Generation Z lost to NEET

Calling time on a school system that fails too many young people

Doug Martin

Abstract: One in eight young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK are not in education, employment and training (NEET). This represents over one million young people whom society appears to consider disposable. The recent government-commissioned Milburn review is investigating the many factors that contribute to this crisis.

I examine NEET from the perspective of England's state-funded school system via research conducted over the last decade with school staff, practitioners at work in communities with young people and families, and NEET young people and their parents and carers. Through these varied voices I examine how the present approach to English schooling has contributed to the NEET phenomenon.

Comprehensive schooling introduced 50 years ago took a radical stance to tackle the deep inequality inherent within the postwar, two-tier system of secondary education. It has been hijacked by the introduction of policies such as school league tables and academisation, which fuel interschool rivalry based upon academic results. To reduce the risk of further generations becoming NEET, government should engage in radical educational change that reflects the original aims of comprehensive schooling.

Keywords: NEET; comprehensive education; attendance; one-size-fits-all education; interschool rivalry; exam results; inclusion

Introduction

Fifty years on from the advent of comprehensive secondary schooling in England we find ourselves with over one million young people across the UK between the ages of 16 and 24 currently not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET). This represents 12.8 per cent of the population. Some 839,900 of these young people live and were educated in England.[1] The factors that contribute to this lost generation as illustrated in the recently published Milburn report are complex.[2] They include labour market trends, the recent Covid-19 pandemic, its influence on health and well-being, and the availability of suitable post-16 opportunities and progression routes.

This article builds on the knowledge and understanding distilled from contemporary qualitative research that engaged with secondary school staff, practitioners who support NEET young people, parents, carers and young people. Themes that emerged from the research illustrate that the influences which contribute to young people becoming NEET are indeed multifaceted, but that their experience of school is a significant factor which

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has contributed to this generation being 'lost'. Despite the policy rhetoric of successive governments over the last half century concerning inclusion, raising standards and improving equality of opportunity, we find ourselves with 8.8 per cent of young people aged 16 to 18 in England not engaging in learning or work, and over 13.6 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds classed as economically inactive (excluding students in higher education). We can learn from our present lost generation as government did in 1976, a process which resulted in a complete overhaul of the secondary school system with the aim of eradicating the inherent and systematic inequality experienced by working-class children. The 2026 Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act merely tinkers with a school system which is viewed irrelevant by significant numbers of families. Comprehensive education has been hijacked by interschool rivalry driven by league tables and academisation and parental choice. To respond to the present crisis young people face, and to save further generations from falling into the NEET trap, government should set about a new radical vision for the overhaul of English state-funded schooling.

Education policy: highjacked by neoliberalism

The 1944 Education Act saw free schooling from five to 15 years of age introduced in England as a basic right for every child.[3] A long campaign by the labour movement resulted in national government promoting universal education, while local authorities were to provide and manage school provision.[4] The act also introduced the 11-plus as a method of selecting children for the three forms of secondary education. Those who passed this examination transitioned from primary education at the age of 11 to grammar schools while those who failed accessed secondary modern schools or technical schools.[5] Paul Adams viewed this approach to education as a two-tier system, with those considered as elite moving towards an academic route which opened the door to higher education while others experienced an education with minimal access to nationally recognised academic qualifications.[6] The Plowden report highlighted the deep inequality set within the education system.[7] Stephen J. Ball considered this was the point at which the attainment gap between children from poorer communities and their wealthier counterparts first became a national priority.[8]

The Wilson Labour government of 1965 proposed a radical reform of schooling. 'Comprehensive education' (circular 10/65) set out proposals for secondary education with the prime aim to tackle the attainment gap by removing the two-tier system. Comprehensive secondary education commenced in 1976, despite opposition from parents who considered choice and academic segregation as essentials of a school system, coupled with the claimed potential of an erosion of academic excellence.[9] This new approach to secondary education, with social justice as its central feature, became a target through the 'Black Papers' as the New Right emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, and

laid the ground for the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA).[10] The emphasis upon child-centred schooling, as proposed by Plowden and the progressive educators was replaced by a consumerist model based upon standard testing of children and interschool competition fuelled by parental choice.[11]

Since 1988, school policy has been progressively refined and built on this theme of parental choice, fed by a diet of proxy academic measures at Key Stages 2 and 4, supported by school inspection reports whose only concern has been to drive teaching excellence.[12] The Labour government that straddled the turn of the millennium reinforced the emphasis on academic achievement, setting a goal for 50 per cent of children accessing higher education on the transition from sixth form.[13] This caused further education – and its associated vocational routes into a variety of careers – to become tainted as second class. Comprehensive education was appropriated in the policy race to narrow the attainment gap through measures solely focused upon children's attainment. Successive governments from 1988 until the present have only considered schools successful if they maintain their league table positions via a narrowly designed, academically based curriculum and the standard testing of pupils. Some 50 years on, grammar school leaders would recognise and feel at home with our present form of secondary schooling manufactured solely to access higher education.

Today's young people, their parents/carers and the practitioners working with them who took part, discussed how the present state-funded school system has failed to account for young people's needs and aspirations, as one in 10 of secondary school leavers immediately fall into the disillusioned NEET category annually at the age of 16.

The voices of NEET young people and those who support them

Over the past decade qualitative research has been conducted in a diversity of environments, from schools through to community centres, to gain understandings of the impact state-funded education has made on children, young people and families. Most recently this research shifted towards young people said to 'fail' at school. It set out to gain insights into this 'failure' through the lens of school leaders, teachers and paraprofessionals, and with practitioners who support young people in their community, such as NEET and youth workers. Conversations with parents and young people who have found themselves NEET provided accounts from their perspective. Clear messages have emerged that the present manifestation of the comprehensive system is not working for significant numbers of young people, and as a result directly contributes to the NEET crisis.

Young people and their parents/carers identified the narrowness of the present curriculum offer in secondary schools as a major problem. A NEET young person voiced their frustration about the poor diversity of subjects available, the lack of interest

in them as a person, and how they were 'forced' to engage with learning that seemed irrelevant to their lives:

> I knew it was important to get good GCSEs in English and maths. But my other choices were limited. I wanted to do something with my hands. I like doing things, making things, but nothing was like that. It was all sit down at a table, take notes and listen. Most of the lessons were nothing like what I wanted to do. Nothing interested me. I dropped out of school. But I am not thick. I want to work as a bricklayer. It's good money and there are lots of jobs going. So learning about making things was what I wanted to do, but no one listened.[14]

This view of the school curriculum was echoed by many NEET young people. The choices for GCSEs were limited and many of the subjects not valued. It was particularly the case amongst boys who wished to go on to learn a trade: 'I wanted to be a car mechanic when I left school. I couldn't see how geography or history were going to help me get to be a mechanic'.

Parents reflected similar views:

> My daughter goes to school and there seems to be a lot of subjects available. But she thinks most of them are not relevant to what she wants to do. She wants to go to college and work in a nursery. It's hard to get her to go to school regularly as she does not seem to think it helps her.

One result of this feeling of the low worth of the GCSE menus is that many young people who became NEET elected to leave school early. As a result, by not attending regularly they are left with minimal qualifications. The data regarding school absences supports this position: 1.34 million young people, 18.14 per cent of pupils, were persistently absent from school in 2025.[15]

Young people also discussed how their school had convinced their parents to remove them from their studies, causing them to become home educated: 'It was pointless going to school, they did not want me there, they did not like me, so I stayed at home and did not take any exams. It seemed better for my mum and me and the school'.

A school leader discussed the practice of discouraging pupils to remain on roll:

> We've got the extreme of off-rolling, haven't we? And this is still occurring in schools … and I think sometimes that is an easier-to-take route. I can understand why, if you are under pressure as a leader, your wider contribution to society – which you hope most people in education would have – is set aside. So, some schools cut their losses at the cost of young people.

Practitioners working with young people who had become NEET also commented upon

what the present secondary school offer was like:

> I understand why GCSE English and maths are important. They're required to get on most college courses or apprenticeships. But a lot of what these kids learn is irrelevant. They need to learn about basic life skills. Schools focus upon the GCSE grades because they are measured by how good their exam results are. But most of my young people don't have the life skills to get by. I am doing that now with them and I have to do that before I can get them to fill in an application or talk to an employer.

Another practitioner expressed deep concern: 'My NEETs don't know what a CV is, how to apply for college or apprenticeships or even talk to someone on the phone … What do schools do?'.

A school leader also considered that the narrowness of the secondary curriculum offer was a real problem for a significant number of their pupils. This school had offered a solution, unlike others that took part in the research: 'The curriculum has been squeezed over the last decade at the cost of broader pupil experiences. We recognise this and now provide vocational tasters for our young people. I have pupils going to college to get hands on experience. Otherwise, they would have opted out of school'.

A feeling of alienation from school echoed across discussions with a wide range of NEET young people. They talked of how they felt of little worth and of being constantly 'put down by my teachers'.

Practitioners on this point discussed the idea of schools making or breaking young people. And those working with NEET young people considered they had indeed been 'broken by school'. Many young people took a strong position on their school experience as summed up by one young woman: 'I hated school. I don't understand a lot of the work and if you ask teachers for help you don't get it. So, what is the point?'.

A young person encapsulated a view expressed by many others regarding the culture of schools and their experience of uniform, behaviour systems, timekeeping, restriction on not being allowed to go to the lavatory, and being observed throughout the day etc. 'They [the school] expect us to be robots. All dress the same, act the same and learn the same. They don't encourage individuality at all, and they are too focused upon attendance and punishment. It's like a prison camp'.

A practitioner summarised this view by suggesting: 'It's just one-size-fits-all education. It's got to go!'.

Alienated and unsupported

Schools' fundamental lack of trust in young people was illustrated by many research participants who described an environment with the herding of young people around

the school campus in a highly controlled manner. Gates locked, security passes required to move from one room to another, permits to authorise young people to leave classrooms during teaching time, which were examined by school staff, so they could go to the lavatory, these lavatory areas open for easier surveillance, squeezed lunchtimes and morning and afternoon breaks that were said to avoid outbreaks of poor behaviour, CCTV on corridors, and detentions or, even worse, isolation from their peers for the slightest overstepping of the mark, such as a breach of school uniform policy.

Adding to this sense of alienation were voiced issues linked to how schools seemed too ready to make fundamental judgements of their pupils. A mother of a pupil with additional education and health needs reflected on her daughter's experience – which resulted in her opting out of school – by saying: 'School just did not understand my daughter and her needs. They didn't put appropriate things in place that could support her and things just deteriorated to the point where she refused to attend at all'.

The negative and unsupportive view taken of pupils with additional needs and requiring extra support also reverberated in other contexts, such as ethnicity or care-experienced young people.

Care-experienced young people discussed how school staff made judgements about them. They thought the care label produced a stereotype of a young person that could not achieve. A care-experienced young person stated: 'I felt they saw the care label first and me as a person second. I am not stupid. I am not a criminal or troublemaker. I was adopted, but they thought I was some sort of troublemaker'.

Another young person said: 'I think they [teachers] were blinded by an emotional value of me being a child being fostered'.

Further to this, NEET young people from minority communities considered their school experiences were influenced by their ethnicity: 'I had problems with my maths teacher and another teacher due to my heritage and in the end I had to move school'.

Emerging from discussions with NEET young people, school staff and other practitioners working to support them (as touched upon earlier), it became clear how secondary schools failed to prepare pupils for their next steps. The comprehensive school system across England varies. Young people who took part in this research came from schools where the leaving age was 16, whereas other schools had sixth forms where pupils move across to take level 3 qualifications, mainly A levels.

On this point of pupil preparedness for what is next, a school leader said: 'I think too many schools exist on an Ofsted report or on their results table a lot of the time … as opposed to fulfilling pupil need'.

Practitioners working with NEET young people expanded upon this theme: 'the school system inherently favours academic rather than vocational skills'. Other professionals claimed: 'They need to be on top of the table with their results, and that drives schools in a singular direction regardless of the needs or ambitions of their pupils'. And hence:

'many young people drop out of college as they are not prepared by their secondary school, as understanding broader life skills is not a school priority'. Further to this and schools' expectation of pupils entering higher education: 'We have NEET young people that do not feel they will be successful at level 3 and these need to be prepared for work or training by offering level 1 and 2 qualifications while at school. Particularly for those that wish to move on to area like construction trades'.

A practitioner summed up the views of their colleagues, and of many NEET young people and their parents/carers:

> The sort of education system we have is outdated, which is, you know, a lot of young people that we deal with have fallen through the net because there isn't that support in schools. Like everybody has been saying it's just that one-size-fits-all education, you know, if you don't fit into that funnel, that very narrow funnel, you become NEET.

The practitioners who participated in this research recognised most pupils succeed through the secondary school system and progress to level 3 qualifications in colleges or sixth forms with increasing numbers moving into higher education. However, year-upon-year a growing number of pupils do not succeed in transitioning from school to employment, further education or training.[16] We have bred within our comprehensive secondary education system a two-tier approach. There are those that 'fit in the funnel' and move on to higher education and 'those that do not fit the funnel' that become NEET. The next section will examine how a schooling system with social justice as central has become a two-tier one that fails too many young people. How might it change to save the next generation from becoming NEET?

Discussion

The introduction of comprehensive education in 1976 aimed to remove a two-tier system of education introduced through the 1944 Education Act. Selection at 11 years determined the future direction of the lives of young people, and the abolition of testing intended to provide high-quality, child-centred education for all. Comprehensive education became a target for the New Right shortly after its policy inception. The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced interschool rivalry through creating indictors of academic performance that fed parental choice. This instigated the fracture of the relationship between schools, their community and local accountability. The marketisation model of schooling has continued through a diversity of governments to the present day.

A significant proportion of young people are not engaging fully with society, as may be seen through their lack of progression into further or higher education,

training or work. The modelling of our comprehensive secondary schools has been diverted from its original intentions by government policies concerning interschool competition and parental choice. School leaders are pressured to meet targets with the aim of continually increasing the volume of pupils entering higher education. This was historically the prize of grammar school education: a place at university and all that follows from it.

For Tony Blair, the prime purpose of schooling was to enable more young people to enter higher education. This was coupled with a projected move to a highly skilled economy which led to more value being placed upon 'superior' occupations such as teaching, social work, law and health care professions.[17] English schools have become institutionalised into regarding 'success' through a distorted lens, leading to a hierarchy of what is valued. In short, lawyer 'good', construction trade 'bad'. The school system, prompted by interschool rivalry based purely on measures of academic success, has come to consider all but entry into higher level professions as inferior outcomes for their pupils. More practical occupations accessed through colleges of further education have become by default lesser, and therefore of lower value in the frenzy to achieve academic success. Secondary schools presently reflect the purpose of schooling as being for academic excellence, as opposed to valuing progression to broader and equally valued employment, as is evident in other European countries. This construct of education, with its associated valuing by schools of certain occupations, closely mimics a legacy of the values-hierarchy central to the former grammar schools.

A school leader emphasised this point while describing the high proportion of pupils that enter higher education, including 'Oxbridge', while confidently stating that 'we try to provide something for the minority of pupils that do not make the grade'.

Fielding and Moss argue that focusing purely upon school measures of success through Key Stage 2 and 4 results and Ofsted inspections has caused our schools to hold as central to their function 'education in its narrower Sense' (ENS).[18] State-funded comprehensive secondary schools have, through successive overt pressures, come to be judged by academic achievement and outstanding teaching. ENS ignores the wider context of the young person's lived experience and is primarily focused upon teaching which is set within the classroom.[19] The Plowden report, a landmark in understanding the inherent inequality evident within the postwar schooling system, called for child-centred learning. Schools should provide education set within the context of a child's positioning. Bernstein argued that education alone could not compensate for society.[20] This statement, when placed within a contemporary context, reflects the failure of an ENS approach that blatantly lacks understanding of children's broader needs and aspirations. If more holistic approaches were to be adopted, they would provide children and young people with the opportunity to fully engage with education.

Time for a truly comprehensive system

The Blair and Brown governments continued with the theme of interschool competition. But, after wrestling with policy to reduce the attainment gap, they started to develop education policy that supported holistic interventions based upon the context of children's lived experience. Examples include 'Every Child Matters' and the subsequent glimpse of the rebirth of the community school as outlined in 'The Children's Plan'.[21] Fielding and Moss describe this holistic approach to schooling as education in its broader sense (EBS).[22] Adopting a holistic construct of schooling saw attendance improve and the beginnings of a broader engagement with families and their communities, coupled with cohesive planning across services through local children's plans.

These developments were crushed in 2010 by a reversion to pure interschool rivalry and the fracturing of community/school relationships.[23] The Coalition government once again promoted interschool rivalry through further diversification of the market via the academisation of schools. The local school became an independent, unaccountable body fixated upon competition with other academies to ensure survival. In addition to these structural moves was the denial of the need for holistic understandings of pupils. Factors such as poverty were 'mere excuses', as the solution is delivering outstanding teaching. This policy approach marked a reversal from the brief interlude of moving towards schools becoming multi-agency, holistic hubs of their communities. The Coalition's governmental image of the pupil, as projected across the last decade, was of someone totally submissive to authority, supported by a comfortable family home, always eager to learn and keen to adopt the trappings of the system such as the school uniform and behaviour code - an image that resembles a neoconservative construct of the 1950s grammar school pupil, as opposed to one reflecting contemporary British society.

Starmer's education policy, while sold as radical, appeared to be merely tinkering around the edges. It was far from proposing a fundamental shift in the nature of English schooling in face of the NEET crisis and the wider context of contemporary society. It's time for a deep and radical rethink of how we educate our children. The 2026 act claims to be inclusive but does little to mitigate drivers such as interschool rivalry and narrow performance measures. In effect it is a continuation of ENS when what is necessary is EBS: returning schools to become centres for their communities, with a much broader curriculum coupled with holistic and valued considerations of pupils, their families and community. This is what our NEET young people, their parents/carers and practitioners who took part in this research called for.

It would seem timely some 50 years on to remind the present government of the bravery of its predecessors. James Callaghan, a prime minister who did not attend university, set out a vision for English schooling to support a true comprehensive

system. He saw this as an opportunity to provide working-class children with the right to quality inclusive education without the requirement for selection:

> The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both. For many years the accent was simply on fitting a so-called inferior group of children with just enough learning to earn their living in the factory. Labour has attacked that attitude consistently, during 60 or 70 years and throughout my childhood. There is now widespread recognition of the need to cater for a child's personality to let it flower in its fullest possible way.[24]

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Notes

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14. This quotation comes from material I have gathered across a series of research projects undertaken in the last 10 years, as do all similar quotations in the article.

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