and offering low career opportunities and progress. Similarly, Thompson (2011b) demonstrated that work-based learning has been constructed as the best option for disadvantaged youth in need of nurture and care (often labelled as deficit learners). Such a pedagogy is important for often marginalised young people who may have scarred learning identities (Simmons and Thompson, 2013). However, at the same time, students following vocational routes should be offered high quality and challenging education and access to knowledge to ensure their development and increase their career opportunities (Simmons and Thompson, 2013). Instead, these vocational pathways were argued to act as an 'imposed' educational route for the most disadvantaged, with no other alternative and as an exclusionary tool due to its low symbolic value in both the education system and the labour market (Adams, 2012; Keep, 2015; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Roberts, 2005; Thompson, 2011b). Consequently, many young people following vocational routes were found to churn between short term, low level skills

development training courses and unemployment and/or low-level employment (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Thompson et al., 2014; Shildrick et al., 2012).

More broadly, such expansion and increasing diversification of the education system can be understood as deriving from and inscribed in a neoliberal logic prioritising economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness as well as the interests and dominance of the elites (Harvey, 2005). Particularly, it can be argued that increasing the levels of vocational training involved 'relegating an unskilled section of the previous manually working class to worthless vocational certification' (Ainley, 2013:46). Such approaches, combined with the 'work first' model and an increasingly punitive and conditional welfare system (Bussi, 2014), may be understood as working as a segregating tool that disciplines the most disadvantaged young people to be ready to undertake the poorest, lowest paid and least secure roles available in late capitalism (Crisp and Powell, 2017; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018). By contrast, increasing levels of university graduates, despite significantly fewer jobs available to them, may be a result of the state's efforts to manage the economic crisis by the (re)creation of a highly educated and employable (when needed) 'reserve labour army' (Ainley, 2013:47).

Overall, the above analysis strongly suggests that social reproduction still occurs through complex and not always straightforward processes of segregation, inscribed in a highly stratified education system and neoliberal logic serving the interests of capital and the elites (Harvey, 2005; Reay, 2016). It is undeniable that the education system can support upward social mobility, as there are young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who 'beat the odds' and manage to succeed, educationally and professionally, even though often this is at considerable emotional and psychological cost (Friedman, 2016; Lumby, 2012; Reay, 2017; Stein, 2006). However, at the societal/group level, historical patterns of educational underachievement and 'miseducation' of the working-class youth continue to exist, as demonstrated throughout this section.

At the same time, as Reay (2006, 2017) points out, focusing only on within-school processes cannot mitigate the impact of wider socio-economic inequalities on working

class youth lives, relationships with education and transitions. The education system alone cannot compensate for an unequal society (see also Thorburn, 2014 for similar conclusions). Nevertheless, despite a growing body of scholarship in this area, there is a scarcity of research in the Scottish context. Specifically, the delivery of the '*Curriculum of Excellence*' and policies focusing on the post-16 '*Opportunities for All*' in Scotland are claimed to provide progressive, equal and comprehensive education that is '*Getting it Right for Every Child*' (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2005b; Scottish Government, 2012; 2014a). It is therefore crucial to further investigate the educational and post-educational trajectories of disadvantaged Scottish young people in order to examine the accuracy of such claims. Moreover, there is little known about how segregation processes operate 'on the ground' after young people leave compulsory education, thus creating a gap in knowledge about this period of youth transitions. In order to address this, it seems necessary to examine how the post-16 transitions policy agenda is implemented and how discretion is exercised by service providers (Shildrick et al., 2012; Raffe, 2013; Scottish Government, 2017b). By doing so, a more fulsome understanding of the impact of *symbolic violence* on youth transitions beyond education system can emerge, while also adding to the debates on how segregation processes affect individuals' agency (Jenkins, 2002).

The next section explores how young people who follow 'accelerated' transitions and leave school early have become a subject of the state interest and interventions through ascribing them to a problematic category (that of NEET).

## **2.2 Young people labelled 'NEET' – quantified and defined by what they are not**

A (not so) new way of classifying disadvantaged young people emerged in the UK political agenda in 1999 when the Social Exclusion Unit's report '*Bridging the Gap*' was published and a NEET category (Not in Education, Employment or Training) was introduced (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001; SEU, 1999). In Scotland, the first core policy initiative directed at tackling NEETness, '*More Choices, More Chances*' (MCMC), was set up 7 years later (Scottish Executive, 2006). Its main focus was to reduce the NEET

numbers through increasing young people's participation in further education, employment or training, and, since 2007, also to prevent them from becoming NEET in the first place through introducing a range of policies enhancing the delivery of the '*Curriculum of Excellence*' (Scottish Executive, 2005b, 2006; Scottish Government, 2010, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; see also Section 1.3).

In particular, a number of 'skills' initiatives were gradually designed as partnership models and directed at all young people in the transition period from school to further education, training or employment, but with a particular focus at those disadvantaged. For instance, '*16+ Learning Choices*' (Scottish Government, 2010) followed by the '*Opportunities for All*' (Scottish Government, 2012; 2014b) aimed to support the effectiveness of a senior phase of the curriculum by offering a place in learning or training to any 16-19 year old considered at risk of becoming NEET after leaving compulsory education, up to 6 months, in order to provide them with an opportunity to gain work experience and develop a range of skills (Adams, 2012; Scottish Government, 2012, 2014a). Finally, the further shift towards employability and development of skills required by employers has been gradually occurring since 2014 in Scotland, as in order to meet the market demands, the Scottish Government further committed itself to build partnerships between schools, colleges and businesses through the new, more vocationally focused curriculum (Scottish Government, 2014b). In consequence, the employability agenda has become a key focus of policy initiatives directed at youth in general and NEET youth in particular, while the links between education and neoliberal interests visibly strengthened, as also discussed in Sections 1.3 and 2.1.2.

In the academic literature, the most common definition describes NEETness as not being in education, employment or training (EET) between 16 and 18 years old, for at least 6 months (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). The policy guidelines provided by SEU (1999) and the Scottish Executive (2005a) define NEETness even more laconically as 16-19 years olds not in education, training or employment. More recently, due to prolonged, complex and fragmented school to work transitions, the concept of NEETness has been often applied to young people aged 16-24 (Roberts, 2011; Simmons



and Thompson, 2013) or even up to age of 29, for example in comparative evaluations between countries (OECD, 2020a; Powell, 2018).

Since the introduction of the NEET agenda, academic and governmental research has overwhelmingly focused on identifying, measuring and quantifying young people identified as NEET (Holte, 2018; Sweenie, 2009; Whittaker, 2008). Such scholarship has included for instance tracking the NEET numbers and categorising young people into various sub-groups and sub-categories, (re)examining the size, composition and general characteristics of the group, the risk and protective factors, negative consequences of NEETness and even the ways of predicting [sic] and preventing NEETness (see e.g. Kohn et al., 2016; Sadler et al., 2015; Scottish Executive, 2005a; Scottish Government, 2015a).

Assessing the exact size of the NEET group has been particularly problematic, due to such key issues as: a) difficulties with tracking NEET movements and outcomes over time; b) difficulties with recording the length of NEETness (short term vs long term experiences); c) hiding so called 'churners' (young people in and out of NEET, often numerous times) from the official NEET rates; and d) including the 'positive' NEET group (on a gap year or in voluntary/charity work or travel, often from more affluent families) not needing any kind of interventions in the NEET statistics (Nudzor, 2010; Shildrick et al., 2012; Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017; Yates and Payne, 2006). Consequently, as France (2016:139) concludes, 'being a NEET is a dynamic process that is not adequately described by static methods of measurement'.

It was further highlighted that the NEET group is by no means homogenous (Nudzor, 2010). A number of various sub-groups were identified: care leavers, carers, young parents, offenders, early school leavers with low educational attainment, persistent truants, young people with physical/mental health problems and young people with drugs or alcohol abuse problems (France, 2016; Scottish Executive, 2005a; Scottish Government, 2015a). More broadly, young people in the NEET category have been divided into two sub-groups: unemployed – seeking work and unemployed – not seeking, including those economically inactive, in prison, with caring responsibilities

and with health problems (SDS, 2015). While it was pointed out that even though such sub-groups may be somehow useful for intervention purposes, they are not exhaustive, as many more can be subsumed under the NEET category, e.g. chronically ill and disabled or 'positive' NEET (Nudzor, 2010). However, the key problem, deriving from including various issues and social problems under one single category, requires further scrutiny, so far neglected by the NEET-focused scholarship (see Section 2.2.1 for a further discussion).

Similarly as with categorising young people, risk factors for 'becoming NEET' have been mostly described as 'personal characteristics'. Such risk factors, widely identified and quantified in the literature, include: a low socio-economic status; deprivation; financial exclusion and debt-aversity; low attainment; negative school experiences, such as school exclusion, truancy, bullying or lack of basic numeracy and literacy skills; weak family and other support networks; poor soft social skills; stigmatisation and the attitude of others; unpaid caring responsibilities and teenage pregnancy/parenting (Cusworth et al., 2009; Nudzor, 2010; Sadler et al., 2015; Scottish Executive, 2005a; Scottish Government, 2015a). The other strand of the NEET focused research engaged with examining protective factors amongst 'ordinary' young people with similar characteristics to the NEET group, who managed to 'beat the odds' (Duckworth and Schoon, 2012), overcome negative experiences of adversity and disadvantage and move to employment, even though this was often low-level work, insecure and with limited career prospects (Maguire, 2010). Such protective factors encompassed individual characteristics, such as resilience and buoyancy (Lumby, 2012; Stein, 2006), but also support from family, friends and the local community when dealing with disadvantage and poverty (Attree, 2004; Maguire, 2010) or the role of young people's aspirations, school motivation and engagement, as well as prior educational achievement and existing 'soft skills' (Duckworth and Schoon, 2012).

Finally, a considerable body of research has looked at the impact of NEETness on young people's lives and transitions. Being NEET has been linked with experiences of poverty and social exclusion later on in life (Simmons and Thompson, 2011); long term unemployment (Franzén, and Kassman, 2005); poor work outcomes in the later stages

of life (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Scottish Government, 2015a), a negative impact on wellbeing and physical and mental health (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016; Maguire and Rennison, 2005; Scottish Government, 2015a), a sense of lack of control and dissatisfaction with life (Bynner and Parsons, 2002).

Additionally, policy responses to NEETness have been under a great deal of scrutiny and critique. Firstly, it was highlighted that an excessive emphasis has been put on getting young people into education, employment or training despite more urgent issues some of them may be facing, such as lack of housing and ill health, family difficulties and personal problems, substance abuse or involvement with offending (Finlay, et al., 2010; Nudzor, 2010; Whittaker, 2008; Yates and Payne, 2006). As a consequence, work focused interventions were seen as inadequate for a significant proportion of young people (Whittaker, 2008). Secondly, formulating policy in terms of targets, especially aimed at reducing of NEET numbers, was found to lead to prioritising those easiest to reach and support, neglecting the most disadvantaged and often needing multi-level support, but not ready to engage with education, employment or training (Yates and Payne, 2006; France, 2016). A focus on achieving policy-related goals has also resulted in placing young people in any available training or education provision, leading to the effect of 'churn' when young people have been pushed between low level training and low-level jobs and/or unemployment (Simmons and Smyth, 2016; Thompson et al., 2014). Finally, it was also pointed out that there was excessive emphasis put on involving some young people with further education, which may not be the right solution for every young person, especially for those with negative or scarring school experiences (Nudzor, 2010).

While the NEET-focused scholarship offers some insights into young people's transitions, it suffers from a range of shortcomings, at least partially deriving from a too narrow engagement with the fundamentally contradictory NEET category itself and lack of sufficient links with the fields of youth studies and education (with notable exceptions, such as e.g. Simmon and Thompson, 2011, 2013; and to a certain extent Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017). These issues will be uncovered below.

### *2.2.1 Problematizing NEETness*

The NEET category has been widely critiqued for its pejorative nature. Young people continue to be defined through a deficit label and described by what they are not (not in education, training or employment) rather than by who they are. This deficit label fails to recognise differences in young people's circumstances, experiences, strengths and adversities and their consequences for their transitions (Yates and Payne, 2006). It was suggested that even though the NEET category provides a focus on a vulnerable group of young people, it does not recognise their diverse circumstances or needs in order to provide support and effective interventions by professional services (Thompson et al., 2014). Moreover, some young people do not perceive being 'NEET' as a particularly negative situation, for example teenage mothers devoted to caring for their children (Yates and Payne, 2006). Indeed, the value and importance of unpaid and mostly gendered work, such as caring, volunteering or parenting that significantly contributes to the modern economies and the nations' wealth (OfNS, 2016) continue to go unrecognised (Perez, 2019). This is reflected in the responses to NEETness, prioritising economic activity in the service of the country's economic growth, competitiveness and prosperity (Scottish Government, 2014b). Moreover, including (and counting) young people who are economically inactive (not seeking work e.g. due to disability, caring responsibilities or long-term illness) in the NEET category constructs these sub-groups as disengaged and a 'burden' on society (see also France, 2016) rather than as valuable and diverse human beings, who deserve support and respect.

Furthermore, negative assumptions and connotations underpin policy objectives to tackling NEETness, as it is feared that some young people may not become productive and 'useful' members of society or even pose a threat to the social order (Fergusson, 2013; Nudzor, 2010). While the NEET category is relatively new, it seems to be a synonym with terms used in previous discourses concerning young people struggling with their transitions, such as: 'Getting Nowhere'; 'Status Zero'; 'Off Register'; 'Wasted Youth', 'Disengaged', 'Disaffected', 'Disappeared Young People'; 'At-Risk' (all cited in Nudzor, 2010:16). In this sense, the NEET agenda has been from the very beginning

inscribed in the broader processes through which certain disadvantaged, often working-class, young people become problematised as in need of control and objects of targeted governance, while their wellbeing, needs and rights are often silenced or simply ignored (Fergusson, 2013; Hendrick, 1997; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

These (mis)representations have reinforced and replicated negative assumptions about some young people, once again especially in relation to class, that further served as a 'rationale' for introducing punitive austerity welfare reforms (France, 2016; Macdonald et al., 2014; McKendrick et al., 2007). Yet, as a significant body of research clearly showed, disadvantaged young people are far from being disengaged or disaffected. Rather, they hold conventional attitudes and aspirations concerning their futures and value employment as one of their priorities in adulthood, even though they may be pessimistic about their chances of securing it (Fergusson, 2013; Finlay et al., 2010; MacDonald et al., 2014; McKendrick et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2014). Thus, being NEET should not be understood as an active choice young people make or as the effect of negative attitudes they inherit (Macdonald et al., 2014; Robson, 2008), but rather as a result of structural factors and other social divisions that unequally affect individuals' life chances, opportunities and pathways (Robson, 2008).

At this point, it needs to be noted that the Scottish Government has recognised since 2007 the need for challenging the deficit label by suggesting a new phrase to describe the group – 'young people in need of *More Choices, More Chances*' (MCMC). Since then, political discourses in Scotland seem to have abandoned the NEET label (Sweenie, 2009). However, it continues to be widely used not only in academic and public discourses, but also for Scottish Government's statistical and analytical purposes (see e.g. Scottish Government, 2015a; 2016c, 2017c). Thus, it remains important to further investigate whether/how the NEET label has been used by and influenced the service providers' understandings of youth transitions in the Scottish context (see also Section 2.1.2).

Most importantly, while the rhetoric surrounding NEETness significantly differs in Scotland compared to rest of UK, dropping the NEET label has not seen a shift in the

Government's responses to NEETness and socially graded transitions. MCMC policy and 'skills' initiatives remain core policies directed at supporting disadvantaged youth (Scottish Executive, 2006; Scottish Government, 2012, 2014a). This is because the NEET/MCMC agenda has been a cornerstone of the neoliberal processes, allocating the causes of non-participation to deficits and personal attributes within young people and their families rather than the structural inequalities in society (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001; Duckworth and Schoon, 2012; Dumbleton and McPhail, 2012; Fergusson, 2013; France, 2008; Thompson et al., 2014). By doing so, youth poverty, unemployment, spatial concentration of disadvantage, unequal wages and access to benefits have become marginalised issues (France, 2008, 2016; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2014), to which individualistic solutions based on 'fixing the individual' logic have been adopted in policy responses in Scotland and the rest of the UK (Bussi, 2014; Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). In the context of this deceitful policy twist, individualistic solutions to collective problems have been presented as a collective solution to personal issues (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001).

Specifically, assigning young people to stereotyped categories misrepresents the causes of unequal educational outcomes and youth unemployment as a result of deficit 'personal characteristics', but also does little to improve the understanding of the complexity and diversity of their everyday lives and transitions (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001; France, 2016). Indeed, following Finlay et al. (2010:852), it can be argued that 'there is no typical story' when it comes to young people labelled as NEET. Therefore, there is an urgent need for in depth qualitative study, involving young people themselves, to document their views, values and needs, capture the unique persons beyond the NEET label (Simmons and Smyth, 2016; Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Sweenie, 2009) and explore how their complex and diverse experiences and circumstances shape the way they perceive the world, themselves and others in it and their transitions.

Yet, it also remains crucial to position young people's lives within broader socio-economic inequalities, discussed in the previous section, somehow neglected by the NEET focused literature which often fixated on demonstrating the diversity of the NEET

group without exposing the impact of old social divisions behind the unequal patterns of youth transitions (see Section 2.2). This is perhaps due to the intrinsic contradictions underpinning the NEET policy agenda that seems to be at the core of epistemologically fallacious discourses (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) and due to leaving out ‘structural causation of many of the policy problems’ (Keep and James, 2012:224). For example, neglecting to analyse the educational experiences of young people identified as NEET through the lens of persistent inequalities and working class educational underachievement (see Section 2.1.2) rather than as personal characteristics, has significantly reduced the ability of policy responses to prevent and reduce ‘NEETness’ (Simmons and Smyth, 2016).

Furthermore, youth scholars have long argued that contemporary skills initiatives resemble the 1980s approaches which attempted to reduce youth unemployment with help of similar short-term, skills-focused solutions that could not tackle complex structural factors behind it (Miller et al., 2015; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018; Roberts, 2005; Crisp and Powell, 2017). In this sense, we can observe the ‘policy amnesia’ which continues to “temporarily ‘warehouse’ the unemployed” (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:88) and hide their real numbers behind participation in ill-suited interventions that churn young people in and out of ‘NEETness’ (France, 2016; Murden, 2018). This thesis aims to address these problems by exploring educational and post-educational journeys of young people identified as NEET through the lens of the renewed approach reconciling transitional and cultural perspectives to researching contemporary youth. Such an approach is necessarily combined with the in-depth analysis of the impact of the broader socio-economic contexts and policy processes on transitions among this group. By doing so, the claims of the distinctive Scottish context made by the government can be scrutinised.

## **2.3 Conclusion and Research Questions**

This chapter has reviewed the literature relating to contemporary young adulthood and youth transitions, with a particular focus placed upon a segment of the youth population labelled as NEET, and highlighted the key issues requiring further research.

Specifically, reviewing the academic literature and a range of policies led to identifying gaps in knowledge relating to everyday lives and transitions of young people labelled as NEET, which the current study aims to address. Firstly, it was highlighted that the policy context and the ways youth unemployment has been constructed in Scotland differ from the England-based model. Consequently, due to a majority of research on youth transitions coming from England, there is a strong rationale for the current study to explore how young people's relationships with education, employment and training look like in a distinctive Scottish context.

Secondly, even though precarity and insecurity constitute strong features of contemporary young adulthood, the extent to which they have affected everyday lives and transitions of young people identified as NEET is less well known. This project aims to fill this gap by contributing to the ongoing debates in the field of youth studies about continuity and change, as well as similarities and differences in contemporary youth transitions by looking at this segment of youth population.

Thirdly, this chapter highlighted the continuous impact of educational inequalities on young people's life chances, opportunities and transitions. Given the importance of social divisions on young people's relationships with and experiences of education system, it remains crucial to further explore how the in-school processes contribute to the unequal patterns of educational outcomes of disadvantaged young people, so far neglected by the NEET-focused scholarship and to some extent transitional strand of youth studies. Moreover, little is known about how segregation processes operate 'on the ground' after young people leave compulsory education, thus creating a gap in knowledge about this period of youth transitions. In order to address this, it seems necessary to further examine how the post-16 transitions policy agenda is implemented and how discretion is exercised by service providers overseeing youth transitions. By doing so, a more holistic understanding of the impact of *symbolic violence* on youth transitions beyond education system and its consequences for young people's trajectories can emerge.



Finally, it was demonstrated that young people assigned to the NEET category have been quantified, categorised, problematised and obscured behind a deficit label, with little regard to their lived experiences. Consequently, there is an urgent need for an in-depth qualitative study involving young people themselves, that will voice their views, values and needs and explore how their complex and diverse experiences and circumstances shape the ways they perceive the world and consequently impact upon their transitions. At the same time however, as the NEET-focused literature has not sufficiently accounted for the broader contexts to young people's lives and transitions, there is a need to look beyond the unique and individual and towards the impact of the old social divisions.

Based on the issues discussed throughout this chapter, the thesis aims to address the following research questions:

**RQ 1** *Who are the young people beyond the NEET label? How do their complex circumstances and everyday experiences impact on their lives, belonging and transitions?*

**RQ 2** *What are NEET-labelled young people's relationships with, and experiences of, the education system and how do these influence their transitions?*

**RQ 3** *What are NEET-labelled young people's practices of making choices, searching for and accessing learning, training and/or employment after leaving compulsory education?*

As the last three decades have brought significant changes to young adulthood deriving from the proliferation of digital technologies, the next chapter will review the literature relating to this issue and will introduce the last research question. This is treated in a standalone chapter because dominant rhetoric and policy interventions frame technologies as panacea for social problems, including erasing educational and transitional inequalities, yet without adequately theorising technologies, nor critically exploring young people's engagement, especially through the lens of change and continuity.

## **Chapter 3 Young people and technologies**

This chapter reviews the literature relating to young people and digital technologies. The first section critically examines a dominant body of scholarship focussing on young people's engagement with technologies. It demonstrates that the debates on this have been underpinned by a) a range of binaries, b) deficit approaches and c) an administrative gaze that scrutinises digital competencies and requires beneficial and purposeful usage, e.g. for learning and digital upskilling in future service of knowledge economies. Moreover, key digital inclusion policies in Scotland serve as an example of deterministic understandings of technologies as a means of raising attainment and social mobility, with little regard for their socially constructed nature. The second section identifies a more recent body of scholarship highlighting the complexity and richness about young people's engagement with technologies, understood as situated at the intersections of technology, social identities and culture (Davies, 2018a). A range of empirical examples, sensitive to such understandings, further serve to examine the role technologies play in young people's everyday lives and transitions. The last section summarises the literature and identifies the fourth research question this thesis addresses.

### **3.1 Binaries, deficit approaches and administrative gaze**

It has been argued that technologies have become an important, if not key part of young people's everyday lives and relations (Valentine et al., 2002). Changes brought by technological transformations to contemporary young adulthood have resulted in the proliferation of optimistic claims presenting young people as 'digital natives', 'born digital' or 'cyberkids' (to name a few). Young people have been often framed as competent or even expert users of digital technologies who lead 'digital childhoods' (Vandewater et al., 2007), revolving around the constant use of the internet (Cook et al., 2013; Lee, 2008; Prensky, 2001; Valentine et al., 2002). What is more, it has been argued that young people actively participate in a network society – 'a new pattern of sociability based on individualism' (Castells, 2007:240), in which they connect with each other through technologies regardless of their physical space, constituting a new

global community (Castells, 1996, 2007). As Wittel (2001) also asserts, such technologically enabled networking has become an everyday practice, a key part of young people's lives and relations. While he emphasises an increase in network sociality, he also suggests that this phenomenon has been 'especially visible in urban (post) industrial spaces and milieus (...) among the new middle class of culturally educated and media- and computer-literate people' (p.53). This raises an important question about young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as those labelled NEET. Do they engage in social networking in a similar way or are they restrained by social structures? What consequences may this have for their transitions?

Unsurprisingly, technology scholars have eagerly engaged with the critique of the notion of digital natives by demonstrating that it is not only exaggerated but also fallacious (De Almeida et al., 2012; Holmes, 2011; Selwyn, 2009). A large body of scholarship has emerged showing that young people's engagement with technologies may actually be less empowering and sophisticated than generally believed (Selwyn, 2009). Similarly, the scope of online activities young people engage in has been widely scrutinised and assessed as ordinary, or even banal and trivial (Selwyn, 2009). For instance, undergraduate students from Ng's (2012) study were found to use the internet mostly to socialise, access online services, download music and multimedia files, send emails, talk or seek information, rather than being involved in content creation or formal learning.

A large body of literature has further engaged with attempts to categorise young people into typological models of internet users (Holmes, 2011; see van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014 for an overview). Depending on the type of activities undertaken, the perceived beneficial and capital enhancing practices such as knowledge and information seeking have been contrasted with the consumptive ones, such as entertainment, leisure and gaming (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014) and attributed to one's background (North et al., 2008). Children from a middle class background were shown to be more likely to use the Internet for education, information seeking and civic participation, while those from a working class background were more likely to

engage in digital practices encompassing entertainment, leisure and downloading (Hasebrink et al., 2009; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Sanchez - Antolin et al., 2014). Such findings have become a basis for claims that rather than all being 'born digital', inequalities in access to information have resulted in a digitally divided generation, understood in terms of differences in patterns of the internet use (Iske et al., 2008:132). A range of conceptualisations have been developed to understand and measure this (second) digital divide, with attitudes and motivation, access, skills and types of usage (beneficial vs consumptive) being identified as the most common factors influencing digital inequalities (De Almeida, 2012; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014). Yet, even the competent and 'savvy' technologies users have been problematised by further research that has exposed their limited critical skills relating to effective use of online information (Hargittai et al., 2010; Ng, 2012; see Davies, 2018a for an overview). In the new dangerous digital environment of 'an information Wild West' (Davies, 2015:28), young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have been once again identified as the least skilful, critical and 'savvy' (Hargittai et al., 2010; Prince's Trust, 2016) and considered at the highest risk of remaining incipient users. We are further warned that the 'degree of return brought about by internet use is significantly lower' amongst this group (de Almeida, 2012:230).

The other strand of 'digital' research has become preoccupied with risks and harms associated with being online. Concerns, moral panics even, have emerged in relation to children and young people's health (mental and physical), safety (through, for example, 'stranger danger' rhetoric; boyd, 2014:173), development, behaviour and wellbeing (see Harris et al., 2013 for an overview; Hasebrink et al., 2009; Wilson, 2015). Young people from lower SE backgrounds were found to be more vulnerable to these risks than their more affluent peers (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009). Yet, claims surrounding the emancipatory potential of technologies, their promise to transform young people's lives and allow them to freely participate in the global networked society have been also widely spread and influential (Castells, 2007; Davies et al., 2017; Prensky, 2001). Digital upskilling and technologically enhanced education have been proposed in the belief that they will produce digitally literate, competent and internet

savvy adults that will effectively engage in the knowledge economies (Davies, 2015; Davies et al., 2017; Warschauer and Matuchniak, 2010; Prince's Trust, 2016; Valentine et al., 2002).

Unsurprisingly, significant shortcomings have been identified in relation to this body of scholarship, as these have limited our understandings of young people's relationship with technologies (Davies et al., 2017, Livingstone, 2012; Robinson, 2009; Selwyn, 2012). Firstly, dominant debates have been underpinned by stark binaries; technologies have been either understood as emancipatory and empowering or dangerous and harmful (boyd, 2014; Selwyn, 2012); types of engagement have been seen as either beneficial or consumptive (Selwyn, 2006); and young people conceptualised as either savvy or (more often) unsavvy and uncritical (Davies, 2015). Such dichotomies, as Selwyn (2012) rightly observes, can be further ascribed to the lack of conceptual and methodological cohesion that has underpinned this field of study in its beginnings. In particular, technologies have been under-theorised, often understood intuitively or defined descriptively with the help of 'an umbrella term' encompassing a range of different devices (Cranmer, 2010; Livingstone, 2012; Selwyn and Grant, 2009), including computers, laptops, mobile phones, the internet and game consoles. Moreover, such failings to adequately theorise technologies have been accompanied by clear-cut distinctions between online and offline, real and virtual/created, public and private, that have significantly limited our understanding of the nature of technologies and their appropriation in young people's lives (see e.g. Helsper, 2012 for earlier binary theorisations of technologies).

Secondly, negative assumptions, judgements and deficit ways of thinking about young people and their relationships with technologies have proliferated in response to overly optimistic claims describing them as 'born digital' (Davies et al., 2012; Davies, 2015). Young people have been quantified and categorised in numerous ways and concluded unsavvy, ill prepared for the online dangers of misinformation and at risk of harm. Many have been further accused of failing to engage with technologies in any remarkable way and/or for beneficial purposes to advance their futures, and perhaps most importantly, the state's future interests (Lister, 2006). Yet, as several authors

have argued (boyd, 2014; Cranmer, 2010; Davies, 2015; Selwyn, 2012; Wilson, 2015), post positivist methods adopted by research in this field, based on practice tests measuring digital competencies, have reduced young people to a 'neat' category and failed to capture their meaning making practices and the impact of their social environment. Crucially, this social environment 'incentivises, affords or limits certain practices on the Web and beyond' (Davies, 2015:119). These authors have thus contended that the role technologies has been playing in young people's everyday lives and transitions and their interplay with the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts, especially amongst disadvantaged, have remained hidden within the aggregated data.

Finally, the negative assumptions and judgements surrounding research on young people's digital practices (Selwyn, 2006) are yet another example of young people being a category of constant interest, interventions and 'administrative gaze' from the state and its dominant agents (Lesko, 2012). In other words, as Davies (2015:22) eloquently asserts, we can observe 'a continuation of historically identifiable processes that are marked by the exercise of pastoral power and energised by the identification of deficits and remedies' towards a continuously problematised youth population. In consequence, those who have not met expert and state driven expectations and standards of how they should be engaging with technologies, have been deemed as in need of digital interventions and upskilling that would provide them with 'the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are needed for success in today's world' (Warschauer and Matuchniak, 2010:206; see also Prince's Trust, 2016; Scottish Government, 2015b, 2016d, 2017d). Such claims have been further governed by technological determinism, a belief that technologies and the 'proper' ways of engagement have the power to change young people's lives, improve their life chances and social mobility and consequently eradicate some of the structural inequalities (Davies, 2015; Livingstone 2012; Robinson, 2009; Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016). However, as the next section will demonstrate, such deterministic understandings fail to account for the socially constructed nature of technologies or the possibility they can produce new forms of disadvantage whilst reinforcing old ones (Gangneux, 2018;

Livingstone, 2012; Selwyn, 2012; Skeggs and Yuill, 2019). Despite such shortcomings, as Selwyn (2012, 2016) asserts, technologically driven approaches have continued to dominate public and political rhetoric for the last three decades, with significant implications for the key digital inclusion strategies and interventions introduced in response to technological transformations (Davies et al., 2017; Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016).

### *3.1.1 Problematising digital inclusion interventions*

Educators and policy makers have turned to digital technologies, encouraged by their promise to enhance teaching and learning, as well as claims about their potential to improve young people's educational attainment, social mobility and career prospects (Scottish Executive, 2004; Scottish Government 2011, 2014b, 2015b, 2016d; 2017d). Even though these notions have been widely criticised (Davies, 2015; Davies et al., 2017d; Livingstone, 2012; Selwyn, 2012; 2016; Tilleczek and Srigley, 2017), a range of digital inclusion initiatives introduced in Scotland continue to be underpinned by a belief that technologies can transform lives and societies, open 'new technological, socio-technological, geographical–technological horizons' (Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016:1796) and empower in result. It is not to say that digital inclusion strategies should be abandoned, especially as digital literacy has been perceived as a third skill for life, alongside numeracy and literacy (Davies and Eynon, 2018; Valentine et al., 2002), a sort of foundation for participation in everyday lives, in work, learning and governance (Bradbrook et al., 2008; Helsper, 2008). It is rather to highlight the socially constructed nature of technologies, as well as the complexity and subjective experiences of young people's engagement that have not been adequately understood or incorporated by the current policy initiatives.

For example, in the digital strategy for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2011, 2017d), the key areas Government has committed to tackle include: digital participation, broadband connectivity, digital economy and service delivery. The key focus is on improving and ensuring equal access to the internet, promoting confidence in using technologies and an 'inclination' towards them in order to 'improve people's quality of

life, boost economic growth and allow more effective delivery of public services' (Scottish Government, 2011:21). Thus, as with the dominant body of scholarship discussed above, (some of) the state's efforts revolve around 'fixing individuals', improving their attitudes and motivation so they use technologies for learning and work purposes and thus benefit the knowledge economy. In this sense, digital interventions underpinned by technological determinism are also inscribed in the processes of governing youth, constructed as an 'economic asset' or 'human capital' that will serve the state's interests (Lister, 2006; Prout, 2000:304).

Correspondingly, a belief that if 'Scotland's educators, learners and parents take full advantage of the opportunities offered by digital technology', it will 'raise attainment, ambition and opportunities for all' (Scottish Government, 2015b:5) continues to underpin educational policy and the incorporation of technologies into the modern curriculum (Education Scotland, 2014; Scottish Executive, 2004; Scottish Government, 2016d; 2017d). Particularly, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been treated as unquestionable means that enhance teaching, learning and cognitive development, based upon a (determinist) belief in their potential for 'impacting on social situations in ways, which are, to a degree, malleable and controllable' (Selwyn, 2012:84; see also Tilleczek and Srigley, 2017). Unsurprisingly then, the integration of ICT into the classroom was guided by the logic that 'putting a computer on a child's desk and providing IT teaching will produce a technologically literate adult of tomorrow who will be able to adapt to and take advantage of the information society' (Valentine et al., 2002:306). However, equal access to ICT does not mean that every child will engage with technologies in the same way or undertake the opportunities to learn or develop normative digital and other skills (Valentine et al., 2002). Nor does it mean that it will 'help them transcend the structural inequality that defines their educational experience' (Davies, 2015:29), as the previous chapter showed. Rather, as the next section will demonstrate, young people's relationship and engagement with technologies has been far more complex and shaped by the interplay between their distinctive social identities, subjective meaning making practices and a vast range of contextual influences (Davies et al., 2012; Holmes, 2011; Tilleczek and Srigley, 2017).



Such findings raise important questions examined in this thesis, especially around how technological determinism impacts upon the provision of post-16 opportunities and the role professionals play in young people's practices of accessing these opportunities.

It is therefore crucial to move away from technologically driven, poorly theorised approaches to technologies underpinning the key digital inclusion strategies (Davies et al., 2017) and from dichotomous and deficit ways of thinking about young people and technologies (Selwyn, 2012; Tilleczeck and Srigley, 2017). It is also important to acknowledge the richness of young people's digital practices, as the next section will further demonstrate. Most importantly, perhaps, the equalising, empowering and learning enhancing potential of ICT should neither be exaggerated nor treated as a panacea in the process to erase a broad range of socio-economic and educational inequalities (boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2012). Rather, they need to be addressed alongside a variety of structural problems affecting disadvantaged young people's lives (see Chapter 2) which so far have not been recognised by digital strategies. They remain overly deterministic and insensitive to 'the structures, actions, processes and relations that constitute uses of digital technology' (Selwyn, 2012:82).

### **3.2 Making sense of young people and their use of technologies**

As demonstrated in the previous section it has become crucial to move debates about young people's use of technologies from a reductionist, determinist and administrative-gazed focus towards a more holistic, rounded understanding. A more critical, theory-driven and youth-centred body of scholarship has emerged and this has informed this research project and consequently its theoretical and methodological underpinnings.

#### *3.2.1 Blended lives, socio-technological mediation and neoliberal interests*

In her influential ethnographic work '*Alone Together*', Sherry Turkle (2012) examined how technologies have become appropriated by contemporary youth into their everyday social relationships. She observed that young people's lives have become blended, as the boundaries between online and offline, real and virtual, private and

public have become blurred and overlapping, rather than sharp and clear-cut. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) in their ethnographic study of London teenagers. Technologies were found to be 'creeping into' family homes which no longer separate people living in them from the outside world. Moreover, young people were found to employ a variety of strategies in order to navigate the more intrusive adult gaze, of teachers and parents in particular, facilitated by appropriation of technologies to everyday lives. For example, they were carefully choosing what kind of information to share online, depending on the audiences they were engaging with, while face-to-face interactions with the closest friends were valued the most, not only as the means for protecting one's privacy, but also for cultivating closeness, trust and reciprocity. Following these contributions (see also e.g. boyd, 2014; Davies, 2018a; Tilleczek and Srigley, 2017; Valentine and Holloway, 2002), new understandings, in which the online and the offline cannot be treated as 'mutually exclusive' spaces but rather as 'a continuum based in everyday life' (Gajjala et al., 2007:210), have emerged. These have become a basis for theorising youth and technologies in this thesis. Moreover, as Hine (2015) further asserts, technologies have not only become a part of the everyday, but have also been embedded – in 'various contextualising frameworks, institutions and devices' (p.32), and embodied– as technologies are used 'by socially situated bodies, and various aspects of social positioning and material circumstances shape the Internet experience' (3E – everyday, embedded and embodied; p.44). It has been thus argued that technologies have become inseparable from young people's lives, embedded and embodied in the everyday, while one's background may influence the extent to which this happens (Hine, 2015).

This, in turn, allows us to conceptualise young people's social practices away from online/offline dichotomies and as being mediated by technologies instead. As Livingstone (2009:6) points out, writing from the media and communication studies perspective:

First, the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and

society; and second, as a result, the media mediate, for better or for worse, more than ever before.

Consequently, the concept of mediation suggests that rather than talking about 'digital' youth, we can describe them as 'mediated' youth (Livingstone, 2009). Such an understanding allows us to escape technological determinism on the one hand and to avoid replacing it with a social determinism on the other (Davies, 2018a). Instead, social practices are understood as in a 'dialectical relationship' with technologies rather than being a sole 'product of technologies and algorithms' (Gangneux, 2018:57) or technologies being 'open completely to interpretation and capable of determining nothing' (Selwyn, 2012:86).

For example, as Livingstone (2009) further demonstrates through her ethnographic research, young people perform their emerging identities on social networking sites in various and creative ways. At the same time, these practices are also shaped by technological affordances of such sites. In particular, the standard format of identity performance embedded in the sites design can be seen as enacted in multiple ways by their users, who conform, reinvent or resist (often simultaneously) certain types of self-expression (see also Szulc, 2018 on why these platforms incentivise and deter certain types of self-performance). In this sense, 'the intersection of youthful literacies and technological affordances is resulting in the mediation of identity and social relationships' (Livingstone, 2009:7; see boyd, 2014 for similar conclusions). This, in turn, allows us to capture elements of historical change, brought by the appropriation of technologies, intertwined with continuity in young people's lives, as they together encompass 'the increasing mediation of the old social interactions and identity work once conducted, for free, in the bedroom or on the street corner' (Livingstone, 2009:7).

Technologies are therefore neither deterministic, nor value free (Selwyn, 2012). Rather, as Johnson (2006:202) argues, the use of technologies is guided by 'a triad of intentionality at work' that encompass 'the intentionality of the computer system designer, the intentionality of the system, and the intentionality of the user'. In result, 'technology and users co-produce digital practice', while the 'multiple potential uses

are influenced by the technical and social conditions of practice' (Davies, 2018a:2765). While these social conditions of practice will be thoroughly addressed in Section 3.2.2, it is also crucial to examine the dominant discourses and power relations surrounding young people's digital practices (Davies, 2015; Gangneux, 2018; Introna, 2014; Skeggs and Yuill, 2016a, 2016b, 2019; Tilleczek and Srigley, 2017). These were briefly mentioned in Section 3.1, when I showed that expert and state driven discourses circulate and formulate normative expectations of how young people should engage with technologies (Davies, 2015; Davies and Eyon, 2018). Hand in hand with such expectations go the neoliberal discourses that require young people to cultivate the active and entrepreneurial selves ('self as enterprise'; Kelly, 2006), also through their social media presence (Gangneux, 2018). In other words, young people are compelled to actively manage their impressions and present themselves as a 'subject of value' in relation to the labour market (Gangneux, 2018; Farrugia, 2019), but also to legitimate themselves as such (Skeggs and Yuill, 2019). These issues will be further developed in Section 3.2.2. Finally, it is important not to separate technologies from the broader contexts and power relations from which they emerged, remain embedded and developed within (macro-level analyses). In other words, it is necessary to adopt a critical lens to mainstream and corporate-driven rhetoric surrounding Web 2.0 and to position it within the capitalist power relations.

Web 2.0 as a terminology was used for the first time in 1999 by DiNucci, but popularised by O'Reilly from 2005 onwards, to highlight the new features of the Web in its second phase of existence (O'Reilly, 2007). It was contrasted with the Web 1.0, supposedly a read-only platform that allowed only basic access to information and promoted as the shift towards multiple users' participation, collaboration, socialising and content creation (Costa, 2013; O'Reilly, 2007). In other words, a popular rhetoric presented the Web 2.0 as an interactive, participatory and emancipatory environment that brings people and communities together (Zuboff, 2019a). Moreover, such rhetoric has governed popular, and even some early academic understandings of technologies since (see e.g. Tufekci, 2008 making a distinction between an expressive and instrumental Internet). However, the intentions behind Web 2.0 can be understood as

the means of reinforcing the interests of political and capitalist economic systems and their beneficiaries (Coté and Pybus, 2007).

Specifically, as a great deal of critical research has highlighted, the private companies involved in digital communication have been driven by the logic of capital since their creation (Nixon, 2014; Skeggs and Yuill, 2016a). Their pursuit of profit has been achieved through the continuous and aggressive surveillance of internet audiences, data mining and its consecutive commodification, as the information about users' digital activities is gathered, aggregated and then sold to advertisers (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Nixon, 2014; Fuchs, 2010, 2011; West, 2019, Zuboff, 2019a, 2019b). In other words, communication and social relations in a digital era have become another 'asset for monetization', while digital media can be understood as ideological, 'because they [always] operate for particular interests' (Skeggs and Yuill, 2016b:1357, 1367), such as a constant search for the capital expansion (Harvey, 2005).

As Skeggs and Yuill (2019) further assert, the online tracking and commodification of digital audiences also reproduces traditional social divisions, as the sharp distinctions via the algorithms are being made between the subjects perceived as either 'worth' or 'waste' by the corporate interests. Resultantly, a new strand of inequalities can be identified, as disadvantaged young people with poor access to different forms of resources are sold new routes to personal debt (Skeggs and Yuill, 2019) or anti-educational content (boyd, 2016 cited in Gangneux, 2018). While a more detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this thesis, it nevertheless remains crucial to understand technologies in terms of power, as their history has been deeply embedded in the history of capitalism, logic of capital accumulation and expansion, as well as reproduction of inequalities, and audiences exploitation (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; Gangneux, 2018; Nixon, 2014; Skeggs and Yuill, 2016b, 2019, Zuboff 2019a, 2019b). It is only through this that a more holistic, theory-driven and critical understanding of technologies can emerge (Skeggs and Yuill, 2019). This, in turn, allows for further understanding of the (micro) processes of socio-technological mediation of the everyday not only as horizontal, but also as embedded within the macro processes

of asymmetrical power relations between private companies and the wide population (Gangneux, 2018; Livingstone, 2009; Skeggs and Yuill, 2019; West, 2019).

### *3.2.2 Young people 'at the intersection of technologies, social identities and culture'*

Having established a more critical and theory driven understanding of technologies, this subsection examines a more recent body of research which demonstrates that young people's engagement with technologies has been far from deficient or characterised by clear cut dichotomies. Yet, it also demonstrates the impact of existing social divisions on the role technologies play in young people's lives and transitions. It thus seeks to once again highlight that contemporary youth should be understood in terms of (intra)generational units and researched as such (Holmes, 2011), as also argued in Chapter 2. In other words, this subsection attempts to show both the continuity and the change that underpin young people's engagement with technologies and the richness and complexity of their everyday technology-mediated practices.

A growing body of scholarship has explored how technologies mediate various aspects of young people's lives in new and diverse ways, encompassing social interactions and identity work (boyd, 2014; Cranmer, 2010; Davies, 2015, 2018a; Granholm, 2016; Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016; Robards, 2012; Turkle, 2012); socialising, leisure and entertainment (Batchelor et al., 2017; North et al., 2008); gender performance (Dobson, 2012); formal and informal learning (Clark et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2013; Johnson and Dyer, 2008); youth transitions, employability and networking (Gangneux, 2018; Granholm, 2016; Lee, 2008; Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016) and civic participation (Iske et al., 2008; McGillivray et al., 2016).

Specifically, the strand of research on social interactions has strongly highlighted the importance young people attach to cultivating relationships with family, friends, romantic partners and others close to them. Importantly, it captured that 'doing relationships' has gone far beyond communication. For example, as Granholm (2016) found, for young people identified as NEET, engagement with social media offered the

possibility to glimpse into others' lives, look for similarities and gain a sense of belonging. Moreover, activities such as reading others' blogs, looking at their pictures, playing online games together or watching YouTube videos etc. that have been described as trivial, consumptive and not beneficial allowed them to engage in endless conversations with others. Such activities have thus become an important basis for identity work.

Similar conclusions have been reached by Davies (2015) whose research with young people from a lower SE background in a vocational college showed that technologies were used by them to explore their sense of self and others and the world around them. In particular, he observed how participants 'self-identified through complex array of pop-cultural codes such as fashion-tribe, loyalty to their football club, favourite: bands, digital games, and celebrities, as well as their social networking presence, and, in some cases, their sexuality' (Davies, 2015:47). These were explored through the complex patterns of cultural consumption of the media content that was further debated, argued, contested, rejected or validated through their everyday interactions with significant others in their lifeworlds. Through such practices, young people were also defining 'who they are, what they believed and what they found offensive or funny' (Davies, 2015:108). Consequently, as Davies (2015, 2018b) concludes, young people can be therefore understood as active and creative social agents at the intersection of technologies, culture and their social identities (see also boyd, 2014).

Youth centred researchers have also highlighted the importance of capturing the subjective experiences and relationships with technologies in young people's everyday lives. Here, the various contexts and specific circumstances have been found crucial to understanding their meaning making practices. For example, research with young people in care demonstrated the multiple meanings technologies have had in their particular lifeworlds: as means of supporting relationships with significant others they were separated from (e.g. siblings and family members); as multi-functional and portable devices that served as a storage of personal and highly valued items – photos, music, videos, that were presented as the most valuable and often the only belongings

in the life of looked after youth; as facilitating 'self-care' – to deal with problems and anxieties in difficult circumstances; and finally as extending the spaces available to them (Wilson, 2015).

Similarly, Cranmer (2010) examined the subjective experiences of technologies in the lives of young people excluded from the mainstream education system. She found that technologies were valued by young people for allowing them to stay in touch with people they were separated from and to seek their support, e.g. in dealing with crisis situations such as illness, family breakdown or personal loss. However, this group had also experienced a range of challenges online, such as exposure to bullying, sexual harassment or harmful content. In this sense, the engagement with technologies has been complex and far from dichotomous, as it has brought to their lives both support and abuse. Finally, many others have looked at the specific meanings and roles that technologies play amongst different groups of young people, such as the disabled (Hynan et al., 2014), those involved in crime and under a curfew (Lim et al., 2013), or queer youth (Taylor et al., 2014), to name a few. Yet, not enough is known about the subjective experiences of and meanings attached to technologies by young people who are labelled NEET, thus pointing to a gap in knowledge this study will address.

So far it has been demonstrated that young people's engagement with technologies is far more complex, rich and meaningful as previously argued. Yet, such focus should not obscure the impact of social divisions that has been missing from the majority of this strand of research.

The first issue concerns the claims that technologies have been everyday and embedded in young people's lives (see Section, 3.2.1). In particular, there is still a proportion of young people with no access to the internet at home (Wilkin et al., 2017). Moreover, as Thornham and Gómez Cruz (2016) exposed, for many others access to the internet and technological devices has often been transient, on and off, and restricted by unequal access to economic resources and their social positioning (Hine, 2015; Robinson, 2009). However, despite these important contributions, the extent to which technologies remain appropriated into the everyday lives of young people



labelled as NEET remains an under-researched issue, thus pointing to another gap in knowledge this thesis aims to fill.

Secondly, as argued by several authors (Davies, 2015, 2018a; Davies and Eyon, 2018; Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016; Selwyn, 2012), the impact of the complex everyday interactions embedded within the broader social, economic and cultural contexts (including influences of family, peers and education) remains crucial to understanding the ways young people do or do not engage with technologies. In other words, the social divisions (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) contribute to the differences in young people's technology use.

In his comparative study of young people from middle and working-class backgrounds, Davies (2018a) highlighted striking differences between the ways technologies were utilised in young people's lives, depending upon their classed investment in the logic of practice of the education system. For middle-class young men, studying at a private elite secondary school and preparing for entrance exams for elite universities, technologies were either a tool for learning or 'a frivolous waste of time' (Davies, 2018a:2777). Such understandings were closely linked with young people's class and gender as they were completely committed to and invested in the 'masculine achievement culture' (Davies, 2018a:2777). By contrast, working class young people, studying at a vocational college, and in most cases unsure about their future trajectories, were using technologies for formal learning only to meet the minimum requirements of their courses. Their commitment to and relationship with the logic of the education system differed significantly from their middle-class counterparts and was played out rather than synchronised. Instead, they used technologies far more extensively outside the college, for their own interests, purposes and identity work. Importantly, the impact of young people's distinctive social identities has exposed differences in their engagement with technologies. This, however, raises an important question in relation to young people with even less favourable experiences of the education system, such as the participants in this study. What does their relationship with technologies look like and what role has education played on how they use technologies and why? This study aims to further explore these issues.

Finally, a relatively small body of research has examined the role technologies have played in young people's transitions, specifically, social mobility and life chances. Lee's (2008) school based, mixed methods study examined how 13 to 19 years old pupils from different SE backgrounds used the internet and what impact it had on their life trajectories. She demonstrated that:

[b]lurring boundaries between socio-economic groups, especially in relation to some young people's online activities or perceptions of the internet, are clearly limited in their impact. [...] The result is a temporary and very limited flexibility in the class membership of young people (p. 150).

In consequence, the impact of one's engagement with technologies, even when similar between young people from different classes, has not affected their educational attainment and choices regarding their transitions, which continued to be influenced mainly by their class background. Despite often complex and creative patterns of engagement amongst young people regardless of their background, technologies alone were found to have a low impact on life trajectories and have not challenged class reproduction and social immobility (Lee, 2008).

Similar conclusions have been reached by Thornham and Gómez Cruz (2016) in their ethnographic study with young people identified as NEET. They demonstrated that 'digital mobility' has been understood as equal to social mobility (p. 1806) with little regard to the impact of existing social divisions. Their research further showed that despite young people's digital practices being creative and often far more complex than allowed by the Job Centre (for example searching for jobs through mobile apps was not allowed and threatened with sanctions), their digital mobility was 'far from enabling'. Rather, it was 'forged in and articulated as part of an everyday life that is dominated by the social and economic horizons that are set by the group's status as NEET' (p. 1805). In other words, once again, socio-economic positioning of this segment of youth population was far more influential and restraining than any possibilities (horizons) access to technologies could open.

Despite these important contributions, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how this group of young people use technologies for looking for and accessing opportunities. For example, in light of claims that everything is technologically mediated (Livingstone, 2009), it is unknown whether young people identified as NEET engage with technologies to make career choices and if so, how this plays out. Moreover, as highlighted in Chapter 2, it remains crucial to explore how disadvantaged youth construct themselves as labouring subjects in relation to the realm of work (Farrugia, 2019) and how this is manifested in the ways they use technologies to search for and access opportunities.

Finally, young people are now compelled to ‘train for labour’ through an active online presence that demonstrates their employability, range of skills, networking and the entrepreneurial self (Gangneux, 2018; Kelly, 2006; Skeggs and Yuill, 2019; Wittel, 2001). For example, Gangneux (2018) confirmed that such practices have been common amongst middle-class youth, as they cultivated themselves as a ‘subject of value’ in relation to the labour market (Farrugia, 2019; Skeggs, 2004a). However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, such form of subjectivity remains classed (Farrugia, 2019; Farrugia and Woodman, 2015; McNay, 1999; Skeggs, 2004a; Skeggs and Yuill, 2019), which poses yet another question: are these practices also common amongst young people from lower SE backgrounds? Answering this question will allow us to capture continuity and change, as well as similarities and differences in young people’s lives and treat them as (intra)generational units (Holmes, 2011; Irwin, 2018).

### **3.3. Conclusion and a Research Question**

This chapter has reviewed existing research, key policies and broader debates surrounding young people’s engagement with technologies. Doing so allowed me to identify gaps in knowledge relating to the roles technologies play in everyday lives and transitions of young people labelled as NEET, which the current study aims to address. Firstly, due to the limited evidence produced with this segment of youth population, it is relatively unknown what meanings they attach to technologies and how their diverse circumstances may contribute to their meaning making practices. In other words,

young people's engagement will not be removed from their lifeworlds, but rather their 'social environment that incentivises, affords or limits certain practices on the Web and beyond' (Davies, 2015:119) will be central to the analysis. Secondly, given their socio-economic disadvantage, the extent to which technologies have been everyday and embedded for this group requires further investigation. Thirdly, it is important to further explore the contextual influences on the ways young people use technologies, and given their difficult relationships with education, its role will be central to the analysis. Next, in light of claims that everything is technologically mediated, it remains crucial to better understand whether and how young people engage with technologies to make choices about their transitions. Moreover, due to differences in youth subjectivities, little is known about how disadvantaged youth construct themselves as labouring subjects in relation to workforce and how this is manifested in the ways they use technologies to find and access work and/or learning opportunities. Finally, given the neoliberal incitement to cultivate oneself as an enterprise, also via an active online presence, it is not clear whether such practices are common amongst disadvantaged young people.

Based on the issues identified in this chapter, the thesis aims to address a fourth research question (see Research Questions 1 to 3 on page 63):

**RQ 4** *How do young people labelled as NEET engage with technologies in their everyday lives and what role do technologies play in their transitions?*

The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis.

## Chapter 4 Theory of practice as a double lens

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that has guided the process of the research and the analysis of the data presented in the empirical chapters. It discusses in detail a triad of concepts from the work of Pierre Bourdieu: *habitus* (one's system of dispositions shaped by structures), *field* (multidimensional social space, where actions happen) and *capital* (resources individuals possess and their position in a particular *field*) that together constitute a holistic model for examining social life, or, in Bourdieusian terminology – social practice. Additionally, it introduces the lesser known but equally important concepts, such as *doxa*, *illusio*, *trajectory*, *misrecognition* and *symbolic violence*, which offer useful tools for understanding the mechanisms of domination as well as affective dimension to people's lives.

The chapter argues that the relational nature of these thinking tools allows us to overcome dichotomies between structuralist and individualistic understandings of social phenomena, including youth transitions and the use of technologies examined in this thesis. It is further contended that adopting a theory of practice offers a double lens for researching how the interplay between human agency and social structures shapes what social agents do in their everyday lives (their 'practical' actions), as well as the wider, socially regular patterns of social life amongst members of the same class/group.

The second part of the chapter addresses critiques of Bourdieu's work, arguing that whilst there are some valid criticisms and limitations, they can be resolved utilising ideas from other commentators. By doing so, this chapter argues that Bourdieu's concepts have a strong analytical utility for researching young people's lives, transitions and use of technologies in late modernity.

### 4.1 Adopting Bourdieusian thinking tools

Reviewing the literature demonstrated the need to take a 'middle ground' approach to researching contemporary young people, that brings together 'structural, historically specific conditions and young people's subjective experience of the times in which they live' (Furlong et al., 2011:360). However, it was also pointed out that it

is necessary to think of contemporary young people in terms of (intra)generational units. Doing so remains crucial for capturing and highlighting differences in young people's lives, transitions and use of technologies, not only in relation to different socio-economic conditions, but also in the subjective dimension of their lives. It was also contended that it is important to be attentive to the processes of change, brought by wider socio-economic and technological transformations, as well as to the processes of continuity in contemporary young adulthood.

It was thus necessary to adopt a theoretical framework sensitive to these goals. Bourdieu's theory of practice proved to be the most adequate choice for three key reasons. Firstly, Bourdieu's lifelong efforts to create and develop a coherent theory of practice were underpinned by a desire to overcome a range of erroneous dichotomies underpinning sociological thought, such as subjectivism vs objectivism, agency vs structures, macro vs micro, theory vs method (Bourdieu, 1990a). The emphasis Bourdieu placed on the relational, dynamic and interconnected nature of subjective and objective elements of social practice was thus found to be a useful way of reconciling the individual experiences, perceptions and subjective meaning-making with the broader structures, allowing for their coherent analysis (Costa and Murphy, 2015; Maton, 2008; Lau, 2004; Sharrock et al., 2003). Secondly, the theory of practice allowed me to capture how subjective dispositions, for example towards education or certain type of work, are in a constant interplay with social structures (Skeggs, 1997; Stahl, 2015), yet without reducing disadvantaged young people to (simply) victims of their circumstances (e.g. by highlighting their everyday, yet classed reflexivity). Thirdly, the concepts of *doxa*, *misrecognition* and *symbolic violence* were found particularly useful for unfolding mechanisms of domination and unequal power relations underpinning contemporary societies, while also being sensitive to the processes of social change (Wacquant, 2016). The concept of *illusio*, in turn, was found crucial to understanding affective dimension to young people's lives, for example in relation to choices they make regarding their transitions or hopes they have for their futures. Thus, overall, the Bourdieusian thinking tools provided me with a double lens to researching contemporary young adulthood.

#### 4.1.1 *The mediating concept of habitus*

The concept of habitus takes a central place in the Bourdieusian theory of practice. There is no single definition of *habitus* and Bourdieu refers to it in various ways throughout his work. On the one hand, this undoubtedly poses some challenges while employing this concept into empirical research. On the other, the open definition also offers a degree of flexibility, as *habitus* is a lived, creative and dynamic construct (Asimaki and Koustourakis, 2014; Wacquant, 2016) that should 'be used in empirical research rather than [as] an idea to be debated in texts' (Reay, 2004a:439). Resultantly, how *habitus* is applied depends upon the researcher's clarification (see below) and methodological operationalisation (see Chapter 5) of this conceptual tool to best fit the purposes and the logic of the specific research project (Costa et al., 2019; Reay, 2004a).

In this thesis, *habitus* is defined as:

a [subjective, but not individual] system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions (...) common to all members of the same group or class (Bourdieu, 1977:82).

This definition demonstrates how complex and multi-layered the concept of *habitus* is (Potter, 2000; Wacquant, 2016), which makes its thorough analysis crucial for understanding how it generates the practices ('practical' actions) of an individual (Dumais, 2002).

According to Bourdieu (1977), the formation of *habitus* starts in early childhood and its development continues throughout the whole life and in various institutions, of which the most influential are: family, education system, peer groups, neighbourhoods, communities and workplaces. One's class, gender and ethnicity are also among the key forces that structure *habitus* (Reay, 2004a; Skeggs, 1997). All of these influences together constitute a 'class of conditions of existence' upon which individual's *habitus* is formed and develops (Bourdieu, 1990a:53). Experiences in the family are the source of the primary socialisation and development of primary *habitus*

(Dumais, 2002; Maton, 2008). Dispositions acquired in this period, encompassing ways of 'thinking, feeling and acting, and common sets of expectations' (Wacquant, 2014a:119), are deeply formative, long lasting and tend to be relatively stable and resistant to change. Secondary socialisation takes place throughout the life course and results with individuals internalising their sense of position within social structures (called 'secondary *habitus*'; Dumais, 2002). In this sense, *habitus* encompasses what is subjectively felt and understood as possible (or impossible) for the 'likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56), as also argued in Chapter 2, for example in relation to the impact of class and gender on young people's dispositions towards education, their occupational choices, domestic relations, or their everyday reflexivity.

The concept of *habitus* encompasses the fundamental principle of theory of practice aiming to reconcile the objective and subjective elements of social life. While social agents always have the capacity to act, their actions remain shaped by the circumstances they don't choose (structures). Moreover, such circumstances are not merely confronted by social agents. Rather, we all are part of these circumstances, as we are born into them, grow up, learn and acquire social capabilities within them (Bourdieu, 1977; Jenkins, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). Consequently, 'the individual is always, whether he [sic] likes it or not, trapped (...) within the limits of the system of categories he owes to his [sic] upbringing and training' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:126). In other words, even though individual agency is not determined by objective structures, it is structured by them (Bourdieu, 1977:77), as agency and structures reside in one's *habitus* and mutually shape one another (Burke, 2015; Stahl, 2015).

*Habitus* brings the individual and social together (Maton, 2008; Wacquant, 2016). Thus, according to Bourdieu (1993), social agents are a unique compilation of individual histories and social structures. Undoubtedly, there are never two identical *habitus*s, simply because there are no two individual stories that could be the same (Reay, 2004a; Wacquant, 2014b). However, social agents experience some of their differences in a 'socially regular way', shared with other members of the same social class, gender, ethnicity (Maton, 2008:53), as demonstrated in detail in Chapters 2 and 3 (e.g. in terms of relationships with education, employment or technologies). As such,



collecting individual histories is vital for capturing individual *habitus*. Then, identifying the shared expectations, attitudes and/or perceptions among participants (Bodovski, 2015), allows us to uncover wider (shared, classed and unequal) patterns of social life (Bourdieu, 1977) and of continuity and change. Finally, grasping one's gender *habitus* allows us to uncover how gender structures choices around, for example, opportunities or domestic relations (McDowell, 2009; Reay, 2004a; Skeggs, 1997). These issues will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

*Habitus* is also always embodied (*hexis*). As Bourdieu (1998a:81) asserts:

[Habitus] is embodied, in a sense: it is a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.

As such, *habitus* does not only encompass an individual's mental structures, but also – 'ways of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu, 1990a:70). In this sense, Bourdieu inscribed the body in the social world, but also the social world in the body (Reay, 2004a). This remains crucial for understanding how certain embodied characteristics are rewarded in the education system or the labour market, especially in light of claims made in Chapter 2 that priority is given to the middle class embodied dispositions, such as soft skills, style of presentation or language (Lawler, 2005; McDowell, 2009).

*Habitus* is also both an agent of reproduction and change, as it is 'consistently subjected to experiences, and therefore affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure' (Bourdieu 1990a:133). In other words, there are choices at the heart of *habitus* which makes it a useful tool for capturing how young people construct their lives and navigate their transitions. However, the range of choices *habitus* 'allows' for lie 'within the limits of its structures' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:19). As such, the choices young people make continue to be shaped in a dual way: by the circumstances in which they live and the internalised framework of what is possible for 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56). *Habitus* is therefore acting

simultaneously as a constraint and 'an impetus for change' (Wacquant, 2014a:119). Consequently, it either reinforces predispositions for certain ways of acting and behaving in vaguely regular, habitual ways (Reay, 2004a) or challenges them, depending on whether it encounters (or not) new circumstances to the ones' experienced during early socialisation (Burke, 2015:58; Wacquant, 2016).

Crucially, the 'mediating construct' of *habitus* also allows us to bridge two dichotomous frameworks, theory and method (Costa and Murphy, 2015; Costa et al., 2019; Rawolle and Lingard, 2013; Reay, 2004a). Because of that the concept of *habitus* was thus incorporated into the methodological design of the study, its logic and epistemological underpinnings (kinds of knowledge it wants to produce) and analysis of findings, and achieved through the process of methodological reflexivity (Burke, 2015; France, 2015). These issues are further discussed in Chapter 5.

#### 4.1.2 *Field*

As *habitus* is a relational concept, both conceptually and empirically (Maton, 2008; Potter, 2000; Wacquant, 2014a), it never produces individual action on its own, but in conjunction with the *field* and *capital*. Together, they reinforce, restrict or modify one's set of dispositions in and through an agent's practices (Potter, 2000; Wacquant, 2016).

According to Bourdieu (1985), a common social sphere occupied by all social agents encompasses the *field* of power that consists of multiple social (*sub*) *fields*, such as the economic *field*, educational *field*, political *field*, *field* of the media, the arts, science or law, to name just a few (France et al., 2013). Bourdieu further argues that even though these *fields* are organised in a hierarchal way and that dominant social agents and institutions exercise (significant) power in relation to practices occurring in a specific *field*, there is still room for an individual's agency and change. For example, as France and Threadgold (2016:621) argue, young people's educational experiences are strongly shaped by legislation and policy (macro) that are 'all politically based decisions' (*field* of power) and by how these are enacted on the ground (meso level), in the classroom and the school. Young people and their families are active agents that navigate and negotiate such *fields*, according to different and unequal positions they

occupy within them, which depend upon the *capital* they possess (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

As such, *fields* are the spaces 'where things happen, where actions take place and where practices occur' (France and Threadgold, 2016:624). Each of the *fields* has its own rules and norms (logic) that shape the behaviour of individuals, while also being shaped by their actions (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In other words, *field* and agents' *habitus* are relational and at constant interplay with each other (Reay, 2004a; Robbins, 2002). At the same time, however, individual *habitus* operates within the constraint of the 'logic of practice' of multiple *fields*. Specifically, a certain position occupied by the agent in the *field* 'mediates what is possible from a limited range of possibilities' (Stahl, 2015:23) available in such *field*. In this sense, what social agents regard as achievable or not, is the fruition of *symbolic violence*, through which certain beliefs, norms and rules of the *fields* (imposed by the dominant groups), are internalised by social agents as legitimate (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; see also Section 2.1.2). The norms and rules in any *field*, called *doxa*, encompass taken for granted assumptions and shared beliefs internalised by social agents as given truths (Deer, 2008; Friedman, 2009). Yet, as Bourdieu (1977) claims, these norms and rules are categories of thinking that are only *misrecognised* as true. In fact, they are arbitrary and a result of historical struggles that had led to their imposition by the dominant classes (*misrecognition*). For example, the education system values 'symbolic mastery', which encompasses 'talking and manipulating culture' over 'practical mastery' – of 'making things' (Jenkins, 2002:108). This priority, imposed by dominant groups in the past, further serves to perpetuate their dominance, as they are already equipped with qualities and dispositions valued by the dominant culture (Friedman and Lauriston, 2019; Grisprud et al., 2011; Reay, 2017), and consequently, able to reproduce unequal social relations – through the processes of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

*Fields* are thus multidimensional, hierarchical and complex social spaces where actions occur (Bourdieu, 1977, 1985) that also locate individuals in specific contexts: historical, local, and national, and in relation to one another (Costa and Murphy, 2015). The

concept of *field* is thus metaphorical rather than geographical (Nowicka, 2015). Yet, as the youth studies research demonstrates, *field* can also be physical. For example, local neighbourhoods and schools play a vital role in young people's everyday lives and transitions (France and Threadgold, 2016; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005), as this is where they grow up, acquire social capabilities and learn about what is possible in these environments, and consequently what is possible for them (Hey, 2005). Resultantly, physical spaces should also be understood as one of the *fields* and researched as such. This, in turn, informed my decision to locate my participants as living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Glasgow, in the context of neoliberal and austere Britain, yet under a distinctive Scottish political and legal context. Moreover, as indicated in Chapter 3, the concept of *field* suggests an approach whereby technologies are embedded within neoliberal and capitalist power relations (Coté and Pybus, 2007). In this sense, technologies can be further theorised as being located 'at an intersection between a multitude of overlapping *fields*, some entirely web (or Internet) based [e.g. social media], and others spanning mediated and co-present environments' (Herzig, 2016:16, cited in Davies and Eynon, 2018:3964).

#### *4.1.3 Capital*

Bourdieu's (1997) contribution to the conceptualisation of resources available to social agents has been indisputable since his introduction of a typology of different forms of *capitals* and their mutual relationship and interdependency into a theoretical discourse (Holland et al., 2007). *Economic capital* consists of wealth and financial assets that can be converted into money directly and immediately (Holland et al., 2007; Potter, 2000). *Cultural capital* consists of 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' such as cultural taste and preferences, style or language (Bourdieu, 1997:47; see also Lawler, 2005; Thomson, 2008), as well as cultural goods and educational qualifications. According to Bourdieu (1997), *cultural capital* is mainly acquired in families through *habitus*, learned within the family, often unconsciously and over long period of time.

*Social capital* has been argued to be the most intangible form of *capitals* (Holland et al., 2007), as it consists of group memberships and networks, connections, relations, and social bonds. These interrelationships between individuals provide them ‘with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a credential’ (Bourdieu, 1997:51). The concept has been further developed by Putnam (2000), who proposed two types of social networks individuals have access to – *bonding and bridging* – and associated them with risks and advantages accordingly. Specifically, he defined *bonding networks* as inward-looking, exclusive and strengthening shared identities amongst homogenous groups that could potentially lead to reinforcement of their socio-economic disadvantage and exclusion of the outsiders (Bottrell, 2009; Walseth, 2008). On the other hand, *bridging networks* were framed as outward-looking, inclusive and allowing individuals to access wider resources, information and ideas beyond the community level (Woolcock, 2001). These networks are consequently assumed to enable individuals to ‘get on’ rather than just ‘get by’ (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001:2105).

As argued in Chapter 2, access to different forms of *capitals* remains unequally distributed among young people, depending on their socio-economic background and locality (Hey, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2005; Savage, 2015) and thus constitutes yet another strand that unequally diversifies their lives, transitions and use of technologies (Furlong, 2013). For example, research has demonstrated that middle class youth have more access to *bridging capital* than their working class counterparts (Holland, 2007; Savage, 2015). MacDonald et al. (2005) further highlighted the paradoxical character of bonding ties amongst disadvantaged youth. They found that such ties provided young people with practical and emotional support and sense of inclusion that made their lives bearable under conditions of objective deprivation. However, they ‘served simultaneously to limit the possibilities of escaping the conditions of social exclusion’ as they tied young people down to their deprived neighbourhoods and local labour market (p. 885). Others have also demonstrated that bonding ties may facilitate acquiring negative attitudes towards education, involvement in offending or substance abuse, or can have a negative impact on the creation of broader social networks

(Bottrell, 2009; Holland et al., 2007; MacDonald and Marsh, 2004, 2005; Reynolds, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, given the potential benefits associated with having access to the right social networks, the focus on bridging ties has become highly popular in political and public rhetoric, viewed as a 'magic bullet' that would facilitate young people's social mobility and access to educational and employment opportunities (Billett, 2014). There are, however, several issues associated with such understandings of *social capital*. While it is argued that its bonding and bridging dimensions hold utility for understanding how they influence young people's everyday lives and transitions, the ways they are conceptualised and presented in public, political and some scholarly debates require significant refinement.

Firstly, such understandings of *social capital* continue to be underpinned by pejorative and moral judgments (Billett, 2014, Reynolds, 2007). Specifically, close ties have become a synonym with a 'dark' or even 'perverse' side of *social capital* (Billett, 2014). It is argued that such discourses have a stigmatising effect as they position resources available to disadvantaged youth as inferior and construct young people as *social capital* deficient or even as being 'at risk' (Allard, 2005; Billett, 2014). For example, while investigating experiences of a disadvantaged young woman in an educational setting, Allard (2005) found that the peer emotional support provided her with feelings of being wanted, accepted and in control, and helped her stay in school, as she had been struggling with difficult home circumstances. However, these ties were not recognised as valuable within the educational *field*. On the contrary, they were constructed by teachers as a risk factor facilitating educational underachievement and leaving school early.

Close social ties remain an important asset in the lives of young people and should be understood as providing trust, support, mutual care and understanding, resources to deal with disadvantage, building resilience and forming identities, as well as offering a base from which to bridge out into broader networks (Allard, 2005; Billett, 2014; Bottrell, 2009; Holland et al., 2007). Furthermore, close networks with family and

friends remain crucial for young people's sense of belonging and wellbeing (Morrow, 2001). It is thus argued that a sense of belonging and 'attachment to place' should both be included in the conceptualisation of *social capital* (Shaefer-McDaniel, 2004:10). This, in turn, allows us to further link *social capital* with the *metaphor of belonging* as one of the key dimensions to young people's lives and transitions (Cuervo and Wyn, 2012, 2014).

Secondly, assumptions that the world is hierarchical and people must follow an upward trend and acquire more *social capital* to improve their position detract from the concept and lead to its further limitations (Allan et al., 2012; Tolonen, 2007). It is argued that young people's experiences should be perceived as valuable not only in terms of the profit and benefits deriving from access to social networks, but also in terms of what such networks mean to young people themselves (Tolonen, 2007). For example, as demonstrated by Phillips (2010), young people often take pride in their personal achievements that may not be understood as successes from a normative educational or employment perspective. Consequently, as Holland (2007) argued, the bridging and bonding ties are complex constructs and should not be seen as either positive (bridging) or negative (bonding). Instead, they are interdependent and interwoven and constitute an important asset in young people's lives, not only in a normative, but also in a subjective sense.

Finally, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, young people make their choices and progress with the use of information embedded in their social networks, including family and peers, schools, wider community and state's agents and institutions. Therefore, in order to enhance their access to opportunities, there is a need for policy and practice to facilitate their access to a wider range of networks and information and ideas beyond the community level (Atkins, 2017; Catts and Allan, 2012; Scottish Government, 2017b; Woolcock, 2001). However, while such enhanced networks are a useful resource, they cannot supersede a lack of economic assets and other structural constraints that unequally shape young people's lives and transitions. For example, as argued in Chapter 2, limited economic resources may mitigate the impact of *social capital*, especially in poor communities (Leonard, 2005), while poverty remains one of

the greatest barriers to educational inclusion and equality (Reay, 2013). Furthermore, as Bottrell (2009) argued, having access to bridging social networks does not necessarily mean it will convert into educational inclusion. For instance, young girls from disadvantaged background attending high performing school felt 'othered' and marginalised by teachers. Consequently, they did not benefit from access to bridging social networks, as their *cultural* and *social capital* was not recognised as valuable in this setting, unlike their middle-class counterparts (Bottrell, 2009). Similarly, Walseth (2008) demonstrated how young girls from ethnic minorities had access to bridging social networks via their membership of a sports club, yet they were also unable to benefit from these networks due to class and cultural differences. As such, *social capital* remains embedded within unequal social relations and should be researched as such, and alongside other types of *capital*, *field* and one's *habitus* (Reay, 2004a). Only by doing this, does it become possible to capture how the interplay of these conditions shapes young people's experiences and access to information and opportunities within education and beyond. Additionally, such an approach allows us to uncover mechanisms of domination and inequality, as for example Bottrell's (2009) and Walseth's (2008) research highlighted, which this thesis also aims to capture.

#### 4.1.4 (*Habitus X Capital*) + *Field* = *Practice*

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984:101) explained his holistic model for examining social life. It can be summarised as:

*HABITUS* (one's dispositions structured by structures) X *CAPITAL* (the status and resources individuals possess, and the position they occupy in a particular *field*) + *FIELD* (social and multidimensional space where practices take place, according to the norms, rules and hierarchies of the *fields*) = *PRACTICE*.

In other words, one's *habitus*, the *field* and *capital* remain in a dialectical, 'indefinite, unconscious, double' relationship that produces one's practices (Bourdieu, 1984:147). As Bourdieu (1990a:46) further explains, this occurs through the complex and often unconscious mental processes of adjustment between individual goals, aspirations and



expectations and objective probabilities deriving from the constraints and opportunities of their lifeworlds:

The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable.

The fundamental principle of *practice*, thus, encompasses both individual agency and the external influences, 'which leave a very variable margin for choice' (Bourdieu, 1990a:50), depending on 'the history of the positions they [social agents] occupy' (Bourdieu, 1993:61). This is an important point, as while *habitus* guides one's practices (Burke, 2015), individuals can only choose from 'what is possible from a limited range of possibilities' (Stahl, 2015:23). The more experiences, options, networks and new environments individuals are confronted with, the more practices may become probable and thinkable. Conversely, deprivation and marginalisation limit the chances for new and transformed practices (Wacquant, 2016).

Bourdieu (1977) further introduces the metaphor of *life as a game* to 'more than simply take what people do in their daily lives for granted', but to also capture the wider (structured and unequal) patterns of social life (Jenkins, 2002:68). According to Bourdieu (1977), the game 'played' by social agents has a competitive character, as their main goal is to accumulate *capitals* and progress in their lives. However, as individuals start with different amounts and compositions of *capitals*, some people are more advantaged than others. They are also likely to use this advantage to accumulate more *capital* and in consequence enhance their chances for success. Section 2.1.2 demonstrated how middle-class parents mobilise a range of resources to ensure their children are advantaged in education and beyond (Devine, 2004; Reay, 2017). As such, Bourdieusian thinking tools hold a utility for capturing social struggles and inequalities underpinning contemporary society, for example in relation to young people's lives, education and transitions.

Importantly, the game metaphor also brings to the spotlight three crucial dimensions to understanding the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1977) – *place*, *time* and a *practical sense*. While *place* is crucial for learning about what is possible in local environments and consequently what is possible for (young) people living there (Hey, 2005), *temporality* allows us to capture their practices and everyday reflexivity as not fixed, but as evolving and changing due to the new experiences and circumstances confronted with the passage of time. *Practical sense*, in turn, which is learnt via playing the game by social agents, either through lived experience or explicit teaching (Wacquant, 1989, cited in Jenkins, 2002), produces the ‘fish in the water’ effect, in which an individual ‘does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127). In other words, because the source of practice lies in an agent’s own experience of reality, most of the time they do not question their lifeworlds (Jenkins, 2002), but rather remain committed to ‘the presuppositions – doxa – of the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990a:66). This is achieved by having ‘a feel for the game’ [*illusio*] – the belief that the game (life) is worth of one’s efforts and investment’ (Bourdieu, 1990a:66). Resultantly, *illusio* is another concept that is crucial for understanding how social agents, especially members of dominated classes, ‘create meaning and then invest in those socially constructed meanings to make life bearable and worthwhile’ (France and Threadgold, 2016:623). In this thesis, *illusio* is thus adopted to examine young people’s meaning making practices in relation to their transitions, of the type of life they strived for and what opportunities they wanted to pursue and why.

Overall, the Bourdieusian thinking tools provide a useful way of examining ‘individuals’ perceptions of life trajectories and the structures on which their experiences were based’ and act as double lens “for understanding ‘the logic of practice’ of a complex social world” (Costa and Murphy, 2015:5). Specifically, they allow us to bring together the contexts in which young people’s lives are lived (discussed in Section 2.1.2) and their individual agency, subjective meaning making practices, what they feel is possible or impossible, and understandings of the world around them and their own place in it. By doing so, I can further engage with debates on how and why, despite significant

socio-economic and technological transformations, we can observe a significant degree of continuity in relation to unequal patterns of youth transitions. Moreover, they provide a useful framework for capturing how the interplay between structures and agency produces young people's practices. Finally, they allow us to uncover the impact of *symbolic violence* on young people's relationship with education, employment and training and on their agency (Jenkins, 2002).

## **4.2 Addressing existing criticisms of Bourdieu's work**

This section addresses criticisms directed at Bourdieu's work. The strongest and most common critiques have focused on the issues of a) determinism and circularity, which leave limited room for agency and social change; b) the underplaying of conscious deliberation and everyday reflexivity; c) underdevelopment of gender and other social divisions; d) *habitus* being a problematic concept; and e) *social capital* neglecting children and young people's agency. It is argued that while some of these criticisms derive from Bourdieu's work being misunderstood (Threadgold, 2019), others are valid. However, many of the criticisms can be redressed with help from a range of scholarship, both theoretically driven and empirical research, in the field of youth studies and beyond.

A number of critics have accused Bourdieu of being a structuralist and determinist (Jenkins, 2002; King, 2000; LiPuma, 1993). Specifically, they argued that his work did not overcome the range of dichotomies it aspired to, but rather resembles a structural construct that subordinates individual agency and actions under the omnipresent impact of objective structures, with limited room for individual agency. Jenkins (2002:96-97) has further summarised Bourdieu's theory of practice as circular and tight, thus unable to allow for social change, when he wrote:

the appearance of meaningful practice is actually the reality of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Social structure and history produce habitus. This, in turn, generates practices which serve, in the absence of external factors, to reproduce social structure. As a consequence, history tends to repeat itself.

LiPuma (1993) further scrutinised the ability of *habitus* to bridge the individual and the social, concluding that it fails to do so because Bourdieu has been unable to explain how the relationship between agency and structures is formed and develops. He supports his claims by arguing that the concept of *habitus* does not account for differences in social agents' dispositions, behaviours or trajectories among the members of the same class occupying similar positions in the *fields* and uses different trajectories between siblings as the most apparent and crushing rebuke.

Bourdieu and his proponents have firmly rejected accusations of determinism and offered a range of counterarguments. Specifically, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) highlighted that the social practice model is not as rigid as Jenkins (2002) assumes. On the contrary, they have emphasised that *habitus* is an open, flexible, fluid, changing and evolving schema, 'durable but not eternal' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:133; see also Wacquant, 2016). *Habitus* is further argued to be 'consistently subjected to [various] experiences, and therefore affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:133). As such, if confronted with new circumstances or encounters, the *habitus* can change, changing one's expectations, aspirations or behaviours alongside. Moreover, *habitus* always remains in conjunction with the *field* (Wacquant, 2016). Because of that, *habitus* is sensitive to its processes, while at the same time may influence the change in the *field* through social agents' practices it produces (Bourdieu, 1990b). For example, as McNay (2001:146) observes, 'there has been an increasing emphasis in Bourdieu's more recent work on moments of disalignment and tension between *habitus* and *field*, which may give rise to social change'. These changes, however, may also be constrained by dominant social agents and institutions exercising power in relation to practices occurring in a specific *field* (Bourdieu, 1985; Wacquant, 2016). Finally, as Farrugia and Woodman (2015:632) assert, practices are always, whenever transformed or not, 'creative responses to structural exigencies, generated by the *habitus* in an active interaction between embodied dispositions and present social conditions'. As such, they are neither only individual decision making nor only structured by the structures, collective and based on probability (Jenkins, 2002; McNay, 2001; Potter, 2000), but

rather 'regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu, 1977:78) and a product of an 'active subjectivity' (Farrugia and Woodman, 2015:633).

Moreover, there are 'classes of habitus or the habitus of classes' (Reay, 2004:434), meaning people occupying similar positions are likely to share dispositions, behaviours or trajectories (as also argued in Chapter 2). However, the class *habitus* does not fully account for the differences between the members of the same class LiPuma (1993) contended for. While the work of Bourdieu does not solve this problem, Nash's (1999) theoretical deliberations offer a plausible solution. He argues that the concept of *habitus* is not deterministic and allows for differences not only between members of different classes, but also within the same class in the form of more than one shared class *habitus* (Nash, 1999). This seems highly probable, taking into account that there are never two identical *habitués*, simply because each social agent will never share the exact same experiences and trajectories (Reay, 2004a). Such differences will be revealed in relation to my participants' perceptions of the world around them and their place in it, their relationships with and attitudes towards education or opportunities they saw as being worth pursuing. This, in turn, further advances the concept of (intra)generational units as more heterogenous and complex than previously argued (see Holmes, 2011).

A number of Bourdieu's proponents, such as Threadgold (2019:38), have further argued that the charges of determinism derive from underplaying, or even ignoring:

concepts that emphasise social relations – *illusio*, *doxa*, social gravity, symbolic violence, hysteresis, misrecognition, struggle, strategy and trajectory – all of which are fertile for understanding ever-present tensions between social change and social reproduction.

As Threadgold (2019) further asserts, these thinking tools seek to capture the role of emotions and meaning making practices which guide one's investment of the self, their time and efforts in the struggle for a good life, that lead to the formation of an agent's *trajectory* and their commitment to the game/life (*illusio*; Bourdieu, 1990a). For example, in their study with young people involved in crime, France and Threadgold

(2016:625) argued that their participants' *illusio* was behind them choosing to enter the 'field of criminal activity', as they perceived its benefits and rewards as exceeding potential risks and thus were worth pursuing and investing their efforts and the self. As such, these neglected concepts are argued to offer an additional (affective) dimension to understanding how young people think about their life and choices, make their decisions and invest in them, but also how they remain mediated by social divisions and unequal positions they occupy in the social world (Threadgold, 2019).

Finally, the charges of determinism can be dismissed based on claims that Bourdieusian thinking tools are not rigid 'rules or laws', but rather a 'conceptual toolkit [that] contains heuristics or devices' to work with in the empirical research (Threadgold, 2019:31). This seems a particularly useful solution, especially in relation to the substantial work Bourdieu had produced throughout his life, and when his thinking and arguments had developed, changed or at times had even become inconsistent or generalist (Threadgold, 2019). As such, these tools are good to 'think with', as they force one to think relationally during the whole research process (see France, 2015; Jenkins, 2002; Nash, 1999; Reay, 2004a). Resultantly, as Nash (1999:185) concludes, without these thinking tools 'we will not make much progress. No doubt we could send these concepts, [...] the whole bagful, back where they came from, and we would be the poorer for it'.

Another critique centres on the fact that Bourdieu's work has been underplaying conscious deliberation and everyday reflexivity (Archer, 2012; Bottero, 2010; Jenkins, 2002; Mead, 2016; Reay, 2004a). Indeed, especially in his earlier work, Bourdieu (1984:46) had often highlighted that one's *habitus* is mostly pre-reflexive and operates 'below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the introspective scrutiny or control of will'. Yet, even though its main nature is pre-reflexive, Bourdieu insisted it can be brought to the conscious level when social agents encounter the *field(s)* they are unfamiliar with, of which their individual *habitus* is not a product of and of which rules it is unaware ('fish out of water' effect; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In *The Peasant and his body*, Bourdieu (2004), provides us with an example of how individuals' 'clumsiness' (both social, but also physical-embodied) experienced in the

unfamiliar *field* brings *habitus* into the conscious level, so the individuals can learn to 'fit in' through the awareness of their own awkwardness. In his later work, Bourdieu (2000:161) further pointed towards 'blips' in *habitus* social agents experience more often than tensions caused by entering an unfamiliar *field*, which generate their '*practical reflection*', however one 'turned towards practice and not towards the agent who performs it'.

Despite these important contributions allowing social agents to engage with self-reflection that can lead to changing their behaviour, actions or approaches to the new situations, Bourdieu's work has been argued to 'overplay the unconscious impulses' (Reay, 2004a:437). Moreover, the strict delineation between conscious thought and habitual ways of 'doing things' were further argued to reduce the concept of *habitus* to a 'mechanistic' habit (Mead, 2016:57), in which (everyday) reflexivity has been only 'an adjunct of disposition' (Bottero, 2010:10).

In response, critical scholars have stressed the importance of hybridising the concept of *habitus* with reflexivity (Adams, 2006; Mead, 2016, Farrugia, 2013; Farrugia and Woodman, 2015; see Archer, 2012 for critique). Doing so made it possible to give more weight to conscious deliberations, alongside embodied dispositions, as a guiding force to social agents' practice that equips them with critical abilities which are crucial for transformative processes, in both the agents themselves and the *fields* they occupy (Bohman, 1998, cited in Bottero, 2010; Farrugia and Woodman, 2015; Mead, 2016). Additionally, hybridising reflexivity with one's *habitus* allows us to keep the value of embodied dispositions 'towards the meaning of the social world and the possibilities available to a given subject within it' (Farrugia and Woodman, 2015:630) as they continue to be linked with the unequal patterns of social life, such as these explored in Chapters 2 and 3. In this sense, it is argued that (everyday) reflexivity cannot be separated from the positions social agents occupy in social space (Farrugia, 2013; France and Haddon, 2014). For example, in their research with disadvantaged young people, France and Haddon (2014) found that their participants' subjectivity and everyday reflexivity were classed, as they were clearly aware of their position in the social world they inhabited. Young people were actively navigating their educational

and occupational choices, yet within the limits of their socio-economic positions and their subjective understandings of what is or is not possible for the people like them. As such, while everyday reflexivity seems to be much more common than Bourdieu may have allowed for, it is nevertheless tied up with one's understanding of their own position in the world. These debates have been found particularly applicable to my participants' narratives in relation to negative school experiences, occupational choices and trajectories, and the use of technologies for cultivating one's interests.

Bourdieu's approach has also been criticised for its extensive focus on class at the expense of gender and other social relations, even though he talks extensively about gender differences in some of his work (Reay, 2004b). Specifically, feminist scholars have pointed that not only class, but also gender (as well as ethnicity, sexuality etc.) are amongst the key forces that structure and reside in one's *habitus* (Lawler, 2004; Lovell, 2004; Reay, 2004b; Skeggs, 1997). They further problematised some aspects of the theory of practice by accusing Bourdieu's work of being underpinned by the 'masculine ontology of the social', in which the social agent is perceived as the rational, purposeful and abstract male (Adkins, 2005:198). Adkins (2004) further pointed out that Bourdieu's understanding of human action as mainly strategic and goal/interest related and accrual of capital-oriented (game metaphor) has been too narrow and instrumental.

These claims were supported by Skeggs' empirical research (2004b:29), which has highlighted that values such as altruism, loyalty or investment in others constitute 'a significant amount of social life', as well as play an important part in social reproduction (especially gendered reproduction). Moreover, being a male, middle class and white, Skeggs (1997) further points out, can be perceived as a normalised and advantageous asset of *cultural capital*. On the other hand, as McDowell (2009) observes, in many types of service work, often low level and available for those less educated, femininity and 'feminine' attributes give one a strong advantage in this stratum of the labour market (as also discussed in Section 2.1.2). As such, based on these important contributions to understanding theory of practice, it is necessary to bring gender into



the *habitus*, in order to capture both classed and gendered aspects of young people's lives and transitions in late modernity.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, *habitus* has also been criticised for its unclear and at times open definitions that have been changing throughout Bourdieu's career (Asimaki and Koustourakis, 2014; Jenkins, 2002). However, rather than a weakness, *habitus'* fluidity and flexibility can be features that give researchers the opportunity to adopt it into a specific research project in a way that fits its logic and purposes. Resultantly, while subsection 4.1.1 focused on the thorough clarification of the concept of *habitus*, Chapter 5 explains in detail how *habitus* has transcended from theory to method and epistemological underpinnings of this study, and what techniques have been utilised to grasp it. Finally, as Reay (2004a:439) further asserts, 'the difficulties, inconsistencies, risks of determinism, and aspects of circularity inherent in *habitus* can be viewed as far less problematic if *habitus* is viewed more fluidly as [...] a way of understanding the world'.

The final critique of Bourdieu's work has centred around his positioning of children and young people as passive recipients of their parents' *social capital* (Helve and Bynner, 2007). Weller (2007) has further accused Bourdieu's intergenerational transmission of *social capital* as concentrating on children's/young people's future as adults rather than on their present lives. Such an approach can be thus understood as deeply embedded within the traditional sociology of childhood, which used to perceive and indeed research children and young people not as active agents, but mostly as in relation to the adults' world, for example within family or education system, while their own experiences and agency had been mostly ignored (the so called 'familialisation' of childhood and youth, Prout, 2000).

In response, more recent research has focused on those neglected aspects of young people's lives (Helve and Bynner, 2007). For example, young people were found to be active agents in creating, negotiating and maintaining their own social networks, in their everyday lives and transitions, and for developing their youth identities (Holland et al., 2007), ethnic identities (Reynolds, 2007) and sense of belonging (Schaefer-

McDaniel, 2004). As such, it remains crucial to understand and indeed research young people's social networks not only as a product of their parents and families' networks, but also as 'a vital means of renewal and development for society as whole' (Helve and Bynner, 2007:9). At the same time, however, as indicated in the previous section (4.1.3), even though children/young people are active agents in developing social networks with each other and others within and outside their families (e.g. as they accumulate and use *social capital* for their advantage, for example through paid employment and babysitting; see Holland et al., 2007), the negative impact of the poor access to resources on their lives should not be neglected (Leonard, 2005).

### **4.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis. The Bourdieusian thinking tools outlined in this chapter were employed in the analysis of the data gathered during the fieldwork. Importantly, however, they have also been omnipresent in the review of the literature and remain in strong link with the epistemological positioning of this project and its method(ology). Moreover, these thinking tools can be thought of not only in terms of a theory, but also, as Reay (2004a:439) asserts, as 'a way of understanding the world'. This is because they offer a critical way of thinking about and explaining our social life – always relationally, always through a double lens, as 'social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127).

The first section discussed in detail the key concepts from Pierre Bourdieu, the triad of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* alongside equally important, yet underutilised tools such as *doxa*, *illusio*, *trajectory*, *misrecognition* and *symbolic violence*. By doing so, a holistic model for examining young people's lives has emerged, which allows one to capture the role of emotions and meaning making practices which guide social agents' investment of the self, their time and efforts in the struggle for a good life.

The second section has addressed a range of criticisms directed at Bourdieu's concepts. While some were argued to derive from the misrecognition of his works, others were

found valid and redressed for the purposes of this study with help from a range of scholarship. By engaging in critical discussions around issues of determinism, limited room for agency and social change; neglecting everyday reflexivity, gender and other social divisions, and youth agency, it was argued that Bourdieu's thinking tools offer a strong analytical utility for researching young people's lives in late modernity.

The next chapter discusses the methodological approach employed to address the research questions.

## Chapter 5 Methodological approach

This chapter outlines the methodological underpinnings of the study. It starts with a detailed discussion on the stance of the thesis on the nature of reality and knowledge in order to provide the (meta)theoretical perspective through which the findings of this project can be understood. It also addresses the issues of reflexivity, positionality and representation, and provides the criteria of legitimation for validating findings of the empirical research which adopted a qualitative approach. Following this, it justifies the reasons behind adopting the narrative inquiry as the most adequate research strategy to answer the research questions. The chapter then discusses in detail the methods of data collection. Particularly, it specifies the sampling strategy and the rationale behind choosing the city of Glasgow as a site of the study, before addressing the fieldwork issues and outlining the participants' background information and the method design. It concludes by discussing in detail the ethical considerations and the process of analysing data, including employing *habitus* as theory-method.

### 5.1 Research paradigm

Every research project is driven by and embedded within 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Guba, 1990:17), which encompass 'general orientations about the world and the nature of research' (Creswell, 2009:6). These beliefs/general orientations have been further described as worldviews (Creswell, 2009), paradigms (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 1998) or meta-theoretical positions (Archer et al., 2016) and comprise of ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies – the 'three musketeers of metaphysics' (Moses and Knutsen, 2007:5). Bringing them into the research is thus underlain by the assumption that a researcher is also a philosopher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), as she engages with the questions of what the social reality is and how it is understood, as well as what kind of knowledge research can and does produce, and why these debates are important.

Crucially, these beliefs are brought into the research as a part of the researcher's personal history, views, ethical and political beliefs (Creswell, 2013). They inform and guide the whole process of the research and its logic, and in particular – a research

methodology, its design and choice of methods (Crotty, 1998; Moses and Knutsen, 2007). At the same time, one's theoretical perspective constrains research practice (method), as it determines, for example, the researcher-participant relationship, adoption of measures ensuring research quality, or the nature of disseminating knowledge (Carter and Little, 2007; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Mantzoukas, 2004). The issues of voice and the way research participants are represented also remain embedded in the researcher's choice of a research paradigm and consequently its methodology (Carter and Little, 2007).

The *ontological position* can be defined as a stance regarding the nature of the reality, a study of being, whether it does or does not exist independently from the human mind, its understanding and practices (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Unsurprisingly, this issue remains highly debatable across social sciences, and there is lack of a consensus on its nature (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). The world has been perceived in different and contradictory ways, as existing and holding meaning independently of human mind (realism/positivism) at the one end of continuum, or as emerging solely from human interpretations and practices (relativism/interpretivism) at the other end (Crotty, 1998; Flick, 2014).

In turn, the *epistemological position* of a study is understood as a philosophical study of knowledge, of what counts as legitimate, valid and valuable knowledge, of 'how we know what we know' (Crotty, 1998:8). Historically, it has been inherent in the ontological perspective on the nature of the world. While an objectivist epistemology has assumed a discovery of true and objective knowledge through the research process and remains linked with the realist ontology (Crotty, 1998), a relativist perspective has made an opposite claim of relativity of knowledge with no true, absolute knowledge being able to be ever acquired (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Such understandings, however, have been guilty of reducing ontology to epistemology, as the nature of being has been understood and indeed defined through the ways of knowing (Vandenberghe, 2009) and preoccupied with:

focus on methods and forms of explanation, with insufficient (or naive and misguided) attention to questions about what kind of entities actually exist in the social world and what are they like (Archer et al., 2016, no page).

Consequently, in order to avoid such mistreatment of a theory of being, the critical realist perspective, introduced by Bhaskar and developed by other theorists such as Archer, Gorski or Vandenberghe (to name a few), emerged as a new paradigm separating the existence of the social world from our investigations of it (Archer, et al., 2016; Gorski, 2013). By doing so, it reconciled ontological realism with epistemic relativism (Flick, 2014) which means it considers the existence of the real world independently of our mind, knowledge and awareness, while also arguing that 'our knowledge about that reality is always historically, socially, and culturally situated' (Archer, et al., 2016, no page). Crucially, such an ontological and epistemic distinction lies at the heart of the critical realist perspective and has been guiding its core claims regarding the philosophy of social sciences and, consequently, questions of how the social world can be studied empirically (Archer et al., 2016). These issues will be further discussed below as they also constitute the main reason why this paradigm has been adopted in the current study.

Firstly, separating the study of being from the ways of knowing allows for the use of multiplicity of methodologies and methods to study the social world, historically perceived as antagonistic and irreconcilable (e.g. quantitative and qualitative approaches; Gorski, 2013; Vandenberghe, 2009). Even though this study adopts a qualitative approach, in the review of the literature it has made use of a range of evidence that adopts various perspectives and methods. This was done in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Specifically, I wanted to capture both statistical regularities relating to unequal patterns of youth transitions/use of technologies, as well as young people's subjective experiences and meaning making practices of the world around them and their place in it. Thus, adopting a critical realist paradigm allows for the coexistence of such different types of knowledge through acknowledging they come from various perspectives, influences, research interests and questions (Archer et al., 2016). It also

demonstrates that the knowledge produced by empirical research is never true in absolute terms, but rather a result of the interpretative and explanatory processes, always historically situated and contextual (Archer et al., 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Madill et al., 2000; Tebes, 2005). Consequently, it is thus argued that all of our ‘accounts [of reality, including this study] are fallible, and while realism entails a commitment to truth, there are no truth values or criteria of rationality that exist outside of historical time’ (Archer et al., 2016, no page). In other words, knowledge about the social world is always socially constructed and context specific, while the reality is not discovered, but construed through the process of empirical research (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

At the same time, however, it does not mean that every account of reality is equal. On the contrary, critical realists have introduced another concept alongside ontological realism and epistemological relativism – that of judgmental rationality (Vanderberghe, 2009) – which aims to oppose the judgmental relativism. By doing so, it allows the researchers to make judgments about various accounts of the social reality (Archer et al., 2016); “to evaluate and compare the explanatory power of different theoretical explanations and, finally, to select theories which most accurately represent the ‘domain of real’ given our existing knowledge” (Hu, 2018:130). Certainly, this was done in the review of the literature in which, after critically evaluating a range of evidence sources, I have taken a stand on various issues relating to young people, their everyday lives, transitions and technologies. Moreover, both the literature review and the theory chapter have engaged with explanations of why and how Bourdieusian thinking tools have been adopted for the purposes of the current study – clearly indicating the judgmental rationality behind these decisions. Consequently, the claims about reality made throughout the thesis can be understood as ‘relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent, and changing’ (Archer et al., 2016, no page), the best possible explanation and interpretation of the phenomenon under study under existing knowledge and with room for improvement in future (Hu, 2018).

Secondly, critical realism breaks up with the positivist and empiricist claims that only what is empirically verifiable, observable and quantifiable can be studied as they are

not the only features of the social world (Archer, et al., 2016; Gorski, 2013), as broadly demonstrated in the review of literature and theory chapter exposing the impact of social structures on young people's lives. Critical realism remains in harmony with this line of argument when it acknowledges that social structures are as much real as human beings (Potter, 2000), even though we cannot observe them directly (Archer et al., 2016). Nevertheless, they are understood as real in the sense that they are produced and reproduced historically and not individually (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000), exist separately from individuals, yet influence their everyday (subjective) experiences and practices (Costa, 2013). In this sense, critical realism awards both the agents and the broader structures with causal powers (Potter, 2000) and consequently transcends the structure vs agency dichotomy (Vandenberghe, 2009). It does so by highlighting 'the alienating autonomy of social systems without denying the power agents have to change the world and themselves' (Vandenberghe, 2009:213). In other words, the critical realist paradigm, akin to theory of practice, remains strongly committed to the dialectical relationship between agency and structures, while Bourdieu's tools provide us with an additional focus on the relational aspect of social reality (Potter, 2000). In this sense, the real is also always relational (human beings and social structures; *habitus* and *field*; see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on the relational aspects of social practice). Moreover, akin to the theory of practice, critical realism is presupposed with the processes of reproduction and transformation, continuity and change through its emphasis on the dialectical relationship between structures and agents, which this project thoroughly examines.

Finally, critical realism remains committed to reconciling objective and subjective elements of social life due to the introduction of two interdependent dimensions to the social world – intransitive and transitive (Bhaskar, 2008). The intransitive dimension highlights the existence of entities and objects independently of our mind, yet still real and with causal powers. In turn, the transitive dimension also encompasses the things that are real, yet they are dependent upon human experience (Vandenberghe, 2009). Those two dimensions are thus crucial for capturing both, young people's subjective meaning making, attitudes, perceptions and understandings, as well as the objective



structures which give rise to them (Sharrock et al., 2003). Moreover, similarly to the qualitative approach which this research project adopts, critical realism values and validates subjective experiences, thoughts and perceptions of the research participants (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) which it seeks to understand rather than quantify as, following Bhaskar (1979:59, cited in Reed, 2008:107), 'meanings cannot be measured, only understood'.

Despite acting as a bridge between various philosophical perspectives (Flick, 2014), and more specifically between different subfields and methodologies, critical realism has not been given prominence in the academic world (Gorski, 2013). On the contrary, as Gorski (2013:661) asserts, 'it is to the [post] positivist standards that we must all still appeal'. This is perhaps one of the key reasons why the ability to capture lived experience and produce valid and trustworthy knowledge through research adopting a qualitative approach has been widely questioned and coined as a 'triple crisis' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:17). Specifically, it was pointed out that qualitative researchers can only produce a social text on lived experience, while the link between such experience and text remains unclear, thus questionable. Moreover, criteria used to ensure the quality of the research findings traditionally adopted by quantitative researchers, *objectivity*, *generalizability* and *validity*, have been found inapplicable and inappropriate for qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Furthermore, some critics went as far as arguing that if there is no objective knowledge to be found by qualitative researchers, it is not research at all (Etherington, 2009). Additionally, questions about the role of qualitative research in challenging the social status quo and effecting positive social change have aroused. 'If society is only and always a text', transformative potential of qualitative research was questioned (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:17).

However, new ways of validating qualitative research findings, representing the voices of participants and of the researcher and advocating for a social change, have been developed in response to concerns over the questionable nature of qualitative approaches. These new criteria can be understood in terms of judgmental rationality advocated by critical realism and therefore adopted in this study. The next two sections

discuss in detail the issues of *reflexivity, positionality, representation* and *legitimation* in qualitative research, while also emphasising the strength of the qualitative approach for investigating and exploring the complexities and depth of the social world, its agents and their experiences.

### *5.1.1 Reflexivity, positionality and representation in qualitative research*

It has been widely argued that reflexivity lies at the heart of qualitative research. As a qualitative researcher, I understood and indeed positioned my own practices within two fields – the academic and the research (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013). Specifically, I have identified myself as a PhD candidate and have been immersed in a variety of activities and duties deriving from this position in the field of academia, as well as during my fieldwork, e.g. while dealing with ethical issues, negotiating access to and engaging with the research participants. However, while doing so, I have also drawn extensively on my lived experience of volunteering and working with disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, such as children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or adults with learning difficulties. The skills I gained there, such as the way I communicate and listen to others, as well my sensitivity towards their needs, beliefs, values and subjective meaning making, further allowed me to positively and respectfully engage with my research participants and build good relationships relatively quickly. The foregoing experiences have also complemented my knowledge, understanding and most importantly my strong commitment to ethical considerations, such as a respectful and thoughtful engagement with silenced and misrepresented groups, and how to best represent them in the research texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

A qualitative researcher is also compelled to reflect on the implications of her role in and on the research process as then, and only then, the claims about transparency of the research findings, and the kinds of knowledge such research produces, can be made and defended (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013:128). This has been done in three ways. Firstly, positioning my study within the ontological and epistemological perspective revealed that my research is understood as socially constructed, as it

construes rather than discovers reality (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Dwyer, 2017). The knowledge produced is thus a reflection of the reality and a result of the interpretative and transformative processes on the side of the researcher and research participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Yet, it was also highlighted that making claims about the phenomenon under study is not simply relative, but rather a result of judgmental rationality through the detailed and critical process of engagement with the existing knowledge (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Hu, 2018) and adopting the most adequate methodology in order to answer the research questions (Carter and Little, 2007; Crotty, 1998). In other words, making my ontological, epistemic and methodological stance clear allows me to make the robust and trustworthy claims about the knowledge produced by this project.

Secondly, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the researchers' background and their personal history, values and beliefs shape the research process (Creswell, 2009; see also Section 1.1). Aspects such as choosing the topic and research approach have been influenced by my experience, my commitment to social justice and to listening to the voices of marginalised groups, as well as by my deprecation of mechanisms of oppression and inequality. This, in turn has influenced my choice of a qualitative perspective, due to the emphasis it places upon the intimate relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon under study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Moreover, as I have been preoccupied with capturing and getting closer to my participants' perspectives, I further committed myself to adopting thick and rich descriptions of them and their lifeworlds which I (as critical realist and Bourdieusian scholar) recognise as a valuable source of knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Finally, the way of reporting findings through 'our own acts of representation' remains bounded with the intended audience (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:137). In the case of this thesis – the form of representation needs therefore to meet the academic requirements for the completion of doctoral training. However, I am also committed to sharing my research in a more accessible way with the public, policy makers and organisations overseeing youth transitions, so young people's voices, traditionally misrepresented, can be heard.

Thirdly, as the qualitative research encompasses both the variety of participants' perspectives and the researcher's interpretations and explanations (Etherington, 2009), I made sure to separate my voice from that of young people. Moreover, as I have been committed to capturing their subjective meaning making practices and the ways they see, think of and relate to the others and world around them (Etherington, 2009), I used quotes from my participants in the empirical chapters whenever possible. Finally, I have also been committed to capturing reflexivity of, and at times tensions, hesitations and differences amongst my participants, in order to grasp their uniqueness in the process of analysis.

### *5.1.2 Criteria of legitimation*

Multiple validation strategies have been proposed in order to legitimate the findings of inquiries adopting qualitative approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1986) argued that expectations of academic *rigour* associated with the criteria of *validity*, *generalisability* and *objectivity* are inappropriate for qualitative inquiry, as they are based on the assumption that the research is objective, while the role of the researcher is that of a detached investigator. Thus, they proposed the concept of *trustworthiness* and linked it with the criteria of *transferability*, *credibility* and *dependability*, in order to assess the quality of research adopting qualitative approach. However, such a development was accused of merely adapting the positivist criteria to the qualitative research (Dwyer, 2017). In response, as Dwyer (2017:16) asserts, '[I]vively debate has moved qualitative research well beyond justifying itself, with frameworks for evaluating research directly responsive to the nature and goals of the research itself'. A number of new criteria, sensitive to such understandings, have emerged and include:

- a) Assuring ontological, epistemic and methodological coherence (Carter and Little, 2007);
- b) Demonstrating procedural '*rigour*' – making methodology and methods explicit and transparent (Finlay, 2006); making links between data and explanations clear and visible;

- c) Moving beyond the data through the process of generalising (theorising) that allows research findings to transcend the local/individual towards the generic (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Payne and Williams, 2005).
- d) Being ethical and demonstrating the ethics of caring (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000);
- e) Demonstrating the importance of the topic studied (Chase, 2011);
- f) Grasping rich descriptions of the participants and their lifeworlds (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000);
- g) Highlighting exceptions and differences as much as similarities and themes (Chase, 2011);
- h) Demonstrating the strengths and limitations of the project;
- i) Demonstrating reflexivity, sincerity and credibility;
- j) Demonstrating the richness of data;
- k) Making a contribution and having an impact;
- l) Having a certain degree of 'artistry' (Finlay, 2006).

I familiarised myself with the above criteria at the early stages of my project and incorporated them accordingly. For example, the issues of reflexivity, coherence, procedural *rigour* and ethical considerations underpinned the design of my methodology and guided my fieldwork and delivery of findings. Contributions to knowledge, strengths and limitations of the study were also reflected upon in the Introduction and Conclusion Chapters. When reporting my findings, I have committed to capturing and celebrating the richness of the data qualitative inquiry allows for (Finlay, 2006; Rapley, 2001). I was particularly committed to ensure that the vividness and authenticity of my participants' stories was preserved and shared (Finlay, 2006). This was done so the 'ambiguity of the lived experience and the diversity and complexity of the social world' were adequately captured and examined, while also having a certain degree of literary 'artistry' (Finlay, 2006:319). Moreover, telling the stories in such a way, as further argued by Bochner (2001), has the potential to make them powerful and believable, as well as ethically and morally grounded, thus also granting a qualitative inquiry a transformative capability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Finally, as section 5.5 will show, the claims made in the chapters presenting the

findings (Chapters 6 to 9) aim for the theoretical, generic and abstract level of analytical thought that can allow to 'move conceptually across a wide[r] range of social contexts' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:162).

## **5.2 Adopting a qualitative approach**

There are two general approaches to conducting social research – qualitative and quantitative (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative approach can be best understood as interested in measuring the macro-level trends and regularities of the phenomenon under study with help of statistical instruments and methods (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative approach is concerned with grasping social actors' experiences, perspectives, meanings and descriptions (Lincoln and Guba, 1986), it seeks to understand rather than quantify. Moreover, unlike the quantitative approach adopting large and generalisable samples, qualitative researchers engage with a small number of participants in their specific local and temporal contexts (Flick, 2014). In other words, while the quantitative approaches seek to capture the breadth and generality of the social phenomena under study, qualitative approaches focus on reaching depth and particularity (Archer et al., 2016).

As demonstrated in Section 2.2, a dominant body of scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on quantifying and categorising young people labelled as NEET, which resulted in a failure to capture their lived experience and the person beyond the NEET label. Similarly, young people's engagement with technologies has been largely quantified, which has led to the development of deficit understandings of such engagement, and thus has failed to grasp its richness and complexity. Resultantly, it was argued that there is a great imperative to seek more in-depth understandings of young people's everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies, based on their lived experiences and coming from their own perspectives. As such, the qualitative approach was identified as the suitable type of inquiry to meet these objectives and it was thus adopted in the current study.

### *5.2.1 Choosing a narrative inquiry*

Adopting a qualitative approach to the research project further requires the researcher to choose the right subtype of the inquiry – its specific methodology and methods (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2014). Methodology can be best understood as a plan or a strategy of the action of the research (Crotty, 1998). In other words, it is the design of the research that shapes the methods which are used in order to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013). Crucially, as emphasised in Section 5.1, the methodology remains shaped and embedded in the epistemological positioning of the study. In consequence, all these three elements of the research – ‘epistemology (justification of knowledge), methodology (justification of method) and method (research action)’ are not only consistent, but also interdependent (Carter and Little, 2007:1326). At the same time, through the methodology adopted, the research method and epistemology also become clear and visible (Carter and Little, 2007).

Creswell (2013) identifies five most common subtypes of qualitative methodologies and encourages novice researchers to choose among them. These include: ethnography, case study, narrative inquiry, grounded theory and phenomenology. These five approaches have each a specific focus, in terms of ‘what they are trying to accomplish’, as well as the emphasis they place upon particular research methods, the strategies for analysing data and reporting findings (Creswell, 2013:103). Specifically, grounded theory requires discovering or generating the theory from the data collected during the fieldwork. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is particularly interested in grasping the ‘description of the universal essence’ of a specific human experience, such as for example grief, insomnia, being left out, undergoing surgery etc. (p. 76). The role of the researcher is to collect data on how people have experienced the phenomenon under study and develop a detailed picture of this experience. In turn, ethnographic research is preoccupied with studying a ‘culture sharing group’ through the investigation of the common beliefs, values, behaviours and language amongst its members and through a prolonged immersion in their everyday lives (p. 90). Finally, a case study, by some understood not as a separate methodology, but ‘as a choice of what is to be studied’, seeks to develop an understanding of the case(s) chosen or to

illustrate certain issue or problem with help of such case(s) (p. 97). The methodology adopted by a researcher depends upon the purpose of the specific research project and requires thorough justification (Crotty, 1998).

I became familiar with the above methodologies alongside the process of reviewing the literature, identifying the most appropriate theoretical framework and defining the research questions, as these stages of the project remained interconnected (Carter and Little, 2007). As demonstrated so far, these simultaneous processes have led my project to be preoccupied with capturing the in-depth understandings of young people's everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies from their own perspective. Moreover, they highlighted the equally important emphasis my study placed upon the impact of social divisions and inequalities on young people's practices, experiences and subjectivities, thus requiring a methodology that was sensitive to these objectives.

Narrative inquiry was consequently adopted for three main reasons. Firstly, narrative inquiry is particularly interested in capturing lived experiences of the group under study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), while also with revealing truths about the social structures of which these experiences are part of (Chase, 2011; Dwyer, 2017). Secondly, neither of the other approaches seemed appropriate as I was neither seeking to generate a theory nor to study a culture sharing group. Moreover, even though I looked at the experiences associated with NEETness, this was not the only focus of my study. On the contrary, my project was also interested in capturing individual trajectories, relationships with education and employment, as well as with histories of young people's practices. In this sense, my study also attempted to capture biographical elements of my participants' lives, a focus which also lies at heart of narrative methodology. Finally, as Burke further asserts (2015), narrative inquiry is particularly suitable for scholars working with *habitus* as theory-method, due to its strong ability to capture the repetition of individual practices, perceptions and attitudes. The narrative inquiry is further discussed in the following section.



### 5.2.2 Narrative inquiry: 'individual stories' within larger narratives

The strength of narrative inquiry lies in the fact that it provides researchers with the means for 'understanding and making meaning of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participation in the ongoing lives of research participants' (Clandinin and Caine, 2008:542). Specifically, narrative inquiry allows for the intimate study of individuals' everyday experiences, how they understand, make meaning of and experience the world around them (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Undoubtedly, most of us construct narratives – 'small stories' – in order to make sense of our everyday experiences (Moen, 2006). We construct these narratives for ourselves and for others; we both think narratively and we are constantly surrounded by the narratives of others and of institutions (Moen, 2006). Narratives are meaningful units, structured by experiences (Moen, 2006) and through which people make sense of such experiences. The narrative researcher is thus committed to capturing these units in order to explain the phenomenon under study.

Moreover, while each person, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000:45) argue, 'is an embodiment of lived stories', these stories are also always contextual, and so is the narrative inquiry itself. It continues over time and in different places in which participants and the researcher meet and collaborate to co-compose the stories which are 're-lived and told' during these encounters (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:20). In these stories the context is also omnipresent. It is at once temporal, spatial and individual and social, akin to the Bourdieusian theory of practice. In other words, the context to the stories told has a three-dimensional nature. It allows access to narratives of experiences situated in time (past, present and future) and located in places (*fields*). It also allows us to grasp both individual (feelings, hopes, perceptions and attitudes that constitute one's set of dispositions) and social aspects of experience (interactions/relationships with others, place and institutions). As a result, participants move backward and forward in time, they move between places where things happened and create new stories in the present during their encounters with the researcher (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Narrative studies value 'thick descriptions' of individuals, the contexts they live in, the map of their social relationships, as well as of the settings of a study (Denzin, 1989; Moen, 2006). This enables the making of stories told by the participants and re-told by the researcher to be believable to the audience, as well as transferable to other contexts (Creswell, 2013), thus collective and important to be cared for (Bochner, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). By doing so, it is possible to make sense of 'lives as lived' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:78), to capture the voices of the research participants; voices that are not only personal, as shaped by their experiences, values, knowledge and feelings, but also social and collective because they are situated in and influenced by the broader cultural, social and institutional narratives (Clandinin and Caine, 2008:542). In other words, narrative inquiry is as much concerned with studying lived experiences as with the questions of how they can be positioned and understood within the broader society and its unequal structures (Chase, 2011; Etherington, 2009). This was achieved by linking my research with critical theory (Crotty, 1998) in order to examine how the impact of the old social divisions and *symbolic violence* have affected my participants' lives and transitions. Additionally, the dominant narratives surrounding young people, such as their difficult transitions being presented as a result of their personal failures or deficit approaches applied to their use of technologies, were also scrutinised and disputed.

Consequently, the narrative researcher becomes more than just the instrument of data collection concerned with gathering participants' views and experiences (Creswell, 2013). She is also a listener and narrator who, in order to understand participants' stories, their voices, lives, trajectories, needs to explore her own stories and experiences first (Chase, 2011; see also the Introduction Chapter). Consequently, as Clandinin and Caine (2008:43) argue:

[n]arrative inquiries begin with inquiring into researchers' own stories of experience. Because narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology, narrative inquirers need to inquire continually into their experiences before, during, and after each inquiry.

For example, my personal justification for undertaking this project, my personal stories and experiences, as well as my set of beliefs and values have also become a part of my participants and broader narratives (see Section 1.1). Moreover, my commitment to ethical 'acts of representation' of my participants' lives (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:137) went far beyond the issues of consent, confidentiality and avoiding harm (Clandinin and Cane, 2008). I aspired to re-tell the stories of marginalised, often misrepresented and silenced young people in a respectful, complex and authentic way, in order to challenge negative, false and even cruel perceptions, misconceptions and public understandings (Smyth and McInerney, 2013). In order to do so, the 'more detailed, descriptive, and richer narratives that reveal more of the identity and interests of participants and researchers' (Smyth and McInerney, 2013:4) were also adopted. More broadly, all above practices have thus constituted a form of advocacy research (Creswell, 2009).

## **5.3 Research methods**

To meet the procedural criteria of legitimation, the research techniques and tools used to gather and analyse data (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Crotty, 1998), alongside the ethical considerations, are discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### *5.3.1 Sampling strategy, fieldwork and participants*

#### *Sampling strategy*

As specified in the review of the literature, my study aims to capture everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies amongst young people labelled as NEET in the Scottish context. In order to do so, it was thus necessary to identify a sampling strategy to select the participants. This process of selection required inclusion of participants based on specific criteria that would allow me to capture the multiple dimensions of their experiences (Flick, 2014; France, 2015). Consequently, a purposive (non-probability) stratified (encompassing sub-groups in the sample for comparisons) sampling strategy was employed as its main aim is to generate an in-depth and rich understanding of the phenomenon under study rather than to produce generalisable findings or measure meanings; to study 'information rich' cases rather than statistical

patterns (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2014; France, 2015; Patton, 2002). The purposeful sampling was further combined with criterion sampling – types of criteria that specified whom to select as participants (Creswell, 2013). As such, young people age 16-24, who were not in education, employment or training at the point of recruitment and who had been seeking to access vocational or learning opportunities in urban Scotland were specified as research participants. Adopting these inclusion criteria meant however that young people, who for any reason, were unemployed and not seeking work or learning opportunities at the point of recruitment, remained excluded from this study.

It needs to be noted that excluding young people in this 'NEET' sub-category (economically inactive) was driven by the objectives and research questions of the current study, that sought to explore young people's practices of looking for work and learning after leaving compulsory education, including the use of technologies. However, as also argued in Section 2.2.1, the economically inactive sub-category (like the NEET category, in general) remains highly problematic, as it includes young people who do not seek/can participate in the economic activity due to e.g. caring/parenting responsibilities, severe disabilities or long-term illness. Subsuming all these groups of young people into one pejorative category further undermines the importance and economic value of the unpaid work (OfNS, 2016) and promotes ableism as the default feature of contemporary society. Additional studies are thus needed to explore the everyday lives and experiences of young people labelled as economically inactive. Finally, using formal channels of recruitment meant that young people who do not use any supporting services, were also not included (see Section 10.2 for implications).

There was no requirement for young people to be actively using technologies to take part, as one of my research questions was focussed on examining how everyday and embedded technologies are in the lives and transitions of young people identified as NEET. While initially I considered recruiting young people aged 16 to 19, as specified by the '*More Choices More Chances*' agenda (Scottish Executive, 2006), I decided to extend the age of young people recruited to 24. This was done because the literature review demonstrated that contemporary young adulthood has become more complex,

fragmented and extended (Furlong, 2013). Additionally, policies such as '*Opportunities for All*' (Scottish Government, 2012; 2014b) provide transitional support to young people between the ages of 16 and 19 only, thus posing the question of what happens to young people after they turn 20 (Scottish Government, 2017b). As also identified in Sections 1.3 and 2.2, there are high levels of unemployment among young people age 16-24, thus requiring further investigation.

While there are no strict rules regarding the sample size in qualitative research, it is often argued that the sample should be relatively small and manageable, information rich and purposeful (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2013) provides guidance on numbers and suggest that the sample size should be no smaller than 12 participants and no larger than 30. I thus limited my sample size to approximately 25 participants, as it was anticipated that this number would allow me to reach theoretical saturation in the data collected, and managed to recruit 22 young people, 15 young men and 7 young women, who met the criteria listed above.

#### *Site of the study*

Having specified the sample size and inclusion criteria, I had to choose a study site (sampling of a context; Bryman, 2012). The city of Glasgow was selected not only for the convenience reasons, but also due to its specific history shaped by the processes of deindustrialisation and neoliberalisation, discussed in detail in Section 2.1.2.

Notably, Glasgow belongs to one of the UK's 'Old Industrial Regions' that 'have since the 1980s suffered stubbornly high levels of unemployment, subsequent to the widespread deindustrialisation and economic restructuring of the UK economy from the 1970s onwards' (MacDonald et al., 2014:201). These processes have resulted in significant changes to the local labour market and its structure. For example, in the West of Scotland, as many as 65% of industrial jobs since 1970s were lost by 2006 and replaced with employment in the business, banking, finance, insurance and service industries (Turok and Edge, 1999; Walsh et al., 2008). Yet, despite the creation of new jobs in the service sector, the manufacturing opportunities in Glasgow were not replaced in terms of number, quality and security of jobs available to the working

classes in the past (Fraser et al., 2017; Turok and Edge, 1999). Rather, Glasgow the once 'Second City' of the Empire, had 'become increasingly peripheral to the functioning of the global economy' (Fraser et al., 2017:238). Consequently, a long-lasting spatial concentration of socio-economic disadvantage linked to such decline has continued to impact 'over decades on the life opportunities of different generations' living in the city (MacDonald et al., 2014:202).

Glasgow's share of the 20% of most deprived areas in Scotland (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation – SIMD; Scottish Government, 2016a, 2016b) is as high as 48%. Over one third of Glasgow's children continue to live in the 10% most deprived areas of Scotland (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, n.d.; Scottish Government, 2016a). Glasgow's inhabitants also have much poorer health outcomes than Scotland's average and higher levels of excess mortality in comparison with other post-industrial cities such as Liverpool, Manchester and Belfast (Walsh et al., 2016). It also has the highest levels of child poverty amongst Scotland's major cities (34% of children were estimated to live in poverty in 2017), while in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods, levels of children living in poverty reach almost 60% (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, n.d.). Consequently, the recent history of the city of Glasgow and its inhabitants has been one of high levels of deprivation, poverty, vulnerability, poor health and high levels of unemployment (Walsh et al., 2016; Scottish Government, 2015a). Glasgow also accounts for one out of seven young people classified as NEET in Scotland, while these numbers have been persistently higher than Scotland's average for over two decades (Adams, 2012; Scottish Government, 2015a).

#### *Permission, gaining access and fieldwork*

Permission for my study was sought and secured from the School of Social Work & Social Policy Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde. As my research involved working with vulnerable participants, I obtained disclosure from the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme. Thereafter, I contacted a member of Skills Development Scotland met through a public engagement activity. A meeting with a group of professionals from across their Glasgow division was then set up and they provided me with details of several organisations suitable for facilitating my study.

These included: careers services, training providers, organisations supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, young people involved in crime, as well as youth clubs located in Glasgow. Approximately 30 organisations were contacted and initially 9 responded. After a three-month process of negotiating access, 3 organisations committed to facilitating my study. These included:

- A careers service operating across 5 different sites in Glasgow, of which 3 (East, South-West and Central) were used for the recruitment purposes (thereafter named Organisation 1), which focused on providing careers advice and guidance, information and support in seeking employment and/or learning opportunities. This organisation is among the biggest service providers in Scotland and supports transitions of dozens of thousands of young people each year.
- A training provider located across 4 different sites in Glasgow, of which 2 (South-East and West) were used for recruitment purposes (Organisation 2), delivering employability training to young people aged 16-24 identified as NEET. This organisation is among the biggest training providers in Scotland, operating across more than 10 local authorities, with a majority of its users coming from the first 20% of the most disadvantaged areas.
- An organisation supporting young people who had been involved in crime (Organisation 3), located in the south of Glasgow and focused on supporting young people to desist from crime and facilitate their transitions towards positive destinations. This organisation was smaller than the above two, as it operated across a few local authorities. Nevertheless, its service users were considered as mostly belonging to vulnerable populations.

Out of the six geographical recruitment sites, five were located in the top 20% of the most deprived areas of Glasgow, according to SIMD (Scottish Government, 2016a). While the sixth site (at Organisation 1) was situated in central Glasgow, in the least deprived area, their service users came mainly from areas of deprivation. Importantly,

recruiting through organisations located in the East, West, Central and South sides of Glasgow proved to be a strong advantage, as it allowed me to gain access to participants residing across the city, rather than clustered in just one local neighbourhood. Although I was committed to including young people with disabilities and from ethnic minorities, several organisations which were working with these groups were unable to assist with my project. Nevertheless, as the section on my participants' background will further reveal, two of my participants attended schools for pupils with special needs, five young people had a learning disorder and one person self-identified as minority ethnic.

The fieldwork began in November 2016 and ended in April 2017. I spent a week at each of the three sites of Organisation 1 and between 1 to 2 days over a period of 5 weeks in Organisations 2 and 3. This was due to differences in how these organisations were operating. Organisation 1 was a drop-in place and operated an appointment system for young people seeking support. In turn, Organisations 2 and 3 were engaging with their service users on daily basis, thus I was accommodated to come in on the least disruptive days. The participants that met the inclusion criteria were identified by the professionals at each site in consultation with me. They were then either approached by some of their key workers/practitioners who knew them directly, or by myself, depending on opportunities available to engage with young people during my time with each organisation. Around 15 young people either declined to take part, or when they agreed, they did not attend their interviews.

Additionally, nine practitioners from the three Organisations volunteered for interviews. These included: four careers advisors (Organisation 1), two employees in the training provider organisation (Organisation 2) and three youth workers, all of different levels of seniority (Organization 3). Moreover, I also approached Glasgow City Council and secured interviews with two policy makers working in the area of youth employability and transitions. Finally, while I managed to established links with the members of Employability, Skills and Lifelong Learning Analysis Division in the Scottish Government, the interviews I secured with civil servants turned out to be informal and



informative only, with no permission to use them in my study. According to the information I was given, this was due to the official stance that the Scottish Government takes on research it has not itself commissioned. Nevertheless, practitioners and policy makers I recruited, provided me with the context to the youth transitions in Scotland and to how the policy processes operate on the ground. Table 5.1 summarises the profile of practitioners and policy makers I interviewed.

**Table 5. 1 Profile of practitioners and policy makers interviewed**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>SIMD position<sup>11</sup></b>
<b>Kathy</b>	Personal advisor	Careers services	East	1
<b>Robert</b>	Careers advisor	Careers services	East	1
<b>Susan</b>	Personal advisor	Careers services	South-West	1
<b>Kim</b>	Work coach	Careers services	South-West	1
<b>Andrew</b>	Training provider (senior position)	Training provider	South-East	1
<b>Kenneth</b>	Training provider	Training provider	South-East	1
<b>Mark</b>	Youth worker (senior position)	Organisation supporting young offenders	South	2
<b>Fiona</b>	Youth worker	Organisation supporting young offenders	South	2
<b>Louise</b>	Youth worker	Organisation supporting young offenders	South	2
<b>Lorna</b>	Policy maker (Senior policy officer in Education, Employability and Skills)	Glasgow City Council	N/A	N/A
<b>Bernard</b>	Policy maker (Policy officer in Youth Employability)	Glasgow City Council	N/A	N/A

<sup>11</sup> SIMD position of area where organisations were based ranked on a scale from 1 (most deprived) decile to 10 (least deprived) decile (Scottish Government, 2016a, 2016b).

### *Demographic information*

Thick descriptions of participants and their socio-economic backgrounds were obtained throughout the interviews and the information collected through the Consent Form (see Appendix 2). In total, 22 young people, 15 young men and 7 young women, all aged 16 to 24 were recruited. The unequal gender composition of the sample was partially driven by the overall NEET statistical evidence, which shows that young men are more likely to be 'unemployed seeking' (work/education) and young women – 'unemployed not seeking' (SDS, 2015). However, the nature of Organisation 2 and 3 also contributed to my inability to recruit more young women, as the service users in these two organisations were predominantly male (e.g. due to the sport activity Organisation 2 used as the means for engaging young people; and the gender differences among young people involved in crime, who were the focus of the support offered by Organisation 3). Finally, 2 young women age 20 and 23 recruited for the study decided to withdraw their consent (see Section 5.3.2 for details and Section 10.2 for implications of the gender composition of the sample).

Furthermore, all but one participant self-identified as White Scottish or White British. While my inclusion criteria required young people to be identified as NEET and seeking employment or education, there were no other prerequisites, such as coming from a lower socio-economic background or belonging to any of vulnerable NEET 'sub-categories' (Scottish Executive, 2006). Nevertheless, participants who met the inclusion criteria were found to share a set of commonalities, the particular 'class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1990a:53). Specifically, the vast majority of participants (18 out of 22) lived in the top 20% of the most deprived areas of Glasgow. Moreover, 16 participants lived in the neighbourhoods that were classified as persistently among the first 5% of the most deprived areas in Scotland since the introduction of the SIMD in 2004 (Scottish Government, 2016a, 2016b). Demographic profiles generated throughout the interviews indicated that the young people and their families had experienced multiple forms of socio-economic disadvantage and were predominantly from the lower socio-economic backgrounds. These included: poverty and material deprivation, lone parenting, worklessness and using state

support, history of parental substance abuse, family breakdown, domestic violence, parental bereavement, negative school experiences, truancing and anticipated school exclusion, learning disorders/special needs, living in care, homelessness, involvement in crime, young parenthood and/or health issues.

Even though I was using purposive sampling that specified the inclusion criteria as broadly as the 'NEET experienced', the profile of participants recruited encompassed a range of so called characteristics and included multiple 'NEET' sub-groups identified and quantified by the NEET-focused scholarship. Additionally, my participants' experiences of NEETness varied greatly, as I could identify so called 'churners' (those in and out of NEET and EET numerous times), long term-unemployed and short-term NEET, while in many instances some or all of these categories also overlapped. In other words, even though I was using non-probability sampling, the sample recruited broadly reflected the characteristics of the highly heterogenous 'NEET' group (see Section 2.2 and Table 5.2). This further indicates that a sample close to the maximum variation across the cases was achieved (Merkens, 2004), allowing the researcher to draw moderate hypothetical generalisations from the study towards other similar cases (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Payne and Williams, 2005).

Furthermore, while my participants were from lower socio-economic backgrounds and lived in the most deprived areas of Glasgow, their socio-economic status, forms and level of disadvantage differed. On the one side of the spectrum there were young people who lived in workless households and who experienced multiple forms of disadvantage and severe levels of poverty. The majority of participants had at least one parent working in the low-level employment. Yet, some of young people in this subgroup were living in single headed households, alone, in care, or homeless and thus reported significant experiences of socio-economic deprivation. Finally, three participants had parents working in lower middle-class professions (as per ONS, using 2010 classification) and reported significantly fewer experiences of material disadvantage than the other young people in this study. Participants' background information is shown in Table 5.2.

**Table 5. 2 Young people’s background information**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Local area <sup>12</sup>	Family background <sup>13</sup>	Other circumstances
Alan	20	M	White Scottish	2	Mother – unemployed, on state support; Father – transport drivers and operatives	Young parent; History of offending
Alison	16	F	White Scottish	1	Single parent household	Truancy
Anne	17	F	White Scottish	1	Single parent household; Mother – Elementary service occupations	Truancy Dyslexia
Brian	16	M	White Scottish	1	Mother – secretarial related occupations Father’s education – first person in family with HND	In receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance (when at school)
Calum	17	M	White Scottish	1	Parents – long-term unemployed, on state support	Attended school for pupils with special needs; Bullied at school; Very limited ability to read and write
Christopher	17	M	White Scottish	1	Mother – nurses Father – skilled construction and building trades (self-employed)	Truancy
Claire	16	F	White Scottish	Residential Care	No information volunteered	Family problems Living in care
Daniel	17	M	White Scottish	1	Single-parent household	Dyslexia
Danielle	18	F	White Scottish	1	Mother – care workers and home carers	Bullied at school
Declan	16	M	White British	2	No information volunteered	Truancy
Emma	18	F	White Scottish	2	Father – lower administrative and secretarial occupations	Long term illness
Hannah	17	F	White Scottish	4	One parent household	Young parent, Truancy, Parental substance misuse
James	19	M	White British	1	One parent household,	Domestic violence, parental split up, Bullied at school;

<sup>12</sup> As per SIMD position, ranked on a scale from 1 (most deprived) decile to 10 (least deprived) decile (Scottish Government, 2016a, 2016b)

<sup>13</sup> Parental occupation as per Standard Occupational Classification: SOC2010 (ONS, 2010)

					Mother – unemployed, on state support. Father – sports and fitness occupations	Estranged relationship with father
<b>Jamie</b>	16	M	White British	1	No information volunteered	Young parent, In informal kinship care
<b>Jason</b>	16	M	White Scottish	1	Father – lower managerial and administrative occupations	
<b>Joe</b>	24	M	White	1	No information volunteered	In kinship care; Mother’s substance misuse
<b>Liam</b>	23	M	White Scottish	1	No information volunteered	Dyslexia
<b>Martin</b>	23	M	White Scottish	Living with a partner	One parent household; Mother – unemployed, on state support	Young father, Parental substance misuse; Parental split up; History of offending; History of substance misuse
<b>Matthew</b>	19	M	Black British	1	No information volunteered	
<b>Michael</b>	20	M	White Scottish	Homeless hostel	Parents – unemployed, on state support	Young parent Attended school for pupils with special needs; Homeless; History of offending
<b>Noemi</b>	17	F	White Scottish	1	One parent household	Mother’s bereavement; Abusive relationship; Reduced ability to read and write
<b>Ron</b>	17	M	White Scottish	1	No information volunteered	

Notably, identifying this shared ‘class of conditions of existence’ (Bourdieu, 1990a:53) among my participants can be considered as a finding in itself, which demonstrates the systematic links between socio-economic inequalities and unequal patterns of youth transitions (see also MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012 for similar conclusions). It also reveals the intrinsic contradictions underpinning the NEET policy agenda, which allocates the causes of youth unemployment to personal deficits and attributes rather than the dynamic processes and structural inequalities underpinning contemporary society (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). These issues will be further explored in Chapters 6 to 9.

### *5.3.2 Methods of data collection*

Having chosen a methodology and my participants’ profiles, it was necessary to choose methods of data collection sensitive to my research objectives. Specifically, the

narrative inquiry approach and the research questions directed this research project to an ethnographic-like approach as most suitable to the study (Burke, 2015). The multi-layered design included: interviews as conversations with 22 participants (Clandinin and Caine, 2008), young people's diaries, researcher's reflective journal and *habitus* as theory-method. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews with 11 practitioners and policy makers overseeing youth transitions in Scotland were conducted in order to position young people's stories within the larger, institutional narratives (Moen, 2006).

Face to face, open ended, in-depth and semi-structured interviews as conversations with young people were a key tool of data collection (Bryman, 2012; Clandinin and Caine, 2008). The main purpose of interviewing was to see the world from young people's own perspective, to gather their stories, and then to retell these in a way that captures and preserves young people's unique voices (Bryman, 2012). Such aims were clearly linked with the epistemological questions of what counts as knowledge and where such knowledge comes from. Thus, the interviews were a form of acknowledgment that young people's accounts, perspectives and experiences constitute a meaningful and reliable source of knowledge. Young people, in turn, were recognised as knowledgeable actors, experts in their own circumstances, who make knowledge about their lifeworlds explicit (Bryman, 2012).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) identify three main approaches to open-ended interviewing: the informal conversation, interview guide and standardised open-ended interviews. This research project adopted a combination of the first two strategies. It relied on the natural flow of the conversation and a general guide that covered the main themes I identified in order to answer the research questions (see Appendix 3). Resultantly, the flexibility of the conversational approach was a useful way to generate discussion and to give young people an opportunity to share their accounts freely and decide what to talk or not to talk about (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, the conversational character of the interviews allowed for eliciting rich and in-depth accounts of young people's lives, alongside the information about the multiple *fields* they occupied, their social relationships or their detailed demographic profiles (Broadhurst et al., 2005; Denzin,

1989; Moen, 2006; Rapley, 2001). On the other hand, the flexible adoption of the script guide covering the main themes enabled me to capture data for the cross-case comparisons during the analysis stage (Bryman, 2012). At the same time, I was able to follow up the issues that were significant to my participants and that emerged from their stories, perspectives and meaning making practices (Bryman, 2012). As such, the order of the questions was often changed and additional questions were used to follow up the stories told, so I could grasp young people's lifeworlds and their unique voices (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Notably, these strategies also demonstrate that the researcher's role is central to the interview process (Etherington, 2009). In other words, how the story is told depends not only on the narrator, but also on the listener, as she leads the discussion and 'hears' the conversations (Etherington, 2009). Interview encounters with my participants were therefore both interactive and collaborative (Warr, 2004), as the stories were co-produced in the interview setting (Rapley, 2001), which was itself embodied and situated (Warr, 2004). Consequently, data gathered through the interviews was understood as situationally, locally and contextually specific and emerging from the interaction between the participant and researcher (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Rapley, 2001). This, in turn, leads to understanding knowledge obtained as just one of the possible versions of the participants' accounts concerning their everyday lives and experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Being aware of the importance of my role as an interviewer, I was committed to following Kvale's (1996) main criteria of good interviews. Being a good listener, active and alert to the stories told made me particularly sensitive to what young people found meaningful and wanted to talk about. I followed up issues that were raised by my participants, yet without losing sight of the main themes I wanted to cover with them. Moreover, being open about who I was as a person and a researcher, highlighting the independence of academic research and its non-judgmental character, were vital in establishing rapport with my interviewees and to ensure 'a good interview' (Becker et al., 2012; Josselson, 2007). I was thus committed to providing my participants with a positive and empowering experience and making them feel listened to and cared

about. Specifically, on numerous occasions I emphasised that it was their voices that were central to my study, their perspectives and meanings that I sought. In most cases, this proved a useful way to encourage young people to share their accounts freely and to openly reflect on their experiences, some of which were very difficult and adversary.

Crucially, I think of the ways I engaged with my participants as positionality and reflexivity in action. Such understandings were further captured in my reflective journal, in which the issues of rapport and consequently depth of the interviews, were central (Dwyer, 2017). Indeed, I felt that a majority of my participants responded well to me and our encounters. For example, I was told by some of young people that they found the interview process enjoyable as they could talk about themselves, or that it encouraged them to reflect on their lives in the ways they have not done before. Some described our interview as a highly positive experience, because they were listened to, unlike in other spheres of their lives, such as the school context. These comments, as I also found out, were widely discussed and shared amongst the whole group of young people participating in the employability training (Organisation 2) and encouraged some to also come forward and take part in my study.

Moreover, I felt that for two participants in particular, James (19) and Brian (16), coming to speak to me was particularly important due to the feelings of being unheard and let down during their transitions. James, for example, arrived three hours late due to caring for his autistic cousin and was positively surprised that I was still at the Organisation 1 and free to speak with him. He proved to be a reflective and engaging narrator, open about his everyday life and the variety of his experiences, while the feelings of injustice and being '*wound up*' after finishing several work placements without securing employment, strongly underpinned his narrative. Brian, on the other hand, was particularly keen to share how his school let him down by not allowing him to study Higher Drama, thus leading to his self-exclusion at the age of 16. Both young men wanted their stories to be heard, understood from their own perspective and shared, so maybe 'something could be done about it', as Brian told me after our interview. In a broader sense, for many of my participants the interviews may have thus been understood as a form of 'intervention', as they may have affected their



knowledge about themselves, as emancipating and healing experience, or even as a type of confession (Bryman, 2012).

However, as Bryman (2012) also warns, for some, interviews may become intrusive, sensitive, or uncomfortable experience. This seemed to be the case for two other participants, Declan (16) and Jason (16), who I felt found the interview process rather difficult, and perhaps even intrusive. They answered the interview questions, but without providing much insight into their lifeworlds. Moreover, my interview with Declan felt contrived, judging by his closed body language and frequent glancing at the audio-recorder. I stopped our interview twice to make sure he was comfortable to continue. As Declan did not want to stop the interview, I made an *ad hoc* decision to keep the interview quite short by not asking additional questions, while respecting his wish to continue. The experience seemed quite different for Jason, who came across as talkative and confident, however he also did not open up much. This was clearly visible when we were discussing his relationships with teachers, and he answered with '*Are you kidding me?*' At this point, I once again reassured Jason that I was seeking young people's perspectives and opinions, without any judgment, and even though he shared some of his experiences afterwards, I felt he was guarded and mindful to ensure he was not disclosing too much information. My observations were validated after we finished our interview and were chatting informally about his experience. Jason confirmed he would never speak with me openly as he would with his friends, as he felt he did not know me well enough.

In the case of these two participants, the relatively limited rapport acted as a significant barrier to gathering in-depth accounts of their lifeworlds. Additionally, two young women recruited at the Organisation 2, decided to withdraw their consent and were not included in the study. One of the participants did not wish to be recorded, while the second told me, after struggling to give an answer to the first question, 'Can you tell me a bit about yourself?', that she finds it too difficult to talk about herself. Issues of rapport have perhaps played an important factor in deciding to cease the participation in my study. However, there may be an additional explanation, based on the accounts of other young people who did take part in my research. Specifically, a

majority of my participants disclosed that they found it hard to talk with people they did not know, especially in a formal setting, as they felt they lacked confidence to do so. My engagement with the literature has also revealed that certain set of dispositions, such as confidence, sense of entitlement or being in control are typical of the middle-class *habitus* (Grisrud et al., 2011; Skeggs, 2004a, 2011), while disadvantaged youth may have to work, at times hard, to acquire such attributes (Farrugia, 2019).

The interviews with young people were followed by a mental mapping exercise. This was found to be a creative and fruitful way of engaging young people, as its particular strength lies not only in giving young people relative freedom of choosing content, details and design of the map, but also in providing them with the opportunity to creatively express themselves (Trell and Van Hoven, 2010). As such, participants were asked to fill in a timeline of the important technology related events in their lives. Specifically, they were encouraged to explore the history of their use of technologies, starting in childhood and up to the time of interview. Additionally, contextual influences including family, peers and the education system on their engagement with technologies were discussed during the activity (Granholm, 2016). One participant, Callum (16), however, opted to not participate in the activity and have a discussion instead, due to his inability to write.

A narrative methodology also allows the researcher to make use of various artifacts which constitute an important part of the field texts (Clandinin and Cane, 2008). Specifically, diaries are argued to be one such research artifact, praised for their usefulness for studying everyday, intimate or private aspects of people's lives that could be difficult to be observed otherwise, for example due to ethical or practical reasons (Harvey, 2011). Moreover, diaries have been widely used as one of the means of triangulating participants' accounts (Creswell, 2013), or as offering participants a safe space to reflect on the issues discussed during the interviews (Harvey, 2011).

Given these advantages, diaries were thus adopted as an additional tool of data collection. Their main purpose was to grasp various aspects of young people's everyday

lives. Specific questions revolved around daily routines during a chosen week, places visited, people met and activities undertaken, as well as engagement with technologies, both in young people's everyday lives and while looking for education, employment or training opportunities. Each of the participants was asked to keep an audio or written diary for a week. One participant, Declan, decided not to do this, while the remaining participants chose the written version. However, some young people immediately indicated they may not have [had] time to keep a diary. In the end, only three diaries were returned, which confirmed what my participants told me during the interviews.

Before discussing the process of analysing the data, the next section addresses the key ethical issues.

## **5.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethical 'acts of representation' of my participants and their lives (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:137), alongside issues of hearing the young people's voices and advocacy, have been discussed in detail throughout this chapter, as they lie at heart of narrative inquiry (Chase, 2011; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This section outlines the remaining ethical considerations underpinning my project. Specifically, it emphasises the sensitive character of research involving vulnerable groups and addresses key ethical principles.

### *5.4.1 Vulnerable groups and the sensitive character of the project*

Research involving people as participants poses key ethical issues that should be recognised and addressed by the researcher in order to meet ethical standards. In the early stages of this project, the guidelines specified in the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (ESRC, 2015) and Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings (University of Strathclyde, 2013) were consulted.

Certain categories of participants, however, are considered vulnerable. Consequently, research involving such groups becomes more sensitive and raises additional ethical, methodological and practical challenges (Becker et al., 2012; Mason, 2002; Renzetti

and Lee, 1993; Russell, 2013; Sime, 2008). Young people who took part in my study were identified as being potentially vulnerable at the early stages of the project. This was not only due to their age as young adults (Becker et al., 2012). The diversity and character of the group that consists of young people from the lower SE backgrounds, including those with experiences of poverty and multiple deprivation, as well as defined by policy and public discourses as problematic, contributed to ascribing these young people to the 'potentially vulnerable' category (Becker et al., 2012). Moreover, as demonstrated in the literature review, vulnerable sub-groups have been identified amongst young people labelled as NEET (Scottish Executive, 2006), thus requiring the researcher to be prepared for the sensitive character of research and to anticipate potential ethical challenges at every stage.

#### *5.4.2 Respect for participants and being an ethical researcher*

The remaining key ethical considerations encompass the issues of respect for participants, informed consent, protection from harm, confidentiality and anonymity, and mitigation of the potentially intrusive character of research (Becker et al., 2012; Flick, 2014; Russell, 2013). In addition, research with young people requires one to be an ethical, open, honest, sensitive, gentle, caring and empathetic (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Kvale, 1996).

I was prepared for the sensitive character of my research at every stage. For example, respect for my participants and their lifeworlds underpinned the design of the research questions, as well as its methodology and methods and extended to the process of interpretation and dissemination of findings (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Silverman, 2010). This was done through portraying my participants in a balanced and respectful way, as well as situating their experiences within the broader contexts or adopting critical theory that seeks to expose mechanisms of domination and unequal power relations (Russell, 2013). I was also committed to mitigate the potentially intrusive character of the interviews by asking questions that were not too specific and offering young people a safe space to share as much or as little as they wanted to (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, to avoid the risk of disempowering 'the poor'

(Dean, 1996, cited in Sime, 2008), I was particularly committed to provide young people with a positive and potentially empowering experience where their stories were listened to, heard and cared for.

Prior to starting the fieldwork, permission for my study was sought and secured from the Ethics Committee in the School of Social Work & Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde. Moreover, due to ascribing my participants to a vulnerable category, I also obtained a disclosure from the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme.

Before the interviews I sought to secure consent from young people to ensure that they wanted to take part in my study. In order to meet the criteria of informed consent, young people were informed in detail of the research purpose, methods and prospective uses of the research, potential risks and benefits and what they could expect from their participation. I also emphasised the voluntary character of their involvement. Additionally, the participants were informed when their involvement in the research was expected to end and for how long and for what purposes I wanted to keep the data generated. Their permission to audio-record the interview was also sought. This information was provided both in writing (in the form of a Participant Information sheet, see Appendix 1) and verbally, before the Informed Consent form was signed (Mason, 2002; see Appendix 2). Importantly, the language used to explain the research process was kept as simple and clear as possible. Furthermore, as I highlighted throughout this chapter, I was open about who I was and why I conducted my research, as well as how valuable and important young people's voices, perspectives and experiences were for my project. Moreover, participants' right to cease their involvement in the research at any stage without giving any reason was emphasised, in addition to their right not to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with. Finally, I understood informed consent not just as a singular act, but rather as a dynamic process that was negotiated at every stage of research (Renzetti and Lee, 1993).

To ensure that trust is maintained in the researcher-participant relationship and to protect the participants from harm that could arise if their identity was revealed,

researchers are obliged to meet the principle of confidentiality. To do so, participants' anonymity was ensured through adopting several strategies. Specifically, data was anonymised by ascribing pseudonyms to participants, as well as to people, places and institutions they referred to during the interviews. Similarly, organisations and local areas of Glasgow from which participants were recruited were anonymised. Anonymity of participants was also ensured by presenting the findings in such way that participants cannot be identified. Moreover, only data relevant to the project and its research questions was sought to be elicited during interviews, while participants' addresses (apart from the postcode) were not collected at all. However, the confidentiality clause and protecting young people from harm of disclosure was not absolute. While securing their informed consent, my participants were informed that this would be breached in case they disclosed information about potential harm to themselves or others. Only under such circumstances, would information about participant be shared with relevant social and/or health services.

Finally, the researcher is obliged to protect participants from potential distress. Research exploring sensitive issues may, however, pose such a risk. In order to mitigate it, several positive practices were implemented (Renzetti and Lee, 1993). Specifically, the interviews were conducted in the premises of the facilitating organisations, thus providing the participants with familiar and safe spaces. Moreover, I provided young people with a list of supporting organisations they could contact in case they felt distressed after our interviews (Josselson, 2007). Additionally, I encouraged young people to speak with their key worker at the facilitating organisation if they became upset or distressed after our interview. At the end of the interview I also had an informal chat with each young person, to check on their wellbeing (Josselson, 2007). No one left visibly distressed and, to my knowledge, no support was sought from the practitioners as a result of the interviews.

The principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity also applied to the research with practitioners and policy makers. However, as they were interviewed in their professional capacity and not considered a vulnerable population, no additional

safeguarding procedures were adopted and none of the adults interviewed expressed any views or described any incidents which required additional safeguarding measures.

The final section of this chapter discusses in detail the process of data analysis in which *habitus* as theory-method plays a crucial role.

## **5.5 Approach to data analysis**

Leaving the research fieldwork means that the narrative researcher can get immersed in the process of analysing the stories of experience gathered during this period of inquiry. Doing so, however, is not a straightforward endeavour, but rather a creative, highly intellectual and often intuitive work (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 2013). Lack of specific and perhaps scientific-like rules has led to accusations of qualitative research as being relativist and unreliable. Nevertheless, as thoroughly argued throughout this chapter, if certain validation strategies are adopted, procedural rigour assured and the transparency and accuracy of the process demonstrated, qualitative data analysis should not be treated as unreliable or invalid (Silverman, 2010). Moreover, there is a significant body of scholarship that provides a qualitative researcher with general and fundamental guidelines for successful data analysis that ensures that the above principles are met. These guidelines, with which I thoroughly familiarised myself prior to starting the process of analysis, have been adjusted to the specific requirements of my narrative project and are discussed below.

The first step of the process of qualitative analysis starts with preparing data (Creswell, 2013) or, in the terminology of narrative inquiry, preparing the field texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I started with verbatim transcription of the 22 interviews with young people, each lasting 30 minutes to 2 hours (on average 75 minutes), and interviews with 9 professionals and 2 policy makers, each lasting 1 – 2 hours. As a non-native speaker of English and not fully familiar with Scottish English and localisms I might have missed at times capturing my participants' voices entirely authentically as they sounded when spoken. Nevertheless, after the labour-intensive process of transcribing my participants' accounts, I produced the best possible written versions of the interviews awaiting further analysis. Additionally, mental maps created at the

end of each interview were scanned and attached to each of the transcripts, alongside the notes from my reflective journal, and uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative and mixed-method data analysis software tool. I was thus in the 'midst' of moving between the multiple field texts (data) and the research text (a public, final research text demonstrating the findings of my project to the wider audience) after my departure from the research fieldwork (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

The transcribing process was also an initial stage of familiarising myself with the field texts, analysing and interpreting them. This was done by producing memos for each interview, where I sketched my initial thoughts and ideas relating to my participants' lives and transitions. Such practices have culminated with the period in which I was immersed in careful reading and re-reading of the field texts several times before organising them into meaningful analytical segments. Crucially, at this point I was committed to conducting inductive ('bottom up') analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In other words, apart from the general themes relating to my research questions that were identified prior to the analytical process and incorporated into the interview guide, I tried to be open minded and let the stories 'speak for themselves'. I attempted to refrain myself (at least as much as possible) from bringing a range of intellectual resources, theoretical perspectives, concepts (e.g. *habitus* as theory-method), findings from the literature and policy context of which I had an in depth knowledge, to this stage of analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). I was particularly committed to treating young people as the first narrators and interpreters of their lives, experiences, circumstances and transitions (Barkhuizen, 2008). In other words, this stage encompassed the individual level of the analytical process. I was particularly sensitive to capturing the ways young people see the world around them and themselves in it, what matters to them and why, which issues, feelings, events are brought up the most frequently and why, or even to the ways they engaged with particular questions. I was thus seeking to identify the complexities and differences in their narratives as much as commonalities (Chase, 2011).

Following this step, I sought to develop codes that would allow me to 'reduce' or 'condense' my data into the meaningful units of information (Creswell, 2013). Based



on my re-readings of the field texts, I developed approximately 50 codes to which relevant segments of texts were assigned and stored in the NVivo database under a descriptive label (Creswell, 2013). The next step involved organising these multiple codes into ‘themes and patterns of meaning across a [coded] dataset in relation to a research question’, a process known as Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013:175). To do so, Attride-Stirling’s (2001) tools for organising qualitative data were adopted. These included the development of:

- a) Global Themes – understood as ‘super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the text as a whole’;
- b) Organising Themes – ‘categories of basic themes grouped together to summarise more abstract principles’ and
- c) Basic Themes – ‘lowest-order premises evident in the text’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001:388).

For example, as indicated earlier, four general (global) themes were identified a priori and they encompassed my research questions. These included: *a person beyond the NEET label, relationships with education, post-16 transitions and the engagement with technologies*. The organising and basic themes have been further developed in relation to each of the global themes (see Appendix 4) through the complex intellectual and analytical process that involved bringing a range of intellectual resources in order to make sense of the data and form larger meanings (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 2013). In the analysis of the interviews with professionals and policy makers, I was particularly preoccupied with capturing three global themes encompassing: a) *the policy contexts to youth transitions on the ground*; b) *how young people labelled as NEET were constructed and how this affected the guidance, support and advice they received* and c) *the broader issues relating to NEETness, in particular to youth transitions, employability and youth (un)employment* (see Appendix 4). Some of the organising themes, such as barriers to employment, support needed and provided, or (perceived) outcomes of the engagement with the post-16 opportunities were also cross referenced with young people’s accounts.

As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) further advise, theorising became an integral part of the analytical process. Doing so means the researcher thinks with the data, yet goes beyond them, in order to develop ideas and concepts not only on the substantive level (local and individual), but also on a more generic level which transcends the original setting of the study. In other words, the analytical process allows the researcher to move beyond the data, towards interpretations and explanations of the phenomenon under study that can be transferred into the wider contexts (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Such a process acknowledges that there is no single correct interpretation, yet the researcher's role is to do their best under the state of current knowledge and by firmly grounding their claims in the empirical evidence (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, Hu, 2018).

This process of theorising started as early as during developing the organising and basic themes for analysis. For example, I employed the Bourdieusian thinking tools in order to question the social status quo or to seek to capture the existence of permeable underlying structures and inequalities, or how they impact the lives and transitions of young people identified as NEET. Moreover, while analysing and making sense of the data gathered, I tried to grasp my participants' *habitus*, and its interplay with their access to social networks and information, or the broader processes of the *fields* they occupied. Consequently, the larger meanings of the findings were achieved through adopting this double lens. The following section discusses in detail the strategies employed at this stage of analysis to make claims about my participants' *habitus* and the group/class shared *habitus(es)* (Nash, 1999).

### *5.5.1 Habitus as theory-method – an additional dimension of analysis*

As argued in Chapter 4, *habitus* is not only a theoretical concept, but also a method, although 'in a very elastic sense' (Reay, 2004a:439). Notably, and in line with the critical realist perspective, it is further argued that *habitus* 'cannot be directly observed in empirical research' (Reay et al., 2005:25) and can be captured only interpretatively. However, this is not an easy task. On the contrary, as *habitus* exists in 'the largely pre-reflexive form' and as such, 'it appears ordinary' (Burke, 2015:61), it is particularly

'hard to pin down' (France, 2015:87). In order to overcome these difficulties, an emerging body of empirical scholarship working with *habitus* as theory-method was consulted and useful strategies were identified and adopted. Moreover, as further argued in Chapter 4, by doing so, the concept of *habitus* has become a method of working with the data (Reay, 2004a), thus transcending from theory into methodology.

To reach reliable interpretations of an individual's *habitus*, a clear methodological design was necessary (Costa and Murphy, 2015). In-depth, semi structured interviews as conversations were thus adopted in order to elicit rich accounts of young people's daily routines, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and meanings across various aspects of their everyday lives, transitions and engagement with technologies (see Appendix 3). It was anticipated that this way of gathering data will allow me to make robust claims about individual as well as shared class/group *habitus(es)* and was achieved by looking for specific information in each participant's narrative before making cross-case comparisons during the final stage of analysis.

Specifically, as individuals' practices are argued to be the result of their *habitus*, it is contended that uncovering them also allows to identify the structures of the *habitus* that generates such practices (Maton, 2008; Wacquant, 2016). For example, as Burke (2015) points out, identifying habitual and repetitive practices allows one to make judgements about the *habitus* itself. I was also seeking to grasp the internalised and repetitive perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, and set of expectations in my participants' narratives (Costa and Murphy, 2015). This was done in order to make claims about individual *habitus* that itself encompasses certain and relatively habitual ways of 'thinking, feeling and acting' (Wacquant, 2014a:119). Additionally, as France (2015) asserts, grasping a sense of routine, things being done in the certain way and perceived as normal in young people's everyday lives, surroundings and communities, can be thought of as being internalised into one's *habitus*. Finally, Nowicka (2015) advises to seek for the tensions, contradictions and uneasiness in the narratives of experience, especially when individual *habitus* enters the *fields* in which it is not 'like fish in water' (in the case of my participants, for example, the *field* of education or labour market). Additionally, I found my participants' reflexive remarks relating to their

position in the world and to their practices, and what they thought was possible or not for 'the people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56), as another useful tool for capturing their *habitus*.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach adopted in order to answer the research questions. It started with positioning my study within the critical realist paradigm given its usefulness for studying both young people's subjective meaning making, attitudes, perceptions and understandings and the objective structures which give rise to them. It then outlined the implications of the role of the researcher in the research process itself by addressing issues of reflexivity, positionality and the acts of representing my participants and their lives. Specifically, it demonstrated my commitment to re-telling the stories of marginalised, often misrepresented and silenced young people in a respectful, complex and authentic way, in order to challenge negative perceptions, misconceptions and public understandings. It also discussed the multiple validation strategies that were used in order to legitimate the findings of my study.

The second part of the chapter provided a rationale for choosing a qualitative approach in the form of narrative inquiry. Specifically, it was argued that the dominant body of scholarship has failed to capture the person beyond the NEET label or the richness and complexity of their engagement with technologies. Consequently, narrative inquiry was demonstrated to be the most adequate approach, as it allows to reach in-depth understandings of young people's everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies based on their lived experiences and coming from their own perspectives, as well as to position them within the broader contexts.

Following this, the methods of data collection were discussed in detail. To answer the research questions, a multi-layered methods design was adopted that included: interviews as conversations with young people, diaries, my own reflective journal and *habitus* as theory-method. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews with professionals and policy makers overseeing youth transitions in Scotland were

conducted in order to position young people's stories within the larger, institutional narratives. The issues revolving around adopting theoretical and criterion sampling, conducting fieldwork and the key ethical considerations were also discussed. The chapter then concluded by providing a detailed overview of the process of analysis and the analytical strategies employed to grasp my participants' individual and class/group *habitus(es)*.

The next four chapters present the findings produced through the process of thematic analysis of the field texts generated during the fieldwork.

## **Chapter 6 Beyond ‘NEET’ – complex lives, belonging and transitions**

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, young people who leave education early, with little or no school qualifications, and who experience a period outside of education, employment and training, have been largely quantified and defined by what they are not rather than by who they are or want to be (Yates and Payne, 2006). This label, an outcome of the broader neoliberal processes, not only shapes, but also reinforces stereotypes about these disadvantaged and at times vulnerable young people – as a threat to public order, object of governance and correction (Fergusson, 2013), and a burden on society and taxpayers (Harris, 2015).

This chapter challenges such pejorative and misguided understandings by drawing on participants’ own narratives. Specifically, it aims to portray the young people beyond the NEET label, listen to their voices and, as a result, engage in a process of critique that unfolds the mechanisms of domination and inequalities. In order to do so, this chapter responds to the calls for renewed approaches to researching youth (see Section 2.1.1) and to the nature of narrative inquiry that values ‘thick descriptions’ of individuals, the contexts they live in and the map of their social relationships (Denzin, 1989; Moen, 2006). It therefore adds to existing studies on NEETness, which tend to hide individual hopes, understandings and subjectivities behind the aggregated data. In this way, the young people’s everyday lives – who they are, what matters to them and how unique they and their stories are – are privileged and emphasised here. Specifically, the first part of the chapter explores the complexities and diversities of participants’ lives and circumstances by adopting a vignette-based analysis. However, doing so also captures a set of commonalities amongst this group, deriving from the old social divisions. The second part of the chapter uses the metaphor of belonging as a lens to provide rich descriptions of the participants’ relationships with significant others and the place that are embedded in their transitions (Furlong et al., 2011). The last part takes a detailed look at the role social networks play in the young people’s everyday lives and transitions.

## 6.1 Individual narratives

Reviewing the NEET-focused literature demonstrated that there is an urgent need for qualitative research documenting young people's everyday lives and transitions and from their own perspectives (see Section 2.2.1 for details). This section aims to achieve this goal by capturing the unique person beyond the NEET label. It is particularly committed to exploring how participants' complex and diverse experiences and circumstances have shaped their meaning-making practices, values, ways of seeing the world and their own place in it, and how these further influenced the processes understood as transitions (Furlong et al., 2011). At the same time, it attempts to highlight the heterogeneity of this segment of youth population without ascribing the young people into stereotyped categories. Rather, six rich narratives were selected under the premises of difference and uniqueness, so the issues that might be lost during the process of thematic analysis were preserved and emphasised. Nonetheless, presenting individual stories in such a way is also underpinned by the process of theorising, that leads to transcending the local/individual towards the generic (Creswell, 2013), thus making participants' stories collective and important (Bochner, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; see Sections 2.2.1 and 5.2.2). Finally, grasping the voices of young people ascribed to the NEET category aims to contest their pejorative public and political understandings, as well as to inform policy and practice to better understand young people's needs and the challenges they face during their transitions.

### *Claire*

Claire (16) was growing up in care and while these circumstances were mentioned frequently, she never decided to share more than describing them as a result of '*family problems and stuff*'; and I never prompted further. I felt this was a sensitive issue she wanted to talk about on her own terms and I did not want to intrude into this perhaps painful area of her life. Moreover, knowing 'what happened' was not the most important thing to find out. Rather, getting an insight into how Claire interpreted her past experiences herself, how they affected her transitions and were integrated into her *habitus*, were key to understanding her life and choices she made.

Specifically, being away from family, moving from one place to another, leaving friends behind, had an enormous impact on Claire's life. Her relationships became too difficult to manage. Being in school became much harder and added an additional pressure that Claire had to manage, mostly on her own. Even though Claire was positive about the support offered at school and from the staff in her residential unit, ultimately the final decision of leaving school at the age 16 was hers:

*So I went to that school and then I moved to another and then when I started the fourth year, it got harder, like with all the exams, there was more pressure put on you by all the teachers and then that's kinda went off for a bit, but I still went until 5th year and I moved into academy and... I didn't like it much furthermore. I'm not sure why. I think it was just the pressure to do all the work and then you had to study a lot and you had to focus on friendships, as well. The friendship groups, there were so many! And then the teachers. I think it just kinda got to me, it was too much stress.*

Moreover, experiences of growing up in care had played a crucial part in Claire's identity formation, the way she perceived herself and in relation to others – as independent and reliable, but also on her own. These experiences consequently impacted on what she thought her future career may look like:

*Since I was young, I had this idea that I would like to be in the army, but I don't know why. See, because of that [care experience] I've always been really independent and I always had to bring myself up, because of family problems and stuff like that. I always had to be there for myself. The only constant person I've had is me. And I kinda thought the army is a good opportunity because you have to be independent, you have to do things for yourself, you are your own person (...). [Y]ou are going away, you are helping other people, but at the same time you are helping yourself.*

#### *Martin*

Similar to Claire, Martin (23) talked about his life and various experiences vividly. In my fieldnotes I compared this interview to a confession and noted my appreciation of



Martin's openness from the beginning of our interview when, in his strong Glaswegian accent, he said:

*My name's Martin, I'm 23. Eh, I don't work the now, man, I'm hoping to get a job man, because I've got a wean on the way an all, so I have, man. Like, I just found out a couple of weeks ago, so that's really playing on my heid man, so I really need a job badly, like. I'm stressing out a bit 'cause of it, so I am, see 'cause I've not got a job and I've no got nothing there man.*

During the interview, Martin went on an emotional journey, moving in time and between places. He recollected adverse experiences such as parental substance abuse, his own problems with alcohol, committing a serious offence and being sent to a secure unit, mental health issues linked with his experiences in prison and the barriers he encountered to securing employment. He also talked extensively about the positive things in his life – getting support from Organisation 3, entering a relationship with his partner and becoming a father, and the feelings that accompanied these experiences, from fear and pain to hope and love. I noted in my reflexive journal that Martin's narrative expressed the social suffering of an individual in the most powerful way (Bourdieu, 1999; Charlesworth, 2001:63).

Research has linked adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) with negative consequences, such as increased risk of substance abuse, depression and suicide (Dube et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998), poor emotional wellbeing (Osborne and Berger, 2008), increased risk of teenage pregnancy, unemployment (Christoffersen and Soothill, 2003), delinquency (Murray and Farrington, 2010), and imprisonment or involvement in violence (Bellis et al., 2014). Yet, it would not give justice to Martin and his life to just categorise him as a young offender with adverse childhood experiences who was NEET. Rather, it is important to explore how his experiences influenced his life journey, relationships and transitions, and how he made sense of them. It is also crucial to think of Martin's (and others) experiences as embedded within the broader processes of deindustrialisation and economic decline in Glasgow, leading to the spatial concentration of disadvantage negatively affecting lives of the generations living in the

city (MacDonald et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2016). In this sense, participants' experiences and trajectories can be understood as being shaped by structural problems that translate 'into personal distress and disease' (Farmer, 2009:11).

Childhood and young adulthood had been a very difficult time for Martin; complex family circumstances, parental substance abuse, and taking a carer role for his mother had a tremendous impact on Martin's experiences of schooling:

*I hardly ever went [to school] either, I was always like dogging school and all that, so I was. When I was younger, I was quite bad, so I was. Like see with the drink and smoking and that, man, I was really bad, so I was. (...) Like school wasnae really a good time, I didnae really like school, so I didnae.*

Martin linked his negative dispositions towards school with complex family circumstances, expressing both a sense of grievance and disappointment, and not being at fault, but also empathy towards his mum and her problems. As he explained:

*It was 'cause of her [mother] and my dad fell out, so it was. My ma used to go on the drink at the time, so she did. It was like near enough every day, so it was, so we werenae going to school or that. It was me and my older brother, so the two of us werenae getting sent to school man, we were getting sent to the shop. I think that's when it started from, then. Ever since then, I just didnae like going [to school] and that, man. I think that's how I never done my exams and that. I always regret it.*

Crucially, such circumstances have not only had an impact on Martin's school experiences, but also on his everyday life, wellbeing and sense of stability. They further contributed to his involvement with crime:

*I was all over the place and that. Like I stayed with my Ma, then I stayed with my uncle and I stayed with my aunty. And then, I ended up in secure [unit] when I was 15 (...). See, when I think back, it was pure messed up man. I'm not saying it's pure perfect now, cause it isnae. (...) [B]ut it's nothing like that way it was at all, man. It was horrible, so it was.*

Moreover, Martin had not talked with anybody about his difficult circumstances, and his problems were never recognised at school. Only years later, after leaving prison for the second time, he opened up about his adverse experiences and accessed help:

*I didnae really say anything to anybody for anybody to help, to give us support to that. I just made out to everybody that everything is alright, it's all good. Naebody knew all that like. I was suffering and all that, man, too. (...) Until I met Tom [key worker in Organisation 3] and that, I started to tell them stuff and that. Like they would tell me what to do, how to deal with it.*

While Martin spoke openly about his life, feelings, thoughts and circumstances, he decided not to disclose the offence he committed; and as in Claire's case, I did not ask about this 'really bad thing' he did. I felt a question on this was too intrusive and perhaps too painful for him. Yet, Martin's decision not to disclose this information did not mean that he tried to diminish his responsibility or neutralise his guilt:

*I know what I done was really bad, man, like I've never done anything like...I don't know, man, I don't like talking about it, 'cause it was really bad what I done.*

#### *Michael*

Michael (20), a self-reported 'troublemaker', a cheeky and lively young homeless man who had just become a father also reported past criminal behaviour. However, he mainly focused on his present life and the negative impact his criminal record had on his access to work:

*Well, my [criminal] record, aye. My qualifications I don't really know, because I've got qualifications, in construction, aye [...]. But I still don't know how that's not getting me a job (laughs).*

As McAra and McVie's (2015:5) findings from the longitudinal Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime show, 'by far the strongest predictors of NEET status were whether the young person had ever been charged by the police for an offence and whether they had ever been placed on supervision within the hearing system'. Contact

with the criminal justice system has a significant impact on young people's transitions and life chances. Furthermore, at a societal level, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as Martin and Michael, continue to be 'disproportionately selected into the juvenile justice system and retained there by decision making that is predicated on, amongst other things, their impoverished status' (McAra and McVie, 2015:5). This results in systematic processes of labelling and marginalisation of young people already experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability (McAra and McVie, 2007). It is thus argued that maximum diversion/minimal intervention strategies should be prioritised when dealing with young people involved in crime (see also Lightowler, 2020 for a further discussion). Rather than label young people as 'offenders', policy interventions should focus on preventing young people from being excluded from school and on tackling broader socio-economic disadvantage in order to improve their lives and transitions (McAra and McVie, 2010; Reay, 2017).

Michael (20) had not only been struggling with accessing employment for over two years, but also with finding secure housing, which prevented him from having 'a normal life' and fulfil his role as a father and provider. This was reflected in his views on masculinity, also examined in other research with young men in disadvantage (Roberts, 2018).

*Dorota: How would [having a job] impact your life?*

*Michael: Impact, well all it would impact on is I can get better stuff for the wean. Can sort myself out, live normally and that's it. (...) I'm staying in a hostel and that the now. It's a load of... I wouldn't even want to swear on this, but it's rubbish (...). If I got a job or whatever else, that means I could get a decent new house. It would be brilliant.*

Stuck in a vicious circle of unemployability, an increasingly punitive, conditional and non-generous welfare system and homelessness, Michael's transition to adulthood had been that of struggle, with limited access to resources and a lack of stability. Even though Michael often used humour while talking about his adverse experiences and

circumstances, and presented himself as *'not being bothered'*, he also expressed feelings of frustration, even anger, and a deep sense of injustice, showing an awareness of the existing inequalities that affected his life directly.

*'Cause I'm on jobcentre and all that, it's annoying. 'Cause you only get a set amount and all that and yet you're sitting there... You're getting money for nothing. Which is stupid and daft. You should be, rallying out and getting a bloody job and making my money, it's more money than sitting about looking for jobs and getting pennies. (...) I'm just no bothered with it or anything like that, I'm just wanting to get a job and actually just stop getting off the stupid jobcentre because they are daft sometimes.*

However, as this quote shows Michael also did not fully escape the trap of the neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility for one's circumstances. This is not to say that Michael's desire to have a job is only because he felt he was an undeserving benefit claimant. On the contrary, Michel's *habitus* was highly employment-oriented; his set of dispositions and attitude towards work were highly conventional and positive, in contrast to public rhetoric on cultures of worklessness passed down through generations. Moreover, Martin also believed that having a job would lift him out of poverty and instability and would allow him to have the *'normal life'* he was striving for. Yet, as research shows, long term unemployment combined with low qualifications increases the risk of in-work poverty and instability and of getting trapped in a cycle of *'low pay, no pay'* (un)employment (Shildrick et al., 2012).

*Joe*

For Joe (24), who had been living in kinship care since early childhood, a sense of instability was due to his complex relationship with his mother, for whom he cared for his *'whole life'*. While Joe's circumstances made him a young carer, there were huge emotional costs of these experiences, impacting on his wellbeing and transitions, which were expressed as regret at not being able to fully realise his potential. These are evident in the excerpt below when Joe, through the acts of self-reflexivity, made sense of his experiences and their consequential impact on his transitions:

*Joe: Sometimes I go and stay at my mum, now and again. That said, I haven't seen her in like 3 months so.*

*Dorota: Why not?*

*Joe: Just don't speak to her. It's just the way it's always been. Cause she's always been on drugs obviously, so just I don't bother to spend time with her anymore. To share what's going on or (inaudible) as well. (...) My whole life I was taking care of her and whenever I did, it was horrible.*

*Dorota: Was it hard for you?*

*Joe: I don't remember it being. It's hard when I think about it though. Like I could have been, I could have been something more. Still can be, but it's just...(silence).*

#### *Noemi*

Noemi (17), a tiny 5ft freckled girl wearing a loose hoodie, revealed how an abusive relationship with her ex-girlfriend, and then her mum's death, had strongly affected her ability to engage with schooling:

*I have National 4s (laughs) 'cause I just couldn't...I was doing mine for two years because I got like, in 2014, I got jumped at by my ex-girlfriend and I got put in the hospital. And then teachers told me, "Nah, it's too much stress for you and you cannae do it". And then last year, I couldn't do my exams cause when it was coming up to exams, my mum passed away. So I couldn't do it, 'cause I was too under stress. (...) So yeah, it's been almost a year, 16th this month. So... I'm good about it [very quietly].*

The painful impact of parental bereavement had also influenced how Noemi perceived the world around her and how she thought of people's fragile existence. It also led Noemi to develop new practices of having all her memories related to the loved ones saved on her phone. In this case, technologies were utilised to help deal with loss and grief; they had become the means of self-care (Willis, 2016):

*Once like, see my maw passed away, like my sister had her [mother's] phone and she's gone through it all and there was voicemail and my maw clicked the voicemail, and she was like: "What to dae, what to dae, o my god what to dae!" – she said to me and my voice was in it and that. So I kept this [voicemail message], cause you still have her voice in it so, aye. (...) I also have got all my sister's texts on my phone, 'cause she sent them to me. (...) I haven't deleted them. I know what she said, I know what I said cause any minute somebody could go, so you still got the texts and that; all the pictures you've got with them saved on your phone so they may be away, but you still have everything else.*

### *Hannah*

Hannah (17), an expecting mother, expressed strong feelings of happiness and excitement about becoming a parent. These had not only been told but also embodied, in the way she talked – joyfully and softly; in the way she was smiling while talking about the baby; in her motherly and tender gestures while she was smoothing her baby belly. Expecting a child was undoubtedly central in Hannah's narrative, of getting ready for '*when the baby comes*'. She talked about the significant changes in her everyday life (e.g. her routine being '*all over the place*', attending hospital appointments, morning sickness etc.) and more changes to come (securing housing, decorating and moving in with her partner after the baby comes); that of excitement, awaiting, preparation for the role of a mother and of maturing. From her perspective, having a baby constituted the '*life experience*', the one that can be compared, for example, with other important experiences such as travelling internationally to '*India and stuff*'; the life experience that would allow her in future to apply for a course in youth work.

As such, pregnancy was a clearly positive experience for Hannah, producing a new identity – that of an adult, an expecting mother and care giver. It also influenced her (still complex) transitions, yet differently than in the case of the young men I interviewed, such as Martin and Michael, who intensively sought work in order to fulfil their role of the provider:

*Cause I've kinda just... everybody keeps saying no one will take me on, because I'm pregnant and they'll have to pay my maternity leave. I've kinda just given up the fact that I'm having a job right now. I'm just gonna focus on like the college [social care course but postponed at least for a year] and the course [4 weeks course in childcare].*

In Hannah's case, parenthood did not lead to prioritising employment, due to the perceived barriers pregnancy carries for unemployed women. On the contrary, her plans for getting a job were completely postponed, with plans of engaging with Further Education (FE) adjusted due to her pregnancy. The comparison between her narrative and that of Martin and Michael thus demonstrates gendered differences among young parents.

Contemporary public and policy discourses continue to stigmatise young parenthood and construct it as a 'pernicious social problem' (Duncan, 2007). Such discourses further associate young parenthood with a range of risks for 'health, education and economic outcomes [that] remain disproportionately poor, which affects the life chances for them [young parents] and the next generation of children' (Public Health England, 2016:3), with little regard for young people's own perspectives or impact of broader socio-economic inequalities (Middleton, 2011; Yates and Payne, 2006). However, as Hannah's narrative and a significant body of scholarship indicate, having a baby is a positive and meaningful life experience in the lives of many young people. This suggests that we should move beyond the risks and deficits' perspective in shaping non-stigmatising and supportive approaches for young parents, while also recognising the damaging impact of poverty and disadvantage on their lives and transitions.

## **6.2 Young people and belonging**

As highlighted in Section 2.1.1, young people's lives and transitions should be understood and positioned in context – in relation to place and to the people who matter to them (Cuervo and Wyn 2012). Only by including the spatial and relationship dimensions in analyses can one grasp how a sense of belonging shapes young people's choices and decisions regarding their transitions (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014) and



contributes to their identity formation (Holland et al., 2007; Reynolds, 2007; Skeggs, 2004a). A sense of belonging also impacts the ways young people perceive the world around them (Maguire, 2010) and may mitigate to a certain extent the impact of poverty and disadvantage (Attree, 2004; MacDonald et al., 2005).

As such, to think of young people's lives, how they make sense of their everyday circumstances and how their life journeys develop, is also to think of the 'class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1990a:53) on which these are based, such as family, peers, communities, education or local neighbourhoods. These conditions contribute to one's sense of belonging, understood as "a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place" (Antonsich, 2010:644), while home encompasses 'a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment [to people and place]' (hooks, 2009:213). However, to think of one's belongingness also requires one to think of the 'politics of belonging' encompassing 'a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion' (Antonsich, 2010:644), so far neglected by the social generation approach (see Section 2.1.1). Consequently, bringing these two analytical dimensions of belonging together serves as a powerful tool to capture how the 'realm of power' shapes an individual's ability to feel being 'at home' in place and belonging to group(s) of people and to the socio-economic life in a given society (Antonsich, 2010; May, 2011; Taylor and Addison, 2009).

The following subsection discusses the spatial dimension to the young people's experiences and provides a background to their everyday lives and transitions. It is followed by an exploration of the relational dimension of their lives.

### *6.2.1 Young people and place*

As discussed in detail in Section 5.3.1, all participants were living in highly deprived neighbourhoods in the city of Glasgow (Scottish Government, 2016a, 2016b). All participants had experienced some form of deprivation: they had limited access to resources and were confined to their local areas where access to leisure spaces, commercial venues, activities and employment opportunities was significantly

restricted (Batchelor et al., 2017; Fraser et al., 2017; MacDonald et al., 2014). Consequently, participants' narratives indicated a complex relationship with the places they lived in. Their sense of attachment to local neighbourhoods and especially to the people who mattered to them constituted an important part of their lives and transitions, yet feelings of boredom and experiences of socio-spatial exclusion inscribed in the 'politics of belonging' (Antonsich, 2010) were a constant backdrop to them.

*'It's boring, there is nothing there for us'*

All participants described their local neighbourhoods as boring, with no places to go to and nothing to do. As Noemi (16) reflected:

*When I was growing up, when I was younger, there was a lot to do in Hillyroad. We were just making up our wee games. And when you get older, you just sit there. There is actually nothing to do here. Think there're just trees. And like nothing else (laughs). Boring!*

Martin (23) further emphasised limited access to opportunities and services:

*(R)ound about where I am, it feels as if there's none [opportunities], man, like apart from like see this voluntary thing we started like, there were nothing in my area at all, and like you're just walking about, doing nothing, you were just going along to the community centre and you were just like going on the computers and sometimes there wasn't even a worker there.*

Others highlighted the lack of free spaces available and attractive to young people of their own age in their neighbourhoods:

*Anne (17): I don't really think there is anything to do here [her local area] for young people. Except from a park. Or (...) A house, that's like it. Now that I'm thinking about it, oh my God, it's so boring here!*

*Hannah (17): I don't think there's anything for us. There used to be. Like I used to go to youth clubs and that like maybe in 2013, but now it's just... I don't think I'd go. And I don't think anyone would do it, if that was available to be honest.*

*James (19): [Glasgow] It's all right (laughs). Like, not much offering for people like my age. Like when I was younger, I remember going to play football and playing mud fights and that [...]. But now it doesn't offer much [...]. You need to pay for that, but see, when I was younger, I remember it being free. There would be a wee team for you to play and a team against you. Wee competitions.*

These findings are consistent with other studies that demonstrate how living in deprived areas restricts access to free leisure spaces, activities and opportunities (Batchelor et al., 2017; Fraser et al., 2017; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007; MacDonald et al., 2014), while recent austerity cuts to youth services marginalise disadvantaged young people even more severely (Unison, 2016). These accounts also reveal the ambiguous position young people occupy in society, in which they are often forgotten as a group with their own needs, interests and expectations. As Christopher (17) further observed:

*There's no, I mean, when you get older there's lots to do, when you're younger there's lots to do, but at this age, there's only certain things you can get away with, so it's just drives, cinema, go out with your pals, football or something, so...*

The above narratives thus demarcate the line between childhood and young adulthood and the changes that occur within such period. The activities that are available, once seen as attractive and fun, including the attendance of youth clubs, were no longer what many participants wanted to do. The nature of relationships and desirable leisure activities changes, as young people tend to spend much more time with their peers (Salmela-Aro, 2007), while they are also engaging in processes that allow for defining and re-defining their identity, sense of belonging, ways of understanding the world and tacit understandings of their own position in it (Côté, 2007; Reynolds, 2007; Cuervo and Wyn, 2012, 2014). The lack of spaces and activities tailored to the needs and wants of this group, however, leaves many young people marginalised and feeling bored and alienated. This is where socio-economic deprivation and the relationship with place intersect. Consequently, limited access to resources intertwined with the state's

exclusionary socio-spatial politics (Antonsich, 2010) leaves young people without choice, as frequently mentioned by my participants. Specifically, experiences of deprivation prevented my participants from doing things they would like to do or access spaces outside of their local neighbourhood, which they were mostly excluded from. As Noemi (17) explained:

*Like ... I don't have money and that. So I can't do stuff. Like with my pals, I cannae go out 'cause I don't have money. (...) Just to toon, to get food, or to the cinema, or anywhere to be honest. Like get a drink and that. It's like that. I have no money to do any of that.*

Young people in this study were also acutely aware of such barriers to accessing spaces and activities. Joe (24), echoing others, acknowledged there were activities available to some young people, yet recognised that he was excluded from accessing them, while also self-excluded himself from even finding out about activities he knew he could not afford:

*Dorota: Are there lots of things happening for young people in Glasgow?*

*Joe: There might be, but I don't know about them.*

*Dorota: Why don't you know about them?*

*Joe: I don't work. I don't pay attention to them. I mean in town there's a lot to do and obviously now and again I hear about things to do like I was trying to get into Commonwealth games in 2014 to do the volunteering.*

Alan (20) also felt excluded from accessing leisure activities and spaces:

*There is nothing you can do, like if you have no money, but if you have money, there are things you could do.*

However, when asked what kind of things he would like to do if there were no financial barriers, Alan struggled to come up with an answer:

*Dorota: What would you like to do if you had money?*

*Alan: I don't know (long pause).*

*Dorota: I would travel and go to gigs. What about you? [...]*

*Alan: I'd like to go to like a comedy festival or something like that.*

*Dorota: Which one?*

*Alan: Anywhere, if I had the money to go. [...]*

*Dorota: What about the Fringe?*

*Alan: I've never heard about that.*

Importantly, the above extracts show how growing up in deprivation is at the interplay with one's *habitus*; how agency and structure reside in one's *habitus* and mutually shape one another (Burke, 2015). The young people are excluded from leisure spaces and activities due to structural barriers, yet these barriers also become internalised into their system of dispositions, appreciations, thoughts and actions (Bourdieu, 1977). In this way, certain practices become 'unthinkable' because they are 'anyway denied' (Bourdieu, 1990a:54).

*'Being from the scheme' – experiences of violence, territorialism and stigma*

Issues such as local rivalry, experiences of violence and stigma attached to one's local area were prominent in a few participants' narratives. In these instances, the 'politics of belonging', granting (or restricting) feelings of safety, being valued and respected (Antonsich, 2010) were further shaped by state agents, such as the police, educational institutions or employers, but also by other young people.

Specifically, James (19), Brian (16) and to a lesser extent Joe (24), Matthew (19) and Alison (16) highlighted numerous issues associated with being from certain neighbourhoods or 'schemes' and how these impacted their everyday lives and transitions. For example, James (19) explained how being from a certain scheme that leads to rivalry amongst young people, further limited his access to spaces and activities, and posed a risk of violence if he was to trespass these invisible boundaries:

*That's what I hate. Like being from Beconsfield, you canny go into the different scheme, because they hate my scheme kinda thing. So it's kinda rivalry if I can call it that. They want to be gangsters basically and just want to fight with each*

*other. I have no interest in that. I just want to go and have my wee drink and enjoy myself basically.*

He then brought up one of the recent incidents when he found himself threatened by another young man while outside his local area:

*I was getting a McDonald's two weeks ago at the Longbridge. And there was a boy and he was shouting like, "Come on"! So I was like: "I'll walk away from this boy". I'm gonna get a cheeseburger or something and I went to walk away to the bus stop and he stood in a front of me. Emm he kinda tried to push me and I just walked away from him. He started shouting stuff and I was like, "Ah, uh, just breathe" (demonstrates). I kept walking away and he went to McDonald's after me. "That boy is not going to give up, is he? He's kinda following me about". Then my bus came. I was like, "Are you joking, just leave". Emm and he got off in Sparkhill, so that's kinda how it ends. I'm kinda glad I kept my heid [head] doon.*

This situation did not escalate into a more serious incident to James' relief, seemingly due to the strategies he adopted – not engaging with the attacker and avoiding an altercation. Moreover, as James further narrated, keeping his head down became a habitual embodied way of acting whenever he was outside his local area:

*When I'm in toon, I kinda keep my heed doon, I need to walk about in my hood up. Like I don't feel comfortable with people about, that kind of thing. It's not like it's anxiety, I just kinda hate people looking at me (laughs). It's like the best way to describe it. I canny make eye contact with somebody. I kinda have to keep my heid doon or look on my phone or something.*

The excerpt above shows how James' *habitus* was manifesting itself in and through his body that 'has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world' (Bourdieu, 1998a:81). His feelings of being uncomfortable, his perceptions of being unsafe and perhaps vulnerable were expressed through the

way he walked (head down) and dressed (hood up). He felt the same way about the police and interacted with them, once again, through his body:

*It's the same when the police are there, I always put my hands in my pocket, my hood up and I walk with my head down (demonstrates).*

These habitual practices were as much embodied as a part of James's mental structures, encompassing ways of 'thinking, feeling and acting, and common sets of expectations' (Wacquant, 2014:119). In his case, the relationship with the police was that of trying to avoid contact with them based on his perceptions and previous experiences (subjective and objective elements of practice):

*Dorota: Why the police?*

*James: I don't know, it's just instinct. Like it's just being from the scheme they are going to suspect you are up to something anyway. [...] See when I'm wearing my trackies [...] and my hoodie, then they'd be like stopping me and saying: "Where you going?" "I wasn't gonna deal with you". Emm but the police: "All right". "I didn't realise it's either national government on your badge..." "Or you need to tell us where you are going". "Under what act?" "Under the act we are telling you!" "See you later, pal". Walk away from them. And they're: "If you don't stop, then that's gonna be an assisted arrest".*

Thus, as James explained, he expected to be treated a certain way by the police (to be suspected of something – or labelled as potential offender) and he acted upon these perceptions by trying to avoid any contact – through the way he walked and dressed. While these perceptions are subjective, they are also based on objective structures – of how he was targeted by the police without a reason other than being from a certain neighbourhood and looking in a certain way. There was a deep sense of injustice in James's account when he was using his limited agency to resist the acts he perceived as unfair, for example by questioning the basis of him being stopped by the police.

Statistical evidence strongly indicates that "the police are consistently more likely to pick on youngsters from less affluent backgrounds [...and] that such 'class' bias is at the

individual level” (McAra and McVie, 2005:27). Being from a lower SE background often makes young people, such as James, a ‘usual suspect’ for police interventions which subject them to the unlawful and classed exclusionary practices.

Brian (16) also referred in his narrative to his local area as one with ‘a reputation’ and recalled seeing people drinking or using drugs, or gang fights when growing up:

*I come from an area that kinda has a reputation. Like growing up you will see people drunk and on drugs on the streets. And like gang fight and that; gang fighting, someone throwing balls, smashing all windows on their way.*

However, while Brian’s descriptions of his local area pointed to alcohol, drugs and gang fights, he also had insider knowledge of how things worked in his neighbourhood and he perceived his area as less dangerous than it could appear to an outsider. He stated that he did not feel unsafe as he knew some of young people from gangs and he found gang fighting amusing rather than scary:

*I went to school with some of the guys. And me talking to guys, “You know not to do other stuff cause it’s harder on the street; I’m like a foot bigger than you. If you tried anything with me I would pick you up and throw you, like (laughs)”. [...]. Just, but it’s very funny watching them gang fight, cause I live next to Saltley [...] it’s like a bridge on the motorway, so it’s like scheme vs scheme. So they stand with big sticks and golf clubs, but like an ambulance goes past and they think it’s the police, they will run. And I’d just look through my window: hahaha!*

Nevertheless, the threat of violence continued to be a part of Brian’s life. In response, Brian actively navigated his safety on an everyday basis through adopting a number of strategies, such as using his street knowledge, maintaining his reputation and drawing on his social networks to stay safe. For example, when he was threatened by another young man, the incident did not escalate any further due to Brian knowing the attacker’s girlfriend.

*Just before Christmas, one of the local well-known neds... I was looking across the street and he just came across the street going: “What are you looking at!”*



*And I was: "Who do you think you are talking to?" 'Cause there is such a thing as reputation where everybody should be scared of them and I'm not. Cause he's like 19, but he's my height, much skinnier than me and I knew his girlfriend. [...]. But like his girlfriend was in my year at school, so she came over saying: "Leave him".*

Brian also felt that being from a certain area may carry a stigma and he may be labelled as a gang member and these perceptions were echoed by a few other participants:

*Brian: It's just 'cause I'm from Bromford, people assume, "Aye, he is from Bromford".*

*Dorota: That you would be a gang member?*

*Brian: Yeah, 'cause I am from Bromford and I dropped out of school early.*

Brian (16) further acknowledged that certain characteristics, such as his accent or a way of speaking and especially writing, may be seen as negative attributes in some contexts, when discussing his application for college:

*'Cause I was like if I'm trying to think about it [personal statement] and writing down and changing words, I would end up trying to put vocabulary in and that's not me. And so, I was just, "Mum, could you write this up?" 'Cause obviously, if I go to the interview for college or something and I would've written my personal statement; 'cause I don't talk too polite; I will talk like this, this is about as polite as you will get.*

In a broader sense, perceived stigma attached to being from a certain area, associated with feelings of inadequate presentation of oneself to others, can be understood as a barrier to inclusion in various *fields* the young people occupy, such as education and the labour market. In Brian's case, the performance of the self was thus perceived as needing to change to meet the perceived standards imposed by the dominant classes. Such experiences thus add yet another constraint on one's sense of belonging and inclusion, as in order to belong, people should be able to express freely their identity, who they are or where they come from (Sporton and Valentine, 2007, cited in Antonsich, 2010).

### *Active agents restricted by objective structures*

Despite the negative impact of deprivation, threats of violence and stigma attached to being from certain areas, my participants' relationship with place was not exclusively negative. They did not appear passive, but rather continued to actively engage with activities, access places and skilfully navigate spaces to ensure their safety. Yet, these practices remained bounded by the economic, cultural and social resources they had access to. Participants thus talked about going into town, to local parks, cinemas or shopping. They engaged with sport activities (e.g. football, gym, swimming, fitness classes), were going to parties, driving around (*'somewhere where it's a long drive and change of scenery'*, Emma, 18) or taking public transport (*'to go out and see my pals'*, Liam, 23). Some, like Martin (23), Danielle (18), Matthew (19) and Brian (17) were engaged (or used to be) in voluntary work; others were often looking after their siblings and other members of their extended families. For example, James (19) regularly supported his autistic cousin in accessing local services and spaces, and Dannielle (18) used to care for her dying gran when she had cancer.

Participants also highlighted that they did some of these activities only occasionally and usually struggled to overcome barriers to access spaces. These struggles became strategies the young people actively used to mitigate the impact of deprivation on their lives and their sense of belonging. For example, when a gym membership was too expensive, playing football on the local pitch was a free leisure option (*'there is a pitch like a few hundred metres behind my house'*, Joe, 24). Others played simply on *'spare bits of ground'* in their local neighbourhoods, as for example Declan (16) explained. Many said they were going out mainly for *'special occasions, if it's somebody's birthday or something'* (Hannah, 17) or, instead of shopping in town, they just *'browse[d] in the shops'*, as for example James (19) often did:

*If I have no money, I'd just kinda browse a bit and see what I could buy. Once I get money, I'll know prices and stuff like that.*

Due to these constraints, a majority of participants were socialising mostly indoors, given the limited public spaces and free activities available to them and tailored to their

needs. Michael (20) was among the few young people who were actively using public spaces and engaging in street-based leisure:

*Eh, [I usually go] just about the city centre, eh mostly. Where the Four Corners are or whatever, or up into the top of the city centre near Buchanan street or whatever else.*

Yet, similarly as in the case of other participants in this study, Michael's (20) position in public spaces remained highly restricted by limited access to resources, thus affecting the way he could engage with them and shaping his movements across the city. The extract below shows the socio-spatial marginalisation experienced by Michael and his friends while engaging in street-based leisure:

*Sometimes we just go into like, St Enoch centre or Buchanan galleries or something like that. We never stay near one spot for too long, 'cause it just gets boring. So we do, and then we just hang about whatever else, go down to the Clyde or whatever, sit at the Clyde. Then after it gets too boring, we just disappear then. We'll either go our own ways or we'll go somewhere else to cause a riot or whatever.*

These findings also mirror other studies which highlight that street-based leisure, or so called 'street corner society' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007:341), while highly common in the past amongst working class young people, has significantly declined over the last decade and has been replaced by in-door leisure, often involving reliance on technologies (Batchelor et al., 2017; Fraser et al., 2017). These issues will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

#### *(less) Restricted spatial mobility*

Because of the socio-spatial barriers discussed, my participants felt bored, alienated and frustrated as they were not able to participate in basic socio-economic life and leisure. They were mostly confined to their local areas where their everyday lives were lived and where they socialised, which was mostly indoors. In this sense, their experiences of restricted spatial mobility remained shaped by their socio-economic

deprivation and inscribed in the politics of belonging, shaped by the state, its agents and other young people. However, unlike in other studies, in which an internalised strong sense of rootedness to local neighbourhoods was highlighted (Fraser, 2013; MacDonald et al., 2005), participants in this study wanted to be able to socialise outside their immediate locality, even though often unsure where, or what they could be doing. They also expressed their willingness to access work or learning opportunities outside their local area, *'anywhere in Glasgow'*, as this excerpt from the interview with Hannah (17) illustrates:

*If I could travel there each day then I would travel, yeah I think I would like, if I could travel from here to there all the time, like to get to work, then I would do that.*

Only three participants stated they were looking for opportunities mostly in their local areas due to lacking confidence, money issues or not knowing how to travel around the city, as the interview with Noemi (17) demonstrates:

*[I look for jobs] Inside Glasgow, like near where I stay. So like it's not that long to get there. And I wouldn't know where it is as well. (...) If it's far away, I may not have enough money to get there. So I would rather just get it [work] near.*

The importance of the passage of time in the young people's lives, however, should also be highlighted. While Alison (16) identified travel as one of the barriers to employment, she did emphasise that this barrier was not permanent, but rather derived from her young age and lack of experience:

*I think the only barrier I'd have is, like, travel. But like travel is like a lot. I am a young person, like, I'm only 16 as well. If I was 17, it'd be fine.*

At the same time, however, most participants stated that they *'wouldn't actually move away from Glasgow'* (Hannah, 17), while a few (n=5) said they would consider it, if they had managed to secure a permanent and well-paid position that would allow them to move. As such, while economic barriers to spatial mobility remained intact, a strong sense of rootedness and willingness to work locally was less restraining. Resultantly,

these findings pose a challenge to previous claims that young people from deprived neighbourhoods remain strongly constrained within their immediate locality when it comes to looking for work (Connolly and Healy, 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012). Rather, they indicate that disadvantaged young people have become more spatially mobile than in the past, even though still less than the middle class subjects of value (Skeggs, 2004a, 2011). On the other hand, these findings may be explained by the nature of the sample sharing one type of class/group *habitus* (Nash, 1999), as the majority of practitioners in this study identified a confinement to the local area as one of the key barriers to employment.

### *6.2.2 Where place and people intersect*

Despite the socio-spatial exclusion experienced by the young people on an everyday basis, their relationship with local areas was far more complex. This was due to participants' sense of familiarity and feelings of fitting in with people who lived in their neighbourhoods and due to their strong sense of emotional attachment to the people who mattered to them. These relationships constituted an important dimension to the young people's everyday lives and transitions, and provided them with feelings of comfort, security, familiarity, support and belonging (hooks, 2009), thus mitigating the impact of socio-spatial exclusion, stigma and violence in their everyday lives.

For example, for Calum (17), who stayed mostly in his neighbourhood and was unable to travel further on his own due to his learning difficulties, knowing people living locally, was important. As he further highlighted, *'I know everybody about that end, so that's alright'*. Jason (16) also valued his otherwise boring neighbourhood because of the people who lived there, when he said *'Aye, it's fine, nice people'*. James (19) emphasised how his affiliation to Rangers Football Club, bound up with his collective history of his family and the group he was a member of, provided him with feelings of familiarity, safety and inclusion:

*See, like being on the streets, I kinda always put my heed doon. See when I'm going towards Ibrox, my heid is up, I can walk normally, I feel like safe if that*

*makes sense. But like when I'm with my kind of people, that's just... [...]. Aye, when I walk towards Ibrox, that's just, it's an amazing feeling.*

Notably, these feelings were vividly performed through James' body, the way he walked and kept his head up, and in contrast to how he felt in other spaces from which he was excluded on an everyday basis. Experiences of deprivation and living on a 'scheme' significantly limited James's access to spaces and activities. Regular contact with the police made him a 'usual suspect' subjected to the processes of labelling and social exclusion. In contrast, being in places familiar to him, such as the Rangers pub and among people he trusted, allowed James to connect with others and belong:

*I like going with my cousin; we always go to the wee Rangers pub before the game and after the game. Have a few pints, have a wee laugh and stuff so it's good. Even being in the Rangers pub as well, I can stand and talk to people. Like just I can talk to a random person like that. (...) Like that way you know you can trust them kind of thing.*

Furthermore, throughout their narratives, participants emphasised that they cared about and were attached to their friends, romantic partners and families, they enjoyed spending time with them, valued their support and emotional ties. As Joe (24) described his relationship with his family:

*Pretty much family comes first and then everybody else is sound.*

Such strong attachment was further visible in participants' everyday lives, their movements within the space and what they were doing, as these were shaped by their relationships with significant others. For example, Claire's (16) everyday life oscillated around the places where her friends and family lived, so they could spend time together:

*[I usually go to] where my family live, so there; the place where I stay just now [residential care]. I don't really go to other places (laughs). (...) I know lots of other places but just that is my two main places to go, 'cause there are my friends and family and that's where I live [...]. We just sit and watch movies or*

*talk or sometimes we just go out, play football, do a bit of sports or something. I don't know. That's all we do to be honest. Or I just stay at my dad's house and my step mum and sit with my brothers sometimes.*

Notably, relationships with friends in some cases also transgressed spatial boundaries. Christopher (17), for example, spent his free time outside his neighbourhood, as this was where his friends lived:

*St Andrew's isn't my local school, that's up here, I don't stay here, I stay in Maypole. So I've only got, like, a few friends down there. So I usually come up here. So I don't hang about my local area, I hang about up here. (...) It's not eventful [there], it's just where all your pals are.*

This was the same for Daniel (17) and Liam (23), who also travelled from one side of the city to another, to see their friends after they moved out from their local areas, to 'just go out and grab a bite to eat and then just sit in the house, just sit in a friend's house and just play games, watch movies, just talk. That's really it. That's what we usually do' (Daniel, 17). Crucially, Daniel's narrative was echoed by the vast majority of my participants, who often described their relationships with significant others as 'just hanging out', 'just talking', 'going with the flow' or simply being 'where your friends and family are'.

Moreover, for the majority of participants, friends were as close and as important as family – they were family. As for example Brian (16) and Joe (24) said:

*Brian: It's this one thing that pure changed my life. And when I say it that my friends from youth theatre are my family, I mean that. Like sooo deeply. Like I would have hated to have bad word of any of them, even of people I don't like. 'Cause I grew up with them. Like I've seen them more than I've seen some members of my family. So I'll always... I know I've got friends for life.*

*Joe: They [friends] are family.*

Consequently, the importance of close ties was emphasised in all of the young people's accounts. For example, Danielle (18) captured the nature of her close ties:

*Support I've been given, it's just been brilliant throughout my life up until now. The support from your family, your friends, everything. It's just, it's just really good. To have that sort of support, like you know that everybody is backing you and they are encouraging you to do stuff that you never thought you'd imagine doing.*

These relationships were therefore crucial for the young people's sense of belonging and wellbeing. They were valued for the support, closeness and understanding they offered; for providing the young people with feelings of belonging through being around the right kind of people, being where your friends and family are. Consequently, these findings validate the views expressed by other youth scholars that bonding social networks are an important asset in the lives of disadvantaged young people and should not be pathologised or understood as inferior to bridging social networks (Holland et al., 2007). Moreover, they demonstrate the importance of relationships to young people's identity and value practices. Specifically, similarly as in Skeggs and Wood's study (2011), my participants spent their free time '*just hanging out*' with friends and family, '*just talking*', watching movies and sharing food, usually in their homes and local areas. Furthermore, unlike in the case of the middle classes, my participants did not seek to accrue value through the regular engagement with educational and *cultural capital* enhancing activities in order to improve their futures and cultivate their self as 'enterprise' (Kelly, 2006; Skeggs and Wood, 2011). Rather, their self was present-facing, interdependent and others-oriented, while value was accrued 'through the gift of attention to others over time and space' (Skeggs, 2011:509), or through their caring practices for the members of their extended families. These issues will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

Many of participants, however, also experienced adverse family circumstances, or difficult relationships with peers and/or romantic partners. James (19) recalled witnessing domestic abuse as a child, a parental break up and an ongoing difficult relationship with his father, whom he eventually stopped seeing completely. Hannah (17) mentioned problems with addiction in her family when she was younger. Martin (23) had been '*all over the place*' due to his parents' drinking problem. Claire (16) was



living in care, also due to family problems, while Joe (24) was growing up in kinship care and had a difficult relationship with his mother who suffered from drug addiction and whom he stopped seeing completely. Noemi (17) was admitted to hospital after her ex-girlfriend attacked her. One year later she lost her mum. Alison (16) recollected that hanging out with the wrong crowd made her skip school and eventually drop out at the age of 16. Similarly, Hannah (17) reflected on how not going to school had been the norm for her and her school friends.

In a broader sense, all of these diverse experiences constitute a class of conditions on which the young people's everyday lives and transitions were based. These conditions influenced their relationships with education, the decisions they made, for example about leaving school, or what they wanted to do in future, as well as their wellbeing and belonging. These issues will be further explored in Chapters 7 and 8.

### **6.3 Social networks in youth transitions**

This section focuses on the role social networks played in participants transitions. Specifically, the issues of support, access to information, advice and guidance they could offer, alongside the young people's agency in using their own social networks, remain at the heart of the analysis.

#### *6.3.1 Family*

A majority of participants reported having at least one 'significant other' person in their close networks to help them search for and access opportunities. The help they received took different shapes, from active to emotional support, and from advice and sharing information to encouragement.

Alison (16) explained how her family and especially her mum was supporting her in terms of deciding what she could do after leaving school:

*My mum would like sit down and speak to me because she just wants the best for me. (...) [When] she realised her mistake in that department [Alison dropping out of school], she was like getting in contact with the school, getting in contact with colleges and courses.*

Family members not only advised on what kind of opportunities Alison (16) could engage with, but also were actively involved in the searching for opportunities for her, using different means available to them:

*[I]f my Dad hears anything from up in Sparkbrook [Glasgow suburb], he'll tell me, like, "Oh this wee shop's opening," or whatever. Or if my Mum hears anything on, like, Facebook or on the internet, she'll tell me. And my Granny, too. Like my Granny's one of the people, like, even if I don't ask her, she'll like go into like Iceland and ask if there's any staff needed. And if they say, "No", like even if she goes into like a random shop, she'll just ask. But like she's supportive that way as well.*

Others also used their family contacts while searching for opportunities. Alan (20) had his dad and girlfriend's uncle helping him out by asking around in their own workplaces:

*Ma dad has asked at work if they are looking for anybody. And my girlfriend's uncle, he works at (inaudible), but he's often away for his work, so he can point me to people.*

James (19) also reported he had a few family members helping him to look for jobs by suggesting places he could apply to:

*My auntie and my cousin, they helped me actually [...]. Well, my auntie is just suggesting places to me. She will say: "Oh, by the way I've seen this place is looking for people, they've got it on their windie" [window], stuff like that.*

Christopher (17) used his mum's social networks to find out about any openings in nurseries:

*My Mum, [...] she works as a nurse, like a lot of the people she works with, like a lot of my Mum's friends have got people who work in nurseries and that. So if something comes up, they tell my Mum and then my Mum comes and tells me.*

Crucially, for some participants like Emma (18), Christopher (17) and Jason (16), parental networks led to accessing opportunities. For example, Emma (18) decided to leave school when she got offered an office job in the company where her dad was working:

*With the previous job, I got it through... it was my dad, who works in this company and he said to me: "Emma, we are looking for people" and if I was up for it and I said, "Yeah" [...]. I left school because I got a job in the office, so I decided to take the job, that's why I left.*

Jason (16) secured a paid four-year apprenticeship in painting and decorating through his dad's contacts:

*My dad (...) 'cause he knows people, 'cause he obviously is a manager. The person that buys their stuff, he knows the owner in the company I'm going to work for [...]. It was my dad that got me an apprenticeship.*

For other participants, however, families had very limited access to social networks or very little knowledge about the labour market, thus were unable to offer advice or practical help to their children. As Calum (17) explained:

*She [mother] tries to look up jobs, but she's not sure how to do that sort of thing, because she's never worked or done anything on that in her life, so that's why. Eh, but tries to help me, but she doesn't know how to do it either. Eh, my da would help me, but he's dyslexic, he needs help off my ma and all on how to read and spell, so that's it basically. My big brother sometimes, he'll get me search things. Like working in shops, Tesco's and all that thingy.*

Michael (20) also reported his close social networks were unable to offer any practical support with his transitions:

*[A]ll the friends and family I've got are useless in getting, in trying to get jobs. Apart from my sister and my brother, but my brother's in Edinburgh, so I'm not going all the way to Edinburgh to get him to get me a job. And my sister, she's working all the time, so I don't even get to speak to her much.*

Moreover, my participants often pointed out that practical support from their family members was further restricted by a lack of basic digital skills on their side. A majority of participants reported their parents had a very limited knowledge of technologies or did not use them at all. For example, Michael (20) said his mum was not skilled when it came to using technologies and he was the one helping her and other family members out:

*I've helped my ma do it [set up an email]. My maw can't work a computer to save herself. My maw, nobody actually in my family can really do computers well. (...) Eh, my sister, she's got a laptop, but she always asks me what this means, what's that mean. It's a pain in the neck.*

Daniel (17) also pointed out that his family members were not using technologies and thought they were too old to learn:

*Dorota: What about your family?*

*Daniel: They are too old. They didn't understand technology (laughs).*

*Dorota: Did you teach them how to use it?*

*Daniel: No, no. They are too old so.*

These findings resonate with existing evidence which indicates that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more experienced technology users than their parents and guide the appropriation of technologies into the family environment (Kennedy et al., 2008). This is in contrast to the 'networked families' of middle class background, where parents are more likely to be competent users themselves and who are able to teach digital skills to their children or have access to networks providing practical help or guidance (de Almeida, 2012). In a broader sense, the social divisions thus continue to unequally shape parental access to *social capital* (Divine, 2004; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018) and consequently affect their children's transitions (see Section 9.3 for further discussion). Crucially, however, such limited practical support experienced by the majority of my participants made them adopt a range of strategies to access help and information.

### 6.3.2 Young people as active agents in using their social networks

As the young people were often unable to rely on their family support and access to *social capital*, they often used their own networks to identify and access opportunities. However, these networks were predominantly composed of the bonding ties. Nevertheless, these contacts were crucial for participants' decisions about what they wanted to or could do, how and where to access opportunities and formal support. Consequently, the young people valued their social networks for information and advice, encouragement and emotional support, hope and comfort they offered in times of crisis.

Alison (16) explained how having a friend in college and other friends with a job was a valuable source of information on opportunities available:

*My best friend that's on a college course, like, she always tells me like when courses are coming up for childcare. So that's a good thing as well, 'cause I've got an insider for college courses. (...) And like people that I spoke, to friends that've been on a course, and now they're in a job. So it's so helpful, like, to hear that.*

Alison was thus actively using her own networks to access information about different opportunities, and highly valued the first-hand information coming from her friends.

Joe (24) also spoke about using his networks and handing out CVs, when looking for jobs after he left school:

*Before I went to the job centre, I was looking for work through like family and asking people. And handing in CVs, but then obviously I eventually had to go to get money as for 9 months through that [informal methods] I didn't get any interviews or anything.*

Social networks acted not only as a source of advice but also for encouragement and emotional support. As Joe (24) explained:

*Dorota: Do you have anyone who supports you with making these...?*

*Joe: Decisions? No. I do it myself. Speak to friends about it, that's just about that. (...) [O]ne of my friends applied to college last year and got in and he's doing DJing. Yeah, he loves it. He's always pissed... trying to get me applying, to get me to do something. 'Cause he feels like I'm wasting time as well. 'Cause he has a lot of confidence in me and believes that I can do stuff so that's good.*

Daniel (17) accessed an employability training through the information from his friend:

*Dorota: How did you find out about this course?*

*Daniel: Through a friend. He told me he did it, it was really good and he got a job through it. He was doing construction stuff, so why won't I do it and see if I can get a job, so I've done it and here I am.*

Following his friend's advice, Daniel thus decided to access a training opportunity and managed to secure a full-time job in a warehouse a few days before our interview. His whole narrative was, unlike in case of other participants, underpinned by joy, laughter and pride at his achievement:

*But once this course finishes, then I'm in employment. So that helped me get a job. Through Organisation 2, yeah. They found me a job (laughs).*

Noemi (17) also got an interview as a salesperson after her friend told her about this opportunity:

*Noemi: She's [a friend] applied for the same job I applied for yesterday. That job she got. (...) [As] the people who knock on the doors and annoy you. Yeah. Aye, she started on Monday. That's how I got the interview there. Thanks to her. She was like, "It's on Indeed". Cause like, it's like a lot of money you get. If you, like go, if you get ten people to sign for something, you get 200 quid a week. Aye. So I like this job. Cause I like money (laughs). I hate having naw money.*

Noemi did apply for this job motivated by her friend's success and the salary she could be getting. Thus, Noemi's choices seemed to be embedded within her social ties and relations with others. They were, however, also guided by the close 'distance from

necessity' (Bourdieu, 1984:6) stemming from her long-lasting experiences of deprivation. These had resulted in the urgent need to have a job, despite its nature and quality (e.g. working as someone who annoys people).

Brian's (16) social networks were significantly broader than those of other participants in this study. Staying in touch with his former drama teacher and involvement in youth theatre provided him with a broader access to information, advice and knowledge in the field of drama. He managed to secure a short-term contract in performance through information he got from his former colleagues at the youth theatre. He also had his drama teacher, the director of youth theatre, and friends help out with his application for college. Finally, he used his networks for emotional support and encouragement.

*I have lots of friends who do a lot of stuff and that's helped to get a job and stuff. [...] Just friends and stuff that know what I am doing. Like my friend she helped me with my personal statement and stuff cause she's done it four times before, for college.*

Brian (16) clearly recognised he was actively using his networks for his advantage and regretted he did not have access to wider networks to help him secure employment to support himself through college:

*Dorota: Would you say you use your networks?*

*Brian: Yeah, contacts. It's super awkward to say that [...]. But I don't have many contacts when it comes to work [...]. I'm starting college and I'm gonna need a part time job.*

### **6.3.3 Social networks and unequal social relations**

As the data above show, access to bonding social networks seemed to prevail, similar to evidence from other studies involving disadvantaged youth (e.g. Holland et al., 2007; Shildrick et al., 2012; Savage, 2015). Family and friends were the main sources of information, advice, support and influence for the young people when it came to making decisions about their transitions and searching for opportunities. Yet, the help

offered by these networks was provided within the means and knowledge available to individuals involved, for example by asking around in their own workplaces and local businesses, looking for adverts displayed in windows, suggesting training and workplaces they knew about. Moreover, some families were in no position to offer any practical support, due to their inability to use technologies and their limited knowledge about how things work in the *fields* of employment and further education. These findings mirror other studies that captured worsening potential of *social capital* among many working class parents and their struggles to support their children's transitions (Shildrick et al., 2012; Treanor, 2017).

However, it also needs to be highlighted that my participants were not solely beneficiaries of their families' *social capital* (Coleman, 1990), but also active agents who were skilfully using their own networks to navigate their transitions (Holland et al., 2007). These family and friendship-based networks were valued for first-hand information and advice about opportunities available, how to look for them, or how to access formal support, as well as for encouragement and emotional support provided in times of difficulty. On the other hand, the information and advice were usually provided by other people occupying a similar position in the *fields* to that of my participants. Many of them were other early school leavers, moving in and out of insecure and low-level employment, college and training courses and welfare support.

Overall, the nature of participants' networks was quite homogenous, bonding and bonded up with their socio-economic background and locality, which further shaped who the young people and their families socialised with (Hey, 2005; Savage, 2015). While one's *social capital* is not the only thing that matters when it comes to finding out about and/or securing opportunities, it nevertheless remains one of the key components of that process (Atkins, 2017; Catts and Allan, 2012; Shildrick et al., 2012; Savage, 2015). Specifically, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, participants clearly made choices about their transitions and accessed learning, training and work opportunities based on information and advice embedded in their social networks (Catts and Allan, 2012). Yet, the knowledge and information these networks could offer continued to be restricted by their unequal position in the social hierarchy in terms of



power, access to wealth and wider resources, including ideas beyond the group (class) level (Woolcock, 2001).

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the first research question by looking at the person beyond the NEET label, in order to contrast the negative public and political rhetoric and understandings surrounding this group, as well as to hear their voices and engage in a process of critique that unfolds mechanisms of domination and inequality. It further explored my participants' relationship with the place they lived in and with people who mattered to them, as well as the role of their social networks in their everyday lives and transitions.

The chapter argued that there are no straightforward journeys amongst the young people labelled as NEET (see also Finlay et al., 2010). Consequently, it demonstrated that their lived experiences and circumstances varied and, at times, it was easier to identify complexities than commonalities (Chase, 2011). It then explored how these experiences and circumstances shaped how the young people perceived the world, themselves and others in many different ways, or how they influenced their immediate relationships with others, places and institutions 'implicated in the processes understood as transitions' (Furlong et al., 2011:360).

While my participants' lives, circumstances and meaning making practices were complex and diverse, however, they also shared many similarities. Growing up in deprivation revealed shared experiences of poverty, limited access to resources and bridging social networks. The young people were found to be confined to their local areas, where access to leisure spaces, activities and opportunities was significantly restricted by the state's exclusionary politics. Moreover, multiple structural barriers also became internalised into their *habitus*, making certain practices 'unthinkable' because they were 'anyway denied' (Bourdieu, 1990a:54).

Nevertheless, despite such negative experiences, the young people's narratives indicated a much more complex relationship with the places they lived in. Specifically, a sense of attachment to their local neighbourhoods and especially to the people who

mattered to them was evident in their accounts and seemed crucial for their sense of belonging, identity work and wellbeing (Morrow, 2001). However, unlike in other studies, where an internalised sense of rootedness to local neighbourhoods was highlighted (Fraser, 2013; MacDonald et al., 2005), participants in this study expressed the wish to socialise outside of their immediate localities, even though they were often unsure what they could do or where else they would like to go if given the option. Moreover, a majority highlighted their willingness to access opportunities beyond their neighbourhoods. Consequently, while economic barriers to spatial mobility remained intact, a sense of rootedness and willingness to work locally were less common among this group, indicating that perhaps disadvantaged young people have become more spatially mobile than in the past, even though still less than the middle class subjects of value (Skeggs, 2004a, 2011).

The final section examined the role of social networks in my participants' transitions. It demonstrated that families, friends and acquaintances were the main sources of information, encouragement and influence for the young people. Yet, the help offered by these networks was provided within the means and knowledge available to them. Some families were in no position to offer any practical support, due to their inability to use technologies or limited knowledge in the *fields* of employment and further education. Thus, in a broader sense, it was shown that young people in my sample had access to predominantly bonding and homogenous social networks, while the information and advice they could access in relation to their transitions was of very particular nature and restricted by their disadvantaged social position.

## **Chapter 7 Relationships with and experiences of school and education**

Young people's transitions are not only shaped by their immediate relationships with others and the place (see Chapter 6), but also by the institutions they interact with (Furlong et al., 2011), of which one of the most influential is the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Reay, 2017). This chapter focuses on the school experiences and educational journeys of the young people labelled as NEET, an often neglected issue in both the NEET-focused literature and policies directed at this group (see Sections 1.3 and 2.2).

This chapter highlights a variety of educational experiences amongst the young people labelled as NEET, yet also identifies shared perceptions and dispositions towards schooling and formal learning and understands them in relation to unequal structures and social relations. It firstly explores my participants' strengths and how these are often not recognised or silenced by the education system and examines the adversities they face. The chapter then explains why the young people's relationships with education are complex and characterised by unease and struggle. This is done by looking at both, the exclusionary processes embedded in the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and self-exclusion among this group (Bourdieu, 1990a). It concludes with discussing how processes of being excluded and self-exclusion eventually result in my participants leaving school early to follow vocational pathways, despite some of them having a strong inclination towards certain (often creative) subjects. This is done by understanding these processes as deriving from *symbolic violence* embedded in the contemporary education system, which continues to act as a sorting mechanism directing young people into different educational and post-educational trajectories.

### **7.1 'School was horrible'! Perceptions and dispositions towards school**

As argued in Section 2.1.2, the education system in the UK continues to be 'a system that both mirrors and reproduces the hierarchical class relationships in wider society'

(Reay, 2017:11). It grants institutionalised *cultural capital*, in the form of educational credentials (Bourdieu, 1985, 1997) and as a result unequally shapes access to opportunities, locating individuals differently within the hierarchy of socio-economic positions (Skeggs, 1997). Individuals' background, experiences of poverty and place of residence continue to unequally shape educational experiences. This occurs, for example, through access to resources for schools, quality of teaching, lack of recognition of the issues young people face in their lives, relationships with teachers, or labelling practices. These issues can result in scarred learner identities, leading to young people leaving school early and overall poorer educational outcomes and employment prospects (Furlong, 2013; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Maguire, 2010; Reay, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2012; Slaten et al., 2016; Sutton Trust, 2009; Sweenie, 2009; Thompson, 2011b; Whittaker, 2008).

Young people who took part in this research were overwhelmingly from lower socio-economic backgrounds and resided in some of the most deprived areas of Glasgow. Their entrance to the labour market had been 'accelerated', as on average they all had left school early (at the age of 16/17 or earlier) and followed mainly vocational pathways. The majority of my participants left secondary education with qualifications at the National 4/5 levels<sup>14</sup>. These were lower than the average for Glasgow, where 55% of pupils left secondary education securing level 6 and 7 of National qualifications between 2010 and 2016 (Scottish Government, 2017a). Only one of participants, Martin (23), left school without taking any of the exams and he was among the 2% of Scottish school leavers with no qualifications for the 2010 – 2016 cohorts. Anne (17) and Alison (16) left school with National 3 qualifications and were among the 2% of Scottish school leavers with such qualifications. Two participants, Liam (23) and Joe (24) stayed in school till the end of sixth year, yet they did not secure any level 6/7 qualifications. Crucially, not achieving the qualifications at the level 5 and above increases the risk of experiencing NEETness by 10 times for men and 7 times for women (Scottish Government, 2015a).

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<sup>14</sup> See the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework at: <https://scqf.org.uk/interactive-framework/> (Accessed 22 March 2020).

My participants' perceptions towards school and institutionalised learning were overwhelmingly similar and consistent with previous findings (see e.g. MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012; Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Thompson et al., 2014; Sweenie, 2009; Whittaker, 2008;) as the majority developed negative dispositions towards school and often experienced it as a bad place:

*I didn't really like it. (Alison, 16)*

*School was horrible, absolutely horrible! (Anne, 17)*

*I'm not going back to school, I hated that. (Calum, 17)*

*Hated it. I hated school. (Christopher, 17)*

*I used to love school when I was a wee girl (...) but I don't like it anymore. (Claire, 16)*

*I think it wasn't good 'cause I never went. (Hannah, 17)*

*School was horrible. (James, 19)*

There were some exceptions – Liam (23), Matthew (19) and Joe (24) expressed more positive views about school and education.

*I stayed on till sixth year, quite liked it, it was good. (Liam, 23)*

*Education wise I loved it. Socially, it was ok for a bit but on the other hand, it wasn't that good because everyone I've known left in 4th year. And I stayed on. (Joe, 24)*

*I just, it was just not, I wouldn't say not for me. At the time I was really young and I just loved football. You know, I was good at P.E. I loved Drama, I was good at acting. I was funny. I done History, which was okay, but, you know, I just wanted to go and do something else, where it was for me. (Matthew, 19)*

Those who said they did not enjoy school, commented on finding school subjects boring, something they did not like or enjoy. For example, Martin (23) described all the subjects as '*just rubbish, absolutely rubbish*'. As he further explained:

*'Cause they weren't interesting, I prefer my music than my like English class or anything like that, because that was all just boring to me. Couldn't be bothered with it or nothing.*

Daniel's (17) account was very similar when he described how his perception of school changed very early on after he started secondary school:

*In first year, it was really good. I enjoyed it really much. Up an about second year it got kinda boring (...). Teachers, the classes they were just, everything really wasnae for me. I didn't enjoy it much. Everything was kinda boring. That's really it.*

Moreover, most of the participants perceived formal education in mostly instrumental terms and referred to it as *'just qualifications'*. Yet, when faced with the contemporary labour market, my participants recognised that lacking educational credentials constitutes a significant barrier to accessing work (see also Section 8.3.1). Nevertheless, the *'perceived irrelevance of the curricula'* (Shildrick et al., 2012:102) and of the educational credentials during their time at school, were among key reasons given by the young people for their disaffection with education. This finding corresponds with other studies examining relationships with schooling among many of the working class youth (Ingram, 2009; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Reay, 2002; Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017). However, unlike in other studies, the majority of my participants also identified subjects they liked and were good at. Hannah (17) for example, who, as she often pointed out, was *'never'* at school, distinguished between the subjects she liked and didn't like and how these perceptions influenced her decisions of whether to attend or not, or to do any schoolwork:

*The ones I liked was Music, Drama and Modern Studies. That was the three that I liked and I would go and I would work harder. The rest, I just didn't... just (pause) they didn't motivate me to do it, 'cause I didn't enjoy the subject so.*

In his narrative, Christopher (17) also emphasised his appreciation and enjoyment of drama, in contrast to other school subjects:

*The only subject I done good in school was Drama. And then after that, like, that's the only thing I done good in. I hated school. Drama was the only thing I actually done good in. My other subjects I didn't like, I hated them.*

Michael (20) and Anne (17) really enjoyed Music, in and outside of school. For Daniel (17) and Noemi (17) – it was Art, while Brian (16) said he loved Drama since he was 11. Alison (16), Declan (16), Jason (16) and Jamie (16) all enjoyed Physical Education (PE), Emma (18) liked PE and woodwork, while Ron mentioned PE and metalwork. For Joe (24), it was his love for science that kept him motivated and Matthew (19) mentioned football, drama and history as his favourite subjects.

Across the individual accounts, it thus became obvious that the young people were less enthusiastic about most of the academic subjects (with exceptions), and tended to show their inclination towards sports, music, art, drama and practical subjects (e.g. woodwork, metalwork). It appears that, unlike most middle class pupils (Gripsrud et al., 2011; Johansson and Höjer, 2012; Reay, 2017), these young people developed habits and attitudes that did not facilitate success in academic subjects. Their generally negative dispositions towards pedagogy (education), and to some extent their rejection of the value of academic knowledge and of symbolic mastery were central feature of their narratives (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Skeggs, 1997). However, participants did express positive views in relation to certain subjects, which they enjoyed and appeared to do well in. They found these subjects meaningful and interesting, allowed them to build positive relationships with teachers and peers by doing well and gaining a sense of recognition. Nevertheless, success in these subject areas did not seem to increase the young people's status as model learners or high achievers and leaving school early and following vocational pathways was still the option the majority followed.

Crucially, vocational routes have been found to be 'imposed' as the best option available to many disadvantaged young people (Simmons and Thompson, 2013; Thompson, 2011b). On the other hand, careers in arts, creative industries, media and sports continue to be accessed overwhelmingly by the middle classes. For example, a

report by Department for Creative Media and Sport (2016) showed that 92% of all employees in the creative economy were from higher socio-economic backgrounds, thus revealing the strong impact of one's class and the broader inequalities on access to certain types of careers. Once again, the education system itself can be understood as playing a significant role in perpetrating such inequalities, as it fails to support disadvantaged young people, like participants in this study, into these kinds of destinations (see also Sweenie, 2009 for similar findings). Moreover, the professional services overseeing youth transitions also failed to support my participants into these pathways. Only two participants, Brian (16) and Matthew (19) were able to access learning opportunities in drama and football respectively. Yet, as they explained, this was only because they had prior knowledge of them deriving from their own social networks rather than from the formal channels:

*Matthew: I knew a couple of people that had done it [college degree in football] previously. Emm, but through Organisation 1; you know, I spoke to them and I told them about the course, that there was a course and they done research.*

*Brian: Courses, like I knew what I've always wanted to do like so 'cause I knew people who were on the [drama] courses as well. So I wasn't looking at any other course beside the acting ones. And then being here [Organisation 1] when I left school, they were like, "Oh, do you want to do like an apprenticeship in construction?" 'cause that's a default thing they are trying get you to do.*

Consequently, the majority of participants in this study, despite their inclination, or even a '*passion*' towards certain subjects, followed vocational routes after leaving secondary education, seemingly also unaware that such careers were available. They were not being provided with support, advice and information by schools nor by the professional services they were using (see Chapter 8 for a further discussion on the post-16 transitions policy *field*).

The following sections examine how and why participants developed habits and attitudes that did not facilitate a positive experience of education, starting with (re)addressing the impact of their complex circumstances on schooling.



## 7.2 Young people's educational experiences

This section examines a variety of educational experiences amongst the young people labelled as NEET and their relationships with formal education under a double lens of Bourdieu's thinking tools. It pays a close attention to the exclusionary processes embedded in the education system.

### *7.2.1 Complex circumstances and their impact on schooling*

In many cases, participants' perceptions of and relationships with education were deeply influenced by a variety of personal everyday experiences and circumstances (see Section 6.1 for some examples). This highlights the highly heterogenous character of the group and the uniqueness of each individual and their *habitus*. Specifically, the impact of different adverse circumstances during their time at school acted as a prism through which the young people made sense of their relationship with education and contributed to their decisions later on about leaving school. On the broader level, however, these various experiences should be understood as one of the barriers to the positive and inclusive experiences of education many disadvantaged young people have been facing. Acknowledging this provides us with an additional dimension to understanding my participants' relationship with education, and consequently their transitions.

James (19) and Danielle (18), who both experienced serious bullying at school, discussed how it negatively affected their learning. They said they were unable to concentrate during their classes, did not enjoy being at school and struggled with their schoolwork. Furthermore, experiences of bullying undermined their trust in others and strongly contributed to them feeling unsafe. These experiences also negatively impacted their confidence, sense of self-worth and wellbeing. Martin (23) reflected on how, due to his mum's alcoholism, he barely attended primary school and, with time, developed a deep aversion towards school. Claire (16) found that growing up in care and moving around a lot affected her relationship with education in terms of having too many friendship groups to manage, having no constant support from at least one significant adult, and dealing with family and school problems mostly on her own. Joe

(24) felt that that his difficult relationship with a drug addicted mother carried huge emotional costs and undermined his potential of educational achievement. Noemi (17) found school too difficult to cope with after her mum passed away when she was 15. Anne (17), Daniel (17), Liam (23), Noemi (17) and Calum (17) found schoolwork particularly difficult due to their dyslexia and in Anne's case this had not been diagnosed till after she left school at the age of 16. Moreover, Calum, Noemi and Liam also highlighted how their significant reading and spelling difficulties had made their transitions particularly difficult, for example in terms of looking for and applying for jobs and/or FE opportunities. Alison (16) talked about truanting persistently since starting secondary school and described it as a normal practice for her and her friendship group. Finally, Hannah (17) implied that addiction problems running in her family made her time at school difficult. While she did not link her persistent truancy from school with family problems or with socialising with other young people who, similarly as her, were skipping school regularly, she distinguished herself repeatedly from other pupils in school – in terms of differences in achievement and in circumstances, as shown in the excerpt below:

*I think like X [names vocational secondary school alternative to mainstream education] is better 'cause they know like, they are taking on this kind of the same people. When at school everyone just gets treated equally, but like some people are different from others. So X is kind of we are all the same, we have all not worked hard at school or we would have something happened in school or something like that. So they know how to, they know how to deal with us. Like and they get us, because it's not like you are their friend, but they are like, they talk to you and stuff like.*

Crucially, such support offered to Hannah outside of mainstream education, was not available to her and the other young people interviewed during their time at school. Moreover, based on my participants' accounts, schools were often not aware of their difficult circumstances outside school. Resultantly, instead of support and providing inclusive education for all (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2005b), the young people were constructed as troublesome and/or deficit learners, whose exclusion from mainstream

education was the option followed by their schools. For example, the school Hannah (17) attended and was regularly truant from, was unaware of her complex family circumstances. She did not receive adequate support at school, and, due to her truancy, she was about to be permanently excluded:

*I was like, they [school] wanted me out anyway, 'cause I wouldn't want to go. So that, my pastoral care teacher was like, "No, you can't just leave with nothing".*

These exclusionary school practices were only mitigated by Hannah's pastoral care teacher, who referred her to the alternative to mainstream vocational secondary school, where she was able to continue her education and take National 4 exams. In contrast, Noemi's (17) school was aware about her mum passing away. Yet, the support offered was to refer her to an employability provider:

*Emm, my teacher just told me about it because she just wanted... she knew that school wisnae something I liked, so she was like, "You can just go to Organisation 2" [Training provider in employability].*

As in Hannah's case (17), the school did not seek to support Noemi with her learning, nor to help her to cope with her grief and loss, but rather encouraged her exclusion from an educational pathway.

Consequently, despite an educational policy aspiring to ensure that all children's needs are met so they can benefit from the interdisciplinary and integrated learning, grow, develop and reach their full potential (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2005b), this was not the case in relation to the young people I interviewed, who were experiencing various difficulties in their lives. On the contrary, work-based learning was understood as the best and only option available to them. In this sense, and consistently with the NEET-focused literature (Simmons and Thompson, 2013; Thompson, 2011b), vocational training was an 'imposed' educational route for the most disadvantaged, and acted as an exclusionary tool due to its low symbolic value in both the education system and the labour market. Similarly, the lack of appropriate support for young people with complex circumstances at schools continues to be one of the barriers to positive and

inclusive education and has been widely highlighted by other scholars (see e.g. Shildrick et al., 2012).

### *7.2.2 Experiences of education system*

While some participants talked extensively about various personal circumstances that had negatively impacted their learning, their experiences of the education system itself were also mentioned frequently as a reason for their disaffection with school. While the ways in which the young people saw the curriculum and of the school qualifications as irrelevant were one of the key barriers to positive relationships with education (as discussed in Section 7.1), this section addresses the remaining factors that contributed to their limited sense of belonging to school.

The majority of participants reported a variety of negative relationships with teachers as one of the main reasons for their disaffection with schooling. They often made direct links between these negative relationships and their truanting and choice to leave school at the earliest possible opportunity, without completing secondary education. For example, Calum (17), who attended the school for pupils with additional educational needs, explained that he left school because of being bullied by one of his teachers and the issue had not been addressed by school:

*Dorota: Why did you leave school?*

*Calum: Eh, 'cause the teacher didn't like me (...). Eh, and I said to them, see like I'm getting bullied, but they wouldn't take it seriously. So that's how I left when I was 15.*

Experiences of being bullied, victimised and/or treated disrespectfully by the teachers were consistent amongst participants in this study, resonating also with previous research with disadvantaged young people (see e.g. MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Lumby, 2012; Reay, 2017; Slaten et al., 2015). Moreover, these issues, as in Calum's case, were often not resolved by schools. Accounts from Christopher (17) and Martin (23) further serve to illustrate this point:

*Christopher: I failed English 'cause I didn't get along with my English teacher. It was a guy and we were proper aggressive with each other. It's like, he was just so mean to all the pupils. And then (...) then nobody done anything about it and it was only me that did. And I just started talking back to him and all that and then there was points where I had to go into the school and say to them, I was like, "I cannae stay in that class". My parents and all that had to come up 'cause they seen that I was getting aggressive towards teachers and that. And they said, "Well, we'll need to move you out of the class", but they never did. That's why I kind of stopped [going to school], 'cause like English you get every day.*

*Martin: I used to hate my class, man. I used to, I don't know what it was, like because see what I was saying, when I was younger, like, I like, I wasnae really, I didnae really have a clue like [with schoolwork] (...) But I can, I can remember my IT teacher, so I can man. I didnae like him man, like see, 'cause I didn't really know what I was doing, it was as if he was always right on top on me and all that, like, "You're doing it wrong" and all that.*

Other participants also discussed problematic relationships with teachers, reporting a variety of issues, such as being treated as 'a wee guy' (Declan, 16), a 'dafty (...) like you are a dumb' (Jason, 16) or as a 'troublemaker' (Michael, 20, Daniel, 17). Jason (16) further explained how he 'used to get the blame for a lot of things that I didn't do. That wasn't me, but I was always blamed. And there is nothing you can do about it'. Crucially, these pejorative labels, even though resisted and challenged by the young people, were also at least partially internalised, as they often referred to themselves as 'a class clown' (Daniel, 17), 'a little dafty' (Alison, 16), 'a troublemaker' (Michael, 20) or as being 'really dumb sometimes' (Martin, 23). Noemi (17) further summarised the damaging impact these labels, in her view unfair and perhaps even disrespectful, had on her learning and sense of belonging to the school:

*You've been there since your first year, till like 6th year and teachers all know you and know what you are like and sometimes you changed, but they don't believe you can change. And that's why they still treat you the way they treated*

*you, like in your 1st year, when you were just playing about and that. In college they don't really know you, so they treat you like an adult.*

In some instances, the processes of labelling were closely linked with the lack of positive recognition of the young people's learner identities, which were often perceived as problematic and disruptive in the school context, as excerpts from Christopher (17) and Daniel (17) demonstrate:

*Christopher: It's not that I didn't get on [with teachers], it's, I enjoyed learning, but having a laugh as well. But a lot of teachers didn't like that. So they just never enjoyed having me in the class.*

*Daniel: I'd say they [teachers] cared about other students who put their heed down and just did their work. See, like other people, who actually done work and not acted stupid, that who I think they cared about the most, but not [about] people who acted out in class.*

These extracts show there was lack of alignment between the young people's *habitus* and the logic of the educational *field*, which involved teachers expecting certain behaviours and qualities of the 'ideal' and orderly learner (see also Ingram, 2009). In this sense, my participants were not equipped with attributes and qualities that are valued and recognised as legitimate by the educational institutions, in contrast to many middle class young people (Bottrell, 2009; Gaddis, 2013; Gisprud et al., 2011; Reay, 2017), thus contributing to problematic and tense relationships with teachers and deepening dissatisfaction with formal learning.

Furthermore, a perceived lack of care and support from teachers was also widely reported as negatively affecting participants' relationship with education. As for example Daniel (17) further explained:

*Some of them [teachers] were supportive, some of them didn't really care. They weren't really like bothered about it, so that's one of the reasons I didn't like school. Teachers didn't care.*

Anne (17), who had undiagnosed dyslexia and found schoolwork particularly challenging, also disengaged from school early due to the lack of support with her learning:

*It was just so hard. It was like, I just didn't get what they were saying. Everybody else did, and I was just sitting there, like, "I don't get it". And they'd [teachers] go: "Oh, I'm sorry I can't help you". And I'd go, "Oh alright". So I just, I gave up. On every class. I was like, "There's no point". If they helped me, I think I'd still be in school right now. And I'd probably have qualifications.*

Crucially, a lack of positive recognition (see also Section 7.1), being bullied, labelled as deficit or troublesome learners and treated disrespectfully in many instances transcended beyond the school gates, negatively affecting my participants' later lives and transitions. Many seemed to leave school with scarred identities, a limited sense of self-worth and/or negative dispositions towards formal learning. In these instances, negative school experiences became internalised into one's *habitus*, acting as 'the matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions' (Bourdieu, 1977:82). For example, Christopher (17) pointed out that his negative relationships with teachers were the main reason he did not 'want to go to college' as he 'hate[d] getting tutored'. Martin (23) reflected on why he struggled to stay in employment or post-16 learning if treated similarly as in school:

*Like outside of school and all that, I think that's how I hardly done anything and all. Like because of the way they used to say stuff to us, I'd be like, "Nae bother then". And I would just throw it away and that because in these years, even when I left school and all, like if people said stuff to us, "You're not doing it right, you're doing it wrong", and all that. I was just like, "What's the point, man" and "I'm not doing it". It stopped me, like I don't know what else to do, man.*

For Daniel (17), negative school experiences affected his perceptions of himself as not worthy of support, as being 'a dafty' in the eyes of others and this impacted his practices of searching for post-school opportunities. Specifically, he rarely sought help

and support with his transitions, e.g. from professional services, and preferred to rely on himself instead:

*I don't think they [careers services] cared 'cause I was always making a fool of myself really so (...). That's why they didn't help me, 'cause like there is no point in helping him, he's just being a dafty. That's what they would think in their heads. That's basically it. (...) [Now] I wouldn't ask them [careers services for help], but like I said, I don't like asking. I don't see the point in telling anybody, that's why. That's really it. I am asking myself basically.*

While the vast majority of participants reported problematic relationships with teachers, broader processes of labelling and a lack of positive recognition, a few referred to the pressure schools put on educational outcomes as strongly contributing to their reasons for disaffection with schooling. A few young women, Claire (16) and Alison (16) in particular, cited the atmosphere at school, the heavy workloads and the pressure of studying for exams as too stressful and overwhelming. Despite receiving a lot of support from teachers and staff at her care home, Claire found secondary school too difficult to cope with:

*I think it just kinda got to me, it was too much stress, it was all homework tasks (...). I had teachers there to support me, like my support teacher, foster care teacher and, if I needed anything, I'd go to him and he would try to help me as much as he could and then my unit; the staff in there could help me as well, but I just kinda wanted to get out of school as quick as I could to be honest (...). I tried, I stayed on [till the 5<sup>th</sup> year], I pushed myself and I said, "No Claire you actually need to stay and do this". And then I said: "No" (quietly). So...*

This account was echoed by Alison – who also liked her school, her teachers and peers. However, despite holding these positive views, on numerous occasions, Alison also highlighted that she did not like being in school – as she found the pressure too much, especially as she struggled with her schoolwork, while her narratives were often underpinned by tensions and contradictions, as visible in the excerpt below:



*I wasn't really good at most classes and stuff. Like, I found it really hard to concentrate in classes, so I just didn't like it that much. But I mean I really, really enjoyed school, but it just came to a point, where I was behind with so much work that I couldn't catch up again, 'cause I've done it like once, so then I just got really behind on work so (...). I just didn't like school at all (...). It was just the whole atmosphere I didn't really like (...) So I thought that I'd go on to like a smaller environment and then I'd go to like college and courses and stuff like that, so it's a little bit more relaxed.*

Finally, two participants expressed strong feelings of injustice embedded in the education system itself and felt their schools significantly failed to support their education. Joe (24) and Brian (16) identified exclusionary school processes as the key factors negatively affecting their learning and transitions, perhaps because their relationship with the education system differed significantly from the other participants. Specifically, they were both initially aiming for university, yet entered (or were about to enter) college instead. Joe (24) explained how he lost motivation at school after not being able to choose the subjects he was interested in (Science) and being assigned by the school staff to vocational classes he did not want to do:

*In the third year, I broke my ankle and I was off for a while and that was when we chose which classes we were sitting and I didn't get to choose them and I was assigned. (...) Cooking and that. (...) I hated that; I wanted to do biology, but they said that was full and I refused to go into the class and ended up having none. So that was kinda bad I guess. And that's why I did it in college. I did Science.*

Similar to Joe, Brian (16) expressed feelings of injustice and being let down by his school which failed to support him with studying Drama at Advanced Higher level, so leaving school became the best and only option:

*Like I said in April, if I wasn't doing drama, I was leaving. (...). So they try to send you to another school. (...) And I was talking to my teacher, they tried to send us to this school with Drama, so I was checking with them everyday, for two*

*weeks, every single day. I was going in early to talk to them, but we didn't hear back from them. And one day he told me, "Oh this place is full, you are not doing it". And I was like: "Wait, what"? And I sat down with my friends and said, "By the way, you guys, I'm leaving" (laughs).*

Moreover, on numerous occasions Brian questioned the logic of the education system that, which in his experience, valued and supported the more academic pupils, while leaving others without help (see Swift and Fisher, 2012 for similar claims):

*So if you want to go to Uni to do medicine, then you are an academic pupil. They will be set for life, (...) there will be stuff handed to you. Like, "Do you need additional support? Here you go". Whereas I wanted to do drama instead of going to Uni, 'cause I wasn't the most academic pupil, there is kinda loop. Tough. (...) If you are not academic....and you prefer to perform, art or doing music – fire away, do your own thing.*

### **7.3.3 Belonging to school and exclusionary processes**

In light of the above analysis, participants' relationship with schooling was that of unease and struggle. They had a limited sense of belonging to education – they were not like a 'fish in water' at school (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127). The majority developed unfavourable perceptions on and dispositions towards classroom-based learning and formalised knowledge, which Bourdieu called 'symbolic mastery' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This was different for Joe (24) and Brian (16), who both had felt '*destined for university*', until these pathways fell apart. It is thus argued that the reasons behind such limited belonging to schools can be linked to the education system itself and its exclusionary processes, as the variety of negative experiences my participants reported was consistent with a significant body of scholarship from education and youth studies.

Specifically, as argued in Section 2.1.2, 'miseducation' and educational underachievement of the working classes can be traced back to the establishment of the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Hendrick, 1997), that has continued to marginalise and devalue working-class culture and learners' identities

(Bottrell, 2009; Ingram, 2009; Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 1997). As Reay (2017) documented, children and young people from working class backgrounds have been continuously exposed to unequal and poor educational provision, lack of support, respect and care, processes of labelling and segregation, also confirmed by this study. Other studies have also highlighted how the *cultural capital* of the working class young people continues to be unrecognised in educational settings, silenced and pathologised (Bottrell, 2009, Ingram, 2009), for example due to them lacking middle class like qualities of being 'ideal' and orderly learners (Gaddis, 2013; Gisprud et al., 2011). Responses to these young people were found to include the imposition of increased discipline, which can be understood as a form of systematic labelling of the working classes as in need of control and correction (Hendrick, 1997; Reay, 2017; see Section 2.1.1 for a detailed discussion), rather than providing them with an inclusive and empowering education (Scottish Executive, 2005b; see also Sections 1.3 and 2.1.2). Indeed, the majority of participants also reported a variety of educational experiences, including negative, disrespectful or even aggressive treatment from teachers towards them, that can be understood in terms of systematic labelling of pupils from dominated group.

A number of studies have further emphasised the importance of positive relationships with teachers and other school administrators, including providing pupils with social and academic support (Attwood and Croll, 2006; Slaten et al., 2016; Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017). Teacher – student relationships (TSR) were one of the key factors contributing to young people's sense of belonging to school, staying in school and not dropping out early (Krane et al., 2016; Slaten et al., 2015). Similarly, Lumby (2012) confirmed that disadvantaged young people, who disengaged from formal learning, perceived such behaviours to be a direct response to negative school experiences. Difficult relationships with teachers and feelings of lack of respect and care were main reasons given by young people for doing so. Indeed, one of the central features of my participants' disaffection with schooling related to various aspects of their negative relationships with teachers. This study further contributes to existing scholarship by capturing the processes behind educational experiences and their impact on young people's later lives and transitions.

I found that negative school experiences impacted on my participants' wellbeing, feelings of self-worth and scarred their identities. This had further affected their practices beyond compulsory education. For example, participants' trust in support services was undermined, their willingness to engage with further education restricted, while in some cases, it led to frequent disengagement with work or FE later on, thus negatively affecting their lives and transitions. This is because 'learning environments and experiences are powerfully involved in the shaping of habitual patterns of personal agency' also at later stages of life (Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017:100). It was also shown that schools silenced and ignored my participants' strengths and interests and consequently failed to support them into destinations that related to the subjects they valued and were passionate about. Instead, by constructing the young people as low achievers, deficit or problematic learners, the school responses in many instances were to exclude them from mainstream education. My participants were thus actively supported to leave secondary school and access vocational routes, often including the least valuable options such as employability training (see also Section 7.3.1). Consequently, the exclusionary processes behind the 'imposition' of vocational training as the best route for disadvantaged young people, highlighted in the literature (Simmons and Thompson, 2013; Thompson, 2011b; see also Section 2.1.2), were captured but also deconstructed by this research.

Overall, all the above processes are understood as exclusionary, a result of the symbolic power underlying a highly stratified education system. The young people's narratives demonstrated that there had been very little effort or success to implement *GIRFEC* and *SHANARRI* based principles during their time at school (see Sections 1.3, 2.1.2 and 7.1). Rather, the education system worked as a sorting mechanism, allocating my participants into low-level educational routes of little symbolic value, and consequently at the bottom of socio-economic positions. Crucially, as *symbolic violence* operates not only on a material, but also a symbolic level (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), the following section addresses the impact of exclusionary processes on the young people's agency.

## 7.3 'School wasnae for me': Symbolic violence and self-exclusion

### 7.3.1 Self-exclusion

As argued in Section 2.1.2, exclusion works most powerfully through self-exclusion (Friedman, 2009; Reay, 2016) – as education was perceived by the vast majority of participants as 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56). Specifically, the young people would repeatedly say that school was not for them. In the main, they tended disengage with school early, play truant and once 16, they often would leave school. As for example Anne (17) explained:

*Dorota: So what was the reason for you not being in school?*

*Anne: Oh, mmm, the teachers, 'cause they never, cause, eh, it was just so hard for me. It was like I'd go, "Alright, I don't get this, can you help me?", "No. Can't help you". Well, what do you expect me to do here? So I just stopped going to school.*

Anne (17) did therefore exclude herself from education early, 'dodging' all classes apart from Music, which she said was her passion, and left school while turning 16 with no plans or sense of direction. As she explained, she 'just gave up':

*Like the minute I found out the exam day [for music], I was like, "Right, that's it". In my head, that day I'm leaving school. Because it was, like, I was done with it, I was done. I was fed up. I was like, "No, I can't be bothered. I'm only staying in school to do Music".*

Others, like Claire (16) and Danielle (18), remained at school for longer, pushing themselves and asking for support from teachers. Yet, they also experienced this as a time of struggle, stress and worry about schoolwork. Claire, for example, felt she pushed herself to the limit:

*It was quite difficult [to leave] 'cause I wanted to stay and I wanted to try as much as I could, but I got to the point when I just tried too much and I was*

*making myself really tired and I was worrying about it all the time, so I just decided to leave.*

As such, Claire's self-exclusion from education had taken a different form from Anne's (17). She was not dissatisfied with her teachers, she was not truanting, she passed the exams she thought she needed for the vocational pathway she wanted to follow (working with the public in retail or customer service). Yet, the outcome, self-exclusion from education, had been the same as for the other participants. Living in care, changing schools often and lacking of support from at least one constant significant other to deal with the demands of schoolwork, made Claire to disengage with education at the age of 16.

Danielle (18) also reported trying hard at school as she initially aspired to study childcare at college. Yet, failing her National 5 exams led Danielle to adopt self-exclusionary understandings of her place and position within education. Specifically, despite the sense of regret implicit throughout her narrative about not succeeding at school and not being able to study childcare, Danielle adjusted her perceptions of herself as not a 'school person' and of education as not for her.

*I did try to do Nat 5s, but obviously they just didn't work out 'cause I emm wasn't capable... I could do better, I could have done better in the Nat 5s, but I just didn't feel like it was for me. So at the end of it, I thought to do more qualifications, which I'm proud of from going to school. Even though it's not the highest ones, but still pretty good.*

Danielle even corrected herself while talking about failing her exams and presented it as a choice, something that she did not feel was for her. On the other hand, she took pride in securing her National 4 qualifications, even though they were not – in her view – 'the best'. Yet, based on her position in the educational *field*, her qualifications become all that 'is possible from a limited range of possibilities' available in this *field* (Stahl, 2015:23). As a consequence of the interplay between the *field* and Danielle's learning *habitus*, her 'matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu, 1977:82) had been redirected towards another pathway, that of leaving school (and

away from childcare) and towards vocational training in retail. The excerpt below clearly demonstrates how Danielle made sense of her position in the education *field* and how she excluded herself from school in her last year:

*I just didn't see the point of staying on through like 6th year. I've said earlier I'd have been doing the qualifications I've already had and I didn't want to do them again.*

As such, Danielle's decision to leave school can be understood as a result of the ongoing revision her *habitus* underwent throughout her experiences of the education system, and so were the choices regarding her transitions:

*When I was at school, my career advisor asked me what I wanted to do. I've always wanted to do retail. I have (silence) ... I did have doubts at first, but then I didn't.*

Importantly, this example highlights the processes of *symbolic violence* that are experienced by the young people during their transitions. It shows how Danielle had gradually internalised the vocational pathway in retail as a desirable and freely chosen option, despite having doubts at first. As the possibility of a pathway in childcare she once wanted to follow became unachievable, Danielle seemed to have adjusted her subjective hopes and expectations to objective probabilities arising from her newfound position within the exclusionary experiences of the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), and presented them as her own choice. In this sense, choosing a career in retail is a clear example of the interplay between one's *habitus* and constraining structures.

Similar to Danielle, Ron (16) failed his exams and, after being contacted by a training provider when the school recommended him for such a pathway, he decided to leave school and look for jobs or apprenticeships:

*I didn't plan to leave; I was basically planning to stay on the 6th year. And then [Organisation 2] said, you can come with us. And then I decided to leave. (...). I didn't see a point in staying on; I wasn't really upgrading my qualifications from*

*last year. I'd be basically just doing the same, so I felt if I left, I'd do better. (...) I probably would have left school with the same qualifications and then just basically left without going to college or anything. But [Organisation 2] is giving me time to go to this course and look for a job. And probably be employed by the end of it. So I think it's really helping me a lot.*

In Ron's case, self-exclusion from school was also the result of the interplay between his practically oriented *habitus* and the education *field*. His subjective expectations of the objective probabilities of leaving a year later with likely the same qualifications and the *field* influences, as school identified Ron as a potential candidate for employability training, gave him the impetus to leave school early. Like in Noemi's (17) and Hannah's (17) case (see Section 7.2.1), Ron was constructed as a deficit learner, whose self-exclusion from mainstream education was actively encouraged by his school. Indeed, it was unlikely Ron would have followed an academic pathway if he stayed for another year, given his educational choices prior to leaving secondary education (studying vocational subjects, such as metalwork and woodwork), his rejection of symbolic mastery and his perception of school as '*just qualifications*'. However, his example helps to problematise the role of *symbolic violence* and its impact on the young people's lives and choices they make regarding their engagement with schooling and consequently their transitions.

To reiterate, the decision to leave school can be understood as the result of an interplay between participants' *habitus* (negative dispositions towards symbolic mastery), the position they occupied within it (not at ease, of struggle, of a deficit learner on a direction to vocational pathways), silencing their interests and strengths and exclusionary experiences of the education system. These factors were all at play, leading to self-exclusion from education (to some extent) and guiding the young people's transitions. Moreover, a majority of participants wanted '*to be out as soon as possible*' (Claire, 16) and they often did not '*see the point in staying in*' (Ron, 16). Consequently, leaving school had often been perceived as easy, inevitable, positive (the end of negative experiences) and in many cases as being decided without giving



much consideration to what to do next (these issues will be further explored in Chapter 8):

*It was a [clicks fingers]. I'm leaving! (Anne, 17)*

*As soon as I got an idea in my head, it was like that – simple. That's the only way out! (James, 19)*

*When I turned 16, I was like, I can leave and then I left. That's it. (Jason, 16)*

For some, like Alan (20), this was even recollected as not a fully conscious decision; leaving school seemed to just happen to him, strongly indicating that some of the processes behind the generative *habitus* operate 'beyond the introspective scrutiny or control of will' (Bourdieu, 1984:46), as also argued in Section 4.1.4.

*Dorota: Why did you decide to leave?*

*Alan: To be honest, I don't know. It's just... I don't think any of my pals were staying on, so...I decided to leave.*

*Dorota: Was it a difficult decision to leave?*

*Alan: No, not really. I just decided I was leaving and just left. Like that.*

Moreover, Alan's account serves as an important example of how social reproduction occurs among some of the working class young people. How much of it is choice, a rational, crafted and reflexive one in construing one's choice biography (Giddens, 1991) or 'self as enterprise' (Kelly, 2006), and how much of it depends on what happens to young people of a certain class ('for the likes of us'), in this case, those belonging to the dominated groups. The answer seems to lean towards the latter.

### *7.3.2 Refusing 'what is anyway denied'*

When examined through the prism of what the young people 'were not' (Skeggs, 1997), my participants were found to be not like the middle classes, as defined economically and culturally. They were not at ease with education, they often expressed negative perceptions of and dispositions towards institutionalised learning and acquiring formal credentials, and they were unlikely to meet the image of the ideal learner. A majority were also unlikely to pursue Higher Education (HE), unlike most middle-class young people (Bodovski, 2015; Gripsrud et al., Irwin, 2018; Reay, 2016).

For example, as Reay (2016:135) highlighted, a choice to follow HE routes among young people from middle and upper class backgrounds is 'a non-decision', but rather 'automatic, taken-for-granted and always assumed' (see also Irwin, 2018). This was the opposite case for participants in this study. Higher Education was perceived as something 'unthinkable' (Bourdieu, 1990a) and unwanted by the majority. Michael (20), for example, had expressed the idea of himself at university as unthinkable in the strongest way:

*Dorota: Have you considered going to college or university?*

*Michael: Me go to university, that's a funny one.*

*Dorota: (Laughs) Why?*

*Michael: I'd get kicked out in the first week or something (Laughs). Nah, eh I've been applying for all sorts of jobs and whatever else.*

This account was echoed by most participants. Yet, for a few of them, the idea of accessing HE had been possible or even probable, nevertheless not automatic or taken for granted, as in the case of many middle class young people (Gaddis, 2013; Reay, 2016). For some, like Matthew (19), who expressed more positive dispositions towards learning and leaving school was to pursue a career in football, going to university was perceived as a probable and achievable option:

*Dorota: What does it take to become a PE teacher, Uni or college?*

*Matthew: Yeah, it would be Uni because, you'd need to be at Uni for, like, 3-4 years.*

*Dorota: Do you consider going to Uni to do that one day?*

*Matthew: Yeah, yeah. You never know. Just anything can happen.*

*Dorota: But have you thought about it? Have you researched it maybe?*

*Matthew: Em, yes. I know what it takes to get to be a P.E. teacher. You know, it takes a lot of hard work.*

Like Matthew, for Hannah (17), who left school very early after extended periods of truancy, accessing HE was also perceived as possible:

*Dorota: Have you ever considered going to University?*

*Hannah: Emmm, I don't think I have good qualifications to do that. But maybe if I get into college and like emm 'cause, it is possible. My big sister, she's starting University as well. She didn't do her best at school with qualifications emm, but she's got there. So I think it's possible to do it.*

It is difficult to say if Hannah will take this route, as at the time of the interview she was pregnant and uncertainty over what she could do in the future was underpinning her whole narrative. However, she perceived HE as an option, something that one may aspire to, however distant and difficult this could be. In Hannah's case, her knowledge and experiences of accessing HE, embedded in her close social networks, made it a possibility; uncertain and unclear, yet a possibility.

Overall, however, the majority of my participants did not consider, nor wanted to follow HE routes. Following Bourdieu (1990a:54), it may be thus argued that by doing so, they 'refuse[d] what is anyway denied'. This further serves to demonstrate how different conditions of existence experienced by members of different classes lead to adopting 'different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable' (Bourdieu, 1977:78). For my participants, accepting the legitimacy of education system and internalising 'what is [and is not] possible for the likes of us', reinforced their disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1990a:56). In other words, *symbolic violence* exercised by educational institutions occurred with the young people's 'own complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:167), as they internalised and accepted their own position within the education *field* (Friedman, 2009). However, it does not mean that these processes happened without struggle or awareness on the young people's side, nor were they the result of false consciousness. Rather, as France and Threadgold (2016:625) point out, they derive from the emotional struggles 'of evaluations, decisions and actions that are realistic responses to one's place in the world'. For example, this section showed how participants were adjusting their subjective hopes, aspirations and

expectations to objective probabilities (see e.g. Danielle's narrative), left school to end negative experiences, such as unsupportive and/or disrespectful treatment (see e.g. Anne's narrative) or refused (ergo acted upon) what was nevertheless denied (see e.g. Martin's narrative). These issues will be also explored in Section 8.2.3 in relation to participants' occupational choices.

### *7.3.3 The absence of parents*

As argued in Section 4.1.1, dispositions towards education and educational success remain closely linked to the history of one's family, the history of their education and the recognition of the value of education by members of that group (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Dumais, 2002). Crucially, parents were in the main absent from participants' accounts when they discussed their time at school, support with their learning and their decisions to leave education early. In most cases, they did not mention any kind of protest or pushback from their parents, who were mostly silent in the narratives. Only Brian (16), whose father was the first person in their family to achieve a HND in college, reported his parents '*going mad,*' contacting school and actively trying to prevent him from leaving.

Alison (16) was also one of the few who mentioned her parents when talking about her (dis)engagement with school. However, they also were absent when she was truanting and eventually decided to leave, and her mum's intervention came too late for her:

*I just had like no plans at all. Like I left school and like my Mum was stressed out, because she basically didn't like, I don't know, she basically didn't say: "You have to go to school". But then she realised her mistake in that department, so then she was like getting in contact with the school, getting in contact with colleges and courses.*

A few participants also described their parents as being unable to help with their school struggles. For example, as Anne (18) said:

*I never went to any other classes until the school kind of got my mum involved, and were like: "Right, your daughter's no going to school, blah, blah, blah". So I got into trouble with my mum a lot. But she wouldn't listen. I went: "Mum, I'm no' going in because...", [then mum said] "I don't want to hear it." And I was like: "It's too hard," and she just never wanted to hear it. So I started having to go to school, but I'd still dodge it, like, all the time.*

The excerpts above thus illustrate how parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds may struggle to successfully support their children's education. Here, the evidence from other studies may offer some help in understanding the problems these parents may encounter. A recent study employing data from the *Growing up in Scotland* dataset found that while lower income parents want their children to succeed, as the majority of parents do, they are less likely to know how to support their children's education, and often less aware of different opportunities available or how to achieve them (Treanor, 2017). This had been further linked by research to broader socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of access to resources, an unjust economy, middle classness functioning as a norm and pathologising the working classes (France and Haddon, 2014; Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 1997, 2004a). However, public and political rhetoric continuous to blame lower socio-economic parents for their children's educational underachievement. For example, Reay (2017) challenged the rhetoric of natural 'brightness' of middle-class children as the reason behind their educational achievement. Instead, she demonstrated that their success is 'carefully constructed and intensively nurtured from birth' (p.141). Parents were shown to both encourage and push their children to succeed academically by mobilising a variety of resources to which working class parents may have limited access, including *cultural, social and economic capital*, to ensure their children educational advantage and success. Devine (2004) and Snee and Devine (2014) further demonstrated that middle class families continue to be more likely to have access to relevant information ('hot knowledge') and can more easily navigate and use the education system to their advantage. In contrast, working class parents often struggle to do this due to their own negative educational experiences, limited sense of

entitlement and/or low confidence when engaging with professionals and institutions (Furlong and Haddon, 2014; Johansson and Höjer, 2012; Reay, 2017).

## **7.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the second research question by examining participants' experiences of and relationships with education and how these experiences impacted upon their transitions. The analysis demonstrated that the young people's experiences of schooling were complex and diverse, akin to claims made by other educational scholars (see e.g. Reay, 2017). Yet, it also identified shared patterns of experience in the lives of my participants in terms of their perceptions of school and dispositions towards formal learning, educational experiences, outcomes and credentials, leaving school and their post-school destinations.

This chapter showed that the vast majority had developed negative attitudes and dispositions towards formal learning and rejected the value of academic knowledge and of 'symbolic mastery' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Skeggs, 1997). However, the narrative approach allowed us to uncover an additional dimension to the young people's educational journeys, that of their strengths and passion for certain subjects, which failed to be recognised and valued by schools. Resultantly, schools were found to contribute to the young people leaving education early and following the vocational pathways, arguably an 'imposed' route reserved for those disadvantaged.

The chapter then explained how and why participants developed habits and dispositions (learning *habitus*) that did not facilitate academic performance. The negative experiences of the education system were found to strongly contribute to the young people's disaffection with schooling. These included: finding the curriculum boring and irrelevant; schools failing to recognise the young people's strengths and interests; negative relationships with teachers; lack of care and/or support; lack of respect and positive recognition; not meeting teachers' expectations of 'ideal' and orderly learners; the ongoing processes of labelling and segregation, and the excessive pressure put on schoolwork, and difficulties to deal with it. These exclusionary experiences contributed to my participants' limited sense of belonging to their schools,

negatively affected their wellbeing, feelings of self-worth and led to scarred learner identities.

The final section linked the above experiences with the symbolic power underlying the education system, understood as a segregation mechanism allocating disadvantaged young people into low-level vocational routes of little symbolic value. This occurred with my participants' own 'complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:167), as in response to the exclusionary processes they excluded themselves from academic and other pathways and careers perceived as 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1990a:56). It was also highlighted that while doing so, the young people were not passive or unaware of their disadvantaged positions, but rather actively responding to the limitations deriving from occupying such positions.

The next chapter examines my participants' experiences after leaving secondary education, specifically of their 'accelerated' transitions and of looking for and accessing opportunities. Close attention is paid to the further segregation processes embedded in the post-16 transitions policy and the labour market *fields*.

## Chapter 8 Youth in transition: accessing learning and employment

This chapter discusses the evidence on participants' choices, practices and pathways after leaving compulsory education. It first looks at the opportunities they wanted to pursue and how these remained mediated by the objective structures. It also explores the roles digital technologies play in the young people's occupational choices, thus adding an additional dimension to research on youth transitions. The second part moves to examine participants' practices of making the most of their mediated choices by exploring the impact of emotional processes behind them through the lens of *illusio*. It also sheds light on the young people's hopes for their futures and how these are intertwined with their 'longing' for belonging. The final section examines participants' experiences of the labour market and the role the policy *field* has on their transitions. The questions surrounding the impact of epistemological fallacy and *symbolic violence* on the young people's agency and transitions remain at the heart of the analysis. More broadly, this chapter explores the interplay between agency and structures and its impact on my participants' ability to freely construct their lives and navigate transitions in late modernity.

### 8.1 The journey to vocational pathways

As demonstrated in Chapter 7, the young people's pathways out of school varied. Some participants left immediately after reaching the legal school leaving age, often with no plans of what they wanted to or could do in terms of work or FE, others were more confident about the routes they decided to follow. These young people had been enrolled in vocational courses while in school and moved directly into colleges or tried to access apprenticeships, training opportunities or jobs. The *symbolic violence* embedded in the education system was found to strongly contribute to my participants' negative school experiences, their consequent self-exclusion from academic and creative pathways and the choice of vocational careers.

Most young men in this study identified employment in the construction sector as their preferred or desirable work: this was scaffolding for Declan, joinery for Ron, electrical



work for Daniel and Alan, painting and decorating for Liam and Jason, and bricklaying for Martin and Michael. Other options they considered included working in retail, warehousing, as mechanics, but also drama (Brian), football (Matthew), science (Joe) and childcare (Christopher and briefly Martin). Young women, on the other hand, expressed interest in employment in childcare/social care (Noemi, Alison, Hannah), sport, fitness and beauty (Emma, Hannah) or working with the public in customer services and retail (Danielle, Claire, Noemi), sectors traditionally dominated by women (Scottish Government, 2016c). There were some exceptions to this gendered divide, as for example Michael (20) and Christopher (17) were interested in working in childcare, Claire (16) considered the possibility of joining the army, and Emma (18) enjoyed her placement and accepted a job in a warehouse because, as she said, *'it's good, I like it, I like when it's hard and stuff'*.

The intersection of class and gender *habitus* guiding one's appreciations and choices was visible in participants' accounts of opportunities they valued and wanted to pursue and the rationale they gave for these decisions. The majority of young men emphasised their preference for practical, *'hands on jobs'* or *'learning on a job'* – a route that had been traditionally associated with working class male occupations. As Ron (16) explained:

*I just want an apprenticeship [in joinery] or something. I don't need to go study something and then get a job. I'd better learn on a job (...) like do the work and get paid and learn. That would be better.*

Michael (20) also highlighted that it was the active and practical nature of work in construction that he appreciated:

*I ended up deciding to switch to going from childcare into construction. Labouring, whatever else (...). Hands on, I like to be active and move about (...).*

Moreover, the value of practical work and learning while working was seen not only as preferable and enjoyable, but also as a welcome contrast to the static and perhaps disempowering environment of the classroom. Resultantly, the choice of active and practical work seemed to also reflect young men's embodied dispositions, where

satisfaction and sense of achievement derived from practical mastery rather than from the symbolic one. For example, Alan (20), while talking about his training in forestry, said:

*Aye, that [training] was all right, 'cause there wasn't all classroom. It was all right. I prefer working and learning like that... rather than sitting down at the computer. It was more practical. Like it feels they taught me more that way.*

On the other hand, the majority of young women expressed interest in working with or caring for people as they sought to access low level embodied and interactive jobs with and on the bodies of others. These were jobs which 'were previously undertaken mainly in private homes and 'for love' (...) not for wages' and now commodified (McDowell, 2009:6). The young women often referred to aspects of their (gendered) identity when identifying what drove them towards these choices. For example, Danielle (18) who considered working in either retail or caring, said:

*I have really like a caring nature. I do. I don't know where that's coming from, but I do have a very caring nature. That's what's driving me on that path.*

Others, like Claire (16), who used her work placement as a customer assistant as an example, highlighted the importance of the interactive and relational nature of employment as preferable and saw it as a valuable option:

*Aye, I liked this type of job, I like working with people. See if I was myself, I don't think I would enjoy it that much.*

Moreover, like their male counterparts, young women also highlighted the active nature of the opportunities they had been interested in and contrasted them with the boring and even tiring environment of the classroom or office. Alison's (16) interest in childcare, and Emma's (18) experiences of working in an office are examples of how their active oriented *habitus* guided young women's preferences and actions when it came to accessing work:

*Alison: So then I've come to 16 and it's still childcare but it's like, like ever since I started this [training in employability], it was like coaching young children too,*

*like kind of like cause I like to be like out and about and stuff as well, and not just stuck in like a room.*

*Emma: [talking about the office job] It was good, don't get me wrong, but it was sitting down all day and kinda felt like I was wasting my energy and stuff. Like I liked more to be in a very sporty environment and doing stuff; and sitting down eight hours a day was just kinda draining.*

### **8.1.1 The role of direct experience**

Participants occupational preferences had been embedded in what they experienced – either while at school/training (educational policy *field*), via their social networks or through other aspects of their classed and gendered everyday lives.

Ron (16) reflected on what drove him into seeking opportunities in joinery:

*My uncle, he was always doing lots of homemade stuff, like building cabinets, things like that. And I'd always pretend that I was doing that. I've always been interested in it.*

Martin (23) who said '*if I got a bricklaying job, I'd love it, so I would*', linked his interest in this type of work with his experience of working alongside his grandfather:

*I know exactly what I'm doing, so I do, man. See when I was like younger, I used to help my grandad and that to do this stuff. Like, they've taught us stuff like, so I'm not like complete daft in the heid man, like I know what I'm doing, man.*

Importantly, Martin presented himself as possessing knowledge and skills required to work as a bricklayer. He described himself as a knowledgeable agent, which differed greatly from his scarred learner identity of years of negative and disempowering school experiences. This account was also echoed by other young men, who often highlighted knowledge and skills they already had in their chosen profession.

Another participant, Liam (23), tried to access work/apprenticeships in painting and decorating because he had some experience via school placements:

*Eh, carpet fitting. Like I would do it, but I'd rather do painting and decorating. (...) 'Cause I've already done it, like one day a week and I just liked it. And I did work experience too in school and I liked it.*

Alison's (16) choice of working in childcare was based on experience of caring for her little siblings. Her choice of a work placement at school also drew on the familiar – she picked her siblings' nursery, which she already knew and valued:

*I think it was like when my little brother and sister started nursery. I liked the whole atmosphere, like how it was just so calm and a lovely atmosphere for like young children to go into. I just thought that that would be my dream job.*

Direct experiences not only helped to define what the young people wanted to do, but also what they did not. Claire (16), for example, chose her preferred type of work and rejected others based on her experiences from work placements accessed while at school (hairdresser assistant, restaurant worker) and college courses (hospitality):

*I've tried college courses, I've done hospitality, but it wasn't really my thing. I didn't really like being in college, I actually wanted to go out and work with the public instead of being inside of kitchen.*

Hannah (17), who 'always wanted to be a hairdresser' after studying it at college, found out that 'it just wasn't what I wanted to do anymore. Emm I just didn't enjoy it (...). I've got a lot experience in it and I think I just changed my mind, it wasn't what I wanted to do anymore'. By this time, she came to the realisation that she wanted to change fields:

*I wanted to be a youth worker emm with people like, with the families with addiction; work with the kids and that so that's what I wanted to do (...). I just don't know, it's just family history just made me want to help people, other people like when I was younger basically.*

In Hannah's case, her family history influenced her perceptions of what would be a meaningful job, helping others finding themselves in the same difficult circumstances she once experienced and got helped with.

### 8.1.2 *The impact of technologies on occupational choices*

Given the widely held belief that technologies play a central role in young people's lives, the study aimed to examine the extent to which technologies were actively involved in my participants' transitions after school. It was found that the young people's occupational choices were not influenced by their engagement with technologies. On the contrary, as the above analysis had demonstrated, participants referred to direct experiences and dispositions deriving from their lifeworlds and relations as the key sources for their choices. These findings also resonate with the scholarship highlighting the crucial role of direct experience in the lives of disadvantaged youth on their occupational choices (Connolly and Healy, 2004), with early years experiences often being deeply formative (Nixon, 2009).

Only two participants, who left school abruptly with no clear idea of what they wanted to do, Christopher (17) and Anne (17), mentioned technologies while talking about them exploring the opportunities they could pursue. Christopher (17) worked in his father's house maintenance company after leaving school, but he found the work 'too intensive', harmful to his health and 'dead repetitive'. While on an employability course, he was encouraged to use 'My World of Work'<sup>15</sup> to seek other options:

*Well before I came to Organisation 1, I was with a company, they were training providers. And then when I went there they'd kind of, you'd give them your qualifications and what you were interested in and then they'd give you back a couple of job sectors [through My World of Work]. Like, "Oh with your qualifications, what you're interested in, this would be good," and they said to me childcare. (...) As soon as they said it, it just sparked. I was like, "I'd probably enjoy doing childcare".*

This extract demonstrates how the histories of one's dispositions and positions meet when young people engage with technologies. Christopher's inclination for drama, combined with enjoyable experiences of caring for his little cousin and his position in

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<sup>15</sup> My World of Work is an online careers guidance website complementing Career Management Skills Framework for Scotland (SDS, 2012); see <https://www.myworldofwork.co.uk/> (Accessed 2 April 2020).

the social *fields*, allowed him to perceive childcare as an option that was both worthy and possible to pursue. In his case, engagement with technologies was a source of information that influenced his occupational choices.

However, technologies are 'not free from sociocultural, political and economic power structures and any mobility or agency they may offer the user is momentary, contentious, negotiated and ambivalent' (Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016:12; see also Section 3.2.2). For example, if social agents find opportunities that are perceived as worthy, but not accessible, engagement with technologies only serves as a painful reminder of the position one occupies in the social structures and exposes the constraints of the social *fields*. This held true for Anne (17), whose narrative demonstrated how engagement with technologies can be far from empowering when considered in the context of individual's everyday life and unequal structures. Anne (17) disengaged with school very early, with no plan for what she would like to do and with a scarred learner identity. She had a passion for music and had been exploring musical career options, which led her to discover opportunities in music therapy:

*I don't know, like, I always wanted, well not always, but I found out about this thing called Music Therapy. And it's so cool, I was reading all about it. And I was like, "Aw, that's so cool, like, you can help people with music!"(...) And I'm like, I'd love to do that kind of stuff. But then after I read it all, it was getting me into it, I was like, (gasps) "this looks good," and then, right at the bottom, it said you need a qualification in, emmm [a university degree]. (...) It was the one that I know I would never be able to get.*

Despite Anne's dispositions towards music, her passion alone was not enough to overcome the objective barriers to opportunities, such as her disadvantaged position in the *fields*. Access to technologies and any 'horizons' it opens (Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016) could not obliterate her negative school experiences and being denied access to a college course towards National 4 qualifications after being told by a college tutor this course was '*too academically challenging*'. These experiences were further internalised into Anne's matrix of perceptions and appreciations of what was and was

not possible. Furthermore, Anne was painfully aware of her disadvantaged position in the *fields* and of opportunities from which she had been excluded. Thus, she acknowledged a rather strong possibility of being compelled to settle for a low-level job that she would dislike, as she subjectively felt this was the only type of work she could access:

*Well, I've been, just looking at any kind of music thing. I know I should be kind of looking for other ones [jobs], because I can't just rely on music. (...) I know I'll need to start looking (...) [at] all the other ones I don't really like, but they're the ones that I can get into.*

### ***8.1.3. Mediated choices – choosing from a limited range of possibilities***

The above analysis suggests that the opportunities the young people were interested in were guided by their *habitus* – the structures of perceptions, appreciations and actions that were based upon objective structures, including class, gender, their position within the education system and limited access to resources and information. For most young men in this study, their *habitus* leaned towards practical rather than symbolic mastery. By contrast, young women were (mostly) interested in interactive and people-oriented, embodied low level occupations, also in alignment with gender norms. Despite such differences, both young men and women rejected jobs perceived as inactive, such as office or administrative employment. These embodied preferences are thus understood as a result of the young people's actively oriented *habitus* – encompassing one's mental structures that had also been incorporated into a body and expressed via bodily practices that continue to simultaneously structure 'the perception of that world as well as action in that world' (Bourdieu, 1998:81). In the case of my participants, this related to jobs they wanted and did not want to do.

These findings demonstrate how one's class and gender intersect with continuity and change in youth transitions. Specifically, gendered and classed occupational choices contribute to the reproduction of unequal gendered and classed relations amongst this segment of the youth population (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Evans, 2002; McDowell, 2009). While the changing nature of the labour market resulted in a shift in

the interest in jobs that were available since post-deindustrialisation, it did not contribute to change in the young people's social mobility. At the same time, the majority of young men were not interested in accessing jobs that have now proliferated in the service economy. On the contrary, their *habitus* remained committed to manual labour. As such, their dispositions and preferences did not appear to adjust to the demands of the new economic conditions; they did not reconstruct their identity by trying to access service jobs which are now dominating the labour market. These findings are consistent with other studies that demonstrate that some working class young men continue to reject employment in the service economy (McDowell, 2009, 2012; Nixon, 2009). Consequently, they are faced with another disadvantage in the labour market, in which employment in manufacturing, construction and other male dominated sectors has significantly declined (Liddell et al., 2014; McDowell, 2009; 2012; Scottish Government, 2016c).

Resultantly, the choices the young people made can be understood as mediated in a dual way. As Bourdieu (1990a:77) asserts, even though choice lies at the heart of *habitus*, the array of opportunities it 'allows' for remains restricted by both: the circumstances under which an individual lives and the internalised framework of what is possible for 'people like us'. Specifically, rejection (self-exclusion, while being excluded) of academic and creative pathways and inclination towards practical mastery or working with people mediated 'what is possible from a limited range of possibilities' (Stahl, 2015:23). In other words, decisions on what opportunities to pursue for this group were 'the result of the meeting of two histories: the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1993: 61).

The choices my participants made were therefore conventional, in most cases aligning with their class background and gender and deriving from what had been known and experienced in the context of their lifeworlds. In this sense, disadvantage, poverty, their marginalisation and the limited presence of opportunity and resources had a strong impact on the young people's trajectories, as they structured and constrained what young people were 'allowed' to experience and think of 'as possible' (Bourdieu, 1990a). Drawing on direct experience and the familiar rather than using technologies



for making occupational choices, can also be understood in terms of being mediated in a dual way. The limited presence of opportunity and resources in the lives of my participants transferred into engagement with technologies, which were not perceived as offering freedom of choice or social mobility, nor were they used as such.

These findings pose somewhat of a challenge to claims made by technology scholars, which describe contemporary young people as technologically mediated (Livingstone, 2009; see Section 3.2.1). Instead, they indicate that some spheres of young people's lives, such as making occupational choices, are not mediated by technologies in any significant ways, at least not among this group of youth. In other words, NEET-labelled young people's occupational trajectories remain guided by their direct experiences and dispositions deriving from their lifeworlds and classed and gendered relations. These findings thus further point to the question of the role of the class and whether this is also the case for young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, who are likely to experience a higher degree of freedom, possibility and choice in their everyday lives and relations (Connelly and Heally, 2004). Would they see engagement with technologies as offering a further possibility for choice and mobility and use them as such? On the other hand, as Chapter 9 will demonstrate, other aspects of my participants' lives remain highly technologically mediated, even though the socio-economic and educational inequalities constitute a significant backdrop to their digital practices.

## **8.2 Transitions in search of a good life and belonging**

This section examines the young people's agency in making the most of their mediated choices by exploring the impact of emotional processes behind them through the lens of *illusio*. It also seeks to shed light on my participants' hopes for their futures and how these hopes are intertwined with their 'longing' for belonging.

### **8.2.1 'I want a job I enjoy!' Making best of the mediated choices**

While the young people's *habitus* leaned mostly towards gendered, practical, or embodied and people-oriented opportunities, this is not the full account of their transitions. Rather, the agentic aspects of their mediated choices were also

emphasised in their narratives, demonstrating that the young people are active agents, even though constrained by societal structures. In their own words, opportunities the young people chose were based on their personal attributes and interests, such as being a *'people's person'* (Danielle and Claire), being *'dead chatty'* and *'being out and about'* (Alison), being *'alternative'* (Anne), active and *'sporty'* (Emma), being *'an outdoor kind of guy'* (Daniel), constantly seeking to better oneself *'both as a person, as a coach'* (Matthew), or even simply liking to *'make people smile'* (Brian). My participants thus wanted to pursue opportunities they found meaningful in their lifeworlds and were reflective of their personalities and interests.

As Bourdieu (1990a) asserts, a need for meaning remains a central feature of our lives, to make them worthwhile and purposeful. Behind one's meaning making practices stands *illusio*, a belief that life and what we do in it 'is worth of one's efforts and investment' (Bourdieu, 1990a:66); that current practices will bring desired outcomes in the future and what we do will lead to self-worth and self-fulfilment (Stillman and Baumeister, 2009:249; see also Section 4.1.4). Thus, *illusio* encompasses an affective dimension to understanding how young people make occupational choices and invest in them. However, it also illustrates how these remain mediated by social divisions (Threadgold, 2019), by, for example, addressing the struggles behind such choices (see Section 8.2.3).

Most participants stressed the importance of progressing towards jobs they enjoyed, valued and were passionate about. For example, Christopher (17), who, unlike other men, sought to access an apprenticeship in childcare and did a placement in a nursery, described this work as *'fun'* and therefore worth pursuing:

*It was fun. I enjoyed it. It was the best thing I've ever done, to be honest. Well so far anyway, 'cause I've done other stuff, but this was my favourite.*

He went on to explain how important it was to him to choose a career he enjoyed:

*I don't want to do a job that I don't enjoy because they'll see me not enjoying it. (...) So I don't see the point in me doing it. I'd rather just struggle for a few*

*months and get something that I enjoy, than do something for a couple of months that I absolutely hate.*

This account was echoed by the vast majority of participants, highlighting the importance of accessing opportunities they liked and enjoyed doing. Liam (23) talked about his choice of career in painting and decorating:

*Aye, I like it a lot, because I was good at it. I want to like do it as a job.*

Others stressed the importance of a job suited to their needs that would motivate them to do it, like Danielle (18):

*You need to keep looking and applying for jobs suiting your needs. (...) Yeah, just the fact of looking for a proper job that you're actually into, you don't want to be stuck with some job you don't like and then just leave after a few weeks of doing that.*

Brian (16) and Matthew (19) highlighted that their passion for football and drama drove them to pursue these opportunities:

*Brian: I thought about just doing construction, 'cause my uncle works there and he can get me a job. But doing that, I would be miserable. Doing that for the rest of my life 'cause I'd know, "Oh, I haven't tried to do acting". Just to take an easy way out, 'cause it would mean so much easier stuff in the future, whereas I'm motivated to do what I want to do.*

*Matthew: I just love playing, I love playing football, you know. Since I was young, I've just loved football.*

The jobs participants were interested in and wanted to pursue were the ones they found meaningful, whether the meaning derived from enjoying work, having a job suiting their needs, feeling the satisfaction of being good at something or working 'hands-on' or with others (as also discussed in Section 8.1.1). Moreover, for the young men, the meaning attached to the jobs they wanted to access also derived from the importance of making one's own living and taking pride in one's work, 'a virtue made

of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). For example, James (19), who had been avoiding claiming benefits so as not to be 'an *arse that does take on benefits*' emphasised, it was important to earn one's money:

*Well, I think I would be a lot happier actually 'cause, going to a workplace, earning my money, it'd make me feel happier knowing I'm earning that. And it's not coming off taxpayers or whatever. And then I'd know I'm spending my money and not somebody else's kind of thing to be honest.*

Young fathers also stressed the importance of having a job to be able to support their children and partners. Martin (23) for example expressed clear discomfort regarding not being able to provide for his family:

*I just don't feel right at all. 'Cause my girlfriend like works and I don't like seeing that, like seeing she's pregnant and seeing her getting up in the morning and like walking to the bus stop. It should be me doing that, like going to the work and that, man.*

In contrast, young women tended to stress the importance of having a sense of direction and purpose in life, progressing towards meaningful, good, enjoyable and worthy jobs, and, more broadly, getting '*somewhere*' with their lives. These accounts were often contrasted with their current lives, which they described as inactive, boring and unfulfilling. These accounts were further accompanied by feelings of '*being stuck*' and fears of time just '*passing by*' without progressing towards their goals. Claire (16), for example, was about to start yet another training course in the hope of improving her position in the labour market:

*Recently, I've been up here [Organisation 1] looking for just kinda [something], because I don't like sitting around doing nothing in the house. (...) If I don't do something, I'm just sitting in the house and I'll just see my life like slip. It's time to do something.*

Hannah (17) also highlighted the pressure of time passing without progression towards meaningful opportunities and the gravity of her current circumstances:

*[I feel] rubbish, rubbish (...). I'm not doing anything, I'm not...time is getting running and I'm not learning anything to get a job. Like it sucks sometimes. Just being stuck in the house all the time.*

Importantly, such feelings of being left behind, or even a failure, are a clear example of how neoliberalism has become a powerful discourse, 'the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world' (Harvey, 2007:21; see Section 2.1.2). As it reinforces the principles of competitive individualism and the self as enterprise (Kelly, 2006), it is unsurprising that young people who face difficulties in their transitions feel high levels of pressure and personal responsibility for their supposed failures. The epistemological fallacy (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) young people have been subjected to affects their ways of thinking and feeling, while hiding the structural problems that continue to unequally shape their lives and transitions.

### ***8.2.2 Longing for a good life and belonging***

All participants expressed hopes for a good, dignified, independent and secure life, with a job they valued, their own family, '*a house and a mortgage and stuff*' (Noemi, 17), so they could socialise with friends, meet new people through work and do things they enjoyed in their free time. In this sense, the young people's hopes for their futures were highly conventional, intrinsic to their transitions and believed possible to achieve through employment. The social and psychological benefits of work (Shildrick et al., 2012) were strongly emphasised across all narratives and contrasted with the negative impact of unemployment and disadvantage (see also Section 2.2.1).

Participants believed that having a job would keep them '*active*', '*motivated and busy*', '*happy*', and with something to do and somewhere to go, unlike their present position (see also Section 6.2). As Noemi (17) explained:

*A job is important 'cause you are not like ... unemployed. 'Cause anyone doesn't want to be unemployed for the rest of your life and I don't want to be unemployed. I hate being unemployed. 'Cause like, most days I'm staying home doing nothing. But like you really want to do something and you can't and it's boring. Nothing to do.*

Noemi's (17) simple explanation that no one wants to be unemployed also carries a deep message – that no one wants to lead a meaningless life without purpose or be marginalised from participation in social life. Young men also highlighted the importance of making *'one's living'* and providing for their families. Moreover, having a job was perceived by the young people as a means to achieving certainty, an *'independent life'* or even simply *'a life'*. For example, James (19), who had been in long term unemployment, said:

*Just having a job itself would be good. Meeting new people, just kinda getting on with it, having a life. That would be good.*

Employment was thus perceived as leading to numerous social benefits, such as a chance to meet people outside of the young people's immediate and often narrow social networks, or the opportunity to participate in social and economic life (see also Chapter 6). Employment would thus allow a life that is structured around work, consumption and leisure, from which my participants were marginalised, as for example Jamie (16) and Alan (20) described:

*Jamie: I liked doing the work and just getting up every morning and going out instead of sitting about and just doing nothing. (...) I'd rather have job cause then you can go for holiday and stuff 'cause you have mere money. And then get things and stuff.*

*Alan: (Work is good) 'cause I do need to get up and go and like I'd not be stuck at home all day. 'Cause I'd have money so I would be doing stuff like at the weekends.*

Moreover, wanting to *'have a life'* as opposed to *'having no life'* was a recurrent theme in the accounts of all participants, most strongly expressed by those who experienced prolonged stages of unemployment and social isolation. Alan (20) hoped that his life would change for the better, as at the time of the interview he felt sometimes there was *'no point of getting out of my bed having no work to go in or no money to do anything, so there is no point of getting up and going out'*. Hopes the young people

held for their future were accompanied by feelings of boredom, powerlessness, lack of motivation and even desperation, as evident from the excerpts below:

Joe (24): *(I feel) Powerless, yeah. I don't have control of what I'm doing.*

Anne (17): *I'm so drained all the time, it's like, I'm just like (sighs). Complaining about everything I do, like, "Oh I can't be bothered." Even standing up, I'm like, "there's no point." And then, that's it. That is my everyday life.*

These findings strongly resonate with research focused on the psychological and social benefits of employment and the negative impact of unemployment (Shildrick et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2014; see also Section 2.2). This study contributes to these debates twofold: by analysing participants' accounts through the lens of belonging and in terms of capturing the processes behind the reproduction of inequalities.

As argued in Chapter 6, the young people's belonging to their material, relational and social contexts was deeply complex and demarcated by everyday inclusions and exclusions. Yet, as belonging is not a state of being, but rather a process of negotiating, doing and achieving belonging, it also encompasses 'longing' – for something or someone (Probyn, 1996). In the case of my participants, this was longing for a good life, a life where they can have a family and socialise, also where they can have a job they value and do things they enjoy. In other words, participants in this study, who experienced joblessness, marginalisation and powerlessness, actively sought and 'longed' for participating in the social, economic and cultural aspects of life (May, 2011).

### *8.2.3 The role of illuso and the struggle for meaning*

Disadvantage, the limited presence of opportunities and resources, and close distance to necessity, seemed to strongly influence what a meaningful life meant. It thus demonstrated the adjustment of one's subjective hopes and appreciations to the objective and unequal possibilities on which such hopes had been based. For a majority of my participants this meant a commitment to low level, low paid jobs. Moreover, their hopes and appreciations had been often construed in opposition to their present

negative circumstances. Thus, participants' struggle for a meaningful life through low level employment encompassed 'a feel for the game' (*illusio*) and commitment to its unequal and arbitrary rules (*doxa*; Bourdieu, 1990a:66). Consequently, summoning *illusio* made these opportunities desirable and appreciated. Doing so, however, also allowed unequal social relations to be reproduced, as they reproduce themselves via subjective processes of finding meaning which are based upon objective structures (Bourdieu, 1977).

However, my participants were not equally committed to the game and its rules, nor did they all believe that what was possible to achieve, was also equally meaningful. On the contrary, some participants seemed to settle even for less, for options that seemed 'good enough'. For example, Michael (20) explained how having a bricklaying work would be simply 'good enough' for him:

*[Bricklaying] It's easy work. Keeps me active, keeps me going. That's happy with me. I'm happy enough with that. Piece of pay I'm happy.*

Similarly, James (19) did not perceive jobs in warehousing or retail as something he liked or enjoyed, yet he still was willing to get a job in these sectors:

*[The job] was just in a warehouse, but it was good pay, so I was willing to move over to there [Ireland] just to have a job.*

His only requirement, repeated throughout his narrative, was to have a full-time job that paid a salary and would allow him to 'have a life', as discussed earlier:

*'Cause I'm looking for full time employment basically, I want a full-time job. No way I'm going to work two days a week earning 30 pounds. That's not worth my time.*

Danielle's (18) account also underlined contradictions and tensions in relation to her choice of work she wanted to do and why. While initially she was striving for work in childcare, failing the college course made her re-evaluate the possibilities available, while summoning *illusio* allowed her to attach meaning to retail jobs, as worthy and desirable options:



*I've tried college [in childcare], but it wasn't really for me. I just prefer to go out, just go and see how it is to work in the retail sector. That's what I really want to do.*

In these cases, participants' subjective expectations had been further adjusted to the objective possibilities which, internalised into their *habitus*, worked as a matrix of perceptions and appreciations for opportunities they were willing to pursue. These processes were not, however, straightforward, easy, un-reflexive or without a struggle. Rather, behind these stood one's *illusio*, which as France and Threadgold (2016:625) argue, in the case of dominated groups often encompasses 'the emotional result of evaluations, decisions and actions that are realistic responses to one's place in the world'. By doing so, the young people remained committed enough to the game, and continued to accept its rules and their own position in it by lowering their expectations.

Joe's (24) and Anne's (17) narratives were particularly underpinned by such a struggle in their search for meaningful employment and lives. They had both been 'stuck' in their transitions and experienced a high degree of uncertainty regarding their futures. Their striving for opportunities in science and music (subjective dispositions) had been hampered by their disadvantaged positions in the educational and labour market *fields*, leaving them in a state of flux. Both conformed to and resisted at the same time the rules of the game, because their *illusio* was much weaker than that of other participants. They were applying for jobs they perceived as reachable, yet they did not really want to do work they perceived as meaningless and depressing:

*Joe: I'm applying for jobs, like I want a job, but I don't really want these jobs, but that's all I can apply for, so. (...) They are just meaningless jobs, I guess. Just something to get money, that's what they are. (...). I don't think anything can be done because there have to be the low jobs, so people have to do them.*

*Anne: I don't want to just be stuck doing something that I don't want to do. Cause that, that'd just make me unhappy and I know for a fact if I was doing something that I didn't want to do, because it's the only thing I could do, I'd feel how I did in school. (...). But it would get to that depressing stage, when you're*

*just sitting there all the time, like, [sighs], "I'm really unhappy." But you need to keep the job, because there's no other way for you to get money.*

This constant conflict between one's aspirations and the objective probability of achieving them goes some way to explain why some young people were 'stuck' in their transitions, with a long period of inactivity and erratic practices of looking for jobs. Joe completed his Highers in college, but saw this as a second-best option to university, to which he initially aspired to go. He then experienced three years of unemployment, underlined by *'Just not having a direction and where I want to go in; (...) like getting a job wasn't my goal, it's just something to do'*. These feelings of uncertainty and being 'stuck' thus became internalised as a way of being, a habitual state (dispositions) in response to his disadvantaged position in the *fields*, which deeply impeded his agency. At the time of the interview, Joe turned again towards education and applied for an HND in applied science, hoping this was his *'way out'* that would provide him with *'a direction to go in'*.

Anne had been stuck for over a year since completing her last training, torn between *'reading all about'* music therapy that she felt she *'would never be able to get into'* and fears of being compelled to take on low level work she would dislike. The constant struggle between her *wants, cans* and *may have tos* – suggesting a clash between her dispositions and the constraints and demands of social *fields* – resulted in a period of stagnation and uncertainty. This conflict had been expressed via her practices – in which formulating goals, making decisions and taking actions had been both constricted and contradicted. Consequently, her actions were those of unfinished job searches, watching television, being *'stuck in the house'*, and *'used to not doing anything'*:

*I've been kind of like, oh right, okay, but then every single day, I forget as well. Cause it's like, I'll Google them [jobs] and I'll go, "Right, I'll get my CV sorted", and I forget because I end up watching telly. (...). And then I'll go, "Right, after I've walked my dog, I'll do it". I come back in, then forget, then watch telly again.*

Consequently, the above analysis problematises emotional struggles my participants experienced when making choices regarding their transitions. While in some cases they settled for what they perceived as good enough options, in others they were long 'stuck' and struggled to make choices because they continued to resist settling for less.

### **8.3 Young people and the fields**

This section examines the young people's experiences of the labour market and the role the policy *field* has on their transitions. It focuses on the epistemological fallacy and *symbolic violence* beyond compulsory education and their consequent impact on young people's agency and transitions.

#### *8.3.1 Post-16 learning and labour market experiences*

To understand young people's transitions is as much about understanding their experiences and practices as it is to understand the *fields* they occupy post-school and their logic of practice. Their experiences are based on and shaped by these wider structures. Specifically, the collapse of the youth labour market and de-industrialisation superseded by service economy, the expansion of Higher Education and the devaluation of credentials have all eroded the possibility of accessing employment straight after school (see also Section 2.1.2). Moreover, as the neoliberal late capitalism strongly values and rewards qualifications (especially Maths and English) for non-graduate labour entry and progression, young people like the participants in my study are at a particular disadvantage and at the bottom of the employment queue (Roberts, 2005; Scottish Government, 2015a, 2017b; Wolf, 2011). Experience, also highly valued by employers, can no longer be obtained by an early entry to the labour market, the way it could in the industrial past (Wolf, 2011).

This disadvantage in the labour market was clearly identified by my participants. They all reported three main barriers to employment: low qualifications, lack of work experience and young age (see also Thompson et al., 2014 for similar findings). Other barriers included: lack of confidence (addressed in Chapter 9), learning difficulties, reduced ability to read/write; mental health problems; a criminal record; travel; being

'a drop out'; lack of support, or limited jobs openings in opportunities in which they were interested.

To overcome such barriers and access employment, participants were actively seeking to improve their position in the labour market. Due to limited knowledge of how to navigate their transitions (see also Section 6.3), they all turned towards professional services for guidance and information and engaged with post-16 learning: vocational training and various combinations of short-term and longer-term college courses. However, some participants also reported quitting college, being removed from courses or not progressing to the next level, thus indicating these courses did not provide a good experience. Nevertheless, re-engagement with post-16 learning has now become a norm amongst young people following 'accelerated' transitions (see MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018; Simmons and Smyth, 2016). What remains to be explored, however, is how the opportunities available to these young people remain shaped by the policy *field* and the ways it operates.

Participants in this study were usually directed towards post-16 opportunities via main institutions operating within the '*More Choices More Chances*' and '*Opportunities for All*' contexts and their particular logic (see Sections 1.3 and 2.2). Their routes towards these opportunities were via the education system, careers services, job centres and/or training providers. These were the opportunities the young people were advised on, '*put on*', '*helped to get on*' (James, 19), '*picked on*' (Alan, 20) or even, as described by Joe (24) '*tossed on*'. Narratives like Hannah's (17) were very common among my participants:

*[I was advised by] My career advisor, Adele. I come down here [Organisation 1] and see her. I may be starting a course [4 weeks training in childcare] on the 20th. I will go and find more information there on Wednesday.*

The above narratives contest the policy narrative of a 'distinctive' Scottish approach that claims to provide access to suitable and sustained positive destinations (Ridell et al., 2008). Such assurances have proved questionable, as many of the young people were advised to follow various short term courses of little symbolic value in the labour

market, which did not offer clear pathways for progression (see also Simmons and Smyth, 2016; Thompson, 2011b). These are the opportunities that exist within the ‘ontological reality’ of the policy *field* (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Moreover, in most of the cases, my participants were not advised on routes towards creative pathways unless they specifically asked, as demonstrated in Section 7.1. As such, the young people’s agency was constrained by the logic of practice of the policy *field*, upon which information and opportunities available were based (these issues will be further explored in Section 8.3.3).

In a majority of cases, re-engagement with skills initiatives offered few “‘pay-offs’ in terms of improved labour market fortunes”, a result also observed in the Teeside Studies (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:79). The young people were in and out of ‘NEET’ status numerous times, punctuated by engagement with yet another training and/or college course. Older participants reported experiencing long-term unemployment after going through all the stages of employability training programmes. Employment, if accessed at all, was temporary, low level, precarious and exploitative. For example, Hannah (17) accessed a part-time customer assistant’s position, which she was excited to get at first. Yet, very quickly this perception changed:

*At the time, it didn’t matter because it was just my first job and I was so excited to have the job. So I was like, I wasn’t thinking about it. Like after 2, I think it was 2 months, I was like, “I think I need like a proper, full time job”. Plus you are getting paid monthly as well, and your wages are really low because of my age.*

Because of her young age, she was paid lower than minimum wage (£3.90 at the time of the study), despite doing the same kind of work as her colleagues. She felt a strong sense of injustice and exploitation:

*[My pay was] quite rubbish, because like I don’t think it should matter about your age like. Maybe would matter about the job or something, but not about your age, of what you get paid, ‘cause you are doing just the same as anybody else in the job. (...) [B]ut you don’t say anything, do you? You just think that*

James (19) also discussed his experience of injustice when his employer defrauded him and he was unable to do anything other than 'quit the job':

*I was just handing fliers out and for me, this is all right by the way, I was enjoying it, just kinda being on the street, just talking to people. But then they owed me 700 and something pounds for that month, 'cause I kept my selling for all sorts of hours. And they handed me 300 pounds at the end of the month and they told me I had been fined. (...) They've done the same with my pal as well. They robbed him with 600 quid.*

Michael (20) was made redundant when a shop he worked for part-time closed down:

*I did a wee job, it was in the city centre, it was a golf shop. I was just like, handing out leaflets and whatever else for them (...) then they shut that down, so.*

Martin (23), on the other hand, quit a job in a chicken factory, which he described as 'the worst job'. As he explained:

*It was with an agency, so it was man, like after a certain amount of time I might of got like kept on, but I didn't like it there. So I just left, you were on your feet man, for twelve hours and like the smell was horrible so it was. (...). I used to go home, man and my girlfriend would be sick and all that, just with the smell.*

The above analysis illustrates experiences of precarity, exploitation, poor quality of work, churning between low level courses, employment and unemployment and lack of realistic chances for career progression, all of which were a strong part of my participants' post-school trajectories. These findings are aligned with a considerable body of scholarship (see Sections 1.3, 2.1.2 and 2.2.1). They also demonstrate how the growing polarisation of the labour market, unequal education and inadequate post-16 policy solutions push the most disadvantaged youth into the most insecure, least prestigious and lowest-skilled jobs. Resultantly, they face the highest risks of unemployment punctuated by periods of economic activity ('low pay, no pay'), as well as of leading insecure, impoverished and marginalised lives (Furlong, 2013; Roberts, 2005; Shildrick et al., 2012). These findings also make a case for treating contemporary

youth in terms of (intra)generational units, as these experiences are not shared across the whole generation. Middle class young people are more likely to follow more linear pathways, often going straight to university, benefit from the intergenerational transfer of assets, and remain relatively shielded from the most insecure and least prestigious employment, as well as from churning and poverty (Allen, 2018; Friedman and Lauriston, 2019; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Furlong et al., 2005; see Section 2.1).

### *8.3.2 Young people and the epistemological fallacy*

As argued in Section 2.2.1, the policy solutions to NEETness have been based on ‘fixing the individual’ logic (Bussi, 2014; Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). By doing so, the skills initiatives have been failing to tackle complex structural factors behind youth unemployment and vocational transitions since the 1980s (Keep, 2015; Miller et al., 2015; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018; Roberts, 2005). Such solutions remain underpinned by the epistemological fallacy. Young people are led to believe that upon engagement with and completion of several training programmes and courses they will succeed in the labour market. This section seeks to further problematise these claims by looking in depth at my participants’ experiences of such initiatives and the impact these are having on both, young people’s practices and the self, so as to reveal the segregative processes behind them.

The data showed striking differences between the narratives of younger and older participants in relation to their experiences in and perceptions of training programmes. Younger participants highlighted the benefits of training for improving their confidence, and often contrasted this with having had very little confidence in the past, especially in the school context. Noemi’s (17) narrative illustrates this point:

*Aye, I think I’m more confident, sometimes I’m not, but sometimes I am. Like I felt like, see when I was in school, before I came here [Organisation 2], like I felt I had little confidence, but I came here and I got my confidence up and keep building it up.*

This perception was echoed by the majority of the younger participants in my sample. Furthermore, training was perceived as a safe environment that allowed the young

people to explore opportunities they liked, discover what options were available to them and to try them out. Alison (16) illustrated this when she said:

*I just kept doing courses to see if I actually did want to do that [childcare], 'cause I was only 15 at the time (...). I like exploring different things if you know what I mean...but I think this course [employability training] is like the best course I've been on, because it's like you have a chance to go out there, like, run the work life and you get to meet other people.*

Learning about the world of work and its logic in relation to accessing employment and navigating the unfamiliar *field* of the labour market was another aspect of training programmes that younger participants identified as important:

*Training staff tell us to go on websites, to go and search for jobs, and they will tell you how to do it and stuff, what's going on so that's good. (Jamie, 16)*

*Just getting my interviews. Giving me skills, giving me help and all. If I ask for help, they would help me. That has been really good (...). But mostly they are trying to encourage you to do it [job searching, applications] yourself. So it's good when you learn; in the future you don't need help or anything. (Ron, 16)*

Finally, younger participants emphasised the positive nature of their relationships with the staff in the training and careers services. Being listened to and treated with respect and understanding were valued features of these relationships, which were once again contrasted with negative school experiences:

*Like in school, teachers didn't listen to you. Here [Organisation 2] they listen to you, they listen to what you need to say. And then if they can help me, they will. So like aye, I'd ask for help and they would give me help. (Daniel,17)*

As such, training providers, career advisors and other supporting professionals played both an advisory and a nurturing role in my participants' transitions. These aspects need to be understood in the context of the systemic injustice this group regularly faced in their lives. Specifically, negative school experiences had scarring effects on the young people, who often reported not being listened to, being disrespected and



labelled as deficit learners. Training providers thus appeared to take a compensatory role for the injustices and adversities the young people had experienced prior their post-16 transitions.

In contrast, older participants' narratives were very different from those of their younger counterparts. They had all been through numerous training courses, work placements and college courses, in and out of NEET status. Consequently, they became critical of how the post-16 transitions system worked:

*They [job centre] just started to toss me around whatever they felt like it, just to pass the time I guess. And it became just something they were doing, I don't know (Joe, 24)*

They also highlighted how the courses they were directed towards became repetitive and did very little to improve their chances of securing meaningful employment:

*It just feels like I'm not getting anything. Just finding things I already know. (Joe, 24)*

*And then "Chances" [training provider] was a follow up course [for which] "Eagles" [another training provider] picked me on. It was just they were teaching me the same things, just in a different way so it was...so I quit this one. (Alan, 20)*

Consequently, in a badly designed post-16 transitions system, the young people had their agency further constrained, as they were recycled from one course to another without getting any real chance for progression and development. The powerful forces of the *fields*, that pushed them from one training course to another, gave them hope of securing employment only to crush that hope later, generated strong feelings of injustice and of being let down. As James (19) narrated:

*Getting told you can end up with a job after; it's like you get your hopes up. Yeah maybe I can get somewhere finally. Maybe there is a chance and then they [work placement] tell you: Oh, we are only looking for someone to work one, two days every other week and I've said, "It's not good enough; see you later".*

These narratives also demonstrated that with the passage of time and learning through direct experience (Wacquant, 1989 cited in Jenkins, 2002), older participants became disillusioned with the epistemological fallacy current policy *field* (post-16 transitions) and its stakeholders promoted. They became more than aware of the false promises and lack of returns from the courses they completed. In response, a few years after entering their first course, they all started strategising how they could increase their chances of employment (Bourdieu, 1977). Being confronted with the new circumstances and experiences deriving from entering and navigating new *fields*, changed the young people's *habitus*, altering their expectations, aspirations and/or actions alongside (Bourdieu, 1990b; Wacquant, 2016). Yet, these changes were still within the confines of their position in the *fields*, and the trajectories they had espoused thus far.

For example, Alan (20), who had completed five employability trainings, after '*hundreds of [job] rejections*', started applying for new college courses. At the same time, however, he was looking for '*any job*', irrespective of his preferences, be it cleaning and factory work, retail, or construction, simply '*anything I think I'm gonna get, realistically*'. Similarly, Liam (23), who completed two college courses and two employability trainings, started applying for apprenticeships and college courses in addition to looking for '*any job*'. Joe (24), on the other hand, who was stuck in his transition for three years and resisted lowering his expectations, decided to access an HND in science, hoping it would increase his chances of accessing meaningful employment. When years of short-term training, work placements and FE did not bring success in the labour market, the older participants altered their practices. They simultaneously sought to re-engage with education and lowered their expectations regarding the quality of employment they sought. In this sense, my participants became disciplined to the roles available within neoliberal capitalism and came to accept poor, low paid and insecure work (see also France, 2007; Shildrick et. al, 2012; Simmons and Smyth, 2016). These processes are thus argued to be a result of the *symbolic violence* underpinning the post-16 transitions policy *field*.

Crucially, while in some cases participants turned towards learning opportunities with a higher symbolic value in the labour market, in others they tried to find new training/short term college courses. The significant question that arose was why the young people continued trying to access such courses despite being aware of their low value. The answer seemed to once again derive from their *habitus* and how the array of choices it allowed for lies 'within the limits of its structures' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:19). This helps explain why some young people, such as James (19), despite expressing strong feelings of injustice and being 'wound up' [deceived] each time the training finished and he was left where he started, considered accessing another course:

*I'd like to get into football coaching. That's what I'm hoping the job centre can help me with (...). I'm hoping they can get me into the course that will get me the qualifications.*

Because James rejected the possibility of studying at college which he '*thought it was going to be something like school*', trying to access a new training was his only option. Similarly, Danielle (18), who volunteered as a sales assistant after completing three training courses in this area, planned to sign up for another such course:

*See about on tomorrow, I'm going to sign up for the 'Children's Futures' website which... through that they train you up again and at the end you have an actual job.*

Like James, Danielle's agency was constrained by the rejection of the FE, due to her negative experiences at school and later in college. Like James, she was committed to getting a job and was trying hard to finally access employment. As such, it is argued that these young people also remained reflexive in that they understood the difficulties they faced and strategised accordingly. Yet, as Threadgold (2011:388) asserts, such 'reflexivity becomes an intrinsic part of reflexive experience of inequality' – a constant reminder that certain possibilities remain impossible, and the choices these young people make are not free. Rather, they are propelled to choose from a limited range of possibilities, within the constraints of the *fields* and their own *habitus*.

Another question that arose concerned the forces that drove my participants to keep trying and believing that *'there may be times when you fail, but you just need to keep getting up and keep going after it and it will eventually work out for you'*, as Danielle (18) explained. Once again, the answer was hope the young people had for a better life; a strong belief that if they tried once more, they would finally succeed. Hope is thus guiding force behind the young people's actions and transitions, as this excerpt from closing James' (19) interview shows:

*Emm, just [going to] the job centre tomorrow, that's what all my life is going around now. Hopefully I'll get something but... but who knows. I need to believe, that's all you can do.*

If young people had no hope (lost their *illusio*), they would likely develop 'a deeply nihilistic or fatalistic doxa', in that they would not act, nor would they try again (Davies, 2015:122). They would disengage from the game, stop looking for opportunities and reject the logic of practice of the *field* and its rules. However, while young people remain committed to the game, there is also a risk that 'repeated negative experiences of education and employment could have a deleterious effect upon their commitment to find work' (Simmons and Smyth, 2016:149).

### **8.3.3 Institutional narratives**

The *fields* young people occupy are hierarchical, and dominant agents and institutions have significant powers to determine what happens in them (Thomson, 2008). Consequently, young people's practices are as much agentic, as they are responsive to the affordances and prohibitions of the *fields*, specifically those of the policy and labour market. The interviews with professionals overseeing youth transitions and policy makers in education, lifelong learning and employability were conducted to further explore how these *fields* operate in a distinctive Scottish context (see Sections 1.3, 2.1.2 and 2.2). The accounts of 'street level bureaucrats' were collected to capture how the post-16 policy agenda is implemented, how discretion is exercised (Shildrick et. al, 2012:74) and how these impact young people's practices and transitions. The rest of

the chapter examines this additional dimension to my participants' narratives: the logic of practice of the policy *field*.

Analysis of the professionals' accounts regarding young people identified as NEET, their transitions, barriers to employment and available opportunities revealed that they were underpinned by overwhelming contradictions and tensions. The main source of such tensions, as also argued in Section 2.2.1, was linked with the NEET policy agenda itself, which remains at the core of epistemologically fallacious discourses (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), in that it emphasises individualist narratives and personal responsibility for one's transitions while hiding structural problems.

The emphasis put on young people's strengths, interests and wants in a seemingly classless and equal society (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) created the illusion among the stakeholders of the limitless opportunities available to this group (see also Hodgson, 2018). Such an illusion also served to strengthen the sense of personal responsibility for one's transitions and employment despite young people's circumstances, structural barriers and the low position they occupied in the *fields*. Resultantly, practitioners highlighted that young people are expected to '*take ownership ... realise that it's their decisions and it's up to them, to build up that resilience*' (Susan, personal advisor) and to '*accept that their employability is their responsibility and that they have to start owning it a bit more*' (Robert, careers advisor).

However, holding the often 'faulty' and 'deficient' individual to such an accountability remains in clear intrinsic contradiction with the person-centred approach highlighting individual strengths and qualities that guides professionals' day-to-day duties. This contradiction seemed to be one of the main reasons professionals struggled to reconcile a range of paradoxes in relation to young people and their transitions. For example, the difficulties and adversities young people face in their everyday lives (discussed in Chapters 2 and 6) were clearly recognised by the professionals and policy makers interviewed. They all listed a range of problems that may affect young people's transitions and chances of accessing positive destinations, such as: poverty and deprivation, difficult home circumstances, being from a care or BME background,

disability, homelessness, having a criminal record or suffering from mental health issues. While discussing such adversities, professionals often sympathised with young people and understood how these issues may have a negative impact on their everyday lives and transitions. Yet, these tended to be presented and understood, in line with the dominant neoliberal logic, as personal issues that 'belong' to the individuals and derive from their families and communities, a view that neglects the broader socio-economic inequalities disproportionately affecting deprived de-industrialised locales, (see e.g. Fraser, 2013, Fraser et al., 2017; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Walsh et. al, 2016).

Adversities affecting young people's transitions remain in deep contradiction with the employability agenda that prioritises economic activity and emphasises personal responsibility for one's successes and failures, despite their circumstances. The quote below from Kenneth (training provider) illustrates how the employability agenda puts the excessive emphasis on getting young people into (any) EET, while other structural barriers continue to be ignored:

*Yes, we can help in the best way we can. But at the end of the day, we're there to help them try and get a job and build different skills, rather than deal with the other side of things and their personal lives.*

The interventions directed at young people thus remain work-focused, with the main priority being the management of risks that may lead to young people becoming 'disengaged' from meaningful economic activities. Consequently, young people who face additional barriers are constructed as '*medium or maximum clients, depending on where they are on the risk matrix*', as Susan (personal advisor) explained. The more problems young people face, the more likely they are to be treated as least '*employable*', removed from the labour market and at '*risk of not finding a positive destination*' (Robert, careers advisor) compared to their 'less problematic' counterparts.

Such constructions of young people's positions and chances of success have significant implications for the support and guidance they receive from the agencies with which

they come into contact during their transitions. The main priority expressed in professionals' narratives stood in contradiction with the principle of recognising young people's strengths, wants and interests, and was rather focused on making young people '*employable*'; on fixing the individual presented as lacking certain skills and qualities. As Andrew (training provider) explained, his main duties were:

*From CV writing to interview techniques, even looking at things like their confidence, how to engage with employers. A whole multitude of things that's going to help them, to almost make them have a toolbox of skills and confidences that, when they approach an employer, it's this what's deemed as a model professional or what an employer wants.*

Young people were therefore 'trained' to become reliable, work-ready and responsive to employers' needs and expectations, as emphasised by all the professionals interviewed. Unsurprisingly then, the interventions young people were directed towards, such as employability training, focused on intensive job searching, interview skills, application forms and CV writing to '*the employers' standards*'. Such interventions are also preoccupied with getting young people '*into a good routine*,' making them '*speak better*', presenting themselves better and helping them be more confident (Andrew, training provider). The ultimate purpose is to get young people into employment, ideally in work they are interested in, but often simply into any kind of work, understood as a '*stepping stone*' (Andrew, training provider) to something better in the future. In these instances, the lifelong learning agenda becomes transformed into '*career management skills*', '*building up resilience and confidence*' and self-presentation skills and qualities (Kim, work coach) that will be attractive to employers (see also Shildrick et al., 2012 for similar claims). In other words, deficits and lacks are identified and worked on, so young people can become 'subjects of value' to the low stratum of the neoliberal labour market, especially the service economy (see also Section 2.1.2).

De facto, young people are expected to develop 'the right attitude' (Shildrick et. al, 2012), rather than encouraged and guided to continue acquiring the skills and

qualifications necessary for more secure jobs and progression in the competitive labour market (Ainley, 2016; Wolf, 2011). Professionals identified Modern Apprenticeships or FE options as some of the possible positive destinations, but usually only briefly, in general terms and often not in relation to the young people who left school early and/or had difficult circumstances. Moreover, no professionals, apart from Lorna (senior policy maker), mentioned HND and HNC<sup>16</sup> routes at all. These findings suggest that the guidance and support at least some young people received directs them towards low level and short-term training and college courses of little value in the labour market (Keep, 2015). Despite 26,000 new Modern Apprenticeships starting up in the year of the fieldwork (2017), none of the young people in this study followed that route and only a few were thinking of accessing it, in most cases only after years of short term courses and training (see Section 8.3.2).

These findings highlight the competitive, fragmented and highly polarised state of vocational education in Scotland (Keep, 2015; Raffe, 2011; Simmons and Thompson, 2011), where the information provided about different opportunities for young people is based on the specific category into which they fall. To manage the risks of non-completion, the least valuable options are offered to the most disadvantaged. In this sense, a significant segment of the youth population is directed towards ‘worthless vocational certification’ (Ainley, 2013:46) that ‘temporarily warehouse[s] the unemployed’ and hides their real numbers behind participation in the ill-suited, repetitive and failing interventions (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:88). Unsurprisingly, however, the fault for lack of success is directed back to the young people themselves, rather than to the quality and value of such initiatives. For example, Lorna (policy maker) said:

*The young people think quite, especially the NEET group, they want more immediate satisfaction and money and not ongoing training. And they are not most reliable anyway. So we have a lot of drop out. For instance, the employability fund, the positive outcomes for that group is low. Nationally, 36%*

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<sup>16</sup> Higher National Diploma and Higher National Certificate; see Guide to Scottish Qualifications at: [https://www.sqa.org.uk/files\\_ccc/Guide\\_to\\_Scottish\\_Qualifications.pdf](https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/Guide_to_Scottish_Qualifications.pdf) (Accessed 04 December 2019).



*to 40% positive achievement. So then it's a self-perpetuating issue that gains a reputation for not being successful.*

Moreover, young people who participate in such skills initiatives are led to believe that once they complete them and are supposedly 'fixed' to employers' standards, they will be able to access secure and meaningful employment. This is the reason why many older participants in this study, who went through several employability training programmes that did not lead to employment, became disillusioned with 'the epistemological fallacy' created by the policy *field* and promoted at ground level by the professionals. It is also why these participants altered their practices by widening the scope of the opportunities they tried to access, but also lowered their expectations by looking for any type of work, as demonstrated in Section 8.3.2. Following Shildrick and colleagues (2012:68), it is therefore argued that the logic behind such interventions, underpinned by the lack of qualifications and skills agenda, serves:

to support entry to (any) employment rather than what might be needed for gaining sustained jobs (for example, better qualifications that might give access to better-quality jobs higher up in the labour market).

Once again, this is *symbolic violence* inflicted upon young people that affects their lives and transitions beyond the school gates as it 'disciplines' and segregates them into the poorest and lowest employment available in late capitalism (France, 2007; Simmons and Smyth, 2016; Yates and Clark, 2018).

The neoliberal logic of the *field* of power that constructs unemployment as a personal failure (Wiggan, 2012), embodied in the system of support focused on the supply side of the labour market (Crisp and Powell, 2017), was further visible in the professionals' accounts when discussing the barriers to employment young people faced. The barriers they identified were predominantly focused on the individuals and their families, highlighting their deficits and personal problems. Meanwhile, the main three barriers identified by my participants (see Section 8.3.1) were significantly different and in alignment with the labour market research (see e.g. George et al., 2015; Irwin,

2018; Scottish Government, 2015a; Wolf, 2011). A quote from Bernard (policy maker) illustrates this point:

*Barriers that young people face? These haven't changed, these barriers have been around forever. It's lack of aspiration. Lack of, eh, you can't say qualifications, lack of experience. Access to drugs, access to black market activities. Care sector. (...) There's drugs, alcohol, eh, gambling. (...) And there's other people who won't have those barriers within that definition, but they still couldn't access a job because they don't have employability skills...So it could be, maybe, confidence or motivation. Or they just don't know how to fill an application form in. They don't know how to go for an interview, which is quite common.*

Bernard and other professionals disregarded the negative impact of low formal qualifications, despite the fact that in the current labour markets, the higher the qualifications, the better the earnings and employment prospects (George et al., 2015; Irwin, 2018; Wolf, 2011) and the lower the qualifications, the highest the risk of experiencing NEETness (Scottish Government, 2015a). Resultantly, such disregard shows once again the absence of a qualifications agenda in relation to some young people who, as argued above, are segregated to fill the low skilled roles in the service economy. Bernard also retells the 'mantra' of young people having no aspirations, despite extensive research to the contrary (see Section 2.2.1). He also highlighted lack of employability skills, confidence and motivation, thus responsabilising individuals for their unemployment.

In addition to personal failures and deficits, cultures of worklessness (MacDonald et al., 2014) were identified by professionals as a main barrier to employment. All but one interviewee (Lorna, policy maker) talked about two, three or even four generations of workless families, whose negative attitudes to employment were said to be 'hereditary' (Andrew, training provider) and were blamed for making young people not want to work and live a life on benefits, as allegedly their parents and grandparents did:

*That's their life, it's in a goldfish bowl. But they're happy with that, and it's fine. They don't have aspirations to go anywhere else, they don't have any aspirations to work, they don't want to make any more money than they're making just now [on benefits], they're happy.* (Andrew, training provider)

Bernard further suggested that getting more disadvantaged young people into employment would make them *'that positive role model within the community. You, as a 16 year-old, going to work every day, other ones see you. So the more that happens, the more that's encouraged to be the norm'*. Once more, such accounts reflect the negative political rhetoric that claims disadvantaged young people lack positive role models at home and in the 'idle' communities in which they live, while neglecting the broader socio-economic inequalities disproportionately affecting deprived de-industrialised locales (Fraser, 2013; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Walsh et al., 2016).

While all the interviewees but one identified cultures of worklessness as one of the main barriers to employment, not all of them thought young people *'don't want to work'*, but rather:

*They don't feel ready to make that step forward and to address all the underlying issues.* (Kim, work coach)

More broadly, there was a clear 'administrative [adult] gaze' (Lesko, 2012) underpinning professionals' accounts of young people, which can be traced back to historically conflicting images of youth understood as either in need of surveillance and discipline or in need of care and support (Hendrick, 1997, see also Section 2.1). As such, young people were at one extreme described as *'good young people, ain't they? They just need a chance'*, to be later talked about as having no aspirations and not wanting to work (Bernard, policy maker). At times they were *'great guys with the great skills'*, at others – they were the ones for whom *'11 o'clock is too early'* (Andrew, training provider). Their disaffection with school was understood as a result of *'teachers' negative attitudes towards them'*, to be later presented as the result of their own behaviour and problems with *'others' authority'* (Kenneth, training provider). On some

occasions, it was recognised that young people *'don't have many amenities, opportunities as in the more affluent areas; no youth clubs in these areas I work anymore; no place to go for young people so they stand on the streets'* (Mark, youth worker). Yet, later the same professional went on to say that *'hanging out with friends, 3 or 4 young people can be classed as a gang'*, so *'they don't do themselves any favours when police say move on and they don't. It's the age thing, the authority thing, cause they say, "I don't do anything wrong, we just stand here, it's because we are young you want us to move"'*. As such, professionals' judgements and disciplinary responses to young people they supported remained intertwined with sympathy and care. However, at the same time young people remain a problematised group, the objects of targeted governance (Fergusson, 2013), while the responsibilities placed upon them tend to exceed their rights, needs and wants.

So far, and in line with the neoliberal logic, personal deficits and inherited negative attitudes toward work were presented as key barriers to employment by interviewees, with the responsibility for employment placed upon young people. Yet, the more our conversations progressed, the more tensions and paradoxes emerged in the professionals' accounts. They all started uncovering structural causes of youth unemployment, despite often flipping back towards their views on personal deficits and individual responsibility.

Professionals thus identified young people's lack of work experience and their young age as significant barriers to employment. They highlighted that employers do not want to risk the perceived *'lack of maturity'*, or *'take the responsibility for young people'* and the training they may need (Bernard, policy maker). They further suggested that some employers may discriminate against young people from deprived areas whom they may label as being *'disruptive, a ned or a delinquent'* (Bernard, policy maker). Training providers talked about the difficulties of finding employers who would accept young people on work placements. They also extensively commented on the *'dated hiring practices'* that are *'not about how well you can do the job, it's about how well you train yourself to do the interview'* (Andrew) and how the qualifications requirements for entry level jobs were too high and unnecessary. They further

acknowledged that many disadvantaged young people compete for jobs against others with much higher qualifications. Therefore, they recognised qualifications as a barrier to employment, paradoxically despite the lack of qualifications agenda in relation to the many young people their services support. At this point, professionals expressed their frustration, even outrage, at some employers' practices, which they perceived as serving to further segregate young people:

*And now that we're making even elementary jobs, you've got to have some level of qualification to get in there (...) so you're narrowing and narrowing their choices. So you're making them an underclass who actually don't have a chance to progress. You're pretty much saying to them, "You're set in life, this is your path, and your ceiling is there." Whereas everybody else is up here, and looking down at you, you know what I mean.* (Robert, careers advisor)

My question about qualifications triggered a discussion about the Modern Apprenticeship route and how it was closed to many young people for whom it used to be a 'chance out' (Kathy, personal advisor). As Robert (careers advisor) further reflected:

*Our Modern Apprenticeship website, there's jobs up there that they're asking for...I would say, qualifications that are not necessary.*

Robert then recalled a story of a young man who was rejected for a car mechanics apprenticeship even though he could 'tell you about every part of the engine, every bit of oil and all that (...) but then they're getting interviews for Arnold Clark, who are demanding that they've got a high-level maths and a high-level science. It's absolute, it's a joke, it's an absolute joke'. In these accounts, professionals' views of young people were compassionate and respectful, capturing their strengths and qualities that had not been in alignment with the logic of practice of the *fields*. In these instances, their understanding of youth transitions shifted from young people's deficits and personal responsibility towards structural barriers.

Professionals further scrutinised the quality of apprenticeships available when they commented on the highly hierarchical system that devalues many apprenticeship opportunities and leads to the exploitation of young apprentices:

*The schools value the big businesses. They have high quality Modern Apprenticeships that are well recognised. So for instance, Arnold Clark, Glasgow training group they have apprenticeships in car mechanics, all sorts of auto engineering, business administration and these opportunities are highly praised. We have big companies like BA systems and the prestigious banks, Morgan Stanley, they do a financial sector training, computing, ICT. These sorts of opportunities are very valuable. Some others... not so much. (Lorna, policy maker)*

*So what's happening now is rather than just saying customer service assistant or customer service trainee, they're now calling it a customer service modern apprenticeship (...). So they're [young people] working full-time, same job as everybody else in the shop, but because they're classed as an apprentice (...) they've got to just pay them a minimum training wage. (Kathy, personal advisor)*

Professionals also identified the annual cuts that result in fewer training provisions available for young people as another barrier to employment. However, they did not question the quality of training and its value in the labour market. Only when prompted, they admitted that *'there could be a very strong argument that employers don't know what it is [the certificate of work readiness]'* (Bernard, policy maker), and thus *'more work needs to be done with employers'* (Kim, work coach). However, as training provision remains among the main routes into work for disadvantaged young people, they insisted that a majority of their clients would access employment upon completion:

*If they actually complete it and they get good feedback from the tutors, I don't think I've had anybody who's not gone into work'. (Robert, careers advisor)*

Those who did not secure employment were claimed to owe it to their '*own attitude*' (Robert, careers advisor). Such claims remain in stark contrast with the experiences of young people in this study and once again shifted towards personal responsibility, while disregarding the value and quality of training and lack of work opportunities attached to training. Once again, young people became a problematised group, whose own attitudes and deficits were to blame for their unemployment. Yet, towards the end of his interview, Robert contradicted his previous statement:

*What would make them successful? I would say, yeah, access to good quality training that's got either employers attached or a clear progression route. So that's one of the things I think the courses fail on. (...) It's just a wee bit disappointing that there's not that straight follow-through. That they can't go straight from training into the job.*

This quote demonstrates how the logic of practice of supporting agencies focusing on job seekers and their deficits constructs unemployment as a personal failure. Professionals often direct young people towards training programmes that offer false promises of employment and progress, they end up believing in it themselves. Yet, as more questions were asked, this 'epistemological fallacy' could not be coherently upheld in their accounts and once again revealed 'structural causation of many of the policy problems' (Keep and James, 2012:224). Despite claims of a distinctive Scottish approach to youth unemployment and transitions, the policy *field* was found to resemble the ill-conceived English model and was underpinned by *symbolic violence* that further segregated disadvantaged young people into the lowest socio-economic positions.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the third research question by examining participants' experiences and practices of looking for and accessing learning and work after leaving compulsory education.

It was found that the vast majority of participants followed vocational routes in alignment with their class background and gender. Their choices derived from what

they had known and experienced in the context of their lifeworlds. It was thus proposed that young people's choices remain mediated in a dual way: by the history of their dispositions and history of their positions (Bourdieu, 1993). A majority of participants did not engage with technologies, while making their occupational choices, but rather drew on the familiar. It was thus argued that the limited presence of opportunities and resources in the young people's lives transferred into their engagement with technologies, that did not appear to offer freedom of choice or social mobility and were not used as such.

The second section problematised the nature of the mediated choices participants were making. It demonstrated the agentic aspects behind such choices, as a majority of the young people, while choosing from the limited range of options, still also strived for progression towards jobs they enjoyed and valued. Participants believed that getting into meaningful employment would enable them to achieve good and secure lives, as well as belong to basic socio-economic life from which they had been marginalised. Such 'longing' for meaning through low level employment was argued to be guided by 'a feel for the game' (*illusio*), which made such work desirable and appreciated, but also contributed to the reproduction of inequalities. However, it was also demonstrated that summoning one's *illusio* was often a result of the emotional struggles the young people went through while making their choices.

The final section examined the young people's transitions by looking at their experiences after leaving compulsory education in conjunction with the labour market and policy *fields*. It was found that participants were often directed by supporting agencies toward low level and short-term training of little symbolic value. Consequently, they were in and out of NEET status numerous times, punctuated by engagement with yet another course and/or employment. The latter, if accessed at all, was found to be precarious, of low level and exploitative. These findings are consistent with extensive research that demonstrated poor returns on ill-conceived schemes that have warehoused unemployed youth for decades (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018).



The differences between the narratives of younger and older participants were further scrutinised to see what impact policy solutions had on their transitions. Younger participants praised training courses for improving their confidence, offering a safe space to explore employment options, learn about the unfamiliar *field* of the labour market, and for the positive and respectful relationships with staff. Yet, these aspects were positioned within the context of the systemic injustice this group had faced throughout their lives. In contrast, older participants became disillusioned with the epistemological fallacy of the post-16 transitions policy *field*. In response, they started strategising to improve their employment prospects, but also lowered their expectations regarding the quality of work sought. It was thus argued that these participants became disciplined to the lowest stratum of the labour market.

A similar outcome was also observed in the analysis of the 'institutional narratives'. While individualism, personal responsibility for one's transitions and employability agenda featured in the professionals' accounts, the lack of qualifications and skills agenda in relation to young people categorised as at risk of 'disengagement' contributed strongly to the guidance they received. Namely, they were directed towards the least valuable post-16 opportunities within the 'ontological reality' of the policy *field*. It appeared the primary role of such training was to make young people ready to accept any job available, regardless of its quality, security and wages.

## **Chapter 9 Young people and technologies**

This chapter examines the roles technologies play in the everyday lives and transitions of the young people labelled as NEET. It firstly explores to what extent technologies are everyday, embodied and embedded (Hines, 2015) in the lives of this group and what consequences limited access to resources have on their blended lives (Turkle, 2012). It then attempts to capture the meanings participants attach to technologies and explore how and why such meanings develop and consequently materialise in the ways they engage with technologies. This involves positioning the young people's meaning making and technologically mediated practices within their lifeworlds (Cranmer, 2010; Selwyn, 2012). The final section scrutinises how technologies are utilised when the young people look for and access work and learning opportunities. The concepts of 'subject of value' and 'self as enterprise' are used as the lens for analysis to help explore the impact of engagement with technologies and acquiring digital employability skills on youth trajectories and transitions.

### **9.1 Everyday, embedded and embodied technologies?**

As shown earlier (see Sections 3.1 and 3.2.1), it is widely argued that digital technologies have become deeply embedded in young people's lives and relations (Cook et al., 2013; Hine, 2015; Valentine, 2002). Young people are believed to be living 'blended lives' (Turkle, 2012), as their engagement with technologies is no longer understood in terms of dichotomies between online and offline, real and created but rather as a part of the everyday (Hine, 2015). Similarly, their social practices are understood as mediated by technological engagement, as in a dialectical relationship with technologies (Gangneux, 2018; Livingstone, 2009). Yet, the social bodies that use technologies occupy different socio-economic positions that influence their experiences (Hine, 2015). Consequently, everyday technologies cannot be taken for granted in the same way for all young people, as this section will show.

The timeline of technology-related activities my participants engaged in (see Section 5.3.2) revealed that technologies were everyday and embedded in their lives. They reported using technologies, at least since primary school, at home and/or at school.

Some went as far as describing technologies *'as kinda always been there'* (Brian, 16) and because of that it *'never felt like I ever had to try to learn it [how to use technologies], I just knew'* (Joe, 24). Yet, five participants only had access to technologies at home after they started secondary school, and they were the ones who had guided the appropriation of technologies into their households (see Kennedy et al., 2008). Notably, two participants, Liam (23) and Calum (17) had no access to any devices at home, as they were *'too dear'* [expensive] (Calum, 17), which strongly constrained their engagement. For example, Liam (23) reported using the library to check his emails and job applications for a few hours a week, which made his practices very task-oriented and far from being embedded in his everyday life and relations. Calum (17) kept hoping to get a job, so he could *'get an Xbox 1S. Because I want to get one of them, or a PS4. I don't want the PS3 cause that's ancient'*. Calum's experiences of poverty and his acute understanding of everyday exclusion from the culture of consumerism were evident through his desire for the most up-to-date devices, despite the fact he and his family were not able to afford much. For Calum (17) and Liam (23), technologies were neither everyday nor deeply embedded in their lives.

Moreover, only a minority of my participants had unlimited access to the internet and multiple devices. For the majority, technologies were simultaneously accessible and constrained. The majority of participants owned one or two devices (usually phones), often shared them with their siblings and had some access to the internet, for example only at home or until their data ran out. Access was further restricted when such everyday devices were broken, when the young people became angry, upset or unwary. For example, Noemi (17) broke her laptop when *'annoyed'* by her abusive ex-girlfriend, who kept contacting her, despite her clear refusal to continue their relationship. James (19), who strongly identified with his favourite football team, threw his laptop out of the window in anger when *'Rangers didn't have a good day'* (lost a game). Joe (24) broke his phone because of *'being clumsy. I don't take care of technology that much. I throw it up and down and it drops and then it's oops'*.

In these instances, the metaphor of a 'broken object', brought up by several participants, served as a strong reminder of the socio-economic inequalities impacting

young people's access to and engagement with technologies. When their everyday devices were broken, they became 'luxury' objects very difficult to replace. Participants were either unable to replace broken devices, they had to wait for months until they managed to save money, or they had to buy second-hand devices they described as *'terrible' and jam[ming] all the time'* (James, 19). These examples illustrate the transient, 'on and off' access to technologies (and in two cases no access) and how disadvantaged young people's blended lives may significantly differ from those of their more affluent peers (see Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016). In other words, technologies remain in a constant interplay with young people's socio-economic positioning.

## 9.2 Technologies in everyday life

Despite such transient access to technologies, the majority of participants were actively using technologies in their everyday lives and relations and gave them significant meanings (with exception of two participants). Specifically, technologies were described as *'one of the great things in life'* (Daniel, 17) and *'a pure big part of my life (...), an everyday essential really'* (Christopher, 17). Similarly, Joe (24) said *'I love it! Spend all the time on it'*. The young women were even more emphatic, when stated that *'It means everything to me!'* (Noemi, 17), *'I would've been lost without my phone! I need my phone every day'* (Hannah, 17) or asserting that *'If I lose my phone, I've smashed it or something, I'm devastated. I would cry or something'* (Emma, 18). These strong meanings ascribed to technologies permeated the physical objects and related to the affordances they offered that actualised in participants' everyday practices. When asked to further explain why technologies were so important to them, all participants stressed the importance of technologies for maintaining relationships with significant others. The quote from Danielle (18) is typical of the meaning attached to technologies by all participants:

*Having a phone means everything to me because you can keep in contact with your friends, family, boyfriend (laughs) whatever.*

Using technologies for 'doing' relationships was seen as the most important aspect for the young people. This was followed by highlighting the use of technologies for personal purposes and for managing their work and learning transitions. These themes will be discussed next.

### *9.2.1 Technologies for doing relationships*

Technologies were mostly used to build and maintain relationships with significant others – including participants' friends and acquaintances, family members and/or romantic partners. Direct engagement with others was seen as the most important and common purpose for using technologies to 'do' and maintain relationships, as explained by Alison (16) and Claire (16) and echoed by all:

*Alison: Mainly I go on my phone to like get a hold of my friends (...). Like basically if you have internet on your phone you can iMessage your friends, you can go on Snapchat, and like Instagram, and check what your friends are doing and all that.*

*Claire: Being able to communicate with my friends, like on Facebook, being able to see what like your friends are doing and their updates and that kind of things.*

Interestingly, the young people saw communicating and checking their friends' updates on social media sites as one and the same. From their perspective, finding out what was new in their friends' lives was a form of communicating, a relational practice mediated by technologies and facilitated by the affordances of social media sites. This broad understanding of communication highlights the blended nature of young people's lives, where dichotomies between online and offline become blurred and new meanings and practices are produced.

Engagement with significant others differed between participants and served as yet another reflection on their diverse circumstances. For example, Claire (16) who was living in care, often highlighted the importance of technologies for maintaining friendships and keeping in touch with her family:

*And see your family, like you can see what they are doing without actually calling them and asking: Oh, what are you doing today? They can post what they are doing or you can just message them so. Things like that: communication.*

Martin (23), who was awaiting a baby, emphasised the importance of being able to contact his partner:

*If I didn't have my phone and that like, I wouldn't be able to get in contact with my girlfriend and that like, so, yeah, that would bother us big time (...). It's just, I feel that if, see since she's told me she was pregnant, that's when I've really changed as well, like I just get scared all the time in case something happens to her or something, so I do.*

Some of the participants developed distinctive practices of doing relationships, based on experiences and circumstances deriving from their particular lifeworlds. For example, Calum (17) highlighted not only that *'you get friends and that on it, so, that's alright, you can talk to people'* but also pointed out that technologies allow you *'to see what people got on, and what they've not got on'*. Danielle (18) and James (19) also highlighted the importance of technologies for relationships, but not through the engagement with social networking sites. Danielle chose not to have any social media account and was using her sister's Facebook Messenger to get a hold of her friends. As she further explained:

*That's why I don't like Facebook, 'cause like through school, if you've had experience, a bad experience of somebody, you don't want them to find you. You don't really want to make it known, that's where she is, that's where she's staying.*

James, on the other hand, was using his Facebook account, but only to send private messages to his close friends, as *'there are things on the phone, where you can save the messages, you can screenshot and then they can send them onto other people. I just don't trust it'*. These practices of 'self-care' (Willis, 2016) were thus used to ensure their safety and mitigate the possibility of harm and shaped by such experiences in the

past. Finally, Noemi (17) used technologies for ‘remembering’ her mum who had passed away (see Section 6.1 for details).

All the above examples illustrate how the young people’s circumstances and experiences shaped the multiple meanings they attached to technologies and, consequently, their diverse practices involving technologies. Not having a social media account or using it only intermittently, like Danielle and James did, was based on concerns around safety and wellbeing. Looking into other people’s lives, allowed Calum to position himself in relation to others, especially in terms of how he wanted his life to improve in the future. Experiencing loss made Noemi acutely aware of the fragility of human existence, so she started storing pictures and conversations with significant others on her phone in case *‘they may be away, but you still have everything else’* to remember them and help to deal with loss.

Participants’ accounts also revealed that technologies were used mostly to ‘do’ relationships with their close (bonding) social networks. For example, Jason (16), who emphasised being on his phone *‘constantly, probably like every minute of every day’*, further explained how he was actively engaging with his friends, who *‘are all from here’* (local neighbourhood):

*Just texting my pals. That’s it (...). Just to talk to my pals (...). (About) Whatever. Anything. Just about anything. Football teams, making plans.*

Joe (24) explained that he got his first phone when he was about 15 because he never needed nor wanted it as *‘[e]verybody I spoke to was on my street. ‘Cause my street is like, there’s lots of children my age, so we just all hanged about’*. Similarly, Martin (23) and Michael (20) highlighted that they were using technologies usually to get in touch with people close to them:

*Martin: That’s only thing I ever do like on my phone, like go on Facebook and that. I don’t, I don’t really use the internet that much at all. It’s just either looking for jobs or like going on Facebook when my girlfriend’s at work and when one of my pals is like talking to us or something. I don’t really use it for anything else now, so I don’t.*

*Michael: Eh, Facebook, either to get a hold of my maw, my sister or my wean's maw. That's why I need that phone. All I use it for is getting hold of my mates or just seeing what people have been putting up on Facebook.*

These findings have significant implications for debates surrounding young people and technologies (see also Section 3.1). Firstly, my participants' social networks, including those technologically mediated, were found to be predominantly of a bonding type, with the exception of a few young men involved in online gaming (see Section 9.2.2 for further discussion). This evidence thus corresponds with other studies highlighting how growing up in deprived neighbourhoods often constrains access to bridging social networks and facilitates development of close social ties rooted in the locality, that make life bearable under conditions of objective deprivation (Holland et al., 2007; MacDonald et al., 2005; Skeggs, 2004a). Indeed, following on from evidence given in Chapter 6, the social networks the young people had access to provided them with practical and emotional support, enabled their sense of belonging, and were the arena of identity work.

These findings challenge assumptions about the 'potential' for technologies to assist with the development of broader social networks (*bridging social capital*). In particular, Castells' (1996, 2001) claims of the emergence of the network society where individuals are linked with the help of technologies regardless of their physical space, and Wittel's (2001) assertions that networking has become a norm, cannot be fully upheld in relation to many disadvantaged young people. Rather, as the above accounts demonstrate, the social networks these young people access, develop and maintain through technologies not only tend to reflect their social reality and their social positions, but also tend to be rooted in their locality. As such, the intertwined nature of social change brought by the widespread of technologies with the continuity of the old class divisions continue to shape not only young people's engagement with technologies (boyd, 2014), but also their lives and access to opportunities in late modernity (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This is because disadvantaged young people continue to progress with the use of information embedded in their social networks (Chapter 6) and professional services (Chapter 8). It thus needs to be highlighted that



'[t]echnologies do not radically reconfigure inequality', as their potential 'to restructure social networks in order to reduce structural inequality rests heavily on people's ability to leverage it to make new connections' (boyd, 2014:174). The complex implications of such findings will be further unpacked in Section 9.3.

Secondly, as argued in Section 2.1.1, young people develop different forms of subjectivity that depend upon the objective material conditions that 'offer different possibilities for value accrual' (Skeggs, 2011:509). In the case of my participants value practices were found to be 'made [...] through the gift of attention to others over time and space' (Skeggs, 2011:509). Consequently, it seems plausible to interpret the high importance the young people attach to technologies for 'doing' relationships as relational/others'-oriented value practices. This challenges dominant debates constructing these forms of engagement with technologies as not beneficial and contributing to the digital divide (De Almeida, 2012; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014). Rather, these understandings fail to capture what is important to young people, as they remain insensitive to the broader contexts and different classes of conditions of young people's existence (Bourdieu, 1977) in which their technology-mediated practices develop (boyd, 2014).

### *9.2.2 Technologies for [informal] learning, cultivating interests, socialising and leisure*

Participants' accounts in relation to their use and the meanings they attached to technologies highlighted the importance of ICT for cultivating personal interests, for leisure, socialising and (informal) learning, the boundaries of which were mostly blurred and intertwined.

The meanings the young people ascribed to technologies derived from opportunities engagement with ICT offered them to pursue their interests and passions, often in music, drama, arts, sports or science. In this sense, personal engagement with technologies filled a gap not met by schools. For example, Michael (20), who had a passion for music, stressed how he could not imagine his life without his laptop which he used for mixing recordings:

*My laptop, if I didn't have that I'd be going scatty and all. Eh, cos that's for my music stuff (...). Eh, it's a DJ software I've got on it, I've still got on it I had DJ decks at one point (...). I mix all sorts, all different kinds of music. Rock to pop to whatever else.*

Daniel (17), who identified himself as 'a creative person' with a passion for drawing, linked his interests with a distinctive practice of searching up cartoon characters to find out 'how old they are, their age really, how long they have been like in TV and stuff like that'. As he further explained, he was doing it because 'it's personally interesting, I just like it'. Anne (17), who was passionate about music and highlighted how a big part of her life music has been, said she was 'always looking at "America's Got Talent" stuff. 'Cause I just like to see people singing and that' and to 'watch people covering songs'. Joe (24) highlighted how he cultivated his interests in science via his engagement with the Web resources:

*I'm interested in like space exploration and obviously looking into stuff on it and research it. I just get excited when I read something about it or whatever (...). Like I was reading a paper today on anti-aging thing that may help people get to Mars. Exciting.*

Brian (16), who had been into drama and acting since he was 11, was using technologies to cultivate his interests, to learn, as well as for leisure and entertainment. All these purposes were strongly intertwined:

*I love a bit of a comedy, 'cause one of the women that is working with me whenever I was coming to work rather than listening to music I would be listening to like a comedian and just put my phone to my pocket. And I'm coming in and laughing all the time. 'Cause it's something me and my friends are trying to do. It's a bit of a hobby. I'm trying to do a stand up, it's kinda a buzz. So like watching or listening other people doing it, it's the same as watching the audition thing [for the performing exercise to access a college course in drama], seeing how other people do it.*

Indeed, it seemed impossible to separate participants' interests from entertainment, leisure and learning. Crucially, such understandings might have been easily lost in the quantitative studies looking at young people's engagement with technologies and when segregating their practices into different categories (beneficial vs consumptive; empowering vs trivial; see De Almeida, 2012; Selwyn, 2009). This may hold true especially as my participants usually did not refer to such practices in terms of learning, but rather as something they just did, liked doing or because it *'just sparks interest'* (Anne, 17). Furthermore, the above examples also illustrate how different meanings and purposes have been ascribed to seemingly trivial or 'consumptive' practices, such as watching "America's Got Talent", a bit of comedy or reading about Disney's characters. Without adopting a narrative inquiry and positioning participants' engagement with technologies in the context of their everyday lifeworlds, it would not be possible to uncover such complex and creative patterns of usage that allowed the young people to develop their interests, learn and engage in leisure activities.

As such, participants practices were purposeful, carried different meanings significant to them and illustrated the agentic and creative aspects of their engagement with technologies. Yet, as revealed in Chapter 7, cultivating interests and informal learning were taking place away from the context of formal education, which failed to recognise the young people's strengths. Rather, these practices were moved into the private sphere of their lives and continued to be developed with the affordances offered by technologies. Moreover, in most cases, they were also completely separated from vocational pathways the young people were following. This may also help explain why some of the participants, like Michael (20) and Daniel (17), did not share their creative work with others in any way:

*Dorota: What do you do with your recordings?*

*Michael: Nothing, I just keep them to myself.*

*Dorota: I'd like to see your drawings.*

*Daniel: Would you (laughs)?*

*Dorota: Yes. Do you have them on your phone?*

*Daniel: I don't have anything, no (laughs). I just keep them at home.*

Unlike the middle class young people in Gangneux's (2018) study that used social media to 'train for labour' – to actively promote their work and present themselves as a 'subject of value' to the neoliberal labour market, such practices were not developed by my participants who were mostly undertaking vocational pathways, as the excerpts above illustrated. Only Matthew (19), who was pursuing football as a career, started using Twitter for professional purposes:

*I think social media's quite, it's very key in terms of whatever it is you're trying to get into, you're interested in. Obviously, I'm interested in football, so Sky Sports, Twitter, or, you know, Instagram. You know, it's very unique, it's very normal for me. (...) Like, you know, a lot of professional footballers have Twitter. A lot of the pundits have Twitter, a lot of people have Twitter. (...) Just to tweet things, you know. Tweet things and, obviously, like know what someone's saying, this and that. You're finding out information. Rangers have a Twitter page. You know, putting all their information on Twitter. So I think social media's very important, yeah.*

Matthew's narrative, however, also suggested that his main purpose was not self-promotion or building his professional image, even though this may eventually occur due to his active presence in this specific context, but rather to expand his knowledge in the sports field, as '*the more research you do, the more learning you're taking in*'. Nevertheless, Matthew's engagement with the internet for professional purposes was exceptional among my participants, highlighting how young people's practices depend on the context in which they develop and remain incentivised or suppressed (Wacquant, 2016). In this sense, the impact of objective structures allows for the explanation as to why most participants took their interests away from the education

system that failed to recognise them and cultivated them in the private sphere of their lives. By doing so, and by following vocational pathways instead, these young people also did not actively cultivate their online presence to promote their creative work or the 'entrepreneurial' self.

As in Davies' (2015:47) study, my participants 'self-identified through a complex array of pop-cultural codes' such as affiliation to their favourite football teams, bands and music genres, TV shows, video games, YouTubers and celebrities, and even political figures. Crucially, these aspects of their identities strongly guided their engagement with the web. Evidently, as participants developed their distinctive social identities that guided their interests, likes and dislikes, and ways of being (unique *habitus*), there were also variations in issues they found meaningful in their lifeworlds. Yet, the broader implications of the young people's self-identifications revealed how they made sense of the world around them, its rules, norms and values and their own place in it, in a complex and remarkable way. To illustrate this point, a few prominent examples are highlighted below.

During his interview, James (19) talked extensively about his affiliation to the Rangers Football Club. Narrative analysis combined with *habitus* as theory-method allowed me to make claims that this affiliation constituted a significant part of his identity which provided him with a sense of belonging, feelings of safety and inclusion (see also Section 6.2.2; Bourdieu, 1993). Thus, part of James's everyday routine involved '*looking up the Rangers page and reading all about football*'. These habitual and repetitive practices, alongside the practical sense learnt through his participation in the football culture, provided James with knowledge about the Old Firm and its conflicted history, difficult relations between fans and police, or difficulties faced by the club, such as financial debts or its demotion to the Third Division. The interview setting provided James with the arena where these issues, crucial to his identity and his lifeworld, were debated, explored, questioned and made sense of. For example, the excerpt below demonstrates James's understanding of a rivalry between Rangers and Celtic, but also the position he took on it:

*Aye, it's a big rivalry really. It's crazy. I don't even understand it half of a time. I just like going to football and having to sing songs. Like Celtic they kinda, they sing for the Republican army basically and obviously Rangers sing for Britain (...). It's kinda, Rangers are loyalists so basically about hating a certain culture (...), kinda catholic culture.*

Interestingly, in this excerpt James did not say 'we' while talking about Rangers as he did on all other occasions, thus distancing himself from the 'hating' culture. Rather, he understood his affiliation being '*all about football*', despite also pointing out that a rivalry between the clubs '*is just the way it kinda works like*'. In a broader sense, expanding and updating his knowledge in the field of football constituted a meaningful and important activity in his lifeworld, a sort of *cultural capital* mobilised not only in the interview setting, but especially in his everyday interactions with others, as excerpt below shows:

*Aye, it [talking to friends] can be about the game or we can just slag each other off. That's about how hot it gets. Or it can be a bit about the football or whatever. So I've got a pal who is Rangers fan, a pal that's a Celtic fan. So me and my Rangers fan pal, we're always ganging up the Celtic fan pal. It's funny.*

In contrast, Noemi (17) developed a strong interest in a controversial figure – Donald Trump. She explained how she liked to '*look for Donald Trump*', because '*he's really interesting. He's a douche but really interesting*'. As she further explained:

*'Cause the way he is... how can somebody be like that and don't have any remorse of what they are saying. I don't understand that. He's like, he doesn't like foreign people; he's been racist, but his wife is from another country. But he wants to keep them out. But his wife is from another country (laughs)! And I'm sitting there and I'm asking him this question, I really didn't talk to him, but I asked this question: "Why are you being a racist if your wife is from like, I don't know, somewhere else?" He is not from America, he's from Scotland, but he moved to America and I understand he's American and that. But I don't understand, like Obama was born and bred in America, but he wanted to see*

*his like birth certificate. But he was from Scotland, his birth certificate is from Scotland. I don't know. I don't understand. I actually understand a little bit mere now. I don't get why he's a president. Americans, aye I don't get it!*

Reading articles and watching YouTube videos about Trump allowed Noemi to investigate the complexity of the social world around her, raise critical questions and make judgements, through which she also defined her own self. Through her engagement with the web, Noemi explored the racist actions and uncovered the underlying paradoxes of a person in power, while also developing her own anti-racist attitudes and condemning those who take the opposite stand (including Trump's supporters). Like in James's case, these issues were debated and made sense of in the context of her everyday life and relations, when she highlighted that she '*could talk about Donald all day*'.

Some, like Anne (17), also engaged with the Web to find out about their favourite celebrities:

*Aye, like see, like, celebrity interviews, like, from TV shows? So they'd go in and they'd ask the celebrity, like, things like, "So, we heard about this..." and then the celebrity's sitting there like, "Oh God." And then they'll play a video of the celebrity, and I don't know, I just love it, eh. (...) Cause if it's a celebrity that I like, it's like, I'm learning more about them. And it kind of makes me go, "Okay, yas!" (...). So I was Googling them and I got absolutely cuckoo on them, I'd become like a stalker and just, like, pure like, "Oh God, I need to find out everything about them." (...) But I was watching an interview with her [an actress] and she was just, oh my God, she was horrible, how she was talking, and what she did, and I was like, "Oh, right, okay."*

Learning about celebrities and who they are in real life, served a very similar purpose as reading about football or Donald Trump – it was allowing my participants to make sense of the world and other people in it, who they are and what values they hold. Consequently, such practices can be understood as an expression of young people's curiosity and reflexivity, constituting a part of the identity work inscribed in the

processes of growing up and transitioning towards adulthood (Davies, 2018b; see also Allen and Mendick, 2013 for a detailed discussion on the discursive roles celebrities play in young people's lives and identity work). This, in turn, can lead to a conclusion that young people could and, indeed, should be understood (and researched) as active and creative social agents at the intersection of technologies, (popular) culture and their social identities (Davies, 2015, 2018b), as this section has thoroughly demonstrated.

Finally, technologies for gaming/leisure were an important part of some of my participants lives. Some of the young women mentioned playing games such as Pool or Candy Crush and highlighted the social aspect of such activities, as an extract from Alison (16) illustrates:

*It's like if you have Facebook you can connect to your friends, so you can play them at pool on your phone.*

Some young men, however, talked extensively about their immersion in the gaming culture and the multiple meanings this carried in their lifeworlds. Playing video games was compared to 'playing football in a way', done to 'pass time I guess, something to enjoy' (Joe, 24). This account was echoed by Ron (16) and Christopher (17), competitive players in Call of Duty:

*Ron: Games, like online games, and you compete against one another and just have fun. Just like that, enter the tournament. And you get a prize at the end of it.*

*Christopher: I'm a competitive player in that [Call of Duty]. It's just a shooting game, but it's like, me and my pals and other people, we play it competitively, which means you enter competitions and you can earn money. It's like a completely different sport, called an E-sports.*

As such, these young men self-identified as members of a broader gaming community who played E-sports, an electronic sport. They emphasised various aspects of gaming, demonstrating the many different roles it may fulfil in their everyday lives. Alongside



its entertaining character deriving from competitiveness, teamwork and possibility of winning money, young men also highlighted their own skills and expertise that allowed them to play with other professional players, as explained by Christopher (17):

*I've always played it. I've played it for years, then, all of a sudden I was good at it, and then the more you play it, people message you, like, "Would you like to do it competitively, like, with the professionals?" and you do it.*

Gaming was also as much a leisure and entertainment activity, as a way of socialising with others. For example, as Joe (24) stressed:

*I love it [technologies]. Spend all the time on it. I obviously spend time gaming, spend time with my friends.*

Moreover, participation in the gaming culture was valued by these young men for offering them new life experiences. For example, Ron (16) talked extensively about travelling to Blackpool for a tournament and showed clear excitement for this, demonstrating how important this experience had been for him. In my fieldnotes I highlighted a change in Ron's tone of voice, body language, as well as how he talked at length about this, so far, one-time life event:

*Like I went for tournament in Blackpool. It's like all people all around the world. Well, not around the world but mostly from the UK go down there to compete and it's like you get 15 thousand. But I didn't win. (...) I went there. I met up with few people from Mill Hill, England and Aberdeen. I met them down there. I left on a Sunday. You play on a Friday, Saturday. Then you get free time, so we just like went for dinner in Blackpool on Saturday and then left on Sunday morning. I got a new experience, I travelled on my own as well, with my mates.*

Importantly, in these instances, technologies offered my participants the possibility to interact with broader social networks. Yet, these networks did not convert into *symbolic capital* that could be utilised to increase the young people's social positioning or improve their social mobility. Rather, they became a part of the private sphere of their lives that contributed to the identity work inscribed in the processes of growing

up. This quote from Joe (24), talking about his gaming networks based mostly in the US, serves as an example:

*[We talk about] Everything and anything. Politics, your life, gaming. I think you are talking to them as if they are your friends, I guess.*

In a broader sense, technologies provided participants with additional and accessible spaces for spending their free time and/or socialising with others. This aspect of engagement with technologies seemed especially important when positioned within the context of participants' everyday lives in which access to spaces, commercial venues and leisure activities remained highly restricted (as shown in Section 6.2). At the same time, however, even though gaming was perceived as an entertaining, social and valued activity, it was also presented as the only alternative available, exposing a complex interplay between individual agency and constraints deriving from material deprivation. For example, as Joe (24) further revealed:

*Yeah, it [gaming] keeps your mind like off things. [...]. There is nothing else to do so pretty much... 'Cause I don't have money to do other things I would rather do (...). Travel. I want to travel.*

This one alternative available was often perceived as 'freeing' or as mitigating the feelings of powerlessness, boredom and lack of purpose deriving from the prolonged unemployment and socio-economic marginalisation (discussed in Sections 6.2.1 and 8.2.2). Excerpts from Joe (24), James (19), and Alan (20) also illustrate how participants presented their engagement with technologies in such a sense:

*Joe: Online you are independent (...). It's like freeing in that way (...). It takes your mind away from stuff you don't like to think about. Like being on this, the job centre. Not knowing what I want to do (long silence).*

*Alan: (Technologies help) Kill the time 'cause I wouldn't have anything to watch so... If I didn't have telly, probably I would be sleeping all day (...). Like you have something to do when you are bored; like you can just play games on your phone or something.*

*James: But in few days I just woke up and I was like: Nah, not today; I'll just lie in my bed and play a computer which ain't good but it's just how I feel sometimes. It's better to lock myself in the room which obviously is no good for anybody but (silence).*

Participants' engagement with technologies was clearly guided by the interplay between their agency and the affordances and confines of the social world they lived in. The above analysis reveals the complex and creative patterns of usage that offered the young people new modes of spending time, socialising, learning and pursuing their interests and passions, as they explored their sense of self, the world around them and their own place in it. Yet, socio-economic disadvantage and everyday marginalisation (see Section 6.2) constituted a significant backdrop to such digital practices, which were also presented in terms of overcoming boredom, lack of things to do and places to go to and, especially among older participants, to mitigate the feelings of helplessness and lack of purpose caused by the prolonged unemployment. In this sense, these findings reveal that the processes behind the proliferation of an in-door leisure, involving reliance on technologies among disadvantaged youth (Batchelor et al., 2017; Fraser et al., 2017), are strongly shaped by the state's exclusionary 'politics of belonging' (see Section 6.2.1).

### **9.3 Technologies for transitions**

This final section focuses participants' engagement with technologies as a source and form of knowledge for looking for and accessing learning and work opportunities. The importance of technologies for transitions was strongly emphasised by all participants. When asked what technologies mean to them in their everyday lives, Danielle (18), Alan (20), Claire (16) and Liam (23) explained:

*Danielle: It helps you when you are looking for jobs, as I said, you just take one job in, it can come up, and if you want to apply for it, you just press apply and it saves you using your brain and all the paperwork and all that, like back in the older days which I would imagine you would have to do. Just writing why you think you are suitable for this job, and this and that.*

*Alan: Oh [it means] everything 'cause if I didn't have my phone I wouldn't be able to look for jobs!*

*Claire: Aye, that's a good thing as well actually – for looking for jobs and applications and applying for college and that, for creating CV.*

*Liam: Eh, you can go and apply for stuff. Eh, check stuff. Look for jobs and that.*

As such, one of the main meanings participants attached to technologies was their usefulness for looking for and applying for jobs and further education. In this sense, technologies have been perceived and employed as an everyday tool that mediates such practices. This demonstrates the change technologies brought into how work, learning and training opportunities are nowadays accessed. Moreover, technologically mediated practices of looking for and applying for opportunities have proliferated because the [labour market/post-16 transitions policy] *fields'* logic of practice and their rules have been changing. Such processes have been clearly dialectical; many employers run recruitment online; job centres require an online proof their claimants actively look for jobs; training providers and careers services emphasise (digital) employability skills that involve CV and personal statement writing, filling job applications and intensive job searches, which, in turn, also reinforce young people's practices. Yet, participants' accounts also revealed technologies had little impact on making choices about which opportunities to pursue. Rather, occupational choices derived from the young people's lifeworlds and were shaped by the constant interplay between the history of their dispositions and positions (as shown in Section 8.1), which demonstrates a degree of continuity in the unequal patterns of youth transitions.

### *9.3.1 Problematizing digital employability skills in youth transitions*

Uncertainties about how to search for and access opportunities, or judge the value of the opportunities available for long-term labour market prospects, constituted strong features of participants' narratives. In contemporary discourses, such uncertainties tend to be understood in terms of young people's limited digital skills and evaluated according to their (in)ability to perform certain tasks online (see e.g. a report by the

Prince's Trust, 2016<sup>17</sup>). Such understandings are thus argued to derive from a perspective of technological determinism underpinned by an 'administrative [adult] gaze' (Lesko, 2012) that scrutinises digital competencies and requires beneficial and purposeful usage (see Section 3.1). Consequently, such understandings fail to recognise the socially structured nature of engagement with technologies and construct young people in terms of deficits.

Specifically, as demonstrated in Sections 2.1.2 and 7.1, vocational pathways remain undervalued by the education system, while young people who follow these pathways receive limited support from schools in terms of information and advice to help them navigate their transitions (see also Scottish Government, 2017b). Moreover, unlike their middle class counterparts who tend to have access to career knowledge through their social networks (especially their parents; Kirchner et al., 2015), young people in this study often mentioned their parents' inability to help (see also Treanor, 2017). This was a result of the precarious labour market position their families often occupied, including experiences of unemployment and welfare support or low-level employment, and in many cases also of their parents' inability to use technologies (see Sections 5.3.1 and 6.3.1). It is therefore unsurprising that disadvantaged young people leaving school did not know the rules of the game, as one's social competences are learnt either via direct teaching or through experience (Wacquant, 1989 cited in Jenkins, 2002).

In other words, my participants' uncertainties about how to look for and access opportunities or judge their symbolic value continue to derive from traditional social divisions rather than solely from lack of digital skills. At the same time, the young people continue to actively operate within such socio-economic constraints. To start

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Prince's Trust (2016:5) report stating: 'The research has shown that the **opportunities provided online are not equally attained by all young people, in particular those who are not in education, employment or training**. Unfortunately, these young people who have already run into frustrating experience offline, are being left further behind in the online world. **We need to dispel the myth that all millennials know how to make the most of the digital world. Many disadvantaged young people, as this research shows, are not achieving positive outcomes online, in particular when it comes to education or employment**. The research has shown that they are also often at a disadvantage because of a lack of softer skills. **With the right support, these young people can get the most out of their digital experience and go on to achieve great things'** (my own emphasis).

with, they were actively using their own social networks, including peers and siblings, and turned towards professional services to learn the rules of the game (as shown in Sections 6.3 and 8.3). Tasks such as CV and personal statement writing, searching for jobs and filling in applications, which younger participants said they struggled with, became a part of an everyday routine for older participants. Such findings thus once again demonstrated the young people's agency on the one hand, and changes in practices upon passage of time (highlighting the importance of *temporality*) on the other. The quote from Martin (23) is representative in such sense:

*Dorota: Anything else that has made it difficult to look for and access opportunities, for example filling the applications, sending CVs and writing personal statements? Is it a barrier or...?*

*Martin: Ah no, it used to be, but no like now, I know how to do that with application forms, I've got my CV up to date and that all the time now.*

Moreover, participants' CVs and application forms had been often improved by numerous service providers, as for example Alan (20) reported:

*Like I went on My World of Work cause you get a template for that and just put like a few things, like my qualifications and a couple of things in, like about you and that; I gave it to careers services to fix it for me and then when I went to Chances [training provider], they fixed it for me. And obviously my support worker helped update it.*

However, despite engaging in an extensive process of searching for jobs, having their digital employability skills improved, online profiles on work websites, job alerts received daily and having up to date CVs polished by multiple employability experts, the young people did not manage to access employment. Alan's (20) and Martin's (23) accounts, echoed by older participants, illustrate this point:

*Alan: I've been declined for at least one job a day for the last two months or something (...). Sometimes it tells you people viewed your application and then they don't get back to you – it's quite annoying.*

*Martin: I do go on it [job alerts] most, I go on it most nights so I do, nearly every night just because there is always something there so there is. You just have to go right through it all and like read it all and that and like see what one is for you, so. (...). I don't know how many I've sent man, I've no heard anything back.*

To understand why acquiring (digital) employability skills did little to improve the the young people's chances of accessing employment, their practices need to be thus understood as technologically mediated, in terms of 'a continuum based in everyday life' (Gajjala et al., 2007:210), and that technologies were only one among multiple contextual influences affecting young people's transitions (Davies, 2015). Thus, these issues need to be examined from the objective and subjective angles (*field* and *habitus*).

Bonding social networks and service providers as a main source of information had significant influence on the young people's transitions. As argued in Section 8.3.3, service providers operate within a certain neoliberal logic of practice that aims to discipline the most disadvantaged young people into low level roles in the labour market. This is done by directing young people constructed as at risk of disengagement towards short-term training and college courses with little or no symbolic value in the labour market. Therefore, the (policy) *field's* influences consequently reinforce low qualifications as one of the main barriers to employment and a possibility of career progression in later life (see also Keep and James, 2012; Scottish Government, 2015a; Shildrick et al., 2012; Wolf, 2011). Moreover, information about jobs and training coming from participants' peers tended to reflect their own disadvantaged position in the (educational and labour market) *fields*. For example, the jobs and training some of participants accessed through word of mouth were precarious, of low quality, and offered no chance for career progression (see also Sections 6.3 and 8.3.1).

At this point it needs to be noted that these informal class-based methods to finding work through one's informal social networks appeared to be in decline. This may be a result of the very narrow social networks some of the participants and their families had access to. Indeed, there is emerging evidence that the worsening and increasingly

precarious position of some of the working-class families in the labour market has been accompanied by a gradual deterioration of parental social networks that in the past had 'power to assist their children in the search for jobs' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:81). Such findings thus differ from the earlier studies in which informal networks were widely used and were effective in accessing employment, even though this was usually low level and precarious work (Shildrick et al., 2012). It may be therefore argued that a shift has been taking place in how opportunities are looked for and accessed nowadays by disadvantaged young people, with significant implications for their transitions.

Specifically, such a shift means that once valuable resources such as localised reputation – knowing and being known – that used to be utilised to access employment in the past (Shidrick et al., 2012; MacDonald et al., 2005) cannot be drawn upon when opportunities are advertised online. They thus become anonymous applicants far behind in the employment queue, where 'objective' criteria such as educational qualifications, work experience and age, alongside the right forms of personhood and self-presentation, are used to assess candidates and may in turn lead to their further disadvantage in the labour market (Farrugia et al., 2018; Keep, 2015; Lawler, 2005; Wolf, 2011; see also Sections 2.1.2 and 8.3.1). This point was made by the majority of participants, with insightful quotes from Hannah (17) and James (19) serving as an example:

*Hannah: I think going out and handing in CVs and speaking to employers is much better than applying online because they just see you. 'Cause like [online] they just see your qualifications, they just don't see you as a person and like you could have messed up at school, but you could be smart and they don't know that. So I think people just need to give young people a chance and realise that like, we did make mistakes at school, but it doesn't mean like we are like stupid and can't do job.*

*James: Just because he has a CV that doesn't determine that somebody is going to be the most confident in the workplace, the best in the workplace, most hard-*



*working. To me, that's just words. I think actions speak more than words, so people deserve a chance first. So if you are going into an interview, talk like face to face and prove yourself, they should start giving young people a wee day trial and see how they do in the workplace.*

Participants thus called on employers to give them trials rather than judge them by their school performance which they thought offered only a partial and possibly distorted picture of their qualities and abilities as prospective employees (similar requests were made by 'NEET' young people in London-based study by Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017). On the contrary, the young people identified themselves as reliable, hard-working, motivated and eager to learn. On the other hand, however, they also talked extensively about how having low or no confidence, reinforced throughout their lives and by negative educational experiences, had been a significant barrier to accessing opportunities. To understand what this means for their transitions, it is crucial to once again turn towards the concept of *habitus* as a subjective element of practice. In so doing, the transitional approach, encompassing the impact of socio-economic inequalities and labour market conditions on youth trajectories, is combined with a cultural one that focuses on youth subjectivities in relation to labour (Farrugia, 2019; Farrugia et al., 2018; Furlong et al., 2011).

Such tensions in the young people's accounts of lack of confidence and their self-identification as hard workers and swift learners are thus understood as deriving from their classed *habitus* and its orientation towards the labour market, which was perceived as an unfamiliar, even alien environment, with unclear rules and presuppositions. The excerpt from Declan (16), echoed by all of the younger participants, serves to illustrate this point:

*I don't know, I just, I don't know what to do next [after completing his employability training], that's the thing, that's why I came here [Organisation 1].*

Uncertainties about the 'proper' forms of conduct and performance of the self in relation to the labour force constituted a strong feature of participants' labouring

subjectivities. Such uncertainties materialised in the young people's digital practices, while looking for and applying for opportunities. A majority of participants found it very difficult to not only to explain why they wanted a job (or learning course) they applied for, but to even to talk about themselves, who they are and what they like. Extracts from Daniel (17), Alison (16) and Ron (16) serve to illustrate this point:

*Daniel: The one question that I hate is: What do you do in your spare time. I hate that question, it's just one of those questions you don't really say. Cause like I could do anything. But like I do it, I do a lot stuff. Well not a lot of stuff, but I do stuff. And if somebody is after that, I'd be like: I don't know. I'd do anything. But like I find that hard and then like when people say like: "What would you hope to get out of the job, of this". I don't really know what to say about that. So I just like leave that blank. So I leave that blank and go to the next question.*

*Alison: Yeah, it's easy, like, it's just like 'cause it's about yourself. But then see when it comes to, like, I don't know, see when it comes to 'about me' message bit, it's just so hard, like, I just don't know what to write, I don't know, 'cause I'm dead chatty as well, I don't know if I'm going to over-do it or not.*

*Ron: 'Cause I wasn't really good at describing myself to get like 250 words and stuff, each box. Yeah, I wasn't really good at that I think. That's why they didn't give it to me [an interview for McDonald's job].*

These accounts showed that participants' (class) *habitus* was brought up to the surface and revealed that they felt like a 'fish out of water' in unfamiliar context. They also revealed that their *habitus* remained excluded from the modes of subjectivities that are expected from and rewarded by the contemporary labour force: namely that of a confident, entitled, flexible and passionate self as enterprise (Farrugia, 2019; Kelly, 2006; Skeggs, 2004a). On the contrary, the young people were aware of their social awkwardness in this unfamiliar *field* and knew they had to learn to 'fit in' (Bourdieu, 2004). In particular, similar to Farrugia's study (2019:56), my participants had to work hard to acquire 'qualities that subjects of passion [middle class young people] took for granted, such as confidence, relational competence and a demeanour that it was

hoped would be pleasing to potential employers'. Such learning often took place through employability training, as for example Daniel (17) explained:

*This course helped me with confidence, being confident about anything. When I came they helped me a lot. I'm more confident with stuff like I can talk other than just sit there blank.*

However, participants' accounts also revealed that learning the rules of the game resembled learning a script of how to perform the self to get it right, as one's *habitus* encompasses the system of long-lasting dispositions that, even though transposable, tend to be relatively stable and resistant to change (Bourdieu, 1990a). The extract from Daniel (17) serves to illustrate how, instead of an 'authentic self-expression' (Farrugia, 2019:52) of his identity, he learns and re-enacts what is acceptable to tell about himself to potential employers:

*But like during the course they taught me, they would talk me through things that I could say. Then I could say something. (...) Aye, [about] spare time, they would tell me to be like: in your spare time you would just say you like hang out with friends ... that's what I do, but like I wouldn't be able to answer it before. But I've got help so I answer some stuff that I know, that I'm being helped with.*

Despite his passion for drawing and interests in space exploration, Daniel did not mobilise this aspect of the self in relation to labour, or in the past, in relation to education. Like the majority of participants, he kept his interests in the private sphere. More broadly, the young people's class *habitus* of being hard working and motivated labouring subjects, rather than 'conducting themselves, in the business of life, as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress' (Kelly, 2006:18), proved to be at a disjuncture with the requirements of the labour market that rewards certain traits and qualities constituting the middle class *habitus* routinely mobilised by this group (Friedman and Lauriston, 2019; Grisprud et al., 2011; Lawler, 2005). They, according to Farrugia (2019), do not omit any aspect of the self, including leisure lifestyles, interests or extra curriculum activities, to present themselves as valuable workers. Undoubtedly, they cultivate themselves as a 'subject of value', who is 'a forward-propelling

subject/object, individualised, always accruing through exchange and investment in order to enhance futures' (Skeggs, 2011:502). For disadvantaged young people, however, such practices remain foreign to the self. Moreover, even when learnt, a degree of uncertainty and unease and a fear of getting things wrong remains, even for older participants who routinely apply for jobs and are trained and equipped with employability skills. An excerpt from Martin (23) serves to illustrate this point:

*Like see if I'm applying for something and I don't know what to do and that, I do get a bit scared and that man, I do sit back sometimes and like just look about and that man, hoping to see what other people are doing. And like, but I willnae say anything, I keep it in. It's not all the time, that's what I'm saying, it's sometimes, I just get the feelings like I'm like that, "Aw no, I don't know what to do" and that and I'll just be going about it in my heid and that.*

Crucially, that is not to say that all participants felt like 'fish out of water' to the same extent. Claire (16) for example reported that despite having 'really bad anxiety' she could hide it by being 'really talkative' and outgoing which she believed helped her to secure a place in college or a job in the call centre. Christopher (17) and Brian (16) recognised that while they struggled to write about themselves, they felt confident and competent in an interview setting. They highlighted the benefits of their extensive experience in drama that made it easy for them to perform the self in an unfamiliar environment. For example, as Christopher described how he secured a work placement with a nursery:

*Like, everybody finds it dead hard to do interviews, I don't mind doing them (...). Cause in drama you do a lot of hot-seat stuff which was kind of like interviews. So I was fine with it, it was fine, when people ask you a question you respond.*

Finally, Matthew (19) recollected how he managed to secure a part-time position in coaching young children by being a confident and outspoken interviewee:

*The interview I done with the youth work, you know, they were so so happy with the way I spoke...The way, eh, the way I spoke, the way I gave examples and the way I expressed myself practically as well...*

Matthew's passion for football, his work ethics of constantly '*bettering himself*' and his players, the reflexivity of what makes a good coach and easiness of talking about it, fitted well with the modes of self-presentation from workers that are valued and rewarded by the labour market (Farruggia, 2019; Kelly, 2006; McDowell 2012; Skeggs, 2004a). All the above examples demonstrate how these participants succeeded in accessing opportunities they applied for due to meeting such requirements, as 'performative identities [and embodied characteristics] are crucial in gaining employment, especially in the forms of low-waged interactive employment open to young people with few skills or little educational capital' (McDowell, 2012:573). They were those who had the 'right' language, possessed the 'right' style of presentation and even perhaps the 'right' looks. Claire (16), for example, easily fitted a description of 'idealised white, slim, young, unwrinkled' body, prioritised in service work (McDowell, 2009:63).

In other words, possessing the right type of qualities (the 'right' *habitus*) offered these participants some advantage in the service economy. For the majority, however, especially young men, lack of such characteristics led to even further disadvantage. For example, the conversation with Liam (23) illustrated how he was denied a job at McDonald's:

*Dorota: And what kind of jobs were you looking for?*

*Liam: Eh, just like part-time in McDonalds and that.*

*Dorota: Were you invited for an interview?*

*Liam: Yeah, at one point. They didn't like, like cause my customer services wasn't good, they said, they'll get back to me, but they didn't get back.*

As such, lack of customer service skills, which can be understood as 'particular forms of aesthetic and performative embodiment that reflect the image or the brand of the employer' (Farrugia et al., 2017:274), leaves many young people, especially low skilled working-class young men, at a significant disadvantage in the labour market. At the same time, however, the majority of the young men in this study sought and preferred

work that did not require an affective/interactive labour and they did not reconstruct their identity to do so. Rather, they prioritised practical mastery and 'hands-on' jobs outside of the service sector. Yet, as this kind of work has been 'diminishing and increasingly insecure' (Gunter and Watt, 2009:526), older participants widened their options by looking for any kind of low-level work, including service jobs, which only meant they faced yet another barrier to employment – namely that of being excluded from the modes of affectivity and interactive embodiment necessary to succeed in the service economy (McDowell, 2009:8).

Overall, acquiring (digital) employability skills did little to improve the young people's chances of accessing employment as subjective and objective dimensions of practice (*habitus*, access to resources and *field*) proved to have much stronger influence upon their trajectories. Learning digital skills does not necessarily mean that young people will also undergo a radical change, for example in terms of developing the 'right' personality, attitudes or styles of self-presentation expected by contemporary labour market. Rather, as they belong to one's *habitus*, they are long lasting, especially if social agents continue to live in circumstances like the ones experienced during early socialisation (Burke, 2015:58). While this is not to say that change cannot take place, it nevertheless requires time and reflexivity, for example through one's awkwardness, encountering new circumstances that would allow for such change, but also a desire on the side of social agents.

## **9.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the fourth research question by critically examining the role technologies play in everyday lives and transitions of the young people identified as NEET.

Participants' accounts showed that access to technologies has been both everyday and constrained. Despite such constraints, however, for the majority of participants, technologies were deeply embedded in their everyday lives and carried significant meanings. Technologies were mainly valued for maintaining relationships, for one's

own interests/passions and informal learning, and to look for work and learning opportunities.

While at a first glance such engagement resembled a digital divide, the analysis of participants' narratives shown complex and creative patterns of usage, involving an exploration of their sense of self and their place in the world. In other words, the young people actively and purposefully used technologies in a way that suited their needs, wants and interests. However, the young people's engagement with technologies was not only guided by their agency and dispositions, but also by the affordances and confines of the social world they lived in. Socio-economic disadvantage, marginalisation and negative school experiences constituted a significant backdrop to their digital practices. Notably, the social networks participants had access to, and were maintaining with help of technology, were predominantly of the bonding type. This highlights how growing up in deprivation often constrains access to bridging social networks (Holland et al., 2007; MacDonald et al., 2005). The often argued 'potential' for developing *bridging social capital* offered by technological affordances (Castells, 1996, 2001) was called into question because technology usage mainly reflected the young people's social reality and their social positions.

Moreover, growing up in disadvantage contributed to developing forms of subjectivities different to those of the middle class 'subject of value'. My participants developed value practices that were relational, as they were accruing value through engagement with others (Skegsg, 2011). Consequently, the high importance disadvantaged young people attach to technologies for 'doing' relationships was understood in terms of such value practices, thus also challenging dominant debates constructing such forms of digital engagement in terms of contributing to a digital divide (De Almeida, 2012; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014).

It was further found that cultivating interests, passions and informal learning was taking place away from the context of formal education, which failed to recognise the young people's strengths. These were moved into the private sphere of their lives and continued to be developed with the help of technological affordances, but usually

these were also completely separated from the vocational routes my participants followed. Resultantly, the young people were not using technologies to promote their entrepreneurial self or to craft themselves as 'subjects of value' to the labour market as their middle class counterparts tend to do (Gangneux, 2018). Lastly, digital practices were often presented in terms of overcoming boredom, lack of things to do and places to go to and, especially amongst older participants, as mitigating the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness caused by the prolonged unemployment.

Finally, technologies were highly valued for their usefulness in looking for and applying for work and learning. Participants' accounts revealed that technologies were perceived and employed as an everyday tool, mediating such practices and shaped by their distinctive social identities. Consequently, technologies were not utilised while making choices about which opportunities to pursue as these derived from the young people's lifeworlds and traditional social divisions.

Uncertainties about how to access work and learning opportunities, how to look for them or discern which may be the most beneficial in terms of long-term labour market prospects, were another feature in the young people's narratives. Such uncertainties were a result of the constant interplay between the history of their positions and dispositions, while (bonding) social networks and service providers proved to be a much stronger source of influence and learning about the rules of the game than engagement with technologies. For example, supporting services were found to direct my participants towards the least valuable training/courses. Consequently, learning digital employability skills did little to improve the young people's chances of accessing (good quality or even any) work, as subjective (*habitus*) and objective (*fields*) dimensions of practice were a much stronger influence upon their transitions.



## Chapter 10 Conclusion

This chapter revisits the key claims and findings of the thesis and reflects on the contribution the findings make and on their broader implications. It then discusses the limitations of the study and ends with directions for future research and policy recommendations.

### 10.1 Concluding remarks

#### *10.1.1 Revisiting background*

This thesis has been inscribed in the current debates underpinning the field of youth studies exploring: a) the interplay between change and continuity in young people's lives and transitions; b) the interplay between young people's agency and the contexts not of their own making, including the impact of the post-16 transitions policies; and c) similarities and differences among young people, with a specific focus paid to class and gender, and to both the subjective and objective dimensions of their lives. Additionally, the role technologies play in everyday lives and transitions of young people labelled as NEET, an issue so far underresearched in these contexts, was critically examined.

The thesis started with a critical overview of the extent of change brought by socio-economic, political and technological transformations to contemporary young adulthood. It was argued that while many aspects of young people's lives and transitions have changed under the conditions of late neoliberal capitalism, there is a significant degree of continuity with the past. Specifically, social divisions were demonstrated to unequally shape young people's access to resources and social networks, their relationships with education, employment and training, and consequently their life chances and now de-standardised transitions (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Reay, 2017). Moreover, they were also shown to diversify young people's forms of selfhood, the way they perceive their place in the world and what can or cannot be achieved (Skeggs, 2004a, 2011). It was further determined that some groups of young people, e.g. disadvantaged/working class, continue to be misconstrued as a threat – in need of control and discipline, as valueless and pathologised for not

possessing the right forms of personhood, which remains reflected in the ways the state designs and justifies its policies and interventions (Hendrick, 1997; Skeggs, 2004a). Finally, the study also highlighted how one's class intersects with gender and consequently structures the choices in relation to work opportunities young men and women want to pursue (Evans, 2002), the barriers to employment young, low educated working-class men may face (McDowell, 2012) or the unequal gender relations contributing to the reproduction of gendered inequalities in family life and work trajectories (McNay, 1999; Perez, 2019; Skeggs, 2004b).

This thesis further situated contemporary young adulthood within the broader conditions of neoliberal capitalism and its dominant discourses that misrepresent and legitimate unequal patterns of youth transitions as deriving from personal attributes rather than from the broader socio-economic inequalities. Additional attention was paid to the economic and educational processes affecting young people's lives and transitions under the lens of change and continuity. It was demonstrated that despite the broader rhetoric pointing towards the emergence of the knowledge societies, we can in fact observe an expansion of the service economy, characterised by the widespread of low-level employment, growth of the jobs at the top and significant squeeze of the middle (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; McDowell, 2009). Under such conditions, contemporary young people face worsening work, material and social conditions (Cotê, 2014; Standing, 2012, 2014). Growing levels of youth unemployment and poverty, alongside precarity, devaluation of credentials, education without jobs and consequently underemployment have become a strong feature of their everyday lives and transitions (Shildrick et al., 2015). However, middle class youth were argued to remain relatively shielded from the precarious and insecure labour market and unstable living conditions, as they continue to be more likely to follow the HE routes and have access to the broader resources, unlike many of their working class counterparts.

Moreover, it was argued that the changes brought by the significant expansion of education sector have not resulted in a more equal education system or eradicated the impact of social divisions on educational and consequently socio-economic

inequalities. Instead, historical patterns of educational underachievement and 'miseducation' of the working-class young people were captured and argued to be contributing to the social reproduction of inequalities by directing young people into different educational and post-educational trajectories (Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 1997). A key mechanism through which this reproduction takes place was further linked to the symbolic power underlying the education system, aiming to maintain the dominance of the elites (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). As a consequence, all the above processes continue to unequally shape young people's lives and transitions and need to be considered when researching contemporary young adulthood.

This thesis also discussed how young people who follow 'accelerated' transitions and leave school early have become subjects of state-led interventions, through ascribing them to a pejorative NEET category. Three main problems relating to the NEET-focused policies and literature were identified and discussed. Firstly, it was argued that describing young people by what they are not and seeking to quantify and categorise them fails to recognise differences in their circumstances and experiences and the consequences for their transitions. Moreover, such negative assumptions and connotations that underpin policy objectives to tackling NEETness contribute to the processes through which certain (working class/disadvantaged) young people become problematised as in need of control and objects of targeted governance, while their wellbeing, needs and rights are ignored (Fergusson, 2013). Additionally, the importance and indeed economic value of unpaid gendered labour, such as parenting and caring (OfNS, 2016), continues to be misconstrued as non-participation (for example, pregnancy and caring responsibilities of more than 20 hours a week are identified as key risk factors for NEETness; Scottish Government, 2015a) and serves to further stigmatise young parents/carers as disengaged and a burden. Secondly, the NEET agenda was demonstrated to be at heart of the neoliberal processes allocating the causes of non-participation to deficits and personal attributes within young people and their families rather than within the dynamic and structural inequalities underpinning contemporary society. This has resulted in the proliferation of ill-suited interventions that offer individualistic solutions to collective problems (MacDonald

and Shildrick, 2018). Finally, it was argued that while the NEET-focused scholarship offers some insights into the policy problems and transitions of young people labelled as NEET, it suffers from a range of shortcomings, deriving from a narrow engagement with the fundamentally contradictory NEET category itself and lack of strong links with the field of youth studies and education.

Given the evidence suggesting such crucial differences among young people nowadays, the renewed approaches to researching youth, the concepts of social generation, the political economy of youth and the metaphor of belonging were further critically examined under the lens of change and continuity. It was argued that the first two approaches, while offering new directions to understanding youth, have failed to resolve theoretical and analytical problems inscribed in agency vs structure binaries (France, 2015; France and Threadgold, 2016). It was thus proposed that adopting a 'middle ground' approach, that brings together 'structural, historically specific conditions and young people's subjective experience of the times in which they live' (Furlong et al., 2011:360) would allow to overcome such limitations. Bourdieusian thinking tools were identified as particularly useful in such regard, as they allow for a coherent analysis of individual agency and meaning making practices alongside the impact of the broader structures (Costa and Murphy, 2015). Specifically, adopting habitus as theory-method, due to its strong ability to grasp the repetition of individual practices, perceptions and attitudes, was found to be a fruitful way of understanding both individual trajectories, as well as shared classed patterns across the cohort (Costa and Murphy, 2015). Additionally, drawing on the scholarship encompassing the school of thought broadly defined as *Feminism after Bourdieu* (Skeggs, 2004b), gender was conceptualised as among the key forces that structure and reside in one's *habitus* (alongside class, sexuality, ethnicity etc.; Lawler, 2004; Lovell, 2004; Reay, 2004b; Skeggs, 1997). Doing so, allowed me to further capture how the intersection of class and gender shaped the occupational choices my participants made, the barriers to employment in the service economy that young working class men were facing and how the engagement with EET differed among young mothers and fathers. Consequently, it was further contended that adopting Bourdieusian thinking tools in

such a way allowed for the concept of youth transitions, understood now as not having the clear start or ending point, to be successfully revived, especially if also combined with the metaphor of belonging to place, others and institutions. Moreover, by looking at the role technologies play in young people's lives and transitions, even more holistic and multidimensional understandings of contemporary young adulthood could emerge.

Examining young people's engagement with technologies was found to be particularly important due to the deterministic, binary and deficit approaches underpinning the dominant debates, policy initiatives and a significant body of scholarship on young people and ICT. It was thus proposed that the above approaches should be abandoned and the debate moved towards more critical, theory-driven and youth centred understandings. This was achieved by conceptualising young people's practices away from the online/offline dichotomies, but rather as being in a 'dialectical relationship' with and mediated by technologies (Gangneux, 2018, Livingstone, 2012). It was further argued that it is also necessary to capture young people's subjective experiences of and relationships with technologies, while also accounting for the broader contextual influences (Selwyn, 2012). Resultantly, it was proposed that contemporary young people should be understood as at the intersection of technology, social identity and culture and researched as such (Davies, 2015; 2018a). Additionally, it was highlighted that it is crucial to understand technologies in terms of ideology and power, as their history has been deeply embedded in the history of capitalism, logic of capital accumulation and audiences surveillance, commodification and exploitation (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; Gangeux, 2018; Skeggs and Yuill, 2016b, 2019). By doing so, it was possible to position the (micro) processes of socio-technological mediation of the everyday as embedded within the macro processes of asymmetrical power relations between private companies and the wider populations (Gangneux, 2018; Livingstone, 2009; Skeggs and Yuill, 2019).

Having established that continuity and change, as well as that the interplay between one's agency and objective structures strongly contribute to complex and diverse experiences among contemporary young people, it was proposed to focus on a specific

segment of youth population – young people who were falling under the NEET policy category. Twenty-two young adults age 16 to 24 living in Glasgow, one of the old industrial regions with high levels of deprivation and NEETness, were interviewed to examine their everyday lives and transitions. A qualitative approach in the form of narrative methodology was adopted, as it put young people forward as narrators and meaning makers, the first interpreters of their experiences (Barkhuizen, 2008). The importance narrative inquiry pays to the temporal, spatial, and individual and social contexts to young people's lives, akin to the Bourdieusian theory of practice, was further found to offer fruitful ways of grasping the complexities of youth transitions. In turn, the interviews with the practitioners and policy makers provided me with useful data concerning the broader processes impacting upon youth transitions and their agency, already constrained by the impact of material deprivation and requirements of the neoliberal capitalism, validating and valuing middle class like qualities and modes of personhoods.

### *10.1.2 Reflecting on findings and their implications*

A number of significant findings emerged in this study, which offered new insights into disadvantaged young people's everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies.

Chapter 6 addressed the first research question: *Who are the young people beyond the NEET label? How do their complex circumstances and everyday experiences impact on their lives, belonging and transitions?* By adopting the vignette type of narratives, the chapter demonstrated that participants' lives, experiences and circumstances were complex and diverse, akin to claims made by the NEET-focused scholarship, suggesting there is 'no single story' amongst this group (Finlay et al., 2010). Yet, it also captured and highlighted a set of commonalities in the young people's lives, as they derived from common 'class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1990a:53). Specifically, growing up in Glasgow's disadvantaged neighbourhoods revealed shared experiences of poverty and material deprivation, limited access to resources and everyday experiences of exclusions from spaces, leisure activities, opportunities and basic socio-economic life. These experiences, however, were also intertwined with experiences of

inclusion provided by significant others who mattered to the young people and provided them with a sense of belonging, encouragement and support, and often mitigated the impact of disadvantage. At the same time, however participants' social networks were predominantly of the bonding type, while the knowledge and information the young people had access to about employment and learning opportunities were limited.

These findings have significant implications for the NEET-focused scholarship and beyond, as first and foremost they captured and emphasised the unique, reflexive and caring persons beyond the pejorative label. Specifically, they showed the remarkable ways in which the young people make sense of themselves and the world around them and what matters to them. Adopting such a lens was a direct response to the dominant body of research that has been preoccupied with quantifying and categorising young people into different groups and sub-groups, which resulted in a failure to capture their lived experience, reflexivity or challenge the deficit NEET label. Instead, this study was particularly committed to hearing the voices of this so far mostly silenced and misrepresented group of young people and retelling their stories in a respectful, complex and authentic way. Doing so, in turn, aimed to make these stories believable and powerful, as well as ethically and morally grounded (Bochner, 2001), in order to challenge negative and false public misconceptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Smyth and McInerney, 2013) and to inform policy and practice on the everyday challenges faced by this group of young people.

The chapter also examined the participants' sense of belonging and access to the bridging social networks, as these remain 'implicated in the processes understood as transitions' (Furlong et al., 2011:360). Specifically, their belonging to place and basic socio-economic life was strongly hampered by the state's exclusionary politics, which has continued to fail to incorporate inclusive policies directed at young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, this chapter also highlighted the impact of such structural barriers on the young people's habitus, as many forms of leisure and socio-economic forms of participation, taken for granted by the middle class youth, were 'unthinkable' for my participants. On the other hand, however, the

young people did not display a strong internalised feeling of rootedness in their locality, as they wished to socialise and access opportunities outside of their neighbourhoods, thus indicating that they perhaps have become more spatially mobile than in the past. A key implication of this finding is that it captured the restraining impact of existing inequalities on my participants' everyday lives and spatial mobility, as well as on their subjectivities, as despite them wanting to belong to the basic life, they were mostly unsure what they could do if given the option. As such, it is the state's role, so far barely fulfilled, to provide disadvantaged young people with a range of meaningful and free activities, tailored to their needs, wants and wishes. The more young people are exposed to the new experiences and opportunities for participation, the more likely they are to develop new practices and new definitions of what is 'possible' (Bourdieu, 1977:78).

The final part of the chapter explored the roles social networks play in the young people's lives and transitions. It was demonstrated that participants' families were actively supporting their children's transitions. However, help offered was often limited by their own disadvantaged position, lack of knowledge of how things work in the *fields* of education and labour market, also in relation to technologies, and diminishing power of their own social capital. In response, the young people were thus actively using their own social networks to identify and access opportunities. This finding is an important contribution, as it highlighted the importance of young people's agency in developing, maintaining and navigating their own social networks and using them for their advantage. This issue has been so far underplayed by the scholarship focusing on youth transitions (see e.g. MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018), and by Bourdieu's theory of intergenerational transmission of social capital, concentrating on parental social networks, and disregarding young people's own agency (Weller, 2007).

Chapter 7 addressed the second research question: *What are NEET-labelled young people's relationships with and experiences of the education system and how do these influence their transitions?*. It was found that the young people's relationship with school was complex and diverse, but often involved unease and struggle and a limited sense of belonging to education. As a consequence, the vast majority developed



negative attitudes towards formal learning that led to their self-exclusion from school. Importantly however, the narrative approach also allowed me to uncover additional dimensions to the young people's educational journeys: of their strengths and passion for certain subjects which were not recognised by education system; the constant struggle and negotiation between their subjective hopes and objective structures that pulled them towards or away from certain destinations in various moments of their lives; and their feelings of injustice and being treated unfairly by their schools and school staff, including the processes of labelling and adopting deficit, disrespectful and disciplining approaches in response to my participants.

These findings contribute to knowledge by making sense of 'NEET' young people's relationships with education not in terms of personal deficits and failures, but as dynamic processes deriving from the interplay between the logic of education system and their habitus. Specifically, the study identified shared patterns of experience in the lives of the young people labelled as NEET in terms of variety of derogatory educational experiences. It was proposed that these shared experiences should be understood as exclusionary, as they contributed strongly to my participants' disaffection with schooling and negative dispositions towards formal learning. In addition to this, schools were found to reinforce such forms of subjectivities by constructing my participants as deficit learners and actively supporting their exclusion from mainstream education. For example, it was shown that schools and teachers often encouraged young people in this study to follow the vocational pathways, arguably the 'imposed' routes reserved for those already disadvantaged (Thompson, 2011b).

The chapter also contributed to knowledge by linking my participants' educational journeys with the *symbolic violence* underpinning education system since its creation, which continues to devalue, mistreat and discipline pupils from the working class background. In response, my participants were found to self-exclude from the education system and follow vocational pathways, often despite a strong inclination towards creative subjects and sports. In this sense, the chapter captured how the *symbolic violence* impacts upon one's agency (see e.g. Jenkins, 2002 questioning such processes). However, the chapter also highlighted the young people's reflexivity and

agency when they self-excluded from schools. There was a strong evidence of the young people being aware of their own disadvantaged position in the *field* of education, and their self-exclusion was an active response to their disadvantaged and devalued position in it. As such, this chapter showed how the segregatory processes embedded in education continue to diversify the lives of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, by allocating them into different learning routes, and consequently into unequal socio-economic positions.

Another important implication of these findings relates to the critical analysis of educational policy in Scotland. By using participants' educational experiences as an example, the success of implementing *GIRFEC* and *SHANARRI* based principles was evaluated (see Section 1.3). Specifically, the main objectives of the above initiatives have aimed to ensure that all children and young people's needs are met, their rights respected, and wellbeing and safety secured (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2005b). Yet, as this chapter demonstrated, there was little effort or success to implement those principles in relation to the young people in this study. For example, my participants frequently brought up negative educational experiences, such as lack of support, respect and care from teachers and other school staff, as well as processes of labelling and segregation that contributed to them leaving school early, often with scarred learner identities. In this sense, neither their rights were respected nor were their needs recognised and wellbeing ensured. Similarly, the advancements made to the school curriculum, aiming to ensure high levels of flexibility and pupils' progress, so it would facilitate their personal growth, relationships with others and undertaking activities of their interest (Scottish Executive, 2004), were not effectively implemented in relation to my participants. Flexible routes, for example, have instead been 'the imposed' routes (Thompson, 2011b) reserved for the so called underachievers. Undertaking activities my participants were passionate about was neither supported nor recognised as valuable by their schools, and no information was offered to them about these alternative routes. Consequently, as Section 10.3.2 will further argue, the education system in Scotland needs to undergo a radical change if it is to meet its aspirational goals of providing progressive education for all.

Chapter 8 addressed the third research question: *What are NEET-labelled young people's practices of making choices, searching for and accessing learning, training and/or employment after leaving compulsory education?*. The chapter highlighted that by the time of leaving school, the young people's (classed and gendered) *habitus* leaned towards practical mastery, including 'hands on' jobs in the traditionally male dominated sectors for the majority of young men and active and/or people oriented occupations for the majority of young women. These were often low level jobs, gendered, traditionally done by working class people and of which the young people had already some direct experience. While these choices derived from a limited and negotiated range of possibilities, most of participants also stressed the importance of progressing towards jobs they liked and were passionate about. In this sense, their transitions were inscribed in a struggle for meaning, direction in life and sense of belonging, as all participants strived for a good and dignified life. It was further argued that due to the exclusionary experiences of the education system, the labour market entry was 'accelerated' for this group and filled with uncertainties about its rules and presuppositions, of opportunities available and their quality, and of the routes to access them. Precarity, exploitation, poor quality work and training, lack of security and realistic chances for career progression constituted a strong part of the young people's transitions and were strongly influenced by the post-16 policy agenda exercised on the ground by service providers that support youth transitions in Scotland.

The chapter made several new contributions to knowledge. It firstly highlighted the impact of class, gender and *fields'* influences that shaped participants' occupational choices, limiting them to what they experienced and knew about in the context of their lifeworlds. It was thus proposed that such choices should be understood as mediated in a dual way: by the history of young people's (classed and gendered) dispositions and by the history of their positions (Bourdieu, 1993). Additionally, this chapter offered a new evidence on the role technologies play in making their occupational choices, an issue so far not researched. It was found that the vast majority of participants did not engage with technologies to do so. The argument put across was that this aspect of my

participants' lives was not technologically mediated due to limited presence of choice, opportunity and resources in their everyday lives. These findings bear important implications by demonstrating that technologies did not open new possibilities (horizons) for this group of young people because the impact of the old social divisions proved to be of much stronger influence.

Another important contribution made by this chapter highlighted the agentic aspects behind the young people's choices and transitions. There was evidence that despite the constraining impact of the objective structures, my participants nevertheless tried to make the most of their mediated choices, as they looked for opportunities that suited their needs and which they enjoyed. Moreover, they believed that accessing work would allow them to finally belong to the basic socio-economic life from which they have been so far marginalised. It was thus proposed that the young people's meaning making practices were guided by their *illusio*, a belief that the jobs they strived for were worthy of their efforts and would help them to achieve belonging. In this sense, this underutilised Bourdieusian concept allowed me to capture and explain the emotional processes behind transitions of disadvantaged young people and how these processes contributed to reproduction of inequalities. Specifically, it was shown that summoning *illusio* was an act of classed reflexivity underpinned by a range of emotional struggles. Many participants, for example, talked about adjusting their subjective hopes to objective probabilities of achieving them, while two participants continued to resist to lower their expectations in their search for meaningful employment. Yet, doing so meant that these young people were long stuck in their transitions and struggled to make choices, because of their disadvantaged position in the *fields*.

The chapter also explored participants' experiences and practices of looking for and accessing learning and work after leaving compulsory education, with particular attention paid to the logic of practice of the policy and labour market *fields*. It contributed to knowledge by capturing a further segregatory processes that affected my participants' transitions. It was found that supporting agencies were directing the young people towards the least prestigious, low level and often short terms courses

and training of little symbolic value. These processes were further argued to contribute to reinforcing participants' disadvantaged position in the labour market, so they can be disciplined to be ready to accept the lowest and often gendered roles available in the neoliberal capitalist service economy. Whilst these findings were consistent with the broad range of scholarship (see e.g. Shildrick et al., 2012), the chapter made a further contribution by also looking at the young people's agency in response to these segregatory processes. Specifically, it was found that, with the passage of time, older participants became disillusioned with the epistemological fallacy promoted by the fields and its main stakeholders. They, for example, expressed a strong sense of injustice and of being deceived by the initiatives they participated in. In response, they started to strategise to improve their position in the fields, yet they also lowered their expectations, as the close distance to necessity, feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, and socio-economic marginalisation became unbearable aspects of their everyday lives.

The final contribution that also served to triangulate participants' accounts was made through offering the original analysis of the 'institutional narratives' relating to youth transitions in Scotland. It was found that professionals and policy makers' accounts were underpinned by tensions and paradoxes, while the reasons behind them were linked with the deceitful NEET policy agenda itself, emphasising individualist narratives and personal responsibility for one's transitions while hiding structural problems. It was thus proposed that professionals and policy makers' everyday duties were guided by such fallacious understandings and contributed to the ways they made judgments of how to support disadvantaged young people in their transitions. Specifically, by positioning young people at the matrix of risks, those most disadvantaged were directed towards the least valuable training and courses. Lack of (transferrable work) skills and qualifications agenda underpinning these initiatives further reinforced the young people's disadvantage in the labour market (see also France, 2016). As such, these findings implicate that despite claims of a distinctive Scottish approach to youth unemployment and transitions, the policy field was found to resemble the ill-conceived English model and was underpinned by *symbolic violence*. Additionally, there was no

evidence that young people's needs, interests, and strengths in finding suitable and sustained positive destinations were prioritised (Riddell et al., 2008). Rather, it was clear that entry to any employment and employability agenda were actively promoted (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018). For example, no information on the alternative to vocational pathways was offered to the participants with strong inclination towards creative subjects, nor have their additional needs were recognised and met first.

Chapter 9 addressed the fourth research question: *How do young people labelled as NEET engage with technologies in their everyday lives and what role do technologies play in their transitions?*. It was found that that technologies were everyday and embedded in the lives of my participants, but nevertheless transient, with on and off access. Despite such constraints, however, technologies constituted a significant part of participants' lives, as they attached various meanings to technologies and used them for the purposes that suited their needs, wants and interests. There was evidence of creative and rich patterns of usage, which offered the young people new modes of socialising, cultivating their interests and informal learning, and undertaking various leisure activities. However, despite such rich and meaningful engagement, using technologies for transitions was underpinned by uncertainties and struggle. Such difficulties were further linked with the young people's distinctive social identities and disadvantaged positions they occupied within education and labour market fields. Consequently, even when participants acquired digital employability skills, these had little influence over their transitions.

These findings offer important contributions to knowledge. Firstly, they highlighted the impact of one's socio-economic positioning on access to technologies, an issue now disregarded by majority of research, which takes technologies for granted in the lives of young people. However, as this study has shown, not only was the access to the internet and devices intermittent for this group, two participants had no access at all. Furthermore, this study also captured the importance of young people's meaning making practices, while making sense of their technology use, and problematised scholarship and discourses that have failed to do so. It grasped the strong importance the young people attached to using technologies for 'doing' relationships and then

proposed that these practices were constituting value practices, as participants developed relational forms of personhoods and were accruing value through engagement with others (Skeggs, 2004a, 2011). It was thus contended that dominant discourses and public/political understandings, constructing such forms of engagement as non-beneficial and contributing to digital divide, have been erroneous and harmful. This is because they failed to account for the importance of young people's meaning making practices or how different forms of subjectivities develop depending upon different socio-economic conditions (Skeggs, 2004a).

However, this study also positioned participants' technology use within the objective structures, as they were vital to understanding how and why certain digitally mediated practices developed or not. Specifically, the impact of socio-economic and educational inequalities was found to constitute a significant backdrop to young people's use of technologies. For example, cultivating their interests, passions and informal learning, was taking place only in the private sphere of their lives, as schools failed to support my participants to do this through formal education. Consequently, the vast majority of young people in this study followed vocational routes, often despite their strong inclination towards creative subjects and sports, as they were mostly unaware that such alternative routes would be possible for them. Neither schools nor organisations overseeing the post-16 transitions provided my participants with information, guidance and support to access such routes. In this sense, the vocational pathways were argued to be the 'imposed' routes (Thompson, 2011b) secured for the so-called educational underachievers, thus perpetuating the overwhelming dominance of the middle classes in the employment in arts, creative industries, media and sports (Department for Creative Media and Sport, 2016).

Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of online leisure, cultural consumption and socialising in the lives of disadvantaged young people. Specifically, the rich patterns of technology use, allowing my participants to access various online spaces, spend free time with others, make sense of the world around them, its rules, norms and values and their own place in it, were captured and emphasised. Crucially, such complex and remarkable ways of engagement continue to be undervalued by

dominant discourses guided by the administrative gaze requiring purposeful and beneficial (in a normative sense) types of usage. Yet, as these findings indicate, the meanings young people attach to technologies and the multiple roles such engagement fulfil should not be judged as inferior, nor underestimated as trivial.

At the same time, it also needs to be noted that the engagement with technologies among this group remains deeply embedded within and shaped by their everyday experiences of exclusion/inclusion. For example, the digital practices discussed already, even though enjoyable and highly valued, were also often presented in terms of overcoming boredom, while not having other things to do and places to go to, and as mitigating the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness caused by everyday marginalisation. In this sense, the state's 'exclusionary politics of belonging' (Antonsich, 2010) significantly contributed to the young people's strong reliance on technologies, as their needs and wants had not been fulfilled in other aspects of their lives, including (but not limited to) access to free leisure spaces and activities, ability to socialise with others outside their own homes or cultivating interests and learning in the context of formal education.

Examining the role of technologies in my participants' lives also led to challenging their empowering potential underpinning one string of the current dominant scholarship, debates and digital inclusion initiatives. For example, the networks the young people had access to via technologies were predominantly of the bonding type, thus they reflected their social reality. Similarly, technologies had little impact on the young people's occupational choices, trajectories or quality of learning and work accessed. As such, the final contribution made by the chapter demonstrated the little impact of initiatives focused on equipping young people with digital employability skills. The reason behind such limited success was further explained with help of Bourdieu's thinking tools, as it was proposed technologies continue to be the only one of many contextual influences in young people's transitions, while the limited presence of opportunity, resources and choice in their everyday lives, alongside the external influences of the *fields*, strongly overshadowed any horizons technologies could potentially open. For example, in many instances my participants' *habitus* did not



possess traits and qualities valued by the service economy, while the post-16 policy *field's* forces were directing the young people towards the least valuable learning and employment routes.

In a broader sense, this thesis was inscribed in the ongoing debates about objectivities and subjectivities, continuity and change, and similarities and differences in young people's lives, transitions and engagement with technologies. The findings demonstrated that the old social divisions continue to unequally shape young people's lives and patterns of transitions, as well as their subjectivities and performance of the self, and these significantly vary between the members of different classes. Moreover, young people from different backgrounds continue to live their lives under different material conditions, that diversify their everyday inclusion to social spaces, leisure activities, opportunities and socio-economic life. Similarly, the segregatory processes underpinning educational provision are also crucial to understanding inequalities in young people's lives and transitions, as educational experiences, outcomes, learner identities and consequently transitions significantly differ between the members of different classes. The experiences of the labour market also continue to unequally shape contemporary young adulthood, as young people identified as NEET continue to undertake the most precarious, low level and often exploitative jobs and churn between ill-conceived skills initiatives, poor work and unemployment. It was thus demonstrated that contemporary young people should be understood in terms of (intra)generational units and researched as such. This is because, as visible in the above analysis, the extent of social change to young adulthood should be understood as at the continuous interplay with the old social divisions. Furthermore, technological transformations did not become the socio-economic equaliser that transforms lives and transcends inequalities. Rather, they remain deeply bonded with young people's lifeworlds. Finally, this study also offered evidence that acclaims of a 'distinctive Scottish context' do not stand up to scrutiny, as everyday experiences of deprivation and marginalisation and a range of segregatory processes continue to hamper policy aspirations to ensure all young people's welfare, wellbeing and access to inclusive and progressive education.

## 10.2 Limitations of the study

This thesis has provided a holistic and multidimensional account of the everyday lives, transitions and use of technologies among young people identified as NEET in a Scottish context. There are, however, some limitations to the study, which need to be taken into consideration:

1. Longitudinal studies have long been argued to offer more insightful approaches to researching contemporary youth, as they can capture the ‘twists, turns and outcomes’ in their now prolonged and fragmented transitions (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018:77). Such an approach was not adopted due to the time constraints of the PhD, thus arguably the findings might have missed long-term changes to the young people’s trajectories. However, this potential limitation was mitigated by recruiting young people age 16 to 24, where comparisons between the older and younger participants were used to account for long-term perspective and changes.
2. This study focused on a specific segment of the youth population – young adults identified as NEET. Doing so, however, meant that young people in jobs without training, a ‘missing middle’ in youth studies (Roberts, 2011), have been excluded from this research. The ‘missing middle’ share some ‘characteristics’ with young adults in the NEET category, such as lower academic attainment and negative (or rather scarred) attitudes towards learning (Maguire, 2010), yet their labour market outcomes are better than those of young people identified as NEET. Thus, the everyday lives, experiences and transitions of the ‘missing middle’ may to some extent differ from the ones captured in this study. Moreover, the participant recruitment strategy further excluded young people identified as NEET who did not use support services, thus limiting the extent to which claims made in this study can be transferred also to this (sub)group of ‘NEET’ youth.
3. Furthermore, the unequal gender composition of the sample and my inability to recruit young women aged 20 and over (as two participants in this age group withdrew their consent) made it more difficult to draw the gendered inferences

on transitions of the young women. Moreover, as the focus of this study was predominantly on youth transitions, gendered implications were mostly relating to differences in occupational choices, barriers to employment faced by working class young men, 'feminine' dispositions and qualities prioritised in the service employment and/or dissimilarities in engagement with EET between young mothers and fathers. It thus needs to be highlighted that I was working within a particular feminist paradigm, broadly identified as *Feminism after Bourdieu* (Skeggs, 2004b), as I was particularly committed to inscribing gender into one's habitus (Skeggs, 2004b) in order to scrutinise unequal employment and family relations underpinning contemporary society (McDowell, 2009, 2012; McNay, 1999; Wyn et al., 2017). Doing so, however, meant that many different forms of feminism and variety of feminist thought (see e.g. Tong, 2009 for a comprehensive overview of the feminist approaches) were outside of the scope of this thesis, thus perhaps posing an additional limitation to the interpretation of the findings.

4. My limited ability to engage with young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and with disabilities meant that such important social factors have been omitted from the analysis. Resultantly, it is plausible to assume that this study does not account for further dissimilarities deriving from such social categories, that contribute to diversifying young people's subjectivities, experiences and transitions.
5. As I did not include parents/legal guardians as participants in this study, I was unable to capture this crucial dimension to young people's educational journeys. However, I managed to mitigate this gap by incorporating findings from a significant body of scholarship on the barriers working class parents may encounter while supporting their children education.
6. Furthermore, as the city of Glasgow was chosen as a study site, the extent to which my findings can transcend the local/individual towards the generic (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) remains limited. Specifically, the urban context

makes it to some extent difficult to make broader claims about young adulthood in rural settings.

7. Finally, this study offered only a partial overview of technologies use among young people identified as NEET, as my specific focus was on the interplay between individual agency and meaning making practices, and the external influences that give rise or inhibit certain digital practices. While youth-centred and theoretically driven findings have been produced, they nevertheless did not account for a variety of other technology mediated practices, such as: identity work linked with one's gender/ethnicity/sexuality; surveillance; assessing online information/content; civic participation; practices relating to social distinction and social sorting; or managing the stigma/shame of being working class.

## **10.3 Research and policy avenues**

### *10.3.1 Future research*

The current study adopted a 'middle ground' approach and double lens to researching contemporary youth. It proposed to think of young people in terms of (intra)generational units, living in a classed risk society, which opens interesting directions for future research. Specifically, given the limitations of this project, it seems crucial to further explore transitions of young people identified as NEET from a longitudinal perspective. Doing so could offer a fruitful way of not only grasping how young people's journeys develop, but also how the passage of time affects their (classed) reflexivity, meaning making, transitional practices, *habitus* and gendered work and family relations.

Furthermore, it seems necessary to adopt a comparative approach in any future research, as it would allow to examine transitions and use of technologies not only among young people identified as NEET, but also among the so called 'missing middle'. Doing so could account for similarities and differences in their trajectories, subjectivities and experiences of the education system, labour market and family relations. Resultantly, further insights into the complexities of youth transitions,

transcending the neat 'dichotomy' between either 'NEET' (accelerated) or 'tidy' pathways (Roberts, 2011:21), while also accounting for gendered inequalities of 'the time economy' (Wyn et al., 2017), could emerge. Additionally, such an approach could be widened by including young people from urban and rural areas, as the place belongingness, as well as opportunities available locally may significantly diversify young people's lives, subjectivities and transitions. For example, it would be interesting to find out how young people in rural areas make sense of their locality and their relationships with significant others, and whether they experience similar interplay of inclusion and exclusion in their everyday lives as did participants in this study. Finally, looking at the experiences of young people from ethnic minorities, and/or with disabilities could offer a broader picture of how these social categories influence young people's relationships with and experiences of education system and the labour market.

Additionally, given the nature of the sample in the current study, it could be useful to explore further who are the young people that do not use support services and the reasons behind their lack of involvement. Moreover, seeking to engage with young people whose status remains 'unknown' (SDS, 2015) would allow us to examine how their transitions differ from the participants in this study. For example, one could further explore if these young people are inclined to use the informal social networks only, or disengaged from economic activity due to various barriers they have experienced throughout their lives?

Another path for future research could focus on exploring the types of support young people expect from practitioners who oversee their transitions, so they are provided with an inclusionary experience, supportive of their wellbeing, interests and needs. This work would thus be aimed at informing policy and practice and build upon the principle of young people themselves being at the heart of policy making. Moreover, young people could get involved in critical action research that aims to challenge negative and disrespectful public and political (mis)representations of their lives and transitions. Doing so could encompass '[c]reating practical counternarratives of hope and possibility', which would 'aspire to better societies built on fairness and equality',

as well as to 'inspire participants to act together to change the course of history' (Ledwith, 2016:21).

This thesis adopted the concept of *habitus* as a theory-method, as it allowed to grasp the repetition of individual practices, perceptions and attitudes. The analytical utility of the *habitus* is based upon its links with developmental psychology and neuropsychological theories (France, 2015; Lau, 2004), although the concept originates from the philosophical perspective. These connections create opportunities for further development of the concept, by for example bringing findings from social psychology into its conceptualisation and empirical research, adopting *habitus* as theory-method. Specifically, it would be interesting to further examine the importance of early childhood experiences, ecological surroundings and influences for the development of *habitus* or the impact of the formative years on the occupational choices, while accounting for one's class and gender.

Finally, future research on young people's relationships with/experiences of technologies can go in many valuable directions. For example, in light of technologies being barely utilised by my participants for making occupational choices, research could establish whether this is the case for the middle class youth. It could also investigate in depth why some of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not self-promote themselves and/or their creative work online; whether it is a conscious choice, or a result of pre-reflexive *habitus* that operates 'beyond the introspective scrutiny or control of will' (Bourdieu, 1984:46); or the interplay of the two. Finally, it remains crucial to further explore everyday lives and transitions among young people who do not have access to technologies, how they develop and maintain relationships with others; what challenges they face in navigating their transitions; whether/how they remain immersed in the popular youth culture; and how these experiences resemble or differ from other disadvantaged and well off young people.

### *10.3.2 Policy recommendations*

The current study demonstrated how persisting socio-economic inequalities continue to unequally shape young people's everyday lives, subjectivities and patterns of transitions. These findings point to several policy implications, which include, but are not limited to:

- 1. Tackling poverty and deprivation: moving towards a more equal society and the 'ethics of care', and away from the harmful logic of neoliberalism.*

It has been widely argued that without tackling widespread poverty and high levels of deprivation and inequality across the UK, the effectiveness of other policy interventions in education, child wellbeing and welfare will continue to be seriously hampered. As such, it remains crucial to rethink how such changes can be reached at a societal level. A number of commentators have pointed towards looking for answers to Nordic models of welfare and poverty reduction (to the lowest levels in the world), as they offer the highest standard of living, lowest income and wealth inequality, high levels of wellbeing and more equal chances for social mobility (Kangas and Palme, 2005; Lakey, 2017; Raffe, 2013).

To achieve such desirable outcomes, a variety of solutions can be put in place, including a just redistribution of resources through taxation of 'rentier' income, wealth and wealth transfers, and use/pollution of the common resources (Standing, 2019). Furthermore, equalising incomes can be achieved through welfare benefits that derive from the well-resourced, universal services state. In order to strengthen education and the NHS, their privatisation and commodification should be reversed (Standing, 2019). Long-term investment in youth services tailored to their needs, wants and age, damaged by the austerity cuts (Unison, 2016) is also crucial, if we are to ensure young people's wellbeing, welfare and inclusion. Another promising solution could be to establish the National Commons Fund (based on the taxation of the rich/wealth/corporations/pollution) from which dividends in the form of Basic Income could be paid to every citizen (see Standing, 2019 for detailed economic analysis).

This approach could be further combined with the progressive economic policy. Given the evidence on the harmful logic and outcomes of the neoliberal model (see Section 2.1.2), the changes to the labour market seem pivotal. For example, strengthening workers' rights and trade union powers would offer a step away from a highly deregulated, polarised and insecure UK labour market (McDowell, 2009). Furthermore, a range of solutions focused on the demand side, such as improving job quality locally through e.g. policies discouraging businesses from cutting wages or creating low quality jobs, promoting innovative organisations or providing an effective welfare support that does not lead to the 'benefit traps', have been widely discussed (see e.g. Crisp and Powell, 2017; Findlay et al., 2017; Kangas and Palme, 2005; Keep and James, 2012; Lakey, 2017 for details). Thus, as Keep and James (2012:224) observe 'for new policy directions to be successful, [...] they have to come to terms with the structural causation of many of the policy problems that are giving rise to concern'.

These are only some examples of how such high-priority socio-economic and political changes could take place, which nevertheless demonstrate the possibility for significant improvements based upon principles of social justice and equity, if only chosen by the political and socio-economic elites and promoted across the society. However, in Scotland the powers in relation to economic policy and taxation remain reserved matters<sup>18</sup>, thus posing a challenge to implementing some of the proposed solutions, as they would require either (so far unlikely) actions from the UK Government or the independence.

In addition to political and economic changes, public and political (mis)understandings that the neoliberal model is the only one available and worth pursuing, should also be refuted (Chomsky, 1999; Hills et al., 2019). Specifically, challenging the dominant narratives of competitiveness and individualism alongside laws and regulations favouring the interests of the elites and capital should be replaced by notions of universalism, collective goods, collaboration, social justice and respect for all. Following Bassel and Emejulu (2018:2326), it is thus advocated that moving towards

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<sup>18</sup> See the Scotland Act 1998 and 2016 at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/devolution-settlement-scotland> (Accessed 03 February 2020).



the 'ethic of radical care' for Others could offer 'the prefigurative foundation for destroying the unloved old world and building the new in which caring for and about Others is at its heart'.

Similarly, the role of education in children and young people's lives requires serious rethinking. As for example Reay (2017:191), citing Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of Oppression*, highlighted, it is the highest time to transform the current model from 'an instrument of conformity, socialising younger generations into the logic of the existing system' of neoliberal capitalism to 'the practice of freedom, enabling children and young people to engage critically and reflexively with the society they are part of, and to learn how to participate in transforming it for the better'.

### *2. Reforming the education system.*

As highlighted in this thesis, without a radical change to the education system, there is little possibility to eradicate deeply entrenched educational inequalities and continuous processes of 'miseducation' of the working classes. Reay (2017:185-187) proposes specific solutions to get closer towards a socially just and equal education for critical citizenship. These include: a) acknowledging the historical roots of the education system, underpinned by *symbolic violence* and intentional 'miseducation' of the working classes, in order to transform them; b) introducing the collaborative learning that recognises, values and builds upon the working class culture; c) equal redistribution of resources for schools, colleges and universities (which, as demonstrated in Section 1.3 continues to be unequal as it prioritises the academic routes); and d) reversing the shift imposing educational responsibilities on families. However, without redressing socio-economic inequalities, there is little possibility for tackling working class educational underachievement, as what is needed most 'is a sea-change in hearts and minds, not just better policy in education' (Reay, 2017:194).

### *3. Reforming post-16 learning provision.*

This thesis also demonstrated the existence of the highly stratified and ill-conceived post-16 transitional policy that does little to improve young people's chances for meaningful, sustainable and good quality employment. Vocational pathways continue

to be fragmented, least valued/able and offer very little returns in the labour market. It has been long argued that such schemes resemble the failed initiatives of the 1980s (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018), and de facto relegate disadvantaged young people towards 'worthless vocational certification' (Ainley, 2013:46). Several commentators offer in-depth overview and analysis of the vocational pathways, and further propose a range of solutions to improve them (Ainley, 2016; Keep and James, 2012; Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Wolf, 2011). For example, post-16 routes require serious re-development, starting with scrapping out the training provision and short-term courses and providing only the most valuable routes such as apprenticeships with a clear paths for progression, and strong learning provision (in terms of practical placements and high quality curriculum in place; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Moreover, as Wolf (2011) and Ainley (2016) further contend, lessons can be learnt from vocational systems elsewhere (e.g. Germany)<sup>19</sup>, that avoid early specialisation in the school curriculum. Instead, young people could benefit from following the general and standardised route that cannot segregate them into academic and vocational pathways before completion of secondary education. Moreover, such solutions would allow young people to keep their options open and avoid accelerated transitions to the labour market. Furthermore, as Maths and English are still key subjects valued for the non-graduate labour market entry (Wolf, 2011), the post-16 learning provision should further provide teaching and qualifications in these subjects whenever possible (Shildrick et al., 2012), yet without discriminating at the entry level. In this sense, bringing the qualifications agenda at the heart of post-16 policy provision, would provide young people with better quality education, increase their labour market prospects and chances for progression (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2018). Finally, by re-introducing a skills agenda, young people would be better prepared to access employment outside the sector they have specialised in, as so far vocational routes

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<sup>19</sup> In Germany the NEET rates amongst 15-19 year olds have been continuously much lower than in Scotland and stood at far below 4% for a decade; similarly youth unemployment rates for 16-24 year olds were much lower than in Scotland; between 3.2% to around 6% in the last 10 years (see OECD, 2020a, 2020b).

have been poorly developed and mainly focused on the immediate and often narrow needs of particular employers (Ainley, 2016; Keep and James, 2012).

It also remains crucial to actively promote alternative pathways in arts, creative industries and sports among young people displaying inclination towards such subjects. Both education system and professional services overseeing youth transitions should take a vital part in such a process. Delivery of such routes also requires serious rethinking, transformation and clear pathways for progression, combined with building the links with the industry.

#### *4. Rethinking technologies*

This thesis also demonstrated how technological determinism and administrative gaze underpin young people's engagement with technologies. The belief that such engagement can transform lives and transcend socio-economic inequalities has been visible in digital inclusion strategies directed at young people. The implementation of technologies in learning practices has been guided by similar beliefs, that continue to ignore that young people's engagement remains shaped by the interplay between their distinctive social identities, subjective meaning making practices and a vast range of contextual influences (Davies et al., 2012; Holmes, 2011). In this climate, it is therefore crucial to move away from constructing technologies as a panacea for social problems, and towards a more critical, youth and theory driven understanding, such as this proposed in the current study.

Abandoning strategies that focus on fixing individual deficits and altering behaviours and attitudes seem as the most appropriate way forward. Instead, meaningful and youth-centred approaches are needed, if we want young people to learn new and critical skills that will help them to navigate the complex digital world. However, not all responsibility should be placed upon young people (and internet users in general). Rather, as a significant body of critical scholarship indicates, the big technology providers companies should be made accountable for their practices. For example, Standing (2019) proposes a much higher taxation of digital companies, which potentially could also undermine the asymmetry of power and reverse the

monopolisation of information and an uncontrollable spread of misinformation. In contrast, Zuboff (2019a:11), who describes surveillance capitalism as an ‘economic creation’ that is neither inevitable nor irreversible, proposes that it should be subjected ‘to democratic contest, debate, revision, constraint, oversight’ and tightly regulated by the law (see also Zuboff, 2019b). In this sense, there is a need not only for national but also for global, collective action in response to the challenges big data brings.

## 10.4 Afterword

As I am writing this conclusion, the world has been facing the unprecedented health crisis, the deadly and fast spreading virus causing respiratory illness, Covid-19 and pandemic it has generated. Despite broad narratives presenting this crisis in terms of ‘we are all in this together’, another, more unequal picture has swiftly emerged and brought to the spotlight as well as exacerbated range of socio-economic inequalities underpinning contemporary UK, also discussed in depth in this study. Specifically, there are many households that continue to work remotely from their homes and can practice social distancing, a recommended Government strategy to slow down the spread of the disease and protect people from getting infected. This group also remains economically secure as it owns the considerable economic assets that can be mobilised in times of crisis (Savage, 2015).

On the other side of such a polarised workforce, there are key workers, previously labelled as unskilled and replaceable, often in the low waged (one third of whom were reported to earn below the living wage<sup>20</sup>), public facing jobs, and at everyday risk of infection. For example, the rate of Covid-19 related deaths among people living in the most deprived areas was more than twice higher than among those living in the least deprived areas in Scotland and this unequal outcome was linked with the nature of their employment<sup>21</sup>. Being from the BAME backgrounds was also found to significantly increase the risk of developing critical symptoms and death, which was yet only

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<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/key-workers-pay-national-living-wage-ifs-report-a9479086.html> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-52637581> (Accessed 14 May 2020).

partially attributed to pre-existing health conditions and deprivation<sup>22</sup>. Gender is another social category that differentiates everyday lives and experiences of the pandemic, as women continue to be overrepresented among many of the low(est) paid key workers, including those employed in health and social work, education, caring and many other service occupations (Scottish Government, 2016c), risking their health and lives, while often also struggling with the experiences of poverty<sup>23</sup>. Women also continue to do majority of housework, childcare and caring (Perez, 2019) which has increased even more significantly under the lockdown<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, many of the low-level employees in the service economy, young people above all, were the first ones to be disposed of when the crisis hit<sup>25</sup>, so the interests of capital and the profit could be secured. Yet, big companies such as for example Amazon continue to increase their profits in the time of pandemic, unsurprisingly at the expense of their employees' health, safety and exploitation (Bach, 2020; Snider, 2018).

Furthermore, the experiences of self-isolation and social distancing differ significantly between haves and have nots. Many families suffer from poverty even more acutely. The recent figures from the Food Foundation (2020) demonstrated that 1.5 million people in the UK have been now severely affected by food poverty and there is a real possibility of pandemic leading to an unprecedented crisis of hunger. As many as 322,000 households in Scotland do not have access to the internet at their homes (Scottish Government, 2018), which leaves them cut off from technology-mediated forms of socialising, leisure and access to information, while their children's access to education remains seriously affected. As such, these households remain the most disadvantaged in times of crisis, as unlike their more affluent counterparts, they seem

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<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-05-07-risk-factors-covid-19-death-revealed-world-s-largest-analysis-patient-records-date> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. episode 9 of *Intersectionality Matters!* at: <https://aapf.org/all-episodes> (Accessed 20 May 2020).

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. OfN's report *Coronavirus and how people spent their time under lockdown: 28 March to 26 April 2020* at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/bulletins/coronavirusandhowpeoplespenttheirtimeunderrestrictions/28marchto26april2020> (Accessed 3 June 2020).

<sup>25</sup> See the report *Young workers in the coronavirus crisis* by the Resolution Foundation available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis/> (Accessed 20 of May 2020).

to be most acutely isolated, from their families, friends, broader communities and institutions. Consequently, these examples paint a truly terrifying picture of how socio-economic inequalities at the intersection of class and other social divisions, further exacerbated by the decade of the austerity and welfare cuts, continue to differently shape everyday experiences of the crisis.

It is uncertain what the future will bring. The struggle between the neoliberal interests of the capital and the elites, and the dominated, often vulnerable groups in the society, is now more visible than ever. It is now a matter of a (global) political choice in terms of what kind of approaches will be adopted to mitigate the socio-economic inequalities deepened by the pandemic. We are yet to see what kind of world will emerge from the desolation of the one we live in now: one that embraces inclusive welfare approaches based upon the principles of solidarity, ethics of care and equality; or the world that is even more unequal, individualistic and competitive, where the rich continue to get richer, and the poor continue to get poorer and more vulnerable?

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Participant information sheets

*Young people*

**Name of department:** Social Work and Social Policy

**Title of the study:** Young people not in education and employment and their use of the Internet

### Introduction

My name is Dorota Szpakowicz and I am a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. I would like to tell you a bit about this project and ask you to get involved.

### What is the purpose of this investigation?

This research project wants to understand how young people who are currently not in education, employment and training use digital technologies, like computers, laptops, mobile phones when they look for work or learning.

The aims of the project are:

- To explore young people's everyday lives and experiences of looking for and accessing work and/or learning;
- To find out how technologies are used for searching for work and/or learning;
- To find out what kind of support young people may need.

I am hoping my research can help with programmes and Government plans for tackling youth unemployment, as well as helping services understand what young people need.

### Do you have to take part?

Participation in the research is completely voluntary. You don't have to take part unless you want to. You can change your mind at any time, without any reason and without any negative consequences for you.

It may also be helpful for me to contact you again later in the future. This would only happen if you agree to be contacted.

### What will you do in the project?

If you decide to participate in the project, you will take part in an interview with me that will last around one/one and a half hour. We will talk about your experiences of searching for work or learning and how you use the Internet to do so. The interview will be audio-recorded, if you agree. This is to save me time from taking notes and to help me remember exactly what you said. The interview's time and place will be discussed and agreed with you.

I will also ask you to keep a written or audio diary of what you do for a week.

Within a month following the interview, you can request a copy of the written interview and say if you wish anything to be removed or changed. You can also request your diary and say if you want anything to be removed or changed.

After a month, what you said cannot be changed.

There will be no benefits to taking part, but your experiences will help to influence future programmes for young people who are not in education, employment or training.

### **What are the potential risks to you in taking part?**

In the interview, I will ask you about your experiences of being not in work, training or employment and your use of technologies.

If you consider any of the questions too private or sensitive, you do not have to answer. It may be that talking about some of your experiences may make you upset, in which case you can also stop the interview at any time.

### **What happens to the information in the project?**

All of the information you provide at any stage will be confidential, except if you say that you, or someone else, might be hurt. In this case I would have to get in touch with relevant social or health services, but this would be discussed with you first.

I will use what you say to write my doctoral dissertation, as well as some publications and reports, but I will not use any real names in these. I might also talk about my research at conferences or on online blogs.

The information I get from all the participants will be kept securely for 5 years on the password protected computer in the University of Strathclyde. After five years, the transcripts of the interviews with no names and digitalised diaries will be sent to an online data archive, called The UK Data Archive.

The University of Strathclyde is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office who implements the Data Protection Act 1998. All personal data on participants will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

### **What happens next?**

If you are happy to take part in the project, please sign the consent form attached. If you do not want to be involved in the project, I would like to thank you for your time. A brief summary of the main findings will be developed after the research is complete. You will be notified when this is complete and offered a copy.

#### **Researcher contact details:**

Dorota Szpakowicz  
PhD student  
Lord Hope Building

#### **Chief Investigator details:**

Dr Daniela Sime  
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Email: dorota.szpakowicz@strath.ac.uk

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This investigation was granted ethical approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the investigation, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee

Research & Knowledge Exchange Services

University of Strathclyde

Graham Hills Building

50 George Street

Glasgow

G1 1QE

Telephone: 0141 548 3707

Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

## *Practitioners and policy makers*

**Name of department:** Social Work and Social Policy

**Title of the study:** Young people not in education, employment or training: everyday lives, transitions and engagement with technologies.

### **Introduction**

My name is Dorota Szpakowicz and I am a PhD researcher in Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde. My PhD project explores the 'offline' and online experiences of young people who are not in education, employment or training in Scotland.

### **What is the purpose of this investigation?**

The research project examines how young people who are currently not in education, employment and training engage with digital technologies to access education, employment and training opportunities. The findings will have implications for current policy initiatives directed at tackling youth unemployment and social disadvantage, as well as for practice interventions supporting young people into positive destinations.

### **Do you have to take part?**

Participation in the research is completely voluntary; you don't have to take part unless you want to. You can change your mind in taking part in the project at any time, without any reason and without any negative consequences for you. You can stop the interview at any time or you can decide not to answer questions you don't feel comfortable with.

Within a month following the interview, you can request a transcript of the interview and indicate if you wish anything to be removed or changed. After a month, anonymised statements cannot be changed.

### **What will you do in the project?**

You will be asked to take part in an approximately one hour long, face-to-face interview that will seek your professional opinion on the issues experienced by young people seeking to engage with education, employment or training in Scotland. If you are aware about the means of digital support they get or may require, you will be asked to elaborate on that topic as well. The interview will be audio recorded if you consent to it.

There will be no benefit to taking part, but your professional knowledge will help to influence policy and practice responses to young people who are not in education, employment or training.

### **Why have you been invited to take part?**

You have been asked to take part in this research project as a professional who is involved in supporting young people not in education, employment or training/a policy maker in youth transitions and/or youth (un)employment area.

### **What happens to the information in the project?**

All of the information you provide at any stage of the research will be confidential and anonymised.

This anonymised information will be used to write my PhD dissertation, as well as journal publications. The findings will also be presented at the academic conferences and may be shared at research blogs and third sector organisations' websites. The information will be stored securely for 5 years on a password protected computer in the University of Strathclyde. After five years anonymised transcripts of the interviews will be submitted to the UK data archive.

The University of Strathclyde is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office who implements the Data Protection Act 1998. All personal data on participants will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Thank you for reading this information – please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

### **What happens next?**

If you are happy to take part in the project, please sign the consent form attached. If you do not want to be involved in the project, I would like to thank you for your time. A brief summary of the main findings will be developed after the research is complete. You will be notified when this is complete and offered a copy.

#### **Researcher contact details:**

Dorota Szpakowicz  
PhD student  
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#### **Chief Investigator details:**

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Telephone: 141 444 8678

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University of Strathclyde  
Graham Hills Building  
50 George Street  
Glasgow  
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Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk





*Practitioners and policy makers*

Name of department: Social Work and Social Policy

Title of the study: Young people not in education, employment or training: everyday lives, transitions and engagement with technologies.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
  - I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences. If I exercise my right to withdraw and I don't want my data to be used, any data which have been collected from me will be destroyed.
  - I understand that within a month following the interview I can request a transcript of the interview and indicate if I want anything to be removed or changed. I understand that after a month, anonymised statements cannot be changed.
  - I understand that any information recorded in the investigation will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- 
- I consent to being a participant in the project. Yes  No
  - I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project. Yes  No

PRINT NAME:	Date:
Signature of participant:	Organization and role:
Email address of participant:	Phone number (optional)

## Appendix 3: Interview guides

### *Young people*

#### Introduction

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
  - How old are you, where do you live?
  - What do you like doing; what you don't like doing?

#### School and post-school experiences

2. Think back to time you were at school. How was it?

##### Prompts:

- How did you feel about school?
- What did you like about school?
- What didn't you like about it?
- What about teachers, schoolmates?
- Who did support you with your learning? (family, teachers, peers, others)

3. What were your plans then – when at school?

##### Prompts:

- What did you want to do after finishing school?
- What jobs were you thinking of? What about studying? What about training?
- Did anyone help you with choosing what you want to do?
- When did you leave school?
- Was it a difficult decision?

4. Now can you think back to time you left school. Can you describe this time? What have you been doing since?

##### Prompts

- What kind of jobs/learning have you been looking for since you left school?
- Can you give me some examples?
- Tell me more about your experiences in this job/course/training etc. (if there are any)

#### Everyday lives/belonging

5. Can you tell me how do you spend your usual day?

##### Prompts

- Can you describe your usual day? What do you usually do?
- What do you enjoy doing the most?
- What you don't like doing?

6. What do you think of Glasgow?

Prompts:

- Can you name places you often go to?
  - Any other places you can think of?
  - Is there a lot happening for young people like yourself in Glasgow?
7. Does not having a job/not being in education or training/ have an impact on your everyday life?

Prompts:

- How do you feel about not working/not studying?
- How do you think your life would look like if you got a job/education/training opportunity?

Technologies:

1. When I say the word technologies, what do you think of? What does come to your mind?

Prompts:

- What do you think about digital technologies?
- What do technologies mean to you in your everyday life?
- What do you like about it (the Internet; the websites you access)? What you don't like about it?

2. Can you tell me how your usual day looks like but add technologies into it?

Prompts:

- What do you do online?
- What are 5 top websites you visit? Any of them you use for work/education/training?
- Can you tell me why do you use these websites? What do you like/don't like about them?
- Any other activities you do online?
- Can you tell me more? Why do you like about this particular activity?

Searching and accessing EET:

3. How do you find out about EET opportunities?

Prompts:

- How have you been looking for EET?
  - Do you use the Internet to search for EET? Why/why not?
  - Which websites do you use? How do you find about them?
  - How easy/difficult has it been to look for and access jobs/education/training?
  - Any challenges you encounter while searching for EET online? Can you give me an example?
4. Are there any people who have supported you with looking for opportunities/to get a job/get into a course?

Prompts:

- What about family members, friends, teachers, others?
5. Did you look for some more formal support to get into EET? What kind of support?

Prompts:

- What about careers services, charities, training providers, job centre, youth clubs?
  - How was it? What did they help you with? E.g. 3 main things they helped you with.
  - 3 things you would like to get help with?
6. What do you think has made it difficult for you to get a job/access training/course?

Prompts:

- Any other barriers/obstacles you could think of?
7. Then researcher will ask participants to fill in a timeline of the important technologies related events in their life.
8. Any other issues you'd like to mention in relation to young people, technologies and searching for and accessing jobs/education/training?

Researcher then thanks participants for their involvement, ask if they have any questions, provide them with a diary and check how they feel/how they found the interview process.

## *Practitioners*

1. Could you introduce yourself and tell me about your role in your organisation?
2. From your professional experience, can you tell me more about NEET young people you support? How would you describe them?
3. What are your organizations' priorities regarding supporting NEET young people?

Prompts:

- What is meant by positive destinations?
  - Can you tell me a bit about how you support NEET young people to search for and access EET?
  - Are there any barriers you and/or your organization encounter in supporting NEET young people into positive destinations? What are they?
4. Does your organization use technologies to support NEET young people into positive destinations?

Prompts:

- How are technologies used to support NEET young people? Could you give me some examples?
  - What about social media – is there any policy about its use to support NEET young people in your organization? Why/why not?
  - Do you use digital technologies while you support NEET youth?
5. From your professional experience, how skilled do you think NEET young people are with using technologies for searching and accessing EET opportunities?

Prompts:

- What kind of support (if any) do they need with searching and applying for EET opportunities?
  - Can you give me some examples?
6. What do you think are barriers NEET young people face in searching for and accessing education/employment/training opportunities?

Prompts:

- What opportunities are available for young people in this area?
  - What about barriers concerning technologies?
7. What do you think makes NEET young people successful in accessing EET?

Prompts:

- Which factors could you list and why?

- What about the role technologies play in accessing opportunities?
  - Can you give me some examples?
8. Is there anything you would like to add about NEET young people and how they search for and access EET opportunities?

### *Policy makers*

1. Could you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your role in the Council?
2. How does policy define NEET young people in Scotland?

Prompts:

- Are there any problems with this definition?
  - Any changes you would suggest to this definition? Why/Why not?
  - What about MCMC young people?
3. What is meant by positive destinations in policy terms?

Prompts:

- Do you think the concept of positive destinations is useful in supporting NEET youth in Scotland?
  - How does this term relate to their everyday lived experiences of growing up in Scotland?
4. What are the Scottish Government's priorities regarding supporting NEET young people?

Prompts:

- Which policies would you list as key for tackling NEETness and why?
5. What are the drivers behind these priorities?
  6. Are there any issues you think should also be prioritised? Why?

Prompts:

- Why do you think they haven't been prioritised? Will they be?
  - What about digital strategies directed at NEET young people?
7. What opportunities are available for NEET young people in Scotland?
  8. Are there any barriers NEET young people encounter while searching for and accessing opportunities?

Prompts:

- How are these barriers tackled by policy initiatives?
9. How successful do you think Scotland has been in tackling NEETness?

Prompts:

- How have the policy outcomes been measured?
- Are there any problems with such measurement? Can you give me some examples?

- Are there any areas for improvement?

10. Is there anything you would like to add about policy initiatives directed at NEET young people in Scotland?



## Appendix 4: Coding frameworks

### *Interviews with young people*

<b>GLOBAL THEME</b>	<b>ORGANISING THEMES</b>	<b>BASIC THEMES</b>
Young people beyond the NEET label	<p>Complex lives and 'accelerated' transitions</p> <p>Metaphor of belonging</p> <p>Social networks</p>	<p>Demographic information</p> <p>Diverse circumstances and experiences</p> <p>Ways of seeing the world and one's place in it</p> <p>Differences/complexities</p> <p>To people</p> <p>To place</p> <p>Politics of belonging</p> <p>Support/Lack of support</p> <p>Types of support</p> <p>Access to information</p> <p>Impact on transitions</p>
Educational experiences	<p>Sense of belonging</p> <p>Being excluded</p> <p>Self-exclusion</p>	<p>Attitudes towards and perceptions of schooling</p> <p>Strengths and interests</p> <p>Dislikes</p> <p>Impact of adversary experiences</p> <p>Relationships with teachers</p> <p>Support and care/lack</p> <p>Positive recognition/lack</p> <p>Labelling</p> <p>Broader injustices</p> <p>Directing young people towards vocational pathways</p> <p>Learning habitus (Learner identity)</p> <p>Practical mastery vs symbolic mastery</p> <p>Leaving school</p> <p>Parental support</p>

Post-16 transitions	<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Meanings</p> <p>Practices</p> <p>Segregation processes</p>	<p>Mediated choice Reasons behind mediated choice Gender norms Role of technologies/lack</p> <p>Transitions as belonging and 'longing' Opportunities wanted/undesirable Hope/lack of hope</p> <p>Engagement with FE, training and work Impact of NEETness Barriers and support</p> <p>Engagement with post-16 learning and training opportunities Adjusting expectations Strategising</p>
Technologies	<p>How everyday, embedded and embodied</p> <p>In everyday lives</p> <p>For transitions</p>	<p>Blurred boundaries Metaphor of a 'broken' object Impact of disadvantage</p> <p>Meanings attached Perceptions of technologies Patterns of usage Networks Subject of value</p> <p>Source of information For making transitional choices Performance of the self Training in using technologies for employability Impact on trajectories</p>

*Interviews with practitioners and policy makers*

<b>GLOBAL THEMES</b>	<b>ORGANISING THEMES</b>	<b>BASIC THEMES</b>
Policy on the ground	Key agenda  Individualism  Epistemological fallacy	Person-centred approach Strengths and needs Sustainable and quality employment vs any employment Employability vs unpaid activities Vocational pathways  Personal responsibility for transitions/employment  (Limitless) opportunities Tensions
Who are young people identified as NEET	Difficulties and adversities  Adult/professional gaze	Sub-groups Personal vs structural Responses/support  NEET label In need of care/support In need of control/discipline Deserving vs undeserving
Youth transitions and (un)employment	Barriers to employment  Support  Segregation processes	In the individual/families/communities Structural Tensions  Guidance Career management Fixing individual/deficits and lacks (Digital) Employability skills  Skills/education agenda/lack Management of risks Discretion Employability training