"You never really know me!":

The lived experience of 'NEET' young people in Malta.

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Abstract

Andreana Friggieri

"You never really know me!": The lived experience of 'NEET' young people in Malta.

Young people disengaged from education, employment, or training are classified as NEET (OECD, 2015) and are frequently the target of the authorities' attempts to integrate them into the education and training system or the labour market (Eurofound 2017). Thus, the number of early school leavers and NEETs in Malta can be reduced.

These young people are more likely to disappear from the radar once they leave compulsory education and are, therefore, essentially a mystery to policymakers and researchers. This study seeks to fill the critical research gap, addressing the need for qualitative data about the complexities and realities of young people classified as NEET worldwide, including in Malta. This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to privilege NEET young people's interpretations of their situation, their focal concerns, and their views about their school experiences and future.

The data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen young people in Malta who were NEET or at risk of being NEET at the time of data collection. Seven overlapping superordinate themes emerged: narratives of hardship, the influence of compulsory schooling, use of time, notions of success and failure, attitudes towards life, coping, and projections for the future. The findings reveal the adversity that participants had to deal with throughout their school years, their understanding of success that transcends academic achievement, narratives of resilience and agency, and their awareness of mental health as a priority to live fully and beat the odds that may be stacked against them. The research participants' interpretations of their lived experiences on their educational trajectories and path into adulthood problematise the validity and usefulness of the term "NEET," given its failure to embrace the lived differences among the cohort in question.

Keywords

NEET youth education employment Malta   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Glossary of Abbreviations

ALP: Alternative Learning Programme

EAR: Emancipatory Action Research

EET: In Education, Employment and Training

EFA: Education for All initiative

ELET: Early Leaving from Education and Training

ESF: European Social Fund

EU: European Union

FREC: Faculty of Social Wellbeing Research Ethics Committee

FSWS: Foundation for Social Welfare Services

HCT: Human Capital Theory

ILO: International Labour Organization

ILOSTAT: International Labour Organization Statistics

LSE: Learning Support Educator

MCAST: Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology

MDGs: Millennium Development Goals

MUD: Moral Underclass Discourse

NAS: NEET Activation Scheme

NEET: Not in Education, Employment or Training

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PES: Public Employment Service

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SEBD: Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulties

STDs: Sexually Transmitted Diseases

UN: United Nations

UNECE: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

VET: Vocational education and training

YG: Youth Guarantee

Chapter 1

Introduction: Young people, Labels, and Education.

1.0 Introduction

This thesis concerns young people in Malta who find themselves out of education, training, and employment (NEETs) (OECD, 2015). The prevalence of youth unemployment in Europe has catalyzed increased investigations by governments into the causes of unemployment among young people. The notion of the young unemployed person disengaged from education and training – NEET – has been used in policies about young people in the European Union (EU) since 2010. The concept has helped governments worldwide track young people described as vulnerable while transitioning from school to the labour market and social inclusion (Alvarado et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2019; Levels et al., 2022).

1.1 Research Aims, Agenda and Objectives

In this work, I have sought to regard "naively" or with a "natural attitude" (Schutz, 1962b) the lived experience of young people categorized as NEET, which is often ignored or taken for granted by experts, authorities, and also by society itself. This study of the lived experience of being NEET in Malta aims to contribute to ongoing debates on how we conceive of 'youth,' as well as about education, training, and employment, including:

i.   the meaning of education and its implications for social justice, for young people, and their right to freedom of opinion and expression, including "freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (National Commissions for UNESCO, 2010, article 19); and

ii. an education that is more *Bildung*-oriented (Buttigieg & Calleja, 2021), aimed at the full development of the person and at "the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," promoting "understanding, tolerance, and friendship

among all nations, racial or religious groups. " (National Commissions for UNESCO, 2010, article 26)

Another important aim is to inform further and sensitize educators, policymakers, school leaders and administrators, youth workers, training providers, and all organizations working to meet the needs of young people categorized as NEET to the myriad realities of these young people, to the lacunae in our education system and especially, to the need to design youth spaces and alternative systems for learning that are informed by the aspirations and experiences of these young people themselves.

This endeavour would entail that education comes to be redefined in pursuit of a new education that rejects the reproduction of colonial and colonising relations (Dei, 2017), including the "abject reality of hatred and exploitation [that] is to be found in the school's cultural-formative mounting" that is directed at "minorities, members of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, people of color, women and entire sections of humanity on whose existence scorn continues to be heaped" (Baldacchino, 2019, in Chitpin & Portelli, 2019, p.16).

A new, fairer approach to education would start from conceiving learning and knowledge as emerging from feelings and experience, not simply the intellect but from culture, ethnicity, and identity (Cutajar & Adjoe, 2016). To look upon the spiritual (psychic and emotional) as contradictory to the political is oppressive, another way power acts to suppress our agency as human beings (Lorde, 1984). This is the crux of knowledge democracy, the right for many ways of knowing to be upheld as legitimate knowledge (Ledwith, 2020).

The thoughts and ideas outlined above all lead me to ask and seek the answers to the following dominant questions that inspired and set in motion this research:

1.   How do young people who are in the situation that is labeled "NEET" interpret their situation?

      a. What is it like for them to be done with secondary school?

      b. What is their outlook on life?

      c. What is important to them?

2. What was their experience of school like?

      a.   What made them disengage from school?

      b.   What would have made a difference?

3. How do they visualise their future – where do they see themselves in five years, for example?

1.2 Background

The notion of "youth" is a social construction. As Fusco (2018, p. 5) writes:

> "...'youth' in all its linguistic variations (adolescents, teenagers, juveniles, etc.) can refer to a state of being, a chronological age, a developmental period, or a culture of its own. Each term comes with its own set of markers, perspectives, and academic discourse. It carries meaning intricately woven in history and social scientific and popular understandings, as well as the economic and political conditions of the times".

Being a young person often comes to be described in terms of transition and, therefore of change. The "transition" metaphor represents the various markers used to describe the journey toward the end of youth, which also invokes normative expectations (Wyn et al., 2011). Related to the metaphor of transition are those of "yo-yo" trajectories (Biggart & Walther, 2006), the

"shuffle" metaphor (Benasso, 2013), and "pinball youth" (Cuzzocrea, 2020), all of which seek to address the fact that transition is a fragmented rather than a linear process (Alexander et al., 2020), and encompasses myriad fears, challenges, dilemmas, struggles and anxieties of young people. Other terms implying movement and precarity that are used in tandem with the idea of youth are: "niches", "pathways," "trajectories," and "navigations (Alexander et al., 2020; Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; McDonald et al., 2020).

This phase in young people's lives is characterized by conditions of the "risk society" (Beck, 1992), where while a variety of opportunities appear within reach to them, access largely depends on impeding factors beyond their control, such as inequity and uncertainty (Avis & Atkins, 2017; Atkins, 2017; Giddens, 1991; Heathfield & Fusco, 2016). The universal infiltration of neoliberal political and economic discourse has led to widespread malignant precarity among populations of young people (Alexander et al., 2020), which is visible in an unpredictable labour market, in issues concerning health and education, and in the emergence of novel forms of "youth culture" (Furlong, 2009; Mäkelä et al., 2021).

The NEET concept stemmed from 1980s research in the United Kingdom and was adopted by the European Commission Employment Committee (EMCO) in 2010 as an indicator to focus on trends in EU NEET populations as part of the Horizon 2020 strategy (Mascherini, 2019).

It was in 1999 that the "NEET" term was officially coined in U.K. politics as a result of New Labour's commitment to addressing the legacy of poverty and inequality inherited from previous governments (Craig, 2002; O'Reilly et al., 2019; see also chapter two for a more detailed review of the NEET concept). There was a conviction that such a concept could address a wide range of issues understood as problematic or risky in groups of people and

communities. These qualities included "unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, and family breakdown" (Craig, 2002, p. 672).

The NEET term is applied to all young people that are disengaged from education, training, or work, and it encompasses a very diverse population with very different characteristics and needs (O'Reilly et al., 2019). The age at which a young person may be considered NEET may vary according to different cultural settings (Rose et al., 2012). Significant factors may include cultural understandings of "youth," obligatory school age in the particular country, as well as the quality of access to educational opportunities. In Malta and EU member states, the NEET age range is 20-34 years (Eurostat, 2019). However, The Youth Guarantee Scheme, an EU-funded project to provide young people with opportunities to continue their education and find satisfactory employment, caters to youth aged 15 to 25 (Youth Guarantee Scheme).

In Malta, the situation of NEET is of concern because "(t)he percentage of young people (15-29 years) classified as NEETs has risen significantly from 7.9% (6.3% males and 9.6% females) in 2019 to 9.4% (8.5% males and 10.4% females) in 2020" (The Malta Chamber's position on a National Workforce Strategy, 2021, p.26).

The NEET young people participating in the present research (8 boys and six girls, 18-24 years of age) have yet to obtain the necessary qualifications to further their education or to find satisfactory employment. They are thus looked upon as "at risk" or "lacking" some essential quality from the point of view of the education system (Gracey & Kelly, 2010; Mawn et al., 2017; OECD, 2015; Yunas, 2016).

1.3 Positioning

In this research, the chosen theoretical approach is phenomenological. I intend to privilege the young people's interpretation of their situation and bring to the fore their side of the story as human beings in context. Stories are much more potent than statistics, holding the key to political answers to change that can inform our actions as human beings (Ledwith, 2020).

I have embarked on this research to seek answers to the question of how young people make sense of their "NEET" situation. As Schutz (1960, pp. 203-221) maintains:

> "The safeguarding of the subjective point of view is the only guarantee that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional world constructed by the scientific observer."

A phenomenological approach to research constitutes a will on the researcher's part to view the world from the research participant's perspective. It involves an "epistemological commitment to the validity of the lived experience of individuals, as an important truth in and of itself, whether or not it correlates with an external world reality" (Ivers & Downes, 2012, p.372), which fits perfectly with the aims of this research.

Accepting that meanings are socioculturally constructed, I am interested in discovering to what extent those meanings are appropriated in the young person's lifeworld. Based on that appropriation, the young person would make sense of a phenomenon (Bhar, 2019). I hope this exploration provides a nuanced understanding of the socioculturally shaped motivations that lead to a particular behaviour - disengagement from education, training, or/and employment, in the case of the participants in this research.

My experiences as an educator in various secondary state schools have sensitized me to the hegemonic power education systems wield on students. Schools have the power to present reality as if no alternative to the present structure of society and education were possible or imaginable (Atkins, 2017; De Lissovoy, 2013). They also exert power in measuring young people against criteria set by dominant forces in society, privileging the values of the powerful (Gramsci, 1971; Jenks, 2005; Skeggs, 2002, 2004, 2009). The hegemonic neoliberal ideology that permeates our times, including our educational institutions, encourages us all to participate in policies that serve to minimize rights in favor of personal responsibilities, the result of which continues to work against the interests of the poorest (Atkins, 2017; Ledwith, 2020; Mayo, 1999).

A phenomenological stance does the most justice to the researched because it respects their right to be heard and understood. Listening to people in an educative context respects their humanity, distinct from attempting to colonize them through a "banking education" (Freire, 2000). What we call education may contain or disguise various intentions, including ones inspired by emancipation and social justice and those that serve manipulation and control (Díaz, 1998; Foucault, 1980; Veiga-Neto & Lopes, 2017). Although "Future-ready students need to exercise agency, in their own education and throughout life" (OECD, 2018, p.4), schools today are prioritising training over "a pedagogy of freedom" (Freire, 2000). Young people are being trained to be competent workers for jobs that exist or are projected to be existing in the near future. The question is whether this is even possible today – an era that Zygmunt Bauman refers to as "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2011) - which is characterized by social forms dissolving much quicker than the creation of new ones. This situation makes "notions such as 'progress', 'career,' 'maturation,' and 'development' either very short-lived or futile" (Sarid, 2017, p. 464).

In such a scenario, students would be "wasting their time" (Bauman, 2005, p. 313) when and if they comply with school practices and values. Following this reasoning, young people who resist and reject this kind of education and leave school prematurely may be seen as using their agency to live on their own terms. Human beings act as knowledgeable objects (Giddens, 1984) in the world. Their action or agency can change their social reality, the structures of which may both constrain and inspire or facilitate endeavour and enterprise (Lamsal, 2012).

Recognising the potential for agency in people is essential (Giddens, 1984). Everybody can act on structures and influence them by virtue of their participation in multiple social systems (domestic, economic, and political, for example). Agency is the capacity to make choices, an act which, small or large, in one way or another, makes a difference to the world (Whittington, 2015). Thus, when a young person chooses to disengage with or even leave school, it may not only be a case of protecting one's self from some perceived harm arising from the school experience, but, from a systemic point of view, that young person may also be acting according to, and protecting, the culture of his or her family and community, and giving feedback to the whole education system as well (Free & Križ, 2022; Moensted, 2022; Quinn, 2004). In this sense, the young people concerned have some social power. They exercise agency when they opt to comply with or resist rules thrust upon them. Each young person attending school experiences its structures in unique and personal ways, as do the students' families. This implies that the structural properties of the educational system only endure to the extent that its members continue to refer to them and reproduce them (Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 2015).

According to Giddens (1984), individual actors do not simply interact with societal contexts. They are inseparable expressions of those contexts, infused with capabilities and expectations that are societal in origins, not just personal. Thus, young people who become NEET interact

with the school on a personal level, but they themselves are products of the educational system itself just as much as of the society they have been raised in. Their choice to leave then reflects and expresses the forces at work within this entire structure. From a systemic point of view, structuration theory expresses confidence in NEET young people's capacity for agency and, therefore, for effecting change (consciously or not) to occur in structures and institutions (Whittington, 2015). Being NEET is not merely a state where these young people do nothing or abstain from choices. As human beings, they function beyond the reductive arenas of "education," "training," and "employment."They draw on aspirations, beliefs, and knowledge of their environment constantly every day, even if their resources may be perceived as limited in exchange value by those in power. This work departs from a stance that questions the inclination to consider NEET young people's disengagement as a problem stemming from the young people themselves and posits that it might be fairer to look at becoming NEET as contingent upon the design of policy privileging neoliberal values (Russell et al., 2011).

Schools function according to the bureaucratic model (Weber, 1978/1922), where strict time frames, obsessive testing, and measurement, rules and regulations promote impersonality and rationalization, and rely on upholding status differences to maintain hierarchy and control (De Lissovoy, 2013; Madan, 2014;). The argument that Weber made a hundred years ago, which held that the market is not neutral, exercising domination by force of limiting the options that can be available (Weber, 1978/1922), seems prophetic in these times where neoliberalism continues to vastly influence education with its market logic (Chitpin & Portelli, 2019). According to studies about the impact of neoliberalism on education (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2014; Mayo, 2015, and others), this translates into the emphasis on excessive individualism and competition in standardization or one-size-fits all, in limited systems of accountability, in reductionism, free choice and fatalism.

Portelli and Konecny (2013) argue that such qualities work against the principles of individual rights. Thus, neoliberal economic policies do not view schooling as a "political act" (Apple, 2013; Ledwith, 2020). Education is not seen as facilitating the holistic growth of the young individual who may struggle with navigating various challenges in his or her personal life. Neither is it seen as an endeavour to nurture and strengthen young people to live an active, functional, and satisfying life. Instead, from the neoliberal perspective, education's primary mission is to produce trained and compliant human capital (Atkins, 2017; Darder, 2019) such that they can use their skills and knowledge to contribute to the knowledge economy. Nonetheless, these arguments exalt the existing opportunities and extensiveness of the knowledge economy, disseminate glamorized narratives around employability and sell false hope to young people, especially to those on vocational programmes with restricted exchange value in the labour market, who would most likely end up in precarious employment (Atkins, 2017; De Lissovoy, 2013; Savage, 2019).

1.4 Context

According to the Education and Training Monitor 2020, Malta is still over-represented in EU comparative statistics about young people who leave school early (16.7% vs 10.2% EU average in 2019)[1]. The report (p. 5) expresses optimism that "education and careers guidance in the school curriculum from the 2018/2019 school year may further help to prevent students from leaving education early".

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1 Target 49 of Europe 2020 was that the ELET (early leavers from education and training) rate should be lower than 10% by 2020.

Career guidance has been in place since the 1960s in Malta[2] , and was further developed in the mid-eighties (Sultana, 2021). It is also noteworthy that the Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) curriculum has a 40-year history as an official subject on the Maltese state school timetable (Falzon & Muscat, 2009; Sultana, 1992)[3]. Albeit crucial, when considering the extent of the early school leaving rate over time, the impact of these services on the early school leaving rate could be questioned. The human complexity of the young person is downplayed or ignored in such reports that depict the young person unidimensionally as career oriented. There also needs to be more clarity in the direct connection made between students' happiness and feelings of belonging in school and the availability of the service of career guidance.

The Education and Training Monitor 2020 also reports that according to PISA 2018, bullying is a "major problem in Malta: about 32% of pupils report being bullied at least a few times a month, compared to 22.1% at EU-27 level". According to the report, bullying mostly happens among low-achieving students and the rate is compared to the "high achievers" (47.3% v 25.5% for high achieving students)". This is seen as contributing to feelings of alienation among students, exacerbating the low reading ability and the school dropout rate. This discourse continues to reinforce the system in place by putting the blame for the high dropout rate on the most vulnerable: they are "low achievers", they are bullies, victims of bullying, misfits, illiterate or semi-literate. Furthermore, the deficit argument does not stop there; when these

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[2] "Career guidance refers to services and activities intended to assist individuals of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers" (OECD & EC, 2004). Upon becoming a new EU member, Malta joined the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network which from 2007 to 2015 worked to develop Career Education and Guidance policy development across Europe (Sultana, 2021).

[3] The PSD syllabus mission statement states that: "PSD aims at empowering students to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes which will enable them to live and participate fruitfully and effectively in their environment" (Abela et al., 2002, p. 2). This addresses the notion of empowerment, the vision being that of helping young people to "fulfil their potential effectively and positively" (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005).

young people drop out, they continue to be looked upon as a problem - they are now NEET - to be intervened upon so that they can become "employable". The report holds that evaluation – internal and external – may be the key to addressing adequately the evolving needs of learners. This discourse suggests that the young person is being seen as an empty receptacle who is there to be filled with knowledge, with disregard of human complexity, and the systemic causes of what is held to be educational failure and success.

1.5 Research Methodology and Methods

It is society that constructs meanings and, therefore, what constitutes truth and non-truth (Peters, 2007; Veiga-Neto & Corcini Lopes, 2017; Wittgenstein, 1999). A social constructionist lens values the examination and problematization of taken-for-granted categories such as education, NEETs, work, success, failure, freedom, and reason, to mention just a few. Thinking in other ways allows us to see things, ourselves, and others from other perspectives and helps us create a better, more just society (Foucault, 1984; Veiga-Neto & Lopes, 2010).

I have chosen the qualitative phenomenological approach because it facilitates my attempt to understand the research participants' own views, interpretations, and attitudes vis-à-vis their lived experiences of the phenomenon I seek to study (Hennink et al., 2011). I have collected the data through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data was yielded during informal short courses organised by JobsPlus under the Youth Guarantee Scheme for young people classified as NEET and in third places – informal settings independent of education, training, or employment, which contributed a variety of contexts and experiences to the sample.

This research is informed by hermeneutic phenomenology, which is the theory of interpretation originating from the work of Martin Heidegger (Neubauer et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2012). Since this study shall seek to foreground the lived experience of NEET young people, Heidegger's understanding of human beings as constantly self-interpreting can facilitate understanding of the particular situations in which the young people concerned find themselves, which may often be beyond their control. In this scenario, the NEET young persons' attitudes toward everyday phenomena, as well as their thoughts about past experiences and their extolled future, may be said to lead to heightened self-reflection and interpretations (Gullick & West, 2020).

Systematic approaches inspired by Heidegger's work to source and synthesize verbatim interview data aimed at hermeneutic interpretation (Gullick & West, 2020) and at achieving a more nuanced understanding of human experience may inform practitioners and policymakers in education, especially in considering the meaning of "success" and "failure". Such approaches can open up new ways of looking at opportunities for personal growth without resorting to practices that might not respect the whole person, such as labeling (Gullick & West, 2020).

1.6 The significance of this research

Young people classified as NEET (OECD, 2015) are often not easily accessible, making it difficult to know or research them. For this reason – and this is a lacuna that the present work also seeks to address – we do not know much about them, especially in Malta, with little to no current qualitative data available about them. This lacuna seems odd, given the multi-layered and complex realities comprising the phenomenon (De Witte et al., 2013), which scholars, researchers, and policymakers strive to understand. Do these young people "drop out" of school, or do they "leave"? Is it a conscious choice? Do they get "pulled," or do they get

"pushed" out of school? (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017; Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013). Are they "troubling," "parasites," lazy, delinquent (Sweeten et al., 2009), or working class (Giroux, 2017; Hollingworth, 2015)? Do they constitute a "problem"? Are they squandering their lives and everybody's time and resources? (Hattam & Smyth, 2015; Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014)?

Have we any right to use such language when speaking about young people with other things to say besides what schools prioritise? What does this say about our attitudes towards difference and freedom of expression? Our self is formed within language as we encounter the world and relate to others (Goffman, 1956b, 1967). Individuals identify with positive feelings and internalize conceptualizations about the self, which are, in turn, affected by external forces in communication with the world (Goffman, 1967). Goffman identifies the emotional nature of the self's facade, i.e., in the importance of keeping up appearances and when we suffer disgrace (Goffman, 1967). This phenomenon illustrates the significance of young people's agency when they challenge what is presented as normal and seek to explore other possibilities and other ways of thinking and being (Veiga-Neto & Lopes, 2017).

Young people who struggle against the school culture – what Paul Willis (1981) calls "Counter-school subculture" – often come to be stereotyped in discourses concerning education (Smyth et al., 2014). In the literature, such stereotypes revolve around notions of lack and inadequacy: school absenteeism, drug addiction, poor school assessment, shady company, dysfunctional home environment, unhealthy relationships, and poverty, for example (Cefai et al., 2016; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019). These young people are "essentialized" (Young, 2010, pp. 104-107), portrayed as being implicated in systemic problems in society. Being NEET in our society essentially denotes a lack of some sort, mainly on the part of the youth concerned; they are somehow "other" (Yates & Payne, 2006).

The narrative data yielded by this research shall help fill an important gap in the body of knowledge about NEETs in Malta, particularly by yielding essential insights into the lifeworld of these young people that can be helpful to professionals, policymakers, leaders, and youth workers.   It could help paint a clearer picture of young people living with disadvantage and raise awareness about the unfairness of blaming young people, their alleged deficits, their histories, families, and communities for lacking educational achievement. The insights yielded by this thesis can help researchers and all those involved in education and youth work become more sensitive to how young people's preferences and choices that might seem incomprehensible prima facie may in fact, stem from more deep-seated, larger-scale problems and injustice (Case & Hampson, 2019).

It is also hoped that the findings from this research will facilitate new perspectives on young people's rejection of schooling to include understanding and acceptance of their agency – their personal power to think and choose for themselves. Moving towards a reality where young people can "contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future" (OECD, 2018, p. 4) entails that society respects these meanings as it respects all others, which is a human right(European Youth Forum, 2023.

The significance and importance of this study is also enhanced by the fact that it is focused solely on the lived experience of the young persons participating in the research and adopts a not knowing, non-judgemental approach that reaps narrative data emerging from the NEETs' own lifeworld. This research is especially significant because of the general need for qualitative data about contemporary NEET young people (Assmann & Broschinski 2021; Mellberg et al., 2022; Román et al., 2022), and also in view of the persisting high levels of young people who are disengaged from education, employment and training in Europe, where Malta still has one

of the highest rates (Eurostat). This is a phenomenon that Maltese authorities have long been seeking to understand and address (Azzopardi, 2015; Bartolo, 2015, 2019; The Malta Chamber's Position on a National Workforce Strategy, 2021), and this work is intended to contribute to existing knowledge, thereby filling a research gap in the Maltese context and enriching knowledge about NEETs in the EU.

1.7 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

This research is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology that aims to understand lived experiences and the meanings people give to what goes on in their personal and social lives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is characterized by a commitment to the authentic voice and sense-making of the research participant, which necessitates that the researcher brackets personal bias and foreknowledge to enable the participants' lived experiences to emerge in their own words and from their own frame of reference. IPA has emerged from theories of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography and initially started being used within psychology and health research fields. Eventually it spread into other areas, including educational research (Gauntlett et al., 2017).

1.8 Organisation of this work

This work is divided into seven parts. In Chapter Two, I review significant findings from empirical research about young people who are not in education, employment, or training in Malta and abroad, which is followed in Chapter Three by a review of policy and major concepts and understandings of the topic about NEETs in the EU, the UN and Malta. Chapter Four is the Methodology and Methods chapter, which contains the theoretical framework, philosophical underpinnings of the chosen research methodology, and an outline of the methods used to collect the data. The findings from this research are documented in Chapter

Five, and the discussion of the findings is contained in Chapter Six. In conclusion, Chapter Seven summarises this work, including recommendations for further research and policy. Since a number of concepts mentioned in this thesis may have different interpretations linked to them, for the purposes of this work I present my understanding of them below.

1.9. Definition of Terms

Agentic: In this work I refer to young people's agency – their power to take action according to how they make sense of what they experience. The term 'agentic' stems from the word agency, which Webster's Dictionary defines as "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power". In the1980s, Psychologist Albert Bandura studied the concepts of agency and motivation, and coined the term 'agentic', which describes the capacity of human beings to self-reflect and act on their own initiative (Bjerede, 2017).

Colonialism: I refer to colonial practices in education at different instances throughout this thesis**,** and thus I offer a definition to clarify my understanding and use of the concept. "Colonialism is a form of political, economic, cultural and physical occupation of lands that works to deny the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples" (Dei, 2019, p. 47). Colonialism is about power and authority, exerting dominion and control over groups of people classified as inferior. On the other hand, coloniality refers to the effect of colonialism during and after colonial occupation. Coloniality consists of "imposition and domination from multiple sources, internal and external" (Dei, 2019, p.47). Imposed ideology in multiple institutions, including in education, works like blinkers on people, serving to foster in them a colonial condition where they lose connection with their cultural knowledge and roots, a process that affects "minds, bodies, souls, and spirits, and implicates the project of decolonization beyond schooling and education" (Dei, 2019, p. 47). The relations between colonialism and coloniality are manifest

in neoliberal ideas and practices, including those about "human rights, autonomy, competition, virtue, equality, and choice" (Dei, 2019, p. 48). Albeit essential, these ideas have little value if they are inaccessible to people who do not have the resources to seek and fight for their fulfillment. The value of these discourses diminishes even more when they are used to distance people from community-based knowledge.

Employment: Throughout this work, I use the terms 'employment' and 'work' interchangeably, even though these terms are not synonymous: 'Employment' refers to a specific relationship or contract between an employee and an employer, where the former receives payment from the latter for specific duties performed. 'Work' is a broader term incorporating paid and unpaid work, including domestic and household work. Various activities qualify as work, such as unpaid labour often performed by women in their families (France et al., 2020). In this thesis, however, reference is made to young people's formal relationship with the labour market involving paid work or wages.

Human Capital Theory (HCT): I refer to HCT in my critical reflections on current education practices. According to Schultz (1960, p.571), the essence of Human Capital Theory lies in treating "education as an investment in man and to treat its consequences as a form of capital." The OECD (2001) defines human capital as productive wealth incorporated in labour, skills and knowledge,, and the conceptrefers to any knowledge or qualities that an individual has, which enhances his or her economic productivity. Essentially HCT views education as having the capacity to increase people's productivity and earning power, which renders education a crucial investment fundamental to a country's economic growth (Tan, 2014). In this context, education receives an added value without preoccupation or concern about the kind of education that is being imparted to children and young people. Educational discourses have

thus come to be imbued with "restrictive definitions of excellence, merit and meritocracy, quality education, focus on human capital development, quality assessments and measurements, parental choice, and individual control" (Dei, 2019, p. 53). These discourses are often insensitive to diversity and different kinds of knowledge and translate into the imposition of business models onto significant portions of teaching practices.

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET): In this thesis, the term NEET is understood according to the following OECD (2023, para.1) definitions:

> Young people in education include those attending part-time or full-time education, but exclude those in non-formal education and in educational activities of very short duration. Employment is defined according to the OECD/ILO Guidelines and covers all those who have been in paid work for at least one hour in the reference week of the survey or were temporarily absent from such work.

Neoliberalism: In this work, I refer to neoliberal culture as stifling efforts towards democratic practices in schools while producing inequality and dehumanising young people through "incessant competition, social atomism, reductionism, presumed neutrality, and objectivity" (Portelli & Konecny, 2013, p. 89). As Giroux & Giroux write:

> neoliberal ideology, with its merciless emphasis on deregulation and privatization, has found its material expression in an all-out attack on democratic values and social relations – particularly those spheres where such values are learned and take root. Public services such as health care, childcare, public assistance, education, and transportation are now subject to the rules of the market. (2006, p. 24)

The hegemonic influence of (mis)framing young people who are out of education, training, and employment has been exacerbated in our times in dominant discourses emphasising the management of risk and putting the onus on the individual (Batsleer, 2008; Bottrell, 2009; Mackie, 2014). From perceiving NEET young people as an "underclass", youth policy and research have changed focus and are now viewing these young people as being "at risk" (Foster & Spencer, 2010; Mackie, 2014; Vallee, 2017). Risk factor analysis uses deficit discourse to identify the characteristics of individuals that can result in "problem" behaviour in the long term. Such problematic outcomes could include deviant behaviour and school resistance (Deakin et al., 2020; Yates & Payne, 2006). This deficit discourse disregards social inequality and the effect of poverty and disadvantage on adolescents in this case, and it indeed would not conceive of what are held to be "behavioural problems" or "offending behaviour" as possible ways of coping and dealing with structural injustices that they happened to be born into.

Increasingly, "individuals are framed as shapers of their own worlds, making decisions according to calculations of risk and opportunity, but risking blame and punishment if they get their choices wrong" (Kemshall, 2009, p. 155). Nevertheless, this idea is embedded within a field of tension between "agency" and "structure" since previous research also indicates that young people's trajectories in life can, to a great extent, still be predicted according to their class positioning (Bynner, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Thus, the young people concerned will be held responsible for not successfully transitioning from school to employment (Kearney, 2020). This stance is oblivious to the effect of economic fluctuations, disadvantage caused by gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, social class derivation, and social exclusion, and how all this impacts young people's agency.

Social justice: This thesis is inspired by the principle of social justice, which can have various meanings for different people. As Rizvi (1998, p. 47) writes, "the immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have a single essential meaning—it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavours".

In this work I refer to the concept of social justice as a common good. I adopt a critical view of the curriculum and general school practices, especially of the ways in which they serve to marginalise young people who are already disadvantaged (Atkins, 2022).   I depart from the stance that education's essential purpose is "the development in our children of the habits of heart and mind that make democratic life possible" (Wood, 1992, p. xvi).

More broadly, I view social justice as a framework of political objectives and policies that respect difference and diversity, and that value fairness, equality of outcomes and treatment, the dignity and equal worth of all human beings, the necessity of meeting of basic needs, the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and opportunities, and the participation of everyone, including the most disadvantaged (Craig, 2002).

Youth Guarantee: which was launched in 2013, is part of a political framework in Europe with the aim of strengthening non-formal learning. The Youth Guarantee in EU Member States aims to provide all young people under the age of 25 years with quality employment offers, continued education, apprenticeship, and traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or disengaging from formal education (Eurodiaconia, 2017).

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I shall critically review research and literature about young people classified as NEET. The first section delves into the history of the NEET concept – how it emerged and evolved into its current use, its shortcomings, and current understandings and meanings, including its impact on the lives of the young people it is used to categorize. The second section critically addresses the labeling of young people as being "at risk," which will then focus on researching NEETs and who these young people may be in reality. In this part of the chapter, I attempt to re-adjust the lenses through that NEET young people are viewed to possibly afford their situation a more nuanced and, therefore a fairer understanding, given that "NEET" is but one construct out of various other possible ones that may be used to refer to young people's situations in transition (Dumont et al., 2022; Pun et al., 2022; Veiga-Neto & Lopes, 2017; Peters, 2007; Wittgenstein, 1999). This shall be followed by a critical review of current research presented according to the three temporal dimensions affecting the lived experience of being NEET: past experiences, the present, and aspirations for the future. The first part shall engage with research dealing with processes affecting becoming NEET (home situations and school experiences), the second with research about being NEET (the actual lived experience), and the third with the transition from being NEET into the future.

In conclusion, I shall identify the important gaps this research fills, highlighting its relevance for the Maltese context, particularly regarding reform in isingconceptualising education and youth.

2.1 Who are we speaking about when we speak about NEETs?

In policy and research, young people who are disengaged from education, employment, and training are referred to as NEET – a concept that implicitly shifts the responsibility onto young people and their families rather than on governance (Bowman et al., 2022), and points at both the challenges of contemporary young people (Kleif, 2021; Holte et al., 2019), as well as of the number of them whose struggles put them at the margins of society (European Commission, 2010b; The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018; Tamesberger et al., 2014).

Being NEET is often a transitory phase (Robertson, 2018; Kleif, 2021) for myriad young people (Eurofound, 2016). Although being NEET is associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, some young people may deliberately decide to take time off from education and work for various reasons, including to find their bearings and get a clearer picture of who they are and what they want to do with their lives (Kevelson et al., 2020; Kleif, 2021; Duckworth & Schoon, 2012; Russell, 2016; Thompson, 2011). The origins and outcomes of being NEET are thus complex and multi-dimensional (Baggio et al., 2015; Borg et al., 2015; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Jonsson et al., 2022; Ralston et al., 2016).

Since being NEET is regarded as closely linked to the state of the economy, following the financial and economic crisis[4] policymakers were concerned that an entire generation of young people in the EU could not participate in the labour market for years to come, risking poverty

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[4] During 2007-2008, the European economy was hit by the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. This was the consequence of the financial and banking crisis in the United States. The crisis revealed imbalance in economic systems in various countries, including in regions within countries of the European Union, challenging the concept of the European Union, especially the Eurozone. The crisis has gravely impacted Europe's labour markets, such that unemployment rates rose across all countries in 2008, at a much faster rate in some countries than in others. In mid-2015, ca. seven years after the beginning of the problem, unemployment rates in many European states persisted at a historical high (Cuadrado-Roura et al., 2016).

and social exclusion, as well as constituting very high levels of unexploited productive capacity and substantial cost regarding welfare payments (Eurostat, May 2020).

Seven subgroups of NEETs have been identified in a study aimed at collecting more information about such individuals so that better support structures could be designed to meet their various needs (Eurofound, 2016b):

- re-entrants – those participating in educational courses, and who will most probably soon proceed out of the NEET category (7.8%);

- short-term unemployed – those who have spent less than a year out of work and are looking for work opportunities (29.8%);

- long-term unemployed – those who have been out of work for longer than a year (22%);

- those who are ill and/or living with a disability and who are not seeking work for this reason, receiving social support because they are not fit to do paid work (6.8%);

- those who have caring responsibilities (15.4%, of whom 88% are women);

- 'discouraged' individuals who have given up on finding employment (5.8%);

- those who do not fit into the categories above, and who are held to be either the most vulnerable, the most privileged, or whose lifestyle may not follow the norm (12.5%).

Despite being popular and even attractive as a concept ever since its inception in the 1990s the NEET concept has also been a subject of controversy (McPherson, 2021; Saloniemi et al., 2020). The next section follows its trajectory from its early beginnings up till today.

2.1.1 A historical perspective to the NEET concept

For the purposes of this research about the lived experiences of NEET young people in Malta, this historical overview will focus on the origins of the NEET concept in England (Simmons et al., 2020; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) and its subsequent adoption in the EU (Eurofound 2012, 2016; Holte, 2017), including Malta. Beyond this focus, the NEET concept started being used around the world in countries such as New Zealand, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea (OECD, 2014a).

Youth transitions today are very different from those in the past, specifically from after the war up to the 1970s (National Youth Commission Australia, 2020; Roberts, 2004; Willis, 1981). Today, youth transitions are more gradual (Sanderson, 2020; Walsh et al., 2019), as in the case of NEET young people, whereas back then, becoming an adult was a more linear process (Furlong, 2006; Harvey, 2005).

The NEET category was invented in Britain, first appearing during John Major's Conservative government of 1992–97, emerging from social work and education research following technical and ideological changes during the late 1980s (Simmons et al., 2020; Simmons & Smyth, 2016). It addressed marginalization and stemmed from an Anglo-American research tradition focusing on the "cumulative personal characteristics of excluded individuals" (Silver, 1994, p. 539). In England, the early 1990s were the start of an era where government, policymakers, and media discourse conceived of young people as embodying "deficit," with negative labels being applied to them, culminating in that of "StatusZero" (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The rationale for the "Zero" was that these young people were "nowhere" or "nobody" because they were out of education, employment, or training. This was later re-named "NEET" after Istance et al.'s (1994) study and was appropriated by New Labour in 1997 for the funding policy recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit (Wrigley, 2019). Since

then, the NEET concept has been normalised in UK policy regarding lawbreaking, welfare, and the 'moral character' of young people who are disengaged from employment, education, and training (Gillies, 2016; Wrigley, 2019).

The "Zero" and "NEET" labels have generated a deficit, victim-blaming discourse (Gillies, 2016) and may be seen as reflecting a new way of governing young people that has become entrenched in dominant discourses about youth globally, including in Malta. When previously the focus in discourses surrounding young people referred to as NEET had been on the provision of training and education, nowadays the emphasis is on deficit (see MacDonald, 2011; Nayak, 2015; Ryan & Lőrinc, 2018). We are witnessing a relentless campaign to drive NEET young people to become EETs utilising school exclusion projects and accreditation of informal learning, for example. Other possible, more creative, and rewarding endeavours than those sustained by paid work are hardly considered (Batsleer, 2008; Wrigley, 2019).

2.1.1.1 The "Bridging the Gap" report.

The Bridging the Gap report in the UK was the first attempted response to the unemployment and education failure of young individuals perceived as socially excluded (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). These were to be channeled into programmes intended to cure the "social ills" affecting 16-18-year-olds, such as deviance, school absenteeism, and addictions (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The report also emphasized the likelihood of such individuals leading unhealthy lifestyles and being young parents (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The Bridging the Gap (1999) report in the UK describes a range of stigmatising characteristics of young people, asserting that socially excluded young people come from dysfunctional family backgrounds, are unemployed and dependent on benefits to survive. These negative references have now been topped up with the deficit NEET tag.

As Levitas (2005) argues, the use of the term "social exclusion" in Bridging the Gap (1999) is problematic because it presents issues of injustice and impoverishment as pathological qualities of NEET young people rather than as a dysfunction of society. This perception has subsequently been normalised in various social policy discourses. Levitas (2005) calls this a Moral Underclass Discourse (MUD) that targets the offensive behaviours of those identified as being socially excluded and within which NEET young people are perceived as a threat to be neutralized.

Diane Reay (2017, p. 102) argues that the "neoliberal vocabulary"[5] of aspiration and efficiency attached to social mobility discourses like that of NEET is oblivious to the structural disadvantage that young people live with. Since the political discourse of social mobility has always been viewed as a good, desirable thing, the working class and many NEET young people will always be seen as lacking whatever it takes to climb up the social ladder. It thus becomes extremely unfair to hold NEET young people individually responsible for their own educational success when they lack the means to attain it (Ryan et al., 2019).

Despite appearing preoccupied with the social, 'Bridging the Gap' reverses the roles of structure and agency, such that deeply entrenched structural inequalities were obscured in favor of discourses that deemed social exclusion a consequence of personal agency (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001). The report also employs individualistic and victim-blaming discourse, wherein the myriad realities of the young people it purportedly aims to address are lost. Disparity is only acknowledged and engaged with when it happens to fit within the limited environs of what is deemed acceptable and within the sanctioned timeframes. There is no space

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[5] Coincidentally, the term "neoliberalism" emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to the rising dominion of "market fundamentalism" (Davies, 2014, p. 1) in global public policy of the 1980s and 1990s.

for agency stemming out of community ownership and engagement. In such a scenario, rather than "bridging the gap" for "socially excluded" people, the impact of these policies was more like "closing the door" (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001, p.355).

2.1.1.2 "ConneXions"

"Bridging the Gap" helped make NEET young people a policy priority that resulted in "ConneXions," a youth support service targeted at diminishing the prevalence of inactivity among 16-18-year-olds in the UK by helping them stay longer in school to obtain qualifications, and eventually enter the labour market. Young people partaking in services by ConneXions were provided with individual personal advisers. However, these needed to be more prepared educationally, apart from being expected to embody various roles combined, such as those of youth workers, probation officers, and any others needed to help young people deal with their myriad problems.

This solution was flawed from the outset because the structural problems underlying non-participation and the competitive ideology of the school were ignored. In addition, there were also fundamental questions that remained unanswered, such as whether the personal advisers could effectively work with young people on their terms, whether personal advisers were allowed to help a young person leave an unhappy educational experience if it is their express wish to do so, whether advisers could effectively challenge institutions to defend young people's needs and wants. The issue was that if personal advisers were perceived to be supervising or policing rather than helping, their mission to help and support young people would most likely fail (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001).

The ConneXions initiative resulted in NEET becoming a statistical indicator and another section of the population to sustain with welfare aid (Russell et al., 2010; Simmons &

Thompson, 2011). Reacting to this, Yates and Payne (2006, p. 338) argued that the notion of

NEET defines the individuals concerned by "what they are not" rather than by the qualities that

truly pertain to them, lamenting that the concept is too extensive to gauge the totality of

marginalization, while being simultaneously too limited to grasp the nuances of people's life

situations (Furlong, 2006)[6].

2.1.1.3 Adoption of the NEET concept in the EU

The international European version of the NEET concept that was used in research varied from

the original English concept in several ways:

i.   Whereas the English concept evolved out of concerns for social justice by the

British Labour government (see section above), in the EU, the concept was re-

framed within a "social inclusion"[7] discourse in 2010. The European Commission

Employment Committee (EMCO) agreed that the NEET indicator should study and

follow currents among NEET cohorts in the European Union within the Horizon

2020 strategy, which prioritises innovation and a knowledge-based economy

(Veugelers et al., 2015), including an emphasis on digitalization (Șerban et al.,

2020). In these discourses, the emphasis is not on social justice, but on young people

as a general category who are seen as potential contributors of knowledge,

innovation, and prosperity in the European Union. In this context, NEETs are seen

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[6]In 2007, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education Fiona Hyslop argued against adoption of the NEET term because it 'labels unemployed youngsters'. She maintained instead that young people disengaged from education, employment or training need 'more choices, more chances'. Subsequently Hyslop's words were used to name Scotland's NEET policy strategy (Finlay et al. 2010).

[7] In this context, 'social inclusion' is defined as:

the process of promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all people to participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity" (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, Glossary, 2017). In discourses about social inclusion young people themselves are held responsible in "breaking or overcoming various barriers before acquiring their access to social rights and being able to participate as full members of society (Șerban et al., 2020, p, 17).

as "an eminent loss of human potential and productive capacity, which may threaten prospects of sustained and equitable economic growth" (Eurofound 2012). In sum, these differences reflect two distinctive lenses by means of which young people are considered in the two contexts: the "problem" lens or the "resource" lens. In the UK young people were viewed more as a problem, and the focus therefore was more on factors that included worklessness, STDs, vagabondage, addiction, and deviance prevention. Youth policies were engaged with in the context of social exclusion. From the "youth-as-potential-resource" perspective of the EU, the focus is on "unleashing all young people's potential" (European Commission 2010a, 2015), and to this end, strategies are devised to stimulate youth engagement and participation through education and training (Wallace & Bendit, 2009; Youth 2030[8]).

ii.   The English indicator referred to people aged 15-18 years, whereas the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofund) favored officially extending the EU NEET indicator to span the ages of 15 to 29 years. After 2014, different EU countries conceived of NEET young people as spanning various age ranges, with 15 opting to encompass young people 30 years of age and under within the indicator (Liszka & Walawender, 2018). This more comprehensive age range of the European category was aimed at encompassing a more heterogeneous population than the English indicator did, capturing all currently unemployed young people who were no longer in school, including marginalized groups and disadvantaged people, such as those having lower levels of education, immigrants, those living with disability, or mothers who are still

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[8] Youth 2030 was launched in 2018 by the United Nations as part of its Youth Strategy intended to strengthen the U.N.'s work with and for young people worldwide with regard to peace and security, human rights and sustainable development.

minors. An important factor differentiating the UK NEET concept from the EU indicator is the fact that the latter encompasses more advantaged young people who may choose to take time out for themselves, perhaps to reflect on what inspires them, to wait for a particular opportunity, or even to embark on a new venture or career. The sheer breadth and heterogeneity of the EU NEET indicator reflect the youth-as-potential-resource perspective because it is no longer focused on identifying the most vulnerable young people (O'Reilly et al., 2019). This is symptomatic of the workings of human capital theory (HCT) and "the logic of rates of return – RORs"[9] (Klees, 2017, p.644) that have long dominated in comparative and international education. This leads us to the next point about the hegemony of HCT in research about NEET young people.

iii.   English research has been more informed by qualitative data, while international European research is more inclined to draw from evidence derived from regulated evaluations like the labour force survey. In the latter case, while comparison between countries is facilitated, not enough attention can be given to idiosyncratic complexities emerging from the different welfare systems, for example. This is because the range of possible analyses is limited by the pre-set classifications whereby and wherein the data can be processed, which is wont to happen in surveys in general (Holte, 2018).The abstraction inherent in such modes of research is characterized by detachment, and therefore by a lack of engagement with the lives of people. This in turn facilitates the creation of judgemental categories that are

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[9] Human capital theory emerged in the early 1960s, introducing the view that labour could be analysed according to supply and demand. HCT and RORs hold that upgrading education is an investment in future workers that will yield a multilevel profit. This resulted in focussed research about this payoff in terms of efficiency. One of the ways in which education systems could be more efficient is to produce less dropouts and NEETs, which nobody could quarrel with, until a closer look at discourses about efficiency reveals that social class or socioeconomic background are not of the essence (Klees, 2017).

often not informed by qualitative evidence. In this scenario, there is an attempt to portray the life circumstances of NEET young people according to generic categorizations typical of surveys. This is illustrated in the report "NEETs—Young people not in employment, education or training" (Eurofound, 2012), for example. Five main subgroups within the NEET population feature in this report (Eurofound, 2012, p. 24):

⋮ "the conventionally unemployed […];

⋮ the unavailable, which includes young carers, young people with family responsibilities and young people who are sick or disabled;

⋮ the disengaged: those young people who are not seeking jobs or education and are not constrained from doing so by other obligations or incapacities, and takes in discouraged workers as well as other young people who are pursuing 'dangerous' or 'asocial' lifestyles;

⋮ the opportunity-seekers […];

⋮ the voluntary NEETs […]"

The passive voice characterizes the writing style of this report, and no reference to evidence from empirical research is cited. The subcategories and their descriptions are judgemental ("asocial"; "constructive", for example), presupposing a connection between reasons for being NEET and the lifestyle of NEET individuals. The term 'discouraged' used about workers seeking constructive engagements appears paradoxical or unclear.

2.1.1.4 The NEET concept in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

UNICEF has focused explicitly on equity[10] in education. In 2015 the NEET classification was introduced into the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN)[11], which were set to guide the global development activities of the UN member states till 2030. Goal Eight of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) in particular, committed the 193 member states to, by 2020, promote "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (United Nations, 2015, Overview). The five-year timescale set for these goals denotes the sense of urgency infusing discussions about NEET young people (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017). However, similarly to the E.U. approach, the main concern here appears to be about collecting data related to the status of NEET young people for statistical purposes – whether they are employed or not, for example – rather than about gaining insights into the myriad disadvantages they may experience that serve to exclude them in society. This emerges from a human capital[12] approach and is reflected in the definition of the NEET indicator as a calculation[13] depending largely on surveys (SDG indicator metadata). The quality of such information is of the essence in portraying NEET young people fairly, such that they are viewed as complex human beings, rather than a number or a statistic, which is how they come to be represented in quantitative research designs that rely on "accuracy of respondents' answers" as per pre-set categories and classifications. It is a well-

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[10] Hardly anyone would argue against the need for the world to become more equitable. However, defining equity is problematic, as is the process by which equity is achieved. Explanations and understandings about equity vary according to individuals' underlying beliefs and ideologies. UNICEF's 'equity refocus' moves from emphasis on human rights to an equity approach stemming from the argument that 'human rights cannot be realized so long as inequality persists' (UNICEF, 2010, p. 19).

[11] Klees (2020) argues that The World Bank is in fact in charge of what counts as knowledge and research globally, including UNESCO. It dominates international trends in education policy, and has arrogantly and frighteningly positioned itself as the ''Knowledge Bank", which means that the Bank essentially only values its own research and that of its supporters, privileging ideology over evidence (Klees et al., 2012; Klees, 2020).

[12] Katerina Tomasevski, the first UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), argues that the human capital framework is antithetical to human rights (2003, p.22): "From the human rights viewpoint, education is an end in itself rather than merely a means for achieving other ends. [...] Furthermore, the obsession with enhancing economic growth depletes education of most of the purposes it is designed to serve."

[13] Youth NEET rate $= Youth - (Youth\ in\ employment + Youth\ not\ in\ employment\ but\ in\ education\ or\ training)\ Youth \times 100$ (SDG indicator metadata).

known fact that rich, textured data cannot emanate from quantitatively oriented research approaches, such as the national household survey micro-datasets approved by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians and applied in the ILOSTAT questionnaire that collects data on various labour market topics and indicators.

The Europe 2020 strategy that had been adopted in June 2010, committed EU member states to diminish social marginalisation in Europe by at least 20 million people by 2020 (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017), and that same year UNICEF (2010, p. 19) declared that "human rights cannot be realised so long as inequality persists". Nonetheless, it was recognised that these targets were not likely to be reached, due to the fact that between 2010 and 2013 social exclusion increased from 23.7 to 24.5 per cent – a total of 122 million people (UNECE 2013; Eurofound, 2015).

The EFA (Education for All initiative) (International Bureau of Education, 2023), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2023), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2023) have been condemned as serving mostly to sanction a colossally unequal world system that banishes billions of people to the side-lines of life (Klees, 2017). Efforts to improve education are being sabotaged by an unrelenting focus on "results" and "outcomes" (Klees, 2017, p. 435), which is problematic because they refer to narrow, limited measures of cognitive achievement. A focus on the outcomes has to consider the logic of how this must be balanced with equal focus on the inputs: "child-friendly schools" require attention, sustained nourishment and the provision of adequate resources (Klees, 2017, p. 432). If we hold education to be a human right, then it is unacceptable to wait until 2030 or 2040 to make it happen (Tomasevski, 2003; Klees, 2017).

The emphasis on measurement reflects rationalization – the dissolution of culture in favour of a heartless education system, as articulated in the work of Max Weber (1864-1920), who had said that modern schools no longer promoted the elite cultivation of the past, but favoured instead the bureaucratic model, where the school is administered like the government and the corporation (Madan, 2014) which "generate their own rules and modus operandi" (Mayo, 2011, p. 21). The school as a bureaucratic institution emphasized impersonality and relied heavily on hierarchy to maintain control. Impersonality served to accentuate the importance of efficiency and competition above all. The bureaucratic impulsion toward rationalisation affected the education system profoundly. One consequence addressed by Weber was the increased weight given to experts and to examinations as a tool for documenting competence and qualification (Rao & Singh, 2018). Fitting perfectly with the exercise of power within bureaucracies, the examination was devised as a means of ascertaining suitability by a selection board that did not know candidates personally.

An education system centred on examinations devalued personality and subjectivity, which led to regimentation of learning and knowledge and to the oversimplification of curricular content. In this scenario, which indeed we are witnessing today, being educated has come to be defined according to a prioritised technical rationality, where the goal is efficient, but lacking cultural depth (Madan, 2014). Weber saw the tendency of bureaucracies to employ the most pragmatic and frequently conservative methods as part of a growing impetus towards instrumental rationality that was overshadowing other forms of reason.

2.1.2 Criticisms of the NEET Concept

The NEET concept is primarily criticized for the sheer diversity of situations that it seeks to embrace (Furlong, 2006; Saloniemi et al., 2020; Serracant, 2014), especially, albeit not exclusively, in the way it is used in the EU: the large range of the group, the myriad family

commitments, complex reasons for being away from education, training and work, illness and disability, personal life goals and so forth. Circumstances implicated in the indicator sabotage its aim to identify factors potentially leading to social exclusion, thus interfering with understanding complexity and hindering policy-making (McPherson, 2021).

Another point of criticism is that typical of capitalist discourse, the concept often addresses people rather than circumstances, which results in the phenomenon being viewed from a deficit perspective – one that focuses on individual deficit, rather than on disadvantage and flawed social policies (Cuzzocrea et al., 2013; Kleif, 2021; Serracant, 2014). As Klees (2020, pp. 11-12) argues, human capital discourse, such as the term "Knowledge Economy," is most pernicious because solving the problems of poverty and inequality is reductively associated with insufficient skills and education rather than widespread systemic factors that enable and normalise poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

An essential shortcoming or inadequacy of NEET discourse is that it is infused with a distant, generalising approach to people, shrouding them in anonymity and vagueness such that it becomes easy to make sweeping statements about them. The young people's lifeworld, ecosystem, embodied existence, struggles, and life situations are arrogantly rendered small and insignificant, reduced to an acronym wielded according to neoliberal agendas (Sefa Dei, 2019). It is no wonder that the neoliberal reasoning that "education leads to skills, skills lead to employment, employment leads to economic growth, economic growth creates jobs and is the way out of poverty and inequality" is incomprehensible (Klees, 2020, p.12). The choice of the NEET term prioritises capitalist agenda-laden policies that serve those in power and not the disadvantaged.

This individualising quality of the NEET concept has resulted in flawed policies. Interventions tend to be aimed at helping young people progress from NEET to EET, lacking the indispensable focus on the elements at the root of their alienation or disengagement (Mäkelä et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2011; Serracant, 2014) and therefore the crucial awareness that being NEET is often a symptom of acute problems in society that need to be addressed first (Klees, 2017, 2020; Yates & Payne, 2006).

Another critique leveled at the NEET concept is that it distracts attention from other problematic phenomena. Robson (2008) maintains that in the UK, the focus on NEETs has cast youth unemployment in the shadows, whereas Furlong (2006) argues that the NEET concept is too obsessed with un/employment, which he believes is not the best approach to dealing with the complex lives of young people.

Finally, the NEET indicators are intended to report on young people, whereas unemployment can occur in all age groups (Serracant, 2014). This focus on younger people could be justified because large numbers of NEET young people could significantly affect the future labour market (Barham et al., 2009; McPherson, 2021). Nevertheless, the phenomenon may be exacerbated when parents are unemployed or engaged in precarious work while their NEET children live in their parental home (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007; Unt et al., 2021).

2.1.3 Understandings of the NEET Concept

Different people may have differing understandings of concepts such as "education", "employment", "training" and "NEET" (Holte, 2018 p.10). Also, as Baggio et al. (2015) note, NEETs are a hugely diverse population including myriad subgroups with commonalities and distinctions. Short-term NEETs must be distinguished from long-term NEETs, for instance.

In this research, the people I spoke with in the field did not conceptualise the NEET concept as it is used in published research. From short conversations that I have had with random tutors at Youth Guarantee before commencing with data collection, I noticed that they conceived of the attending NEET young people as a homogeneous group sharing common problematic or disadvantageous qualities, such as probably being interested in useless things, being lazy, having some disability, or as being intellectually challenged. The research participants themselves, as the research findings reveal, had their interpretations of their life situations, and the term NEET did not feature in them at all.

Holte (2018) distinguishes three levels of meaning to the NEET concept. Firstly, the understanding of NEET rests on clear differentiation between following an educational course, being employed, or being in training (EET) and NEET status. For young people in general, this differentiation may not be at all obvious or clear-cut since being NEET is often a time in their life that is marked by personal upheavals, changes and experimentation with temporary and part-time jobs, training, and educational courses (Russell et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2014). Also, although in the language of statistics earning money characterizes the notion of employment and work, people may perceive work in other terms, such as a ritual, as a necessity or duty in some aspect of their life. For example, the experience of work in the voluntary sector can help people find meaning in their lives, a sense of belonging and dignity, as well as exposure to other realities while being out of the labour market (Muelebach, 2012; Prince & Brown, 2016; Simmons et al., 2014). Thus the concept of NEET may lend itself usefully for counting purposes, but not necessarily for engaging with human complexity, both during the qualitative research process (Giret et al., 2020) and in all aspects of working with people, particularly in all endeavours serving the common good and that can serve to dismantle the power of the neoliberal story (Ledwith, 2020).

Secondly, connotations of the NEET concept in various contexts determine its meaning. When I used it during the data collection phase for this research, for the people I spoke with, the concept conjured up images of vulnerable youth or youth "at risk" who were academically challenged, lived in poverty, or engaged in petty crime, youth gangs, or substance abuse. These images reflect prevailing dominant discourses about marginalized youth and are assimilated by adults in authority in the field. In fact, during a participant observation phase, one of the tutors assured me that the young people I was going to observe were "academically subnormal," "apathetic," and "weak" and needed assistance to read and fill in the recruitment letter that I was using for my research. I found a completely different reality when I started observing and later on while I conducted the semi-structured in-depth interviews with the research participants. This proves that an awareness of and a sensitivity to current dominant discourses are indispensable in understanding the NEET concept.

Thirdly, terms such as NEET can exacerbate marginalization besides identifying it. Follesø (2015, p. 245) argues that risk discourses only serve to exclude because "risk" is a label that refers to indefinite "others" in everyday life. This happens during research, where researchers focus on populations described as "at risk," it happens among young people, who relate and refer to each other in ways that are alien to the "risk" discourse of research and politics. It happens everywhere because we all are more inclined to speak of "others" as being at "risk" rather than ourselves. In such a scenario, nobody identifies as "at risk."

I experienced this first-hand while working in the field to collect the data for this research. When asked to explain what my research was about, the term "NEET" meant nothing to the young people concerned, and therefore I re-framed my definition and reached out to them as "young people just out of school", or "young people in transition from school to the world of

work," or simply as "young people" or "youth" – I repeatedly had to explain that my research was about the experiences of young people who were currently taking a break from, or who for various reasons were out of education, training, and work.

The NEET descriptor always struck me as being offensive towards the young people concerned somehow, and I did not feel comfortable using it with the research participants to explain their qualification for my research. As Holte (2018) argues, there is an inclination to conceive of NEET young people as "others" – disreputable and treacherous others even – which is also what happens when the label "at risk" is used. Young people (I would add human beings in general) do not necessarily think of themselves in terms of labels or categories assigned to them by experts and authorities. We are all phenomenologically immersed in our universe, our personal lives – largely immune to discourses about us 'out/up there.' Similarly, young people who qualify as NEET do not particularly tend to think of themselves in this way, for they are more likely to focus on what they are indeed doing in their lives than on what they are failing to do, according to the authorities.

2.2. Labeling and young people - What does being "at risk" mean?

The NEET label serves to perpetuate the marginalization and stigmatization of the young people concerned (Brunila et al., 2020; Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019; MacDonald, 2011; Matos et al., 2019; Thompson, 2011), exemplifying a victim-blaming stance that has linked NEET young people and their parents to undesirable qualities such as laziness and lack of healthy values. This then feeds into the general assumption (popular media and often academic) that NEET young people do not want to study or work (Giret et al., 2020; Robson, 2008), a process reminiscent of the moral panics outlined by Cohen (1973), who held that a group of people sometimes comes to be put in the limelight by being described as a threat to society and is

featured stereotypically by the mass media and experts or leading people of that particular society, the latter diagnosing and coming up with "solutions" This so-called threat may disappear over time. However, it can be escalated, impacting legal and social policy and society's perception of itself (Cohen, 1973).

According to Cohen (1973, p. 197), moral panics are exceptional instances where the process of labeling and deviancy escalates, and "folk devils" come into being, fulfilling a function of acknowledging and consolidating the cornerstones of society. The role of the media cannot be overstated in this process. This includes exaggeration and distortion – for example, when young people are featured as "problem," "lazy," or "idle," accompanied by bleak predictions for their future. In this research, such "panic" may be observed in the reaction of the education authorities, given students' resistance to opportunities offered at school, for example. The resulting discourse depicts the case of early school leavers and NEETs as if there were no possible alternative but to follow the prescribed educational and career path. The media's use of symbolization is also significant, where words or terms that signify threat or degeneration are used to describe people's lifestyle or situations – Mods and Rockers in Cohen's (1973) work, but in the case of the present research, these would be replaced by the acronym NEET.

Critcher (2008) argues that moral panics are forms of discourse and ways of speaking that construct one version of an issue in such a way as to obscure all other possible ones. Dominant discourses and procedures collude in identifying and legitimating those who have the right to speak, the conditions in which they do so, and for what purpose. Moral panic discourses focus on "folk devils" in society. Examples from our times include asylum seekers, immigrants, teen mums, and all "parasites," including "NEETs."

Most qualitative research about NEETs has involved mainly working-class young people, particularly from low-income families (Bloomfield et al., 2020; Finlay et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2011). This could reflect the dominant views about what causes young people to find themselves in the NEET situation or also the researchers' bias vis-à-vis NEET young people participating in the research (Thompson, 2017). NEETs everywhere are often attributed stigmatising labels: "vulnerable," "marginalised," "excluded," and "at risk": in Hong Kong, NEET youth are referred to as *double loss youth – 'the twice failed'*, referring to their apparent failure in both school and employment; in China, they are labeled as *parasite single, kenlaozu* (the tribe that relies on the old), or *daidingzu* (the tribe of undetermined); in Japan they are *hikikomori* (those who are socially withdrawn and refuse school, or 'caged youth'); in Taiwan 'NEET' are often called *home-squatting wastrels, cocooned kids, wallowers* or *the drowned* (Huang, 2007); in Catalonia and Spain NEETs have been named *Generacion ni-ni*; in Italy and Germany respectively they have been called *Bamboccioni* and *Nesthocker* – terms used to refer to young men who prefer to remain in the parents' home and resist growing up (O'Reilly et al., 2019). In some Western countries, they are also named *Boomerang Kids* (Serracant, 2014; Tam et al., 2016).

Labels such as these reflect value judgments about what people deem to be a "right" education and a "successful" outcome (Biesta, 2020, 2019; Veiga-Neto & Lopes, 2017). This is particularly meaningful for our times, which Bauman describes as "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2011), an epoch wherein social structures disintegrate faster than new ones can come into being. Bauman argues that survival is people's primary preoccupation nowadays, as the pervasive uncertainty and resulting anxiety sap our energy and blur our vision in striving for advancement. The role of education is especially sensitive in

these times because envisioning and planning for the future is hindered by unpredictable social conditions (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008; Sarid, 2017).

Prioritised curricula, regimentation and uniformity, facilitate the smooth running of schools but serve to act in favor of some young people and against others. Many students are alienated by the school system that does not value who they are and where they come from.

Dominant discourses in schools reflect "risk society" (Beck, 1992, 2010; Kelly, 2010) and inherently create the very vulnerability and risk that young people are described by and intervened upon in these institutions. In this scenario, teenagers and their families are held responsible for whatever difficulty they might find themselves in (Biesta, 2020): it is their fault that they are addicts, young parents, poor, and illiterate, for example (Giret et al., 2020; Giroux, 2009; te Riele, 2006).

Despite there being evidence (Carcillo et al., 2015; Eurofound, 2012, 2016;) revealing NEETs' heterogeneity, including myriad life situations that can be associated with vulnerability, using an "at risk" label to describe NEETs is unjustifiable (Dias & Vasconcelos, 2020; Giret et al., 2020). A body of critical research about the NEET concept (for example, Maguire, 2015; Reiter & Schlimbach, 2015; Serracant, 2014; Thompson, 2011) takes it to task for its deficit approach, as well as when it is used to look at the NEET phenomenon as static rather than as fluid (Couronné & Sarfati, 2018; Manana & Rule, 2021; Yates & Payne, 2006).

When we speak about youth, we understand that this is about growth, development, and becoming. We think of young people in terms of our future and recognise that what happens to them as they grow and become will have consequences on this future - theirs and that of society. Logically, the persistence in promoting and using discourses of youth at-risk can seriously

impair this same future we refer to (Kelly, 2011). Meanings surrounding youth emerge from dominant discourses sanctioned and institutionalized by experts. These discourses normalise particular ways of thinking about deviance, education, family, employment, transitions, and personal trajectories (Collins & Mead, 2021; Kelly, 2010).

Young people who resist uniformity in asserting their knowledge and culture are more likely to be treated as deviant (Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014; Teemant et al., 2021). In such situations, they are told that their only hope is to give themselves to the benevolent, charitable system that knows best and on condition that they reform. Those who resist will subsequently be categorized as "parasites" and included in stereotypical discourses that curiously assume that the host is irreproachable or perfect. Pyscher and Lozenski (2014) contend that the situations that such students find themselves in are symptomatic of an unhealthy host.

Discourses and institutions are modes of representation that have an insidious effect on people's minds, inhibiting their capacity to engage critically with the world and participate in democracy (Biesta, 2019). Giroux (2013, 2016) engages with this phenomenon using Didi-Huberman's "disimagination machine"[14] concept, which can serve to illustrate the dynamics whereby colonising cultural mechanisms that include schools and mass media desensitize people, weakening their capacity to dialogue meaningfully with the world. Giroux (2013) focuses on the authorities' role in enabling this "disimagination machine" when they design educational policies that prioritise rote learning and vehement measurement over critical pedagogy. This kind of education creates an infantile population dangerously indifferent to

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[14] Giroux (2013) engages with Georges Didi-Huberman's (2012) use of the term "disimagination machine," in his description of Nazi violence at Auschwitz concentration camp, to argue that the politics of disimagination refers to modes of representation that sabotage people's ability to articulate a point of view that defies the status quo. The "disimagination machine" comprises cultural apparatuses that sabotage personal agency for critical engagement.

how politics are interwoven in every aspect of their everyday life and that is addicted to instant gratification (Biesta, 2019). Of particular concern, as Biesta (2019) argues, is the fact that those same institutions that in the past used to help control individual pursuit of instant gratification are themselves caught up in doing the pursuing.

In these neoliberal times, being a student means that one is expected to be accountable for one's own progress in school, know oneself, be up-to-date, and self-confident in seeking out what is useful and important. Neoliberal governments are no longer responsible for the welfare of the people, who, in this scenario, are conceived as accountable, independent thinkers, self-confident, eloquent, and resourceful (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2020; Kelly, 2010; Nelson & Charteris, 2021).

 This emphasis on shouldering one's responsibilities at a young age is designed to groom young people to think of themselves as flexible beings who can change and adapt as necessary in an ever-changing environment. Thus, they become ideally positioned to submit themselves to the ideal advertised to them by contemporary capitalism (Beck, 1992, 2010). The latter aims at "producing desires" and "installing" them into our heads (Biesta, 2019, p. 665). For Beck (1992) the unabashed infiltration of the market into the very capillaries of human lives and the ensuing siege on young people's thoughts and imagination is nothing short of colonization, manipulating the young into viewing themselves as unlimited beings who can morph into anything deemed necessary or desirable. Notions of "personal responsibility" and "equal opportunity" (Barry, 2005, p. 43; Kelly, 2010, p. 26) are broadly perceived as conniving to shroud the machinations designed to perpetuate the privileges of the rich and the disadvantage of those living on the margins (Vallee, 2017).

2.3. Researching NEETs

Any qualitative research conducted with elusive cohorts such as NEETs, benefits from the establishment of rapport between the researcher and the researched. This can be achieved by using ethnographic methods to collect the data (Feixa et al., 2020; Simmons et al., 2014). Such methods include participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviewing, which I have used in this work. Qualitative research, as in the case of IPA, entails that researchers meet research participants face to face and explain the research to them and to potential gatekeepers (Holte, 2018). Explaining the research can be challenging because technical language and categories deriving from policy and quantitative research, as is the case of the NEET classification, may not make sense to people "out there". This is because they may have different understandings of the same concept, even if it applies to themselves (Follesø, 2015).

This contradiction echoes Østerberg's (1976) distinction between "the anonymous" and "the authentic", where "the anonymous is the repeated, the standardized, the indirect, as opposed to the authentic, which is the characteristic, the original, the direct" (Østerberg, 1976, p. 38). Counting focuses on anonymous qualities or attributes of people's lives that they have in common with masses of other people and can be converted into countable units. This can be very useful for policymakers; it could help them monitor the number of young people outside of education, employment and training at a given timespan. Indeed, modern forms of government depend on the collection of statistics (e.g., Burchell et al., 1991; Hind, 2022; Kasperson & Pijawka, 2022; Scott, 1998). However, the complexity of human experience cannot be known or understood by counting. Therefore the individual lived experience of becoming and being NEET cannot be grasped by employing quantitative research approaches. Various studies have highlighted the crucial impact that the family situation, especially in the early years, and the nature of school experience have on children, being consequential in terms

of whether those children eventually drop out of school prematurely or stay on (e.g., Alexander et al., 2001; Duchesne et al., 2008; Emerson et al., 2016; Gausel & Bourguignon, 2020; Porche et al., 2011; Stempel et al., 2017). Adopting a long-term approach is seen as effective in ensuring that marginalized children are supported as early as possible, especially since there is evidence that early childhood education can positively impact the propensity of young people considered "at risk" to leave school early (e.g., Reynolds et al., 2001; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Young et al., 2020).

The following section will review selected empirical research about NEETs spanning the last twenty years. The review of research will be presented in three sections, reflecting the research questions that this study seeks to answer: research related to possible causes of becoming NEET, including factors deriving from previous school experiences, research related to the lived experience of being NEET, and research related to NEET young people's transition into employment and adult life.

2.3.1 Becoming NEET

Research about NEETs is voluminous, predominantly about possible causes of ending up alienated from education, training, and employment and the long-term consequences of being NEET. Most research is conducted quantitatively (see for example, Arnardottir, 2020; Bonanomi & Rosina, 2020; Bynner & Parsons, 2002), often from a judgemental stance that views being NEET (and the young people concerned) as a problem. This attitude is often accompanied by an inclination (or missionary zeal) to pathologize and seek interventions for the young persons concerned. Relatively scarce attention is given to the lived experiences of being NEET, a gap that this research attempts to address by encountering the NEET young person at this place, where they are suspended in time between past compulsory schooling and the transition into adulthood that is generally held to be symbolised by an entry into the labour

market. For this reason, I am presenting a review of the literature about NEETs reflecting the three phases encapsulated by the lifeworld of the young person at the time of this research.

During the last decade or so, there have been increased international comparisons of NEET rates, but other facets of youth trajectories have been less addressed, due to multiple views about post-compulsory education and training and diverse understandings of unemployment, among other factors (Albaek et al., 2015; Lundahl & Brunila, 2020). In the last 30-40 years, there has been a tendency to look for educational solutions to the transitions of young people rather than an engagement with structural factors, particularly those related to the labour market (Lundahl & Brunila, 2020). This emphasis risks obscuring significant issues related to young people's lifeworlds.

The reinforced impact of "psy-discourses" (e.g., psychological, psychiatric, psychotherapy) (Irisdotter et al., 2020, p.168) can be viewed as highly influencing this educational empowerment of children and young people, as can be seen by the increased importance being given to "at risk" discourses and therefore to therapy. Psy-discourses provide a platform to deal with identifiable and controllable factors related to young people, such as motivation, attitudes, and intelligence. Political claims inspired by psy-discourses are aimed at helping young people cope from a vulnerability or deficit perspective. Youth issues have come to be framed within a pathologising discourse (Lundahl & Brunila, 2020) that finds itself woven within research about NEETs, such as the European Social Fund Census of 2013, that was conducted in Malta. This census has produced findings that show that NEET young people found school uninteresting and unmotivating. The Census report included values and language deriving from the psy-professions, such as NEETs' self-confidence levels that resulted low. In recommending revision of the current educational model, it singled out young people deemed predisposed to

become NEET. The authors also judge that more vocational-oriented courses are needed to retain more young people in schools and avoid their becoming NEET. They pathologize young people by recommending that teachers are provided with specialised training on how to deal with students that show signs of pre-disposition towards becoming NEET. It is as if the authors are speaking about aliens or at least a class of "others":

> many of the participants exhibited a high degree of low self-confidence. Therefore, it is highly recommended to rethink the current educational model being provided to potential NEETs (i.e. those predisposed to become NEETs) and to offer more vocational oriented courses that offer a hands on work experience (youths must be able to understand the purpose of education) ... It is recommended that teachers and educators are provided more training with respect to how to deal with students that show signs of pre-disposition towards becoming NEET. (European Social Fund, 2013, p. 99).

Further to Lundahl and Brunila's (2020) concern about the critique regarding framing young people in a vulnerability or deficit perspective, in Malta Cefai and Cooper's research (2010) sought to capture "voice of students with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties … in an authentic and emancipatory way" (p. 183). Indeed, such young people may be considered vulnerable and prone to disengagement from school and become NEET, given the adverse circumstances they may be experiencing, as this research shows (see Chapter Six). However, given the emancipatory aim of Cefai and Cooper's (2010) study, the selected focus does not reflect an emancipatory approach: "poor relationships with teachers, victimisation, a sense of oppression and powerlessness, unconnected learning experiences, and exclusion and stigmatisation" (p.183). This choice was made even though, as the authors state, other

important themes had emerged, including "school, peers, individual and family issues" (p.186). Cefai and Cooper (2010) justify their choice of focus by arguing that "the perspective of students with Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) on their educational experiences" (p. 186) deserved more attention. Similarly, the research conducted by Magri (2009) in Maltese schools aimed at investigating girls' experiences of exclusion at school "due to their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties" (SEBD) (p. ii). Categories and labels help those in power keep order, but do not serve the categorized and the labelled themselves. Using labels such as "SEBD" uncritically in research can serve to reinforce systems of oppression, such as pathological discourses that can have a stigmatising effect on the individuals under study (Deakin et al., 2020; Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021; Mowat, 2015). As with the NEET label, such categorizations only serve to help young people cope from a vulnerability or deficit perspective.

The findings from both studies highlight the value of conflict resolution and classroom management skills. These deserve to be given more importance in teacher training and educational institutions since they impact the climate of the classroom and of the school itself, affecting the well-being of both students and teachers alike (see also de Bademci et al., 2020; Cefai et al., 2016; Downes, 2013; Poulou, 2020; Ruiter et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2020).

The findings confirm that teachers' autocratic and rigid style exacerbated the alienation of struggling students. It was found that feelings of being discriminated against by teachers, or even being bullied by them, were more common than expected, and the consequences emerged as being more harmful than bullying by other students. This fact appears to explain students' propensity to disengage from school (Juvonen et al., 2011; Lacey & Cornell, 2013; Longobardi

et al., 2020; Mehta et al., 2013; Tsukawaki & Imura, 2020). These findings reflect those from Willis's famous ethnographic research *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1981).

This classic research is an example of approaching young people from their frame of reference – it shows how, rather than being the passive victims, young people alienated by school culture could reject school by failing themselves. The "lads" realise that all their efforts would not help them catch up with their middle-class peers, nor would their toil enable them to reap the same rewards and prizes enjoyed by their high achieving middle-class counterparts. So, they make their own rules to resist school, an act that raises their sense of self-worth. Similarly, an anthropological study by Cheung and Lin (2015) in Xiamen, China, documents the resistance to school and family of a group of students who were members of a counter-school subculture**.** Cheung and Lin (2015) argue that the young people's resistance to the rules helped consolidate their subculture as a haven for "misfits," a safe place where members mutually supported each other within an alienating school system. Contrary to dominant discourses in society, education is not the panacea for young people's problems or poverty (see also Bettie, 2014; McLeod, 2012).

Other research investigates family background as a possible contributing factor to becoming NEET. The survey conducted by findings from the research of Alfieri et al. (2015) in Italy indicate that the mother's education level is influential, affecting the child's educational development and whether that child becomes NEET or not. The findings show the importance of resilience as a personal quality in young people, helping them be more independent and less likely to become NEET. The same study reveals a propensity for children of unsupportive parents to disengage from school completely and turn to precarious employment, which, not lasting, must eventually lead them to be NEET. These results rely on statistical analyses and

may be seen as lacking the necessary detail to comprehend the lifeworld of young people and to draw conclusions that reflect the intricacies of their lives. This is a recommendation made by Boylan and Renzulli (2017), whose quantitative research in the U.S. investigated the incentives behind the decision to leave school prematurely. Their findings highlight the necessity and importance of listening to the students, since the likelihood of richer and more unexpected data emerging will be greater than when researchers adopt dogmatic approaches. One such dogmatic approach is that of associating NEETs with myriad societal malaises. The longitudinal qualitative study by Lőrinc et al. (2019) builds on such an assumption. It draws upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to investigate the archaeology of marginalization experienced by 53 young London NEETs. Viewing NEETs as "collateral damage" (Bauman, 2011) and as mere statistical figures, Lőrinc et al. (2019) show no commitment to the lived experiences of the young people concerned. They cite previous research that lists the negative and even tragic consequences of being NEET for sustained periods, such as financial hardship, feelings of low self-worth, and various psycho-social difficulties that impact relationships. They also sustain their deficit argument by positing academic under-attainment as a main factor for becoming NEET, therefore adhering to a blame-the-victim rationalization. Nonetheless, the authors maintain that they reject the individualization of the "NEET problem," claiming instead that individual experiences are embedded "within wider socio-structural macro-contexts" (p. 414). Based on the data gathered for this research, I argue that tragedy or misfortune is like an act of God, if this can be considered as a "macro-context" – they happen randomly and are not a result of man-made structures, or not all of them at least. If one is born with a disability, for example, as in the case of Rachel in this research, one's quality of life and self-confidence will be impacted, including one's attitude towards school. Such a young person may be more likely to be bullied and traumatized, and to leave school early for self-protection.

Lőrinc et al. (2019) use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development (1979) to reject the individualization of the "NEET problem" (p .412). According to this theory, a person's environment can be understood as ecological structures that interact while being distinct. These "systems" (the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem, respectively) emanate in concentric circles from the individual who is situated solitarily at the center (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) places the family on the same plane with peers and school in the microsystem. Since the young person is the product of the family ecological system, including the family in the same circle as the young person would have illustrated this reality more clearly. This thinking also resonates with Shafi et al.'s (2020) view that a web-like structure would represent young people's lifeworld better, connecting Bronfenbrenner's concentric circles to show the structure of the systems shaping human experience, which are also dependent on the individual's agency within contexts. Other critical views of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model also maintain that it is anthropocentric, lacking consideration for the fact that the individual is not separate from the very fabric he or she consists of, as can be seen in indigenous cultures where there is no separation between the human and the natural world or spiritual realms (Cajete, 2003; Hokari, 2011; Manning, 2017, 2009; Sommerville & Perkins, 2011).

Lőrinc et al. (2019) offer no solution – they use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory to blame NEETs' hardships on the powers that be, excusing schools as underfunded and not giving voice and value to the lived experiences of NEETs – young people struggling in transition. The authors provide a macro perspective, and the nuances of real-lived life remain unexplored. The structures of a machine do not cause personal tragedy. It is devastating on a human level.

Indeed, schools (and young people, their families, and society) would benefit from funding (p.415), but what would be useful and just to young people is a school system that acknowledges the realities and histories of all young people and normalises support for those who struggle, as in cases where adverse experiences threaten to alienate them from continuing their education.

The authors deterministically conclude from their research findings that "the agentic potential of these very marginalised young people was extremely constrained, and often defeated by structures of disadvantage located at various levels of their social ecologies" (p. 424). I find the terms "constrained" and "defeated" to be contentious, for the authors are imposing their beliefs and foreknowledge upon the lifeworld of these young people, judging from the outside. Findings from the present research indicate that the definition of success is very subjective. A fourteen- or fifteen-year-old engaging critically with school procedures, contemplating and choosing to drop out of school early is an expression of agency – it is a powerful act in its own right.[15]

2.3.2 Being NEET

The idea of "experience" evokes the concept of time and all that happens within it. A dimension included in this present research seeks to understand the priorities and attitudes of NEET young people by focusing on how the research participants typically spent their time. Gaspani's (2019) study has also attempted to do the same with NEETs in Italy by investigating the everyday realities of NEET young people, focusing on their typical days that in his view,

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[15] Gert Biesta has suggested that education should be oriented toward 'qualification, socialization, and subjectification'. Biesta (2020a) describes subjectification as having to do with the freedom to act in and with the world thoughtfully or critically, which resonates with Adorno's (1998) description of freedom as meaning the ability to think critically and act as necessary even when faced with limited knowledge. This notion sheds important light on young people's decision to leave school prematurely and become 'NEET'.

revealed personal preferences in structuring their available time. Gaspani (2019) argues that the structuring of time is not only associated with what one does at a certain point, for how long one does it, and how often; instead, it reflects the personal meanings connected to them, individual contexts, and relationships with others.

Although Gaspani (2019) refers to the research participants as NEETs, their age is 28-34, making them adults by common standards. For this reason, the findings in Gaspani's (2019) study reflect another reality to that of the research participants in the present study, who are NEET young people aged 18-24 years. Gaspani (2019) argues that focusing on young adults is justified by the extended and complex transition to adulthood in the Italian context. Nevertheless, there are commonalities between his research findings and the present one. For example, both NEET young people and young adults may react to the absence of structured time provided by education, training, or employment by using available resources and resorting to alternative ways to manage their time. In Gaspani's (2019) study, for example, the leitmotiv in the interviews with young adults who are parents (mothers and fathers) is the issue of lack of control over personal time and not finding time for themselves. In the present research, the participants had time, of which a large proportion was spent on social media.

The idea of exploring the attitudes of NEETs towards time and how they spend their time reflects a curious stance, a respectful one that does not judge but instead seeks to explore, which is often lacking in studies about NEET young people. This may be because many researchers follow the deficit model trend propagated by society and policymakers, where the NEET young person is seen as representing disorder and chaos. One such research focusing on the mental health of NEETs is that of Gutiérrez-García et al. (2018), where the aim was to investigate the psychological and anthropometric characteristics of NEETs as "emerging

adults" when compared to their more successful peers. Describing NEETs as "emerging adults" does not do them justice because their complexity as adolescents and their right to be young are thereby not acknowledged. It is as if there is a reluctance to engage with the essential youthfulness of these young people and a preference to view them as adults. There is also an injustice in the a priori judgment that associates them with mental health problems and the interest in "socio-demographic characteristics" that favors a view of them as a population rather than as the individuals they are. The authors' secondary objective of evaluating their perceived reasons for being NEET sounds promising in their interest in listening to these young people's perspectives on their situation. However, they then colonize these voices by checking whether the reasons they give for being NEET tick any boxes for established mental health characteristics. The research participants were asked to give reasons for being out of education, training, and employment, and their answers were prescribed according to categories related to having to do housework, the inability to find employment or admission to a school, deliberate choice, and not knowing what to do. Other possible reasons were glossed over, perhaps deemed extraneous to the set categories, which appears to negate the full human experience of being NEET, privileging the researchers' agenda.

Data from the research of Gutiérrez-García et al. (2018) suggest that the experience of being NEET may vary according to the reason for being NEET and the age of the individual. The explanation they give to this finding is that in each age category, there are specific life paths that are more "socially acceptable" and "less deviant". These would, therefore, not be considered symptomatic of mental health challenges. In my view, there is danger in subscribing to the belief that if one does not "behave," there is something psychologically wrong with the person. However, this may not be as far-fetched as it seems, considering current school disciplinary protocols.

Continuing in the same deficit vein, the authors expressed surprise that those NEETs who said they were in this situation because they were unable to find a job or were admitted to a school "had less risk of a substance use disorder and illicit drug use than those NEET by choice" (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018, p. 8). According to the authors, the possible explanation is that this is a "temporary" situation, the duration of which was not extended enough to affect them psychologically. It is not clear how they have arrived at this conclusion. People living their lives have no idea of what will happen next at any given time, including the circumstance of being NEET in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2013).

Thompson (2017) focuses on government re-engagement strategies or "opportunity structures" (p. 749) as a way of understanding being NEET. A deficit lens is used to look at these young people, focusing on "risk factors", "educational marginality" and their "long-term scarring" (p. 750), and citing literature that portrays them as "problematic" and "stigmatized" (p. 750). Thompson (2017) set out to examine the school experiences of NEET young people during the first 16 years of their life, up to when they first became NEET, arguing that being aware of frameworks of opportunity that are accessible to young people is essential to comprehend the intricacies of risk factors. Thompson (2017) highlights a lack of qualitative research about the complexities of these young people's realities, a gap that the present research also seeks to address.

Following the lives of English NEET young people from age 14 to 20, Knight and Schoon (2017) address the concept of complexity from a psychological perspective, focusing on the notion of locus of control in NEET young people as a way of understanding their lived experience of being NEET and the impact of agency on their situation at this point in their life. The authors (2017, p. 2126) argue that internal locus of control could save "disadvantaged"

youth from precarious post-compulsory education transition experiences. They further argue that internal locus of control does not protect these young people against remaining indefinitely unemployed after school completion because socioeconomic constraints tend to impair the effectiveness of agency. The problem with this approach to understanding the lived experience of being NEET is that despite the weight it carries in psychology, the locus of control concept has its flaws (Palenzuela, 1984; Weiner, 1995). Weiner (1995) famously argued that the concept of "locus of control" was deceiving since a person could have an internal locus while believing that they were or were not in control; in the same way, one could have an external locus while believing in some instances that one either was or was not in control. Weiner (1995) argued that while ability and effort have internal loci, effort can be controlled, but ability cannot.

In contrast to the research discussed above, Simmons and Smyth's (2016) research moves away from a deficit lens to viewing being NEET. It approaches the phenomenon from a Marxist perspective, critically engaging with the dynamic between the period after secondary schooling and the rising worklessness of young people in Western economies. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic research about the lives of young people classified as NEET, the authors interrogate dominant discourses about young people in this situation and critique market-led neoliberal ideology that sets out to turn people from dependent citizens into autonomous[16] "entrepreneurs of the self", arguing that those who do not comply are blamed for their own hardship (see also Biesta, 2019, 2020; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). The findings from Simmons and Smyth's (2016) research reflect some aspects of the findings from the present research, in that certain provisions presented as having the aim of engaging or re-engaging NEET young people

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[16] Biesta (2014, p. 142) interrogates the idea of whether anyone can ever be truly autonomous. While being important, autonomy is a problematic concept, especially considering how dependent the idea is upon the notion of an advantaged person who is healthy and generally held to be 'normal' in their environment.

in education, training, and work might rather be reinforcing their marginalization (p. 137). The authors argue that the state colludes with neoliberal arrangements through strategies aimed at motivating, reconnecting, or coercing individuals to participate in education and work (Simmons & Smyth, 2016). Data from their research suggest that coercion is becoming dominant for young working-class people across all forms of post-compulsory interventions, which are promoted as the solution to youth unemployment. Such measures, the authors claim, reflect a blame-the-victim stance characteristic of neoliberal ideology. While the ethnographic research method drawn upon respects young people classified as NEETs by seeking to privilege the participants' experiences – through participant observation, interviews, life history maps, photographs, qualification certificates, and other relevant documents – data analysis was highly influenced by the researchers' agenda to illustrate Strathdee's (2013) thesis of three strategies used by the state to encourage young people's "capitalist accumulation" (Simmons & Smythe, 2016, p. 143). They use Habermas' (1996) *Legitimation Crisis* to study NEETs' perceptions of interventions described as motivating, bridging, and punishing (coercing), intended to attract the young people concerned back to education and work. This agenda-laden approach may have prevented the authors from accessing other elements in the young people's lived experiences that they would not have been aware of at the start of the research.

Similarly, Parola and Felaco's (2020) research reflects a focus on risk terminology, where the "doomsday" or "disaster" endpoint is created and defined by dominant capitalist and neoliberal powers. The authors describe being NEET as a risk and a failure of young people to transition from school into the world of work (see also Bonanomi & Rosina, 2020; Giret et al., 2020). It is questionable whether young people think in terms of risk and impending doom as they go about living their lives. The present study seeks to discover their meaning-making, filling this research gap.

Parola and Felaco's study (2020) of an Italian blog, "Lost Generation," also departs from an acknowledgment that contextual perspectives must be considered when engaging with the dynamic of modern school-to-work transition (p. 2). However, they also reflect a preoccupation with measuring and quantifying the number of NEETs, treating them as a malady that needs to be contained or healed without looking closely into its essential nature, which the present study attempts to do. They seek to strengthen this argument by quoting research that portrays NEETs as a cohort of people suffering from all sorts of mental health issues: anxiety, depression, anguish, and increased risk of alexithymia (the difficulty of identifying feelings and emotions), all of which creates "risk" for these young people. Parola and Felaco's (2020) study aims at exploring themes prevalent in Italian blogs written by young people classified as NEET, seeking to understand the experience of what they call "the *disease,*" such that they could interpret NEETs' "specific needs". They maintain that analysis of NEETs' narratives can highlight significant factors of concern for policymakers – "precariousness, thoughts, meanings, needs, value judgments, and emotional projections" (p. 5). The authors view the blog as a third place that contains young people's narratives about experiences of precarious employment. Basing one's judgement on the free expression of young people in a public space could be flawed because what they write spontaneously could be random since they are also protected by anonymity. They could be influenced by other narratives shared previously or even by a need or preference to please or satisfy perceived requirements. Since people often choose to use fake profiles or false identities on social media to protect their privacy, the researcher cannot have access to the context and background of where the data is coming from. On the other hand, a strength of using blogs as a means of data collection is that it allows the researchers access to the most vulnerable persons in society (Carlino et al., 2020; Felaco & Parola, 2018; Gargiulo & Margherita, 2019; Murphy et al., 2020).

2.3.3 Being NEET and beyond

The NEET young people participating in this research have spoken about their outlook on the future, mostly about their wishes – finding a job to their liking, getting a place of their own, being "normal," strengthening a special relationship, and making a dream come true. However, the authorities view them from a different perspective. NEETs remain considered a problem (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Furlong, 2013; Wright & McLeod, 2015) that the state is looked upon to solve. For example, Bonanomi and Rosina (2020) report from their longitudinal survey that young people's well-being needs to be "guided" (p. 1) so that we can avoid losing a generation and ending up living in an impoverished society. They blame Italy's lack of policies and structures that could facilitate a fulfilling life for the young. This line of reasoning reflects a trend to look upon young people as disempowered, lacking agency and power, and needing state-sanctioned structures to guide them toward wellbeing. Rather than speaking in terms of the agency of young people who take their time to make personal and work-related choices, who are flexible about temporary work arrangements, who invest in relationships with family and friends, and who are resourceful and open-minded with regard to finding opportunities for their wellbeing, Bonanomi and Rosina (2020) prefer to view young people's behaviour while being NEET as a "defensive condition" (p. 2) that is symptomatic of lack perseverance or engagement on their part [17]. Again, we are presented with the view of NEET young persons who "lack" something, rather than exercising agency, or who are simply different from the view of them upheld by the authorities. This is further emphasised in the research findings of Giret et al. (2020), and also in those of Bonanomi and Rosina (2020) who draw on data from "Rapporto Giovani 2019" (Istituto Toniolo, 2019).

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[17] See Vallee (2017) for a critical discussion of engagement discourse and its pathologizing and exclusionary function.

Brunila et al. (2020) speak about Brown's (2014) "vulnerability Zeitgeist" or "therapeutic society" (Wright, 2011) to explain how ideas derived from positive psychology, emotional literacy, psycho-emotional support, self-help, and counseling are being applied in education systems (McLeod, 2012; Ecclestone, 2013; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2014). These ideas serve to disempower and pathologize young people, and the concern here is that an increasing number of teenagers in the E.U. are coming to be diagnosed as psychologically unstable (Brown et al., 2017; Brunila et al., 2017; Rodwell et al., 2018; Siivonen & Brunila, 2014; Simmons & Thompson, 2011; World Health Organisation, 2021).

NEETs have been a priority of policymakers for decades, and these continue devising ways and means to develop such young people according to a pre-established notion of being a person – one that upholds autonomy and flexibility as a do-it-yourself project (Brunila et al. 2020; Kelly, 2006; Mononen Batista-Costa & Brunila, 2016). Brunila et al. (2020) argue that in the EU, entrepreneurial and therapeutic discourses in governance – part of a so-called "transition machinery" – are being wielded to influence young people's choices and trajectories. This is embedded in entrepreneurial and therapeutic discourses that complement each other in the interests of markets and for building a more flexible and autonomous labour force. This "transition machinery" stemming from the European Commission hegemonically creates discourses whereby young people classified as NEET are held to be economically and socially threatening (Brunila et al., 2020). By focusing on the young person and emphasising notions of responsibility and autonomy, a coherent and autonomous individual can be reproduced, one who lives according to sanctioned economic development (Brunila et al., 2020; Hansson & Lundahl, 2004; Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). In this scenario, Brunila et al. (2020) maintain that the entrepreneurial discourse consonant with the currently dominant

neoliberal ideology evokes a notion of freedom that upholds the (false) belief that with self-management, nothing can stand between the individual and success.

Brunila et al.'s (2020) research findings indicate that young people today are expected to self-reflect in such a way that allows them to be molded according to the dominant ideology of entrepreneurial and therapeutic discourses. This understanding of self-reflection is problematic, however. While it may be true that the authorities seek to use "transition machinery" to re-engage NEETs, it may be inaccurate to assume that young people do not think for themselves and accept what is handed out to them unreflectively. Young people's ideas may not necessarily reflect the entrepreneurial and therapeutic ideology propagated in the educational system. They may exert personal freedom to construct their biographies in an age characterized by rapid change and uncertainty. This phenomenon is addressed by Gaspani (2018), who argues that the narratives of the NEET research participants reflect biographies in which personal life trajectories often work out unpredictably. Gaspani (2018) finds that although young adults need to gain and maintain independence in private life, they may not necessarily consider being NEET an experience of hardship; they may also view it as a phase of transformation, allowing them a space for reflection and regrouping which could positively impact their perspective of their future.

Deterministic research that seeks to confirm negative perceptions of being NEET – such as seeing them as economically and socially threatening (Mäkelä et al., 2021) or as a "lost generation" (European Parliament, 2020; ILO, 2012, 2022; McGuire, 2020) – does not do them justice. Following this trend in research about NEET young people, Borg et al. (2015) focused on the link between dropping out of school and negative prospects in the long term, such as low self-esteem, long-term unemployment, low levels of functioning in everyday life and an

inclination towards harbouring negative emotions. The findings indicate that early school leavers in Malta are not as happy with their lives as their more academically successful peers, are less healthy, less affluent, and do not have as much access to networks. This statistical analysis shows that a combination of these factors significantly restricts NEETs' chances of returning to education (Borg et al., 2015). These findings raise questions: Does the education system foster social well-being? Is our education system respecting the rights of the child according to the UN objectives for education (UNICEF, article 29)? Why are certain groups marginalized? Why do they have increased feelings of low self-worth, bad health, and lack of financial resources? Is it because they have dropped out of school early, or have they dropped out of school early because of these issues? How might society and its institutions, including the education system, be implicated in this phenomenon?[18] Despite discourses portraying being NEET as causing a psychologically "scarring effect" (Egdell & Beck, 2020; Knabe & Rätzel, 2011), much research has revealed the necessity of further qualitative research about the phenomenon which remains elusive due to its sheer complexity and fluidity (Arnett, 2006; Devine, 2004; Irwin, 2020). The long-term negative consequences attributed to being NEET may in fact, be caused or influenced by antecedent situations in the lifeworld of the young people concerned, such as their socioeconomic background (Alcázar et al., 2010; Bloomfield et al., 2020).

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to bring to the fore the contexts within which the descriptive category of NEET has emerged and continues to refer to a myriad of young people who spend

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[18]The purpose of education remains an essential question for all those involved in the design and implementation of education — including policymakers and educators, who should always be engaged with what their efforts seek to bring about. It is concerning that in the current "age of measurement," the purpose of education is often seen as being the achievement of measurable "learning outcomes." (Biesta, 2020, 2010).

time away from education, employment, and training for various reasons. I have done this by critically reviewing research and literature about NEET young people, focusing on the detrimental effect of the dominant neoliberal ideology on the education, well-being, and future of our younger generation. I have examined the frequently applied term "at risk", emphasising the complex personal nature of being NEET.

I have engaged with the literature by focusing on the three chronological dimensions of the NEET status, given that the NEET position is intimately affected by past experiences that include those of schooling, the lifeworld of the young person going through the NEET phase, and their hopes for the future.

As this literature review shows, given the prevalent focus on deficit and human capital ideology in policy and research about NEETs, it is clear that we need to look at young people more sensitively and be more respectful of their knowledge. Education is a human right, enabling participation in society and transformation. The freedom to access a meaningful education is thus a social justice issue, implicating democracy (Ledwith, 2020). This literature review reveals how much we still need to reflect on what we mean when we say that we have "social justice" at heart and engage critically with what the concept truly means and what we want our education system to achieve. This level of reflection necessitates the knowledge afforded by an engagement with people's lived experiences – those of the young people in Malta who are classified as NEET in this case – which is what the present research attempts to do. Listening to what young people labeled "at risk" have to say can put us in a most favorable position to engage critically with knowledge produced by research (Holte, 2018). Research that prioritises encountering young people who have been constructed as NEET can provide new opportunities

for dialogue between young people and subsequent research aimed at learning more about them.

In the following chapter, I shall address the current policy about NEET young people in Malta and its implementation.

Chapter Three

Responding to moving, growing, and shifting youth:

A Review of Policy

3.0 Introduction

This chapter is intended to be a second part to the previous one, where I have critically reviewed research and literature about NEET young people, examining the contexts within which the NEET category has emerged and continues to be applied in reference to young people who are disengaged from education, employment, and training.

In this chapter, I shall critically review policy about NEET young people in Malta, focusing on the effect that the dominant neoliberal ideology is having on the education of our younger generation.

3.1 NEET policy in the EU

The importance of youth education and employment policy in the EU has been reflected during the last twenty years in a number of EU strategies focussing on youth, specifically, the EU Youth Strategy 2010–18 (European Union, 2016), whose employment objectives are translating into the Youth Employment Package (YEP). This embraces a spectrum of measures aimed at intercepting the detrimental effects of exclusion in the long term. It includes initiatives explicitly aimed at young people and others focusing on the labour market (Eurofound, 2014). Inspired by effective and evidence-based practice in Sweden, Finland, and Austria (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017), a most important YEP initiative is the Youth Guarantee, which offers education or training for employment to all young people twenty-five and under upon becoming workless, or when they drop out of formal education (Eurofound, 2015). Youth Guarantee has been adopted by all EU member states, including Malta, since April 2013.

3.2 NEETs in Malta

Statistical information obtained from a Eurofound study by Mascherini et al. (2017b) reveals that Malta fits in "Cluster 2", denoting a majority of southern European NEETs who are inactive with regard to education, training, and employment. Countries in this category include Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Slovakia.

According to the NEET census (2015), most NEETs in Malta remained in the family home, most often in traditional ones where the father is the breadwinner and the mother is the housewife. 11.1% of the NEETs interviewed were themselves parents, and most had a minimum of a School Leaving Certificate, O-level, or diploma. Very few possessed a university degree. More than half of the participants were disengaged from education, with 54% claiming to need more skills to fulfill their aspirations. 76% of the participants had work experience, and those of them doing part-time jobs said there needed to be better opportunities. 43.3% claimed they had no plans for the future, while 6% of the participants considered starting their own business. Results also indicated a pervasive tendency among NEETs to have an external locus of control (i.e., a belief that their life is largely influenced by destiny and support by other people, see section 2.3.2), which researchers interpreted as indicating the propensity of Maltese young people to prefer finding a job rather than create one themselves.

This analysis reflects a similar one made by Swedish policymakers in a national study that identified the reason for dropping out of senior secondary school as being young people's lack of interest (Lundahl & Olofsson, 2014). An analysis that shifts the blame on young people is characteristic of what Lundahl and Brunila (2020) call the "transition machinery", which tends to put all responsibility on the individual, rather than considering structural problems that young people experience. Life-course interviews with young people have shown how long-

established processes with various interacting forces collude in causing a young person to fail at school (Lundahl et al., 2017; Lundahl & Brunila, 2020).

Although informative, this census data lacks texture, as is typical of statistically derived information, and one would wish that there were more qualitative data available to get a better picture of the status quo among young people classified as NEETs in Malta.

Also, it would seem logical to ask whether the educational system in Malta effectively prepares young people to be entrepreneurs, such that they emerge from school with the skills and mindset necessary to fend on their own in case of not finding a job.

3.2.1 Developments in Maltese policy about NEETs

The policy outlined in this section regards ELET – Early Leaving from Education and Training, and not NEETs specifically. However, being NEET is considered a direct consequence of leaving school early; therefore, policy about "Preventing early leaving from education and training (ELET)" is considered relevant for becoming and being NEET as well. All sectoral education strategies and policies are contained in "The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024," which was launched in 2014 by the Ministry for Education and Employment. The framework has four targets that reflect benchmarks adopted by the EU and internationally:

I.   "reduce the gaps in educational outcomes, decrease the number of low achievers, and raise the bar in literacy, numeracy, and science and technology competence;

II.   support educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and from low socio-economic status, and reduce the relatively high incidence of early school-leavers;

III.   raise levels of student retainment and attainment in further, vocational, and tertiary education and training; and

IV.   increase participation in lifelong learning and adult learning."

These broad targets emphasize uniformity and the achievement of learning outcomes, manifesting a need for more engagement with human diversity, creativity, and individual learning needs and rhythms. This is reminiscent of business discourse and is aimed at treating the symptoms of much larger problems wherefrom children and young people who are described as vulnerable emerge. It seems logical to solve the problem of being "at risk of poverty" and "low socio-economic status" before implementing an educational strategy that can only attempt to compensate for this injustice rather than effectively address it. As things stand, the injustice will keep on being perpetuated.

There needs to be a mention of how these targets will be achieved. The author's gaze only skims the surface of the realities students have to deal with on a personal level before they tread on the school threshold. These problems act as barriers to them at school and cause them to disengage with their educational journey. Such problems need to be tackled at the government level and not only by the education authorities. However, schools could and should be redesigned to offer the necessary flexibility and freedom for those who find it difficult to fit in the traditional school setting. Education is not about retaining the largest number of young people in the system possible; it is about much more than this, necessitating an engagement with students as human beings whose wellbeing lies at the heart of any endeavour they might undertake or be expected to undertake. A focus on retainment is symptomatic of market-driven ideology that deprives our children of their human right to an education that "shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human

rights and fundamental freedoms…" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26, United Nations). It also appears that existing policy is not proving effective with regard to the overall well-being of our young. According to the UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 2020, Maltese children's mental and physical wellbeing as well as their academic and social skills leave much to be desired considering comparative research among children in 41 high income countries including Malta (Bonello, 2020).

Two national strategies have been developed from the above framework addressing ELET:

1. A Strategic Plan for The Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta (Ministry for Education and Employment);
2. The Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (Ministry for Education and Employment).

The time frame for the first strategy document, a "Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving In Malta" was 2014-2020, and it focused on supporting young people in their educational trajectory even beyond compulsory schooling. The aim is stated as being to help students develop their human potential as "citizens" (e.g., pp. 22-23; pp. 28-29) and as "stakeholders" in the economy (e.g., p. 14; p. 32). Again, there is a paradox in this statement that puts humanity on the same level as being a citizen and a stakeholder. One gets the impression that no attention is being given to the human aspect – an education of the heart that develops the whole person, starting with knowing oneself and relating with oneself and the world respectfully and lovingly. Our children are largely seen as citizens and stakeholders rather than the children they are, and the emphasis throughout is on decreasing and increasing numbers. This discourse reflects an overarching preoccupation with the interests of the

economy and with neoliberal values (Biesta, 2019, 2020; Chitpin & Portelli, 2019; Ledwith, 2020; Portelli & Konecny, 2013;;).

3.3 The way forward 2020-2030

Although the first (2014) national policy for the prevention of Early School Leaving (ESL) was aimed at increasing the number of students who remain in education and training, Malta's ELET rate is still 17.5% (2019), significantly above the 10% rate target set by the EU (Eurostat).

According to the new National Strategy Policy for students at risk of ELET, the focus is on ensuring:

> inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning; reducing the gaps in educational outcomes between boys and girls and between students attending different schools, decrease the number of low achievers, raise the bar in literacy, numeracy, and science and technology competence, and increase student achievement; supporting the educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and low socio-economic status; raising the levels of student retention and attainment in further, vocational, and tertiary education and training; and increasing participation in lifelong learning and adult learning.(Early School Leaving Unit, 2021, p. 1)

The terminology here still reflects discourse that prioritises the achievement of pre-set goals for employability. There needs to be a mention of a humanistic endeavour towards a holistic education that sees the student as a human being first and foremost rather than a future worker, which this research has discovered an urgent need for. The objectives include discourse about efficiency reminiscent of human capital theory, such as "Reduce the gaps in educational

outcomes, … decrease the number of low achievers, raise the bar in literacy, numeracy, and science and technology competence, and increase student achievement" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p. 13), as if there is a transcendental position, separable from people's realities and concerns with equity and distribution.

In some instances, the objectives appear to make little sense in the way they are articulated, in particular: "Support the educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and low socioeconomic status by reducing the relatively high incidence of early school leavers" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p. 13).

There is a dangerous play with words concerning "at-risk-of-poverty" (p.13). The fact that they are being described as such indicates that these children are indeed disadvantaged – they are already poor, in which case, they may lack basic needs that prevent them from engaging with educational "achievement." The authors of the new educational policy would solve this by "reducing the relatively high incidence of early school leavers" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p. 13). This approach to education continues to fail young people from subordinated groups, as false generosity or tokenism creates an illusion that fairness and justice prevail (Ledwith, 2020).

Such an education system fails disadvantaged young people – those living in overcrowded homes; those living in homes where there are no books; those who speak languages other than Maltese and English; cared for children; young people who live with an unemployed, single, or disabled parent, to mention but a few cases.

The new ELET strategy acknowledges that research indicates (as does the present one) a significant link between ELET and students' wellbeing at school and their socio-economic and

multicultural backgrounds. It is also stated that addressing risk factors related to ELET early on in the educational journey "supports a more inclusive and holistic educational system, which is why this policy adopts prevention and intervention strategic pillars as the first two actions" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p.2). However, there is no mention of students' overall wellbeing. They cannot become magically well at school, if their personal and social situation is adverse. Education alone cannot compensate for structural hardship; the well-being of young people must be viewed systemically, and education must not be detached from students' lifeworld. For this reason, the new strategy does not constitute a paradigm shift but rather patches on the preceding one. Moreover, if the students' socioeconomic situation is acknowledged to impact their propensity to leave school prematurely, why not tackle the economic and multicultural factor for social justice, rather than devise charitable initiatives that instead of achieving the desired equity, only serve to pathologize those who "escape" and "confront" the system (2020, p.15)?

The new strategy also aims to "target aspirations of students at risk of ELET" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p.17). Why is it taken for granted that young people should have aspirations? What if they do not, as the current research has found? The discourses surrounding aspirations must be interrogated (refer to Chapter 6, section 6.1.7) for they make part of the neoliberal project.

An important reference in the new ELET strategy is about literacy, which is described as ranging:

> from the fundamental ability to read, write, listen, and understand, to higher level processing skills, where learners are able to deduce, interpret, monitor, and elabourate

on learning matter. Since the advent of digital media, the definition of literacy has widened and progressed. Literacy acquisition is not only a cornerstone of academic responsibility, but it is also the basis for future learning and participation in society and employment. (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p.34)

There is no mention here of literacy as "reading the world" in Freire's words (2000), an essential skill in democracy. The dearth of discourses about critical pedagogy confirms a lack of investment in young people as potential contributors to the well-being of society, which is urgent, since they shall be voting at the age of 16. The new strategy presents the role of literacy in its traditional understanding of possession of basic skills for employment, including "the role of literacy in promoting competitiveness" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p.34), together with democracy and social cohesion, which seems paradoxical. The new ELET strategy does not address the crucial function of education – being a responsible, engaged citizen who is expected to and who can act in favor of social justice for a better world for all.

The new ELET strategy outlines three strategic actions: prevention, intervention, and compensation. While these are important and useful, the vital process of identification is conspicuous by its absence because it is on the basis of sensitive identification (Dupéré et al., 2015) that adequate, focused, and particular intervention can take place. Intervention measures are intended to provide "support for students at risk", described as being primarily ones having reading difficulties and who are often absent from school (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020, p. 31). The lack of attention and focus on identifying students needing support in various ways will surely lead to selective and exclusive interventions. Data from this research indicate that young people who leave school early and become NEET may have problems they do their best to hide because of fear of judgment and adverse consequences.

Not all problems are apparent; educators should receive training on how to identify struggling students due to difficult home situations, for example, and the school system must be designed in such a way that it normalises and encourages the role of educators and their space to work with and help students when they struggle (Bussu & Pulina, 2020; Cefai & Cavioni, 2015). It must be acknowledged that all students can go through challenging times in their trajectory, and intervention should occur sensitively without pathologising the young persons concerned, which would further alienate them. As things stand, schools are (rightly so) catering to students with learning difficulties but not to other kinds of struggles that may not be immediately obvious. Also, it is most often the symptom that is treated but not the root cause. Schools need to help students develop personal skills to deal with their life challenges themselves rather than prescribe ready-made solutions:

> Young people today need an education that provides for the development of the requisite cognitive, social, and emotional competencies and resilience to grow and thrive in the face of the present and future socioemotional as well as cognitive challenges. (Cefai & Cavioni, 2015, p.233)

3.3.1 Formal education: main policy measures on ELET

The main policy measures listed include a Free Childcare Scheme, which is helpful for young people who are parents and who need free childcare to be able to continue with their education, training, or work, a Cultural Integration Unit, set up to help the increasing number of international students integrate more easily in schools, the re-writing of curricula upon radical adoption of a Learning Outcomes approach in compulsory schooling, the introduction of co-education in secondary schools, increased investment in educational technology, the inclusion of VET subjects on the secondary school curriculum, enhanced support for students

transitioning from one educational phase to another, and increased impetus towards the participation of parents in their children's education.

These are mostly helpful measures, but the radical move to re-write school curricula at the compulsory level to implement a Learning Outcomes approach to engage more students merits particular attention. According to Calleja (2016, p. 6) "outcomes-based qualifications provide students, teachers and labour market stakeholders with a common reference point, potentially allowing for improved and active learning processes, better quality teaching and more relevant qualifications".

Teachers in schools have had much to say about such outcomes (Avis, 2000; Bennett & Brady, 2014; Erikson & Erikson, 2019; Furedi, 2013; Northwood, 2013; Prøitz & Nordin, 2020, for example) and there have been significant criticisms of such an approach to learning (e.g., Biesta, 2020b; Clegg & Ashworth, 2004; Furedi, 2012; Havnes & Prøitz, 2016; Lassnigg, 2012; Prøitz & Nordin, 2020). The point of this criticism is that the notion of learning outcomes is thoroughly misguided and that their purported accuracy, directness, and objectivity are mostly specious. Learning outcomes have been misused at the service of modern management systems and survival in competitive market economies. Learning outcomes have been introduced because they are necessary to the commodification of learning and, therefore, to the compulsion to examine and supervise people's performance, thus increasing the propensity of such a method to sabotage the agency of teachers and students alike. It is worth considering how the learning outcomes approach relates to fundamental values of education that hold it up as a common good, one such value being the prioritization of critical thinking (Biesta, 2019). Biesta (2009, 2019, 2020) has noted that not all desirable outcomes can be measured. He argues that in adopting a learning outcomes approach, we may put ourselves in the unfortunate position

that values quantifiable knowledge and skills more than all that is of equal value, but which does not lend itself to being counted and measured.

3.3.2 Intervention measures to prevent early school leaving

Interventions to help students engage with their education include the setting up of The National Literacy Agency, that organises literacy programmes for students and their families, and the Alternative Learning Programme, which is intended to be an alternative learning setting to that of the mainstream. It mainly attracts young people who do not fit in mainstream secondary schooling. It would benefit more from a youth-work-inspired learning environment offering an applied-learning-oriented programme during years 10 and 11. Similarly, The Prince's Trust International's XL Programme was introduced for younger students in secondary schools who may be considered vulnerable. While concurring with the need for an alternative to the current mainstream educational setup, and having worked at the ALP in the capacity of assistant head of school, I believe that the main concern with the Alternative Learning Programme is that it attracts young people with various intellectual capabilities, when the ALP, in fact, caters mainly for students with lower intellectual abilities. As the research by Schembri (2018) shows, there is no official syllabus at the ALP – the teachers design the syllabus of their respective subjects themselves. This seriously impacts the assessment and validity of qualifications, especially when ALP students finish their course and wish to further their training in other post-secondary institutions. Students with very challenging behaviour and mental health problems are admitted along with others who are mainly interested in the hands-on approach and the VET subjects per se. This creates a conundrum because some students would need appropriate mental health care, which the physical school environment does not foster, and the teaching staff at ALP are not qualified to give. A central concern is that such students would be at risk due to peer bullying. This situation would exacerbate the mental

and emotional distress the young people may find themselves in. Teachers interviewed in Schembri's (2018) research said they lacked necessary teaching resources, lamenting the dilapidated school building that does little to lift the spirit of both students and staff. This is corroborated by data from Spiteri et al. (2020) that cites ALP students' preference for flexibility, a more practical approach to learning, human rapport, a relaxed environment, patience, and a wider choice of opportunities. In the same research, ALP educators mentioned the necessity for relevant professional training to better meet the needs of ALP students.

The Msida Educational Hub fulfills a similar function to that of the Paola ALP in its aim to provide an alternative learning experience to students coming from mainstream schools in which they could not fit. The programme has also been designed to help young people acquire employability skills and includes vocational subjects such as Woodwork, Art, Home Economics, Welding, and Electrical Installation, within which the core subjects Mathematics, Maltese, and English are embedded (Fenech, 2017).

Another measure to prevent early school leaving is the introduction of a data management system (the E1 platform) to enable psychosocial professionals to detect chronic absenteeism and intervene as early as possible. There has also been an increased presence of psychosocial professionals and youth workers in schools. This increase in psychosocial support in our education system is promising in its potential to provide students with the opportunity to process their emotions and deal with difficult life situations. Nevertheless, increasing concern is being directed at therapeutic practices as the panacea for student well-being. Again, such interventions could come across as patching up systemic problems that need to be addressed at their roots in governmental and societal structures that affect the ecosystem of young people. The strengthening of psychosocial services in schools may owe its origins to the emergence of

entrepreneurial and individualized discourses in the EU and the OECD, among other political and economic organizations, and emanates from the "vulnerability Zeitgeist" (Brown, 2014) or "therapeutic society" (Wright, 2011). The entrepreneurial and therapeutic ethos in education has put down roots in the West (Brunila, 2012, 2014; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013; Procter, 2013; Wright, 2011) through new objectives for education that are embodied in the encouragement for a predefined and therefore sanctioned subjectivity (Brunila et al., 2020; Kallo & Rinne, 2006; Korhonen et al., 2011).

Diverse studies have raised the alarm about normalising trends that view education as a feeder for the market and as a therapy clinic, both of which put the onus of societal problems on children and young people. There is also concern about the potential susceptibility or fragility of young people and adults that interfere with their making decisions about their own lives (Brown et al., 2017; Dahlstedtet al., 2011; Siivonen & Brunila, 2014; Simmons & Thompson, 2011; Wright, 2011).

Therapeutic and enterprising discourses may seem different, but they both stem from the neoliberal impetus causing the reorganization of education (Ball, 2016; Brunila, 2012; Rose, 1998). Neoliberalism has been described as an ideology that reveres the market and erodes everything that makes us human (Metcalf, 2017). Indeed, such discourses have colluded towards the creation of an independent, enterprising, malleable, and egoistic "ideal self of the neoliberal order" (Brunila et al., 2020, p. 153).

3.3.3 Compensation measures to prevent early school leaving
The Foundation Certificate Programme at MCAST, a similar programme at ITS and GEM 16+, SEC revision classes, Youth.Inc, Foundation programmes, and targeted measures such as

Embark for Life, and Pathways, were set up to support school leavers who lacked the requisite

qualifications, but were still interested in furthering their education or training (Eivers, 2020).

A VET youth-work-oriented programme within the National Youth Agency intended as a

second opportunity has been developed to provide young adults with training to make their

transition into the labour market as seamless as possible. This initiative has been replicated

under the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) of the Ministry for the Family and

Social Solidarity. It was specifically aimed at supporting young people diagnosed as vulnerable

(Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a).

Part-time adult education programmes are being held by the Directorate for Lifelong Learning

and Early School Leavers and MCAST, respectively, the latter being VET-oriented.

Programmes intended as a second opportunity for young persons with disability are offered by

at least three entities under the Ministry for Education (Ministry for Education and

Employment, 2014a).

JobsPlus, the Public Employment Service (PES), is also using ESF funds dedicated to Youth

Guarantee programmes designed to prepare young people for the labour market in various

ways, as well as courses aimed at NEETs through the NEET Activation Scheme (Ministry for

Education and Employment, 2014a).

 The NEET Activation Scheme (NAS II) provides psychosocial services and tailor-made

intervention for NEETs with social difficulties who are residing in Malta or Gozo and are

unemployed and not enrolled in any education or training institution (https://jobsplus.gov.mt/

schemes-jobseekers/youth-guarantee-scheme).

The implementation of the NEET activation scheme across the E.U. has been critically appraised (Cabasés Piqué et al., 2016; Hämäläinen et al., 2015;; Tsekoura, 2019), with the actual implementation in countries with high youth unemployment resulting in falling short of initial expectations (Eichhorst & Rinne, 2017). Findings from the research of Hämäläinen et al. (2015) indicate that Youth Guarantee is effective only among young persons who have a vocational education and are out of the labour market. The same findings did not indicate that Youth Guarantee participation impacted the chances of young people without qualifications to enter the labour market. Research findings by Cabasés Piqué (2016), Strecker & Pardell Veà (2016) also reveal that the impact and effectiveness of Youth Guarantee on the whole target group is questionable, including in the long term. Growing precariousness and insecurity coupled with the inclination for existing labour to be only redistributed indicate that the Guarantee may contribute to a scenario where precariousness is normalised. A contradiction is identified by Tsekoura (2019) between the policy model implied through Youth Guarantee, who argues that while the concept of active citizenship as leading to employment is promoted, in reality, the employment context offers limited structural opportunities for the realization of these premises for the young people concerned when they start testing the waters in the labour market. Tsekoura (2019) continues that de-contextualized initiatives for youth employment lacking a clear vision of the lifeworld of youth can reinforce the status quo, as they offer little support for young people in their efforts to find satisfactory employment. This resonates with previous research findings (for example, Atkins 2009; 2010; 2017) and, more recently, with findings from the study of Esmond & Atkins (2022), which indicate that: "these young people have aspirations which are broadly similar to those of higher achieving peers, but that they lack the support, knowledge and cultural capital to pursue those aspirations, which are thus effectively unrealistic" (p.107).

3.3.4 Addressing ELET through non-formal and informal learning and quality youth work

The Youth.inc programme is an inclusive education programme for young people aged 16 to 21. Youth.inc is managed by Aġenzija Żgħażagħ and is inspired by a youth-centered philosophy in the implementation of the five sections of its educational programme: basic skills courses, work placement, vocational courses, informal activities, and a life skills programme. All young people attending the programme are supported by a youth worker on a daily basis (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a).

Aġenzija Żgħażagħ caters to the Youth Hubs area non-formal education service in higher education institutions. The Youth Hubs help create a recreational environment for young people to interact and develop their personal, social, and creative skills with the support of youth workers (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a).

It is noteworthy that the youth work approach in Malta is only used with young people who cannot fit in the mainstream for various reasons after compulsory schooling, when due to an adherence to a rigid and traditional model of education, so many opportunities would have been lost to engage such students and others still.

Research shows the benefits and effectiveness of youth work-inspired education systems because this promotes a sense of connection and community (Azzopardi, 2011; Baldridge, 2020). Instead of using youth work only to patch up, making it mainstream could help improve student well-being, engagement, and retention (Baldridge, 2020; Carey et al., 2020; Sprague Martinez et al., 2020; Luthar et al., 2020).

3.4 Conclusion

Finally, one cannot but notice the replication of services targeted at young people who are seen as being vulnerable, prone to leave school early, or become NEET. The various programmes are hardly distinguishable in their approach and goal to keep all young people in formal education, which may create confusion in the minds of young people who are already alienated from school or in the process of becoming so. So many replicated programmes could make young people feel unseen in the flurry to patch up a perceived leak or a gap in what is generally held to be a fully-functioning system that is all set to provide a "journey"[19] for everyone. These replicas could also potentially create chaos in the minds and lives of the same young people they are intended for, increasing their vulnerability rather than their propensity to find a path that works for them. Such chaos could lead to criminal behaviour if left unattended, which of course, would be the opposite of the intended outcome of such initiatives.

There is also a sense of waste of human resources across so many replicas of the same endeavour. Initiatives propelled and inspired by ongoing qualitative research, such as the present one, that foreground the young persons' voices would be more promising in

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[19] I use this word as a reference to the name of recent educational reform in Malta, whose title I find inappropriate because it assumes that the education system has intimate knowledge of young people's lifeworlds, and therefore, of their wishes, hopes, and dreams, which are very personal. The 'Journey' that the name refers to means that students will have more vocational subjects to choose from in secondary school, which is an emphasis strongly reminiscent of the human capital theory agenda employed in the EU and UN that views young people as "resources" who are potential contributors to economic growth. We cannot make the mistake of reducing educational systems to production systems to be evaluated simply in terms of performance and efficiency. We will fail our children and society if we reduce education to a tool or factory for producing workers (marketable education). This would demolish education's transformative and emancipating potential (Carrera Santafé & Luque Guerrero, 2016). There is also a moral imperative that education should not be oriented toward the dictates of the market but rather to the development of the whole human being. "My Journey: Achieving through different paths" was launched in 2016 – reform purporting to further democratize academic, vocational, and applied quality learning among all students under the same school roof and in all secondary schools. It aims to align with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal number 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

effectiveness and relevance. In the next chapter, I present the research methodology and the methods I have used to collect the data for this research.

Chapter Four

Methodology and Methods

I METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

The design of this study departs from my belief that what can be known or what counts as truth, is an interpretation of phenomena or what happens to us.[20] Therefore, the methodology informing this research, as well as the research methods applied, reflect the nature of the questions that this research sets out to answer (as stated in Chapter One) and also the epistemological position of the research itself.

This chapter consists of two sections: (i). the methodology, and (ii). the methods that I used to collect the data. In the Methodology section, I consider qualitative research – its strengths and flaws, my stance as the researcher, and the rationale for engaging with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and its epistemological position. In the following section about the research methods, I describe the sample of research participants, outline the pilot project and present an overview of the research participants. I then move on to describe the recruitment process, the research methods I used, and the rationale for using them. This is followed by the interview guide and analytical strategy. The last part of this chapter will discuss ethical considerations.

This study's epistemological stance recognises the power with which words are imbued, such that our lives are "soaked through with language" (van Manen, 1990, p. 38). My motivation and objective were to learn what it was like for a young person to be on the other side of what is considered a safety net and, therefore, essential in our society: education, employment, or

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[20] The act of interpretation necessitates that the interpreter directs her gaze at "the things themselves," which is not simply a matter of a single initial decision but her "first, last and constant task" (Gadamer, 2019, p.279). The interpreter continuously imposes personal meaning onto the text as soon as any preliminary meanings take shape. However, this happens only because she reads while harbouring expectations vis-à-vis particular meanings. Continuous awareness and revision of this fore-projection as the interpreter further penetrates into the meaning will lead to an understanding of what is there (Gadamer, 2019).

training. To do this, I have used a phenomenological approach. Narratives of the experiences of young people labeled "NEET" yield an abundant and profound source of information for education practitioners, professionals, and experts. I would also like to think that the opportunity given to the research participants to express themselves and to reflect on their situation has empowered them and transformed them in some way that would not have happened had they not participated in this study.

This research set out to investigate the meanings that NEET young people give to their experiences of life in school and beyond, and the knowledge gained is now available for those who work with young people, affording them insights into how these experiences can be shared among other young people in similar circumstances and into how each experience can be distinct. My methodology of choice has been interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) because it privileges a strong focus on the participants' words and the natural unraveling of their descriptions and narratives and also because it facilitates embracing the research participants' own voices and interpretations from within their lifeworlds (Smith et al., 2012).

4.1 The research approach: Qualitative research

Qualitative research views reality as socially constructed and presupposes a connection between the researcher and the subject of the research, as well as the contextual constraints influencing inquiry. Qualitative researchers are sensitive to how research is never a neutral act and strive to find answers to questions about the creation and meaning-making of social experience. Quantitative research contrasts with this by emphasising counting rather than processes. Quantitative researchers believe they perform their studies objectively (Zyphur & Pierides, 2020; Powell, 2020).

Since the qualitative approach has been forged and shaped by various historical and philosophical movements, it does not lend itself to easy definition. Even the term has been debated, often referred to as naturalistic, interpretive, or qualitative. For example, for Denzin and Lincoln (2013, p. 6), qualitative research is "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible".

Also, "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, p. 3).

Furthermore, Van Manen (1979, p. 520) views qualitative research as:

> an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world.

Essentially, qualitative researchers seek to understand the meaning people construct about phenomena – the sense we give to our world and what happens to us. Different writers have focused on different characteristics of qualitative research, but there are commonalities among them still. Most scholars agree that qualities essential to qualitative research include the emphasis on process and meaning, the researcher being focal in the collection and processing of data, an inductive process, and a nuanced, textured, and descriptive result. Essentially the qualitative approach sets forth to grasp the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the research participants – the emic perspective – and not from that of the researcher or the etic point of view (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.1.1 The strengths of qualitative research

Qualitative research is used to collect, analyse, and interpret data related to the social world that are not easily reduced to numbers. It deals with lived experience at the intersection between individual belief, agency, and culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Qualitative research distinguishes itself from quantitative research by facilitating a deep understanding of people's realities, interpretation of their experiences, and the meaning they give to phenomena (Crick, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The qualitative researcher is socially located, and engages with practices or tools that facilitate knowing as much as possible about the phenomenon under study. These tools and practices seek to gain insights into the world of the research participants through particular activities that include writing field notes, conducting and recording interviews and conversations, analysing photographs, and journaling. As they reflectively engage with these data collection processes, qualitative researchers are immersed in an interpretative endeavour of the phenomena as perceived or manifested by the research participants.

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to interrogate dynamic, complex, or challenging issues. Denzin and Lincoln (2017, p. 4) view the qualitative researcher as a "methodological bricoleur," skilfully performing diverse tasks that range from sensitive interviewing to intense self-reflection and introspection, all of which is requisite when considering the richness of the data that typically emerges from the various methods that may be used in qualitative research (Flick, 2002; 2007).

Qualitative approaches help the researcher delve beneath the surface and look closely at power dynamics impacting phenomena (Ejimabo, 2015). These approaches and methods are helpful both to recognise culture, the "consciousness" or the "lived experiences" of people and also to

uncover political, social, and material injustice so that transformation can be facilitated (Forester, 1992). Qualitative methods enable access to "funds of knowledge" in personal lives, families, and communities (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), such that findings from such in-depth, sensitively performed qualitative research may inform policy decisions or/and serve to bring about positive change for marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society. This is one of my main aims in conducting this research: seeking to explore the lived experience of being a NEET young person. For this purpose, I have chosen Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a most suited research approach (refer to section 4.3 below).

Skillful qualitative methodology using IPA significantly strengthens the research because of the rapport that the approach allows to develop between the researcher and the research participants. In addition, IPA gives researchers the best access to the lived experiences of research participants, and being participant-oriented, privileges the knowledge, experience, and free expression of the research participants themselves – of NEET young people in this case. Despite the criticism it receives, when rigourously conducted, qualitative research is "unbiased, in-depth, valid, reliable, credible, and rigourous" (Anderson, 2010, p. 2).

4.1.2 A Critical Look at Qualitative Research

Detractors of the qualitative research approach typically challenge its claims to be scientific. They maintain that the approach is exploratory, subjective, and is simply a façade for what, in reality, is Marxism or secular humanism (Denzin, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Huber, 1995;). However, the critique of qualitative research transcends the "ever-present desire to maintain a distinction between hard science and soft scholarship" (Carey, 1989, p. 99). The sciences are frequently held up as the Meisterstück of Western civilization, and there is the assumption that their methods contain a neutral, absolute truth detached from personal beliefs

and values (Carey, 1989; Schwandt, 1997). Qualitative research is perceived as embodying all

that is antithetical to this "value-free objectivist science" model (Carey, 1989, p. 104).

Both research models – qualitative and quantitative – have problems and flaws (Becker, 2017),

but I shall focus on those that may be found in doing qualitative work since this is the model I

have chosen to guide my investigation.

Drawbacks of qualitative research frequently featuring in the literature in general are: the use

of small samples, data collected from one source, and inadequate reporting of analytical

procedures (Crick, 2021). Another issue is that of generalization. Maxwell (2021) argues that

there are qualitative researchers who view generalization to be in contradiction of the

characteristic qualitative aims as well as a constructivist stance. Maxwell (2021) maintains that

the concept of "transferability" has largely taken over generalizability among qualitative

researchers. Rose and Johnson (2020) argue that qualitative researchers should focus more on

substantiating their analyses and claims because trustworthiness can best produce

transformative research vis-à-vis people's lives. The trustworthiness of a qualitative research

study depends on thorough epistemological understandings, rigourous engagement with the

literature, appropriateness of the theoretical framework, careful selection and implementation

of the data collection methods and analytical procedures embarked upon, and on being attentive

to how and to what extent both the research methods and the findings connect with and diverge

from broader discourses and theories surrounding the phenomenon (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

For Becker (2017), considering critically ideas and processes at all stages of qualitative

research could ensure its quality by avoiding inaccuracies caused by taking ideas for granted

and not engaging critically with things as they arise. He argues that researchers often ignore

ongoing changes in the subject/s under study, only considering these matters when the unexpected conflicts with what they think they have previously established. However, this can be turned into an opportunity for an immediate revision of long-held convictions based on this new turn of events, argues Becker (2017). Errors occur when researchers do not take advantage of these possibilities, for example, when they do not prioritise the importance of history, writing notes in the present tense, where what is known "now" is the be-all and end-all of the study. Researchers who make this mistake consider any variations from this stationery model as a negligible and accidental deviation from their concept of how things are. Important discoveries in the field occur when researchers come upon something unexpected and focus on it as something significant that they never thought of before. The new information will impact the focus of the research to some extent, but it can also spark an investigation in another area in which the discovery plays a leading role (Becker, 2017).

The data gatherer's social situation and the incentives it gives them to do things in one way rather than another shapes the reliability of the data and thus, its ability to function as evidence for a sociological argument (Becker, 2017). Moreover, our data rest on a consensus to accept the "good enough for our purposes" objects yielded by our research tools (Becker, 2017, p. 20).

4.2 Researcher positionality

Research is necessarily a subjective act, originating from a person who is constituted by and therefore brings to the work the entirety of her life experience. "Researcher positionality" (Sikes, 2004, p. 17) and the researcher's stance regarding beliefs, values, ontology, epistemology, and relationality are all implicated in the research methodology, positionality referring to researchers' concept of themselves as they engage with the research and the data – their perception of self in the creation of knowledge (Berger, 2013). Researchers' assumptions

and choices about research methodology profoundly affect the research findings (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). This self-reflection has helped me understand that I lean towards the interpretivist/constructivist research perspective, a worldview that rests on an ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumption that knowledge is co-created by the researcher and the researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

I have come to this research motivated by several factors, not least my personal experiences as a student in the Maltese educational system and later as an educator in the same system. I have always been critical of the workings of the education system, especially of its disregard for the personal life experiences of children and youth who in the last analysis, only come to be viewed in terms of numbers. In secondary school I started reflecting on my relation to the workings of the educational system. I found the double standards disturbing – the fact that we were encouraged to believe that school and educators cared for us, only to learn that if we did not fit into the standard mold, nobody could "rescue" us, and we would be left all alone, having to fend for ourselves. This was catastrophic if one's parents or guardians happened to be uneducated, disempowered, or/and oblivious to the workings of the state education system. They could not help one find alternative ways to make it. I felt concerned by this when I was thirteen or so, and things had not changed much by the time I became an educator, working for many years in various state schools and at different levels in the capacity of teacher and later as assistant head of school. The system always leaves some children and young people behind because of its design.

I am aware that these personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions could influence my work, and I have attempted to guard against this impact to the best of my capacity throughout the research journey with the practices of bracketing and reflection.

4.3 Theoretical framework: Heidegger's analytic of Dasein (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

This IPA study investigates the lived experience of being NEET, attempting to understand the meanings the research participants give to their disengagement from education, employment and training. This aim is also reflected in the primary research question of this work: How do NEET young people interpret their situation?

The NEET classification is a term or label used by statisticians to gather statistical data. However, it also informs dominant discourses about young people who do not conform to sanctioned educational and social norms and expectations. Discourses surrounding the NEET concept put individuals thus referred to in a negative light, for they are described exclusively by factors that constitute a lack in young people according to the dominant value system. The young people concerned are viewed according to what they are not: not in education, employment, or training, and this phenomenological research aims at foregrounding their interpretations of the circumstances that lead them to be NEET.

 In this work I use Heidegger's analytic of Dasein as a theoretical framework (Heidegger, 1927/1962). My interpretation of Dasein will help me understand the participants' accounts of their lived experiences of being NEET in Malta, and what led them to this. Moreover, this theoretical framework is best suited for IPA as it "concurs with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). Another advantage in using Heidegger's philosophy in this work lies in the value it brings to discourses about the NEET concept and the meaning of education for life. Heidegger's wider philosophy is centred around Dasein, prioritising what it is to 'be' in the world, and therefore restoring person-centred humanism that lies at the heart of education as human flourishing and emancipation.

Heidegger explored the self in terms of everyday life interaction with others and argued that to understand Dasein (being in the world), this must be studied in the context of "being with others", or "Mitsein" (Heidegger, 1927/1962). For Heidegger ''being with" (Dasein) refers to being with the world – with others, and not "being alone" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 152). Heidegger's phenomenological notion of Dasein will help me examine the lived experiences of the NEET phenomenon from the point of view of a small group of young people. The objective of this research is to foreground their meanings and interpretations concerned, while delineating the impact the contexts they come from and inhabit had on this experience. Different factors lead to being NEET. The focus of this research is finding what these were with regards to the group in question, in order to come up with recommendations on how to rectify particular social injusticies underpinning education systems (Buttigieg & Calleja, 2021; Gramsci, 1971; Jenkins, 2007; Ledwith, 2020; Portelli & Konecny, 2018). Phenomenological theory, which also informs IPA, can help this work contribute to knowledge about NEET young people by facilitating particular and nuanced insights and understandings into their experiences. This contribution can complement quantitative studies about this cohort.

A study of lived experiences entails that researchers focus on conscious experiences because they have a "phenomenal dimension" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 214) as to how the world appears to the individual. Phenomenology assumes that only the subject can objectify and that objective reality is "largely constituted by subjective meaning-making" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 214). This justifies investigating the subjective first-person perspective to gain nuanced insights into a phenomenon like NEET. In phenomenological research, first-person accounts are used to understand the "universal meaning and dimensionality of a phenomenon" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 214), and researchers engaging with a phenomenological ontological perspective focus on only one phenomenon of study – the "phenomenon of being [...] general ways of being

that are revealed from interpreting lived experiences" (p. 214), or truths. Thus, as Larsen & Adu (2022, p. 214) elabourate, research methods aimed at producing generalizable outcomes cannot, from a methodological perspective, generalize "toward a phenomenon of being because neither the phenomenon nor the being are people, but truths." Phenomenology is driven by the search for a "universal truth" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 214) that can be distilled from lived experience. Nevertheless, as researchers, it is crucial that we understand that no research is perfect and that the tension between attempting to find truth versus generalisability constitutes rocky terrain. Indeed, phenomenology does not aim to generalize research findings to the broader population.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the philosophical school of thought introduced in the first half of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl and was furthered by other philosophers, four of the major ones being Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others.

Phenomenology is both a method and a theoretical framework with epistemological and ontological features (Larsen & Adu, 2022). It can thus provide a theoretical lens to investigate human experiences and help researchers select research methods that are most suited to answer the particular research questions credibly:

> The expression 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a methodological conception. This expression does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject matter but rather the how of that research. The more genuinely a methodological concept is worked out and the more comprehensively it determines the

principles on which a science is to be conducted, all the more primordially is it rooted

in the way we come to terms with the things themselves (Heidegger, 1962, p. 27).

The voluminous body of literature about phenomenology is significant but often not easily

accessible (Larsen & Adu, 2022). Table 4.1 below summarizes the main schools of

phenomenology and their respective characteristics.

Table 4.1 Schools of Phenomenology and their respective characteristics (adapted from
Larsen & Adu, 2022, and Smith et al. (2022).

School of phenomenology	Focus of Inquiry	Goal of inquiry
Transcendental phenomenology (Husserl)	Intentionality, transcendental subjectivity and subjectivity in general;	Arrive at the essence of experience; epistemological explication of experiencing;
Phenomenological psychology (Husserl, Giorgi)	Psychological subjectivity;	Essential themes of apperceptional experiences;
Existential phenomenology (Heidegger)	Dasein;	Uncover the meaning of being;
Hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, Ricoeur)	Identity.	Discovering the narrative self.

In modern philosophy, the term "phenomenology" is mostly applied in reference to sensory

experiences such as seeing and hearing. However, this is very reductive since human

experience transcends mere sensation, which the phenomenological tradition recognises and

addresses. This richer analysis of human experience engages with the significance of

everything we experience as human beings living in this world, of all that we encounter in our

"life-world" limitlessly (Engelland, 2020). The analysis of subjective experience can give

unexpected, novel insights and meanings that can enhance and change our prior understandings

of that experience (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The development of Heideggerian Phenomenology

Husserl developed phenomenology into a research method to describe phenomena "in terms of their essential concepts, the essences which make themselves known in intuition" (Husserl, 1970; van Manen, 1990). Qualities at the core of Husserl's conceptualization of experience include:

i.   An awareness of intentionality (the individual's relationship to their environment and the notion that human beings are not conscious of their relationship at the point in time – that realization happens upon reflection about experience);

ii.   the practice of bracketing;

iii. And core structures – what Husserl calls the "whatness" of things (van Manen, 1990).

Husserl believed that phenomenology could tell us "what is given to us in immediate experience without being obstructed by pre-conceptions" (van Manen,1990, p. 184). Identifying and describing the essence of a phenomenon is addressed by descriptive phenomenology. The descriptions emerging from the research reflect the exact content of the research participant, only allowing a minimum of interpretive assumptions. Husserl intended to "bring out the full richness of our subjectivity as ways of discovering the world" (Finlay, 2011, p. 45) while believing in the possibility of arriving at the core elements of an experience. Mentioned above and crucial to bring the researcher as close as possible to "the things themselves" is the exercise and strategy of bracketing or practicing the epoché.

The epoché emerges from schools of ancient Greek philosophy and may be understood as the act of suspending judgment. Husserl used this term to describe the method of

phenomenological inquiry (Larsen & Adu, 2022). He believed that thinking could be separated from thought by applying the epoché and phenomenological reduction (rigourous focus on the essence of the experience under study). As Larsen & Adu (2022) aptly describe it, "if thoughts are fish, then thinking is the river, and he wanted to find a way of removing the fish from the river to study the flow of water without the fish confusing his gaze" (p. 61). In this investigative process, scholars do not deny the facts of the natural world but place them in brackets.

Although Husserl and Heidegger believed in striving to elicit meaning that is not immediately knowable through observation, Heidegger did not believe in the idea of objectivity – a separate, detached position from which to look at things happening outside of oneself (Cerbone, 2009; Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2007; Heidegger, 1927/1962). For Heidegger (1982, p .64), "the idea of the subject which has intentional experiences merely inside its own sphere is an absurdity that misconstrues the basic ontological structure of the being that we are." He maintained that the only way we experience the world is by Dasein – being and interacting with the world we are part of. Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy includes the concept of being in the world, encounters with entities in the world, being with, temporality, spatiality, and the care structure (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016).

Heidegger's Dasein Theory

The Dasein is capable of self-determination in a world full of possibilities (Heidegger, 1927/1962). This freedom emerges from Dasein's ontological structure conceived of as care (Sorge). This basic structure of Dasein is constituted by three fundamental aspects of experience: its being thrown in the world, its having sense of being-ahead, and its 'falleness', its preoccupation with entities in this world. In this condition, Dasein's freedom is expressed

in agency. Dasein can be authentic in the face of existing with others and the possibility of merging with the anonymous crowd of the 'they'. Dasein is free, possessing the capacity to be free, both from technological devices and attitudes, and also from 'Enframing' (Gestell in German), which Heidegger described as a state of forgetfulness of who we are in favor of becoming absorbed by values and norms that are not 'us' but 'they'. In Heidegger's words, enframing is "a true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature the way they see and judge" (Heidegger, 1962, p.119).

Heidegger depicts Dasein as conscious of its Being and possibilities and advocates laying ''bare a fundamental structure of Dasein'' as being in a world immersed in ''average everydayness'' (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 65). Heidegger posited that understanding is achieved through worldly activity, arguing that Dasein's understanding of its Being and the Being of other entities encountered through average everyday interactions constitutes the point of departure in investigating Dasein's Being (Cerbone, 2009; Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger argued that "the structure of being is determined by reference" (1927/1962). For this reason, we speak of "lived experience" as a research domain (Larsen & Adu, 2022). Heidegger views meaning as ontologically already in the world - we understand the world according to how we interpret it. The lived experience thus means that we only reveal or make meaning of the contexts or situations we find ourselves in by engaging with and acting on our environment, therefore exercising agency. Dasein can be understood as "its commerce with things" and is determined "by the success and failure, the feasibility and unfeasibility" of things for us (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 50). The meaning that things can have for us does not come from some transcendental, separate, and neutral place, but we discover meaning as we deal

with life. From this perspective for Heidegger (1927/1962), the research question is: What does it mean to be?

Heidegger developed the analytic of Dasein through its encounter with entities in the world and introduced the concept of "equipment" as a means to distinguish entities that Dasein encounters from "mere things" (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). In this sense, each one of us is "immersed in the world of equipment, instruments, institutions, organisations, factories, workplaces, etc." (Joensuu, 2012, p. 424).

Heidegger explored ''the self'' regarding average everyday existence in the context of "being with others" (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In using the term others, Heidegger reflects the identification of Dasein with others who have similar characteristics, beliefs, norms, and values, arguing that in being with others, Dasein may assume a passive role since living alongside other human beings often necessitates the assimilation of the collective norms and values of others or society. This way of living absolves Dasein of personal responsibility, decision-making, and choice (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Within this passive role, Heidegger depicted existence as being inauthentic or "fallen." Heidegger defines Dasein's inauthentic existence as the act of uncritically conforming to societal norms and values, thus losing selfhood. In presenting the alternative to an inauthentic existence, Heidegger reveals Dasein's authentic self (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Heidegger views Dasein's being in the world as represented by processes of ''Being alongside the world'' (Dasein's engagement with entities), Being with others (Dasein's relations with others), and ''Being one's self'' (who we are in the world) (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 169).

Heidegger distinguishes between two types of Self: (1) "the Self of one's own Dasein" and (2) "the Self of the Other" (Heidegger 1962: 166/128). These two types of selves are connected with Heidegger's concept of authenticity, which renders the first authentic and the second inauthentic (Stroh, 2015). The first would be a Self capable of perceiving and understanding its own Dasein from the first person perspective, allowing it to attain authenticity. In the second instance, the "Self of the Other" conceives of itself as inseparable from the community as an entity into which people are absorbed. Heidegger asserts that Dasein's "authentic potentiality for Being its Self" can only be achieved by becoming self-sufficient, which appears to imply that our absorption in matters of the world causes us to focus solely on ways of coping with what is outside of us, predetermined situations that we must somehow function in to belong and fulfill social expectations of us. This may be seen as contrasting with the view of the individual as having a mind of their own and as capable of critical thinking and agency (Stroh, 2015), but the world is constituted by human beings or "cases of Dasein" living together to form a community, and both concepts are not exclusive of each other. In the end, "Dasein is always lived as a "case of Dasein" and, as such, the singular and collective first-person perspectives are necessarily interrelated" (Stroh, 2015, p. 258).

Heidegger presents the concept of Dasein's interpretation of the world in terms of two core dynamics: the ''as structure'' (viewing or describing an entity ''as'' something) and the ''restructure'' (reflecting the prior knowledge of Dasein about an entity or entities). ''The 'as' makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood; it constitutes the interpretation'' (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 188). By revealing the capacity of Dasein to interpret the world, Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein's (our) interaction with the world departs from, or rests on preexisting knowledge that we possess, or ''fore structure of understanding'' of the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 191). Heidegger presents

"interpretation" as a concept closely intertwined with "understanding" in ''making explicit that which was already implicitly present in understanding" (Cerbone, 2009, p. 62).

Concerning the 'as' structure, Dasein's circumspective interpretation was projected toward entities ready to hand (useful things), revealing their purpose or function and the totality of involvement associated with this entity. "The 'as' makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood - it constitutes the interpretation'' (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 188). By revealing the capacity of Dasein to interpret their world, Heidegger demonstrated that interaction with entities was not neutral but guided by the familiarity of everyday interaction. Dasein was thus presented as having preexisting knowledge or ''fore structure of understanding'' of their world (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 191). In presenting Dasein's capacity to have preunderstanding, Heidegger highlights that any act of interpretation is never value-free (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016).

Befindlichkeit (Disposition)

Heidigger believed that Dasein is relative to context, and there will thus be a mood or disposition – Befindlichkeit – arising from the experience of Being-in-the-world - from our interactions with all that surrounds us in the world (Wrathall, 2006). In terms of the present research, the participants' thoughts and feelings about their situation are underpinned by their attitude or disposition (Befindlichkeit) that constitutes their interpretation of the phenomena investigated in this work - their lived experience of being NEET (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Mood takes into account ideas preconceived from all individual experiences of Being-in-the-world – for example from one's state of physical and mental health, socio-economic status, family, friends, immigration status, neighbourhood, living in Malta, and so on.

Care: ''the structural totality of being in the world.''

For Heidegger, the human being's or Dasein's relation to themselves is characterized as care (Sorge) (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Dasein's relation to their existence is also actualized through care, which is not meant in the psychological sense of 'worry' (Besorgnis), the state of being carefree (Sorglosigkeit), or as "emotionality and affectedness" (Joensuu, 2012, p. 420). The term "care" as used by Heidegger engages with the individual's priorities, or what they hold to be most important in life, exposing their concern and angst. This reveals itself, particularly in people's aspirations for the future. To care is to care about someone or something, and is a process by means of which human beings reach out towards their Being and 'future', which also constitutes the meaning of Being-in-the-World (Joensuu, 2012). Heidegger presents care (Sorge) as three-dimensional, defining it to embrace the essential dimensions of human existence: "solicitude (Fűrsorge), a prior social relatedness to the others; concern (Besorge), an instrumental relation to things and equipment totality of the world, and as care (Sorge), a fundamental characteristic of human existence" (Joensuu, 2012, p. 421). Heidegger's three-dimensional model of care constitutes or describes the space within which human life unfolds through care-relations that can be either authentic or inauthentic.

Further, Heidegger's care structure is presented according to three temporal notions representing the past, present, and future of Dasein's existence (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). This care structure moves from future to past to present (Heidegger, 1927/1962), thus acknowledging Dasein as "being ahead of itself" (future), "already being in a world" (past) and finally, "being alongside" (present) in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 236–237). In caring about what the future might hold, and therefore conceiving of, thinking about, or aspiring for what comes next, Dasein (the human being) in the present is positioned in a

particular way, or in Heidegger's terms, "thrown." "Thrownness" means that we (Dasein) find ourselves existing in a world that was already made before we were born into it, a world bound by specific constructions, norms, and values (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). For Heidegger, this position of thrownness represents Dasein's past. Dasein's future and past as they are fused in Heidegger's care structure explain Dasein's condition ''ahead of itself already being in a world'' (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 236).

Dasein understands and interprets the world, encountering everything on its way with attention and concern that also derives from and impacts human thoughts about the future. Thus, Dasein's being in the world is conceived of as one of "essentially care" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 237). Dasein's care structure constitutes Heidegger's view of the life trajectory from a temporal stance, exposing Dasein's existence "from its beginning to its end" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 276). Heidegger viewed Dasein's future, past, and present as ever-evolving, which he illustrates by means, or method, of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation.

Heidegger and Interpretation

From Heidegger's perspective, the meaning that is derived from lived experience is situated on a horizon where past, present, and future combine as memories "in the now" (Larsen & Adu (2022). These can be examined hermeneutically as a text expressed in "intentional speech-acts" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 72). For Heidegger, the role of interpretation is to reveal the meaning and references people give to things they experience. It can be thus argued that at the core "of Dasein's (our) experience is the interpretation-mediated understanding" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 54). Heidegger acknowledges interpretation as a way of accessing Dasein that facilitates this entity to "show itself in itself and from itself" (1927/1962, p. 36). For Heidegger, the concept

of interpretation is an integral part of being in the world, and he acknowledges having foreknowledge as part of Dasein's existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962). According to Heidegger, there is no discernible distinction between epistemology and ontology because knowledge is extrapolated from interpretation and understanding. All we can understand emanates from our experience of being in the world (Dasein) (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Put differently, we construct our reality, our worldview, which Heidegger (1982) describes as:

> a matter of a coherent conviction which determines the current affairs of life more or less expressly and directly. A worldview is related in its meaning to the particular contemporary Dasein at any given time. […] Whether the worldview is determined by superstition and prejudices or is based purely on scientific knowledge and experience, or even, as is usually the case, a mixture of superstition and knowledge, prejudice and sober reason, it all comes to the same thing, nothing essential is changed. (p. 55)

Heidegger's concepts of phenomenological description, discourse, language, interpretation, and understanding have been instrumental in the evolution of hermeneutic phenomenology, including the art and science of interpretation of written text (Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1976) and the phenomenological exploration of being through lived experience (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger did not establish a specific method for phenomenological research (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). However, his work on interpretation has led to the development of various interpretative research methods aimed at investigating the human experience, including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009, 2012, 2022 ; Van Manen, 1997, among others). IPA researchers emphasize the centrality of Heidegger's concept of interpretation and his argument against an objective approach to phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009, 2012, 2022). The IPA researcher ''brings their fore-conception (prior

experiences, assumptions, preconceptions) to the encounter, and cannot help but look at any new stimulus in the light of their own prior experience'' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 25). Smith et al. (2009) go on to explain that the ''forestructure is always there, and it is in danger of presenting an obstacle to interpretation. In interpretation, priority should be given to the new object, rather than one's preconceptions'' (p. 25). Reflexivity is, therefore, essential in the researchers' endeavours to bracket their preconceptions.

Heidegger's philosophical analytic that includes the concepts of Dasein, lived experience, everyday ordinariness, being with, encounters with entities, and the care structure, offers a vantage point wherefrom to achieve the purpose of IPA in examining people's interpretation of particular life experiences (Smith et al., 2022) - being NEET, in the case of the present research study. This also reflects one of the core aims of Heidegger's philosophy: to disclose the significance of everyday ordinary human existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

4.4 The choice of IPA: Aims and objectives

In this work, I use IPA to explore the lived experience of young people in Malta who have been categorized as "NEET" by statisticians and policymakers. IPA is a qualitative research approach examining how people make sense of important life events. It originated in psychology but has since been applied to various other areas of study. IPA proponents hold that it is phenomenological because it seeks to "explore experience in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1). I chose IPA because it was the research approach most suited to answer the questions posed by this research. Questions that I asked myself to help me choose include:

i.   Which methods are most suitable to ensure that I reach the aims and objectives of my investigation, taking into consideration my role as researcher and the dynamics involved in the research process?

ii.   What ethical implications are there?

iii.   What is my ontological and epistemological positioning as a researcher?

As argued in the previous section, Husserl aimed at finding the essence of experience, and IPA focuses on capturing the essence of lived experiences of particular cohorts (Smith et al., 2022), allowing for both confluence and difference between research participants (Smith et al., 2022). This commitment to idiography provides "rich and detailed descriptions of concrete experiences" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p.95). Thus, individual participants' experiences are explored in detail, case by case, before considering similarities or differences across the different cases (Smith et al., 2022, 2009).

IPA draws substantively from Heidegger's interpretative phenomenology, which Smith et al. (2022, p. 11) explain, constituted a move away from the transcendental strand and laid the foundations of hermeneutics and existentialism in phenomenology. Heidegger questioned that any knowledge could exist outside of interpretation as grounded in "the lived world" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 12). This stance permeates the present work, which departs from the belief that NEET's interpretations of their situation constitute valuable knowledge. This knowledge is important since we need to realise that young people experience diverse trajectories in their lives, which quantitative research will not factor in.

As underlined above, a qualitative approach was opted for to collect these diverse trajectories. The process of bracketing and a non-judgmental attitude was essential during the entire

research process, wherein I made every effort to check any existing personal bias. This phenomenological attitude allowed me the space to acknowledge these preconceptions and assumptions to gain the best perspective possible of the phenomenon, even while I was conscious of the inevitability that a degree of foreunderstanding would remain. For this reason, reflection and reflexivity on my part were vital throughout the whole process (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

IPA is often the subject of argument among scholars and researchers of various stripes, much of the critique touching upon the persisting focus of IPA on individual experience. Todorova (2011) argues that oppressive or stigmatising social meanings discovered by researchers will be more rigourously interrogated utilising a constructionist epistemology. There is also consensus among other scholars that the epistemological basis of IPA should be based on both breadth and profundity (Houston & Mullan-Jensen, 2012). While appreciating the value of IPA research in serving to inform best practices in various fields, Larsen & Adu (2022) question whether IPA is phenomenological due to its idiographic character.

Employing IPA as a methodology reflects the characteristics of qualitative research of focusing on meaning and context. Smith (2011b) maintains that while IPA zones in on the personal and experiential, other research will also contain a more explicit social background, and thus the gained insights into lived experiences will enhance discussions about social and political forces. The current research embraces this complexity as it explores the lived experience of young people who go through a phase in their life disengaged from education, training, and employment.

Qualitative approaches to research that I could have considered as appropriate for this research include narrative methodologies, where the focus is on stories and how they serve in the production of social constructions; discourse analysis, which delves into the representational functions of language; and also thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which focuses on identifying, analysing, and reporting on recurring patterns.

4.5 The theoretical foundations of IPA

4.5.1 Epistemology

IPA emerges from theories of phenomenology, interpretation, and idiography and is positioned between realism and social constructionism. Whilst acknowledging the existence of an objective reality, IPA holds that our subjective engagement with the world renders it meaningful (Smith et al., 2012). IPA departs from the assumption that even though people can speak about their cognitive and emotional states, it is through the researcher's scrupulous and rigourous interpretation that meaning can emerge. Privileging the research participants' point of view and drawing on knowledge of previous scholarly works, the researcher interprets participants' personal narratives. IPA thus draws on descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology traditions combined with the researcher's interpretation (Smith et al., 2012). I shall now address important concepts and terms relevant to IPA for more clarity.

4.5.2 Phenomenological attitude

According to Husserl, the phenomenological attitude necessitates that the researcher moves outside of their everyday experiences and reflects on their thoughts about and reactions to those daily experiences to achieve objectivity (Smith et al., 2012).

Finlay & Evans (2009) recommend an approach to the phenomenological stance that is more humanistic, one that allows researchers to receive the participants' disclosures as their truth.

Accepting participants' socio-cultural backgrounds, "taking seriously our respect of difference and diversity" is integral to this open stance (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p. 37). Phenomenological researchers are empathic and curious as they endeavour to gain insights into the participant's lived experience, simultaneously preserving enough detachment so that they can remain critically analytical.

4.5.3 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic phenomenology, or interpretive phenomenology, as it is also called, emerged from the work of Martin Heidegger. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. It influences the dynamics of IPA research, including the role of the researcher. Originally applied to interpreting biblical texts, it was a tool for deciphering ancient scriptures. This involves both a linguistic and a psychological aspect: engaging with the text itself and with the meaning intended by the author in producing the text. Another perspective involves the reader's role in the interpretative act (Smith et al., 2012).

While Heidegger's philosophical engagement developed in tandem with Husserl's, he later contested core issues of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (Engelland, 2020). The rationale of phenomenological research was the cause of Heidegger's move away from Husserl: Husserl's focus of study was the nature of knowledge (epistemological), whereas Heidegger's was the nature of being and temporality (ontological). Distinct from Husserl's focus on human beings as knowers of phenomena, hermeneutic phenomenology privileges human experience (Engelland, 2020). Thus, Heidegger focuses on how human beings interact with their lifeworld (Neubauer et al., 2019), a perspective that views human beings as being aware of their position in the world, albeit not continually or intentionally. According to Heidegger, central to phenomenology is the concern with understanding things as they manifest themselves (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In making sense of our world, we are sculpted and shaped

by our encounter with it (Campbell, 2019; Engel, 2019). The world contains meaning for us because we are part of it, and we have meaning because the world is part of us too. The moment is the container within which the reciprocal meaning-making of human life occurs (Engel, 2019). It is a coming-together, a crux containing life in all its messiness – one in which human Dasein's "uniqueness, finitude and historicity" is affirmed (Gadamer, 2019, p. 135).

Heidegger argues that a phenomenon manifests itself subtly in the text. Engaging with the text thus enables the researcher to elicit the phenomenon which otherwise would be latent. In this process, the research participant may or may not be conscious of the phenomenon uncovered by the researcher. In IPA, data is gleaned through detailed and systematic analysis of the text, yielding understandings exceeding and absorbing the participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, the researcher's role is essential in bringing forth the manifest meaning and interpreting it simultaneously. In sum, the interpretative act allows the phenomenon to be known. This rigourous and structured analysis is requisite for quality and validity in doing IPA research, including the principle of bracketing.

Having extensive professional experience in education, including working with young people who would be in the process of arriving at the same situation as the research participants, bracketing was something that I, as researcher, was constantly engaged with throughout the research journey, and I have fully engaged with adopting the phenomenological attitude, despite being aware that this may not be entirely possible.

4.5.4 The Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle describes the circular movement from the whole to the parts, "deconstructing and then re-constructing the text, resulting in a shared understanding" (Lafont, 2005, p.6). In this research, I attempt to answer the question, "What is the lived experience of

being NEET?" The researcher interrogates the text, attempting to find out what it means to be NEET. In applying the hermeneutic circle, the researcher attempts to "uncover the true essence of the experience" (Lafont, 2005, p. 6). The hermeneutic circle offers infinite possibilities, as each exploration of the text can yield further insights and possibilities (Koch, 1995).

IPA involves a double hermeneutic – a cyclical process in which the researcher is constantly trying to make sense of the meanings that the participant has given to his or her experiences a priori. Best described in circles, one representing the participant and another the researcher, the two join at one location. This contact alternates when the researcher engages in bracketing, interpretation of data, and observing personal preconceptions, impacting the movement around the circle and the extent of contact. In this dynamic, the researcher is instrumental in discovering meaning within the data. In this work, I have engaged in reflective, detailed, and careful data analysis over an extensive period. This has enabled me to be constantly aware of my interpretative role as researcher and to keep conscious of any preconceptions that might adulterate the findings.

4.5.5 Idiography

IPA is committed to idiography – it is characterized by a focus on the research participant's experience in their specific context (Smith et al., 2012) and on rigourous examination of each case. Similarities and differences across cases are studied cautiously, producing textured and detailed data from participants' reflections on shared experiences (Smith et al., 2012). Generalization is not the aim of IPA; the endeavour at the heart of IPA is to achieve profound insight into a phenomenon, which insight may or may not be replicated in the accounts of other research participants who find themselves in the same circumstances. The present study has set out to explore the particular experience of young people classified as "NEET." It has focussed

on each case individually in the first instance, carefully exploring common and divergent patterns across the other cases.

4.5.6 Analysis in IPA

Smith et al. (2022) write that IPA analysis is described as "an iterative and inductive cycle" (p. 74): using line-by-line analysis of each participant's narrative to identify patterns within these narratives, "emphasising both convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance, usually first for single cases, and then subsequently across multiple cases" (p. 75). The analysis also looks at the process of interaction between the researcher, the analysed data and the emerging knowledge about the meanings that the particular concerns might have for participants in a particular context. This would lead to the formation of a more interpretative account.

Smith et al. (2022) explain that analysis "is an iterative and fluid process of engagement with the transcript", involving "flexible thinking, processes of reduction, expansion, revision, creativity and innovation" (p. 77).

4.5.7 Heideggerian phenomenology in IPA

An essential feature of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927/1962) is his understanding of phenomenology as an interpretative act, perceiving it through the lens of hermeneutics. This is crucial in IPA, together with Heidegger's connection between interpretative work and our foreknowledge, highlighting the importance of self-reflecting about bracketing while interpreting qualitative data (Smith et al., 2022).

Heidegger notes that "phenomenology" is composed of two parts that derive from the Greek phenomenon: to "show" or "appear" and logos: "discourse," "reason," "judgment". Thus the main goal is to investigate the "thing itself" as it manifests (the phenomenon) –NEET, in this

case. Then analytical thinking is required by the logos aspect – the part played by the researcher – to make sense of what manifested to us, which according to Heidegger, is central to phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/1962). This micro-analysis and synthesis caused Heidegger to define phenomenology as hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2012).

For Heidegger, phenomenology engages itself with studying something which may be invisible or disguised in the form that it presents itself and also with examining the presenting form itself because this is part of what lies beneath the surface of appearance – the invisible or disguised part of which it is simultaneously a part of and distinct from (Smith et al., 2012). This is an interpretative process, and it is never neutral (Heidegger, 1962), a fact that I, as researcher, have had to constantly reflect upon throughout this research journey. The researcher perforce brings preconceptions to the encounter from within which she looks at and perceives the manifesting phenomenon. This endangers the interpretative act, which should always prioritise the new "moment" rather than the pre-conceptions of it:

> Our first, last and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our … fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 195)

Heidegger's study of fore-understanding facilitates our awareness of bracketing as a cyclical process that can never be completely achieved (Smith et al., 2012, p. 25).

4.5.8 Lifeworld

Phenomenological research is characterized by a departure from or rootedness in the lifeworld. This embodies the natural attitude of everyday life – the original pre-reflective, pre-theoretical attitude conceived by Husserl (van Manen, 2016).

A person could have several lifeworlds: the home, the peer group, the school, and the sports club, for example. Each lifeworld, or context, will offer different experiences, and it is the central aim of phenomenological inquiry to examine these by adopting by a non-judgmental stance that is open to the participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A sensitivity to the lifeworld of the NEET young people participating in this study was thus essential, given my aim to gain closer, fine-grained insights into their lived experiences.

Looking at the lifeworld requires that we approach experience in a way that is as unbiased as possible, and we must also be aware that there is no guarantee that our personal experiences are similar to those of other people. Our experiences are unique to us, and yet, in particular arenas, we are united by the same words and languages, which help us navigate the intricacies of our lives (van Manen, 2016).

For Husserl, a phenomenon can only be understood from the perspective of a given individual, which leads him to ask the critically important question: "What is it for an individual to know or to be conscious of a phenomenon?" Husserl believed that the lived experience of a phenomenon contained universal elements common to other individuals experiencing such a phenomenon, which needed to be grasped for a generalizable description to be achieved. The core of this description would then be an accurate representation of the nature of that phenomenon. The task of any researcher using Husserl's phenomenology would lie in truly arriving at the universal essences of that phenomenon, which demands of the researcher

rigourous self-reflection that enables him or her to transcend personal bias in favor of a concerted focus on the participants' unique accounts of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.93).

Heidegger takes a different course by asserting that an individual's conscious experience of a phenomenon, the world, and the individual's personal history are intertwined. For Heidegger, consciousness is formed by a person's biography and the environment within which the person was raised. We cannot jump out of ourselves – human beings experience phenomena from a frame of reference to background knowledge. Van Manen (1990) outlines four essences of lived experience: how we live time, how we experience distance and space, our bodily experience, and our experience of the myriad relationships we share with others.

Considering how the "NEET" phenomenon is experienced in these four dimensions has enhanced my insights into the lived experiences of the research participants. We all have our particular way of existing in the world, and each of us describes what we go through in life in our own idiosyncratic way, using our own words, expressions, and language. Discovering depictions or meanings that the participants may share and that speak to me as the researcher rests on my sensitivity and attention to these critical components proposed by van Manen (1990). Also, as Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003, p.39) write: "our very own behaviour, our personal actions and our individual ways of being are all a result of our own personal room in the world, which can be described as one's own entry to a common and shared world."

4.5.9 Experience

Given that this IPA study focuses on "lived experience," the concept of "experience" would merit a closer look. IPA proponents' (Smith et al., 2012, p. 2) view of experience is influenced by Dilthey's (1976), where experience is seen as hierarchical:

i.   The elemental level of experience, in which the individual is unthinkingly and naturally immersed in the constant flow of experience;

ii.   A higher level of experience, in which the human being has an awareness of what goes on or has an experience;

iii.   The comprehensive level, where the experience takes on specific meanings. This comprehensive experience is constituted by life fragments, which are IPA's primary focus.

Smith et al. (2012) illustrate this by giving the example of someone going for a serious operation and how this affects them. The various stages of this surgery experience include: becoming diagnosed, getting ready for the operation, recovering, and so on. Each phase may be separated in time, but all the phases belong to the same (medical) journey or event in that person's life.

IPA aims to engage with the human being in making sense of the totality of this experience. The role of the researcher in the process consists of rendering the ground fertile for the research participant to engage in-depth with the experience being addressed. In this way, the phenomenon under study – the lived experience of being NEET in the present case – becomes comprehensive.

4.5.10 Lived experience

Smith et al. (2012) explain the concept of "lived experience" through the example of a person strolling down a lane. The authors here refer to this person mindlessly glimpsing trees, and hearing birdsong, perhaps because the mind is preoccupied with other thoughts that have nothing to do with the present stroll. External factors such as past encounters and conversations or cultural and social mores "adulterate" the experience of strolling down the lane. Paying

attention to the research participant's personal account of his or her lived experience of the stroll, the researcher may discover the essences of its nature (van Manen, 1990) and thus create a phenomenological description.

II RESEARCH METHODS

4.6 The Research Participants – the sample

Smith et al. (2012) emphasize recruiting a sufficiently uniform sample when using IPA, which entails sampling a cluster of people who have a specific phenomenon in common and will thus be in an optimal position to shed light on it (see also Janackovski et al., 2020; Armitage et al., 2020; Hulgaard et al., 2020; Langdridge, 2007).

In the present work, the research participants are young men and women aged 18-24 who, although coming from various walks of life, share being, or having been, recently NEET. For this reason, I viewed them as a homogeneous group sharing experiences of being disengaged from education, employment, and training. Being NEET is not always a clear-cut situation, as the young people concerned may fluctuate between periods of precarious employment, tentative or irregular participation in training or education, and inactivity (Kelly & McGuinness, 2013; McPherson, 2021; Thompson et al., 2014). For this reason, my focus on NEET young people had to include individuals disengaged from employment, education, and training during and also up till a few months before the fieldwork.

Sampling was purposeful – I wanted to recruit individuals sharing the same characteristic of experiencing or having recently experienced being NEET. Sample selection involved planning the necessary steps to achieve this goal, the first of which was to discuss with my supervisor the idea of holding a pilot study and possible venues where I could find NEET young people

as potential participants. We agreed that once I had been granted approval from FREC to enter

the field of research, I should contact Youth Guarantee[1] administration to introduce my

research and find out how I could gain consent to access informal sessions held for NEET

young people. I drafted an introduction letter (refer to Appendix 2) signed by myself and my

supervisor to present to the administrative officials at the office of Youth Guarantee and

proceeded to make an appointment via email. I explained to the manager that data collection

for my research would entail attending sessions as a participant observer for several hours per

week, writing field notes, and conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with the

attending young people who would consent to participate in the research. In the meantime, I

had been granted approval from FREC to collect the data for my research, so I could proceed

when the Youth Guarantee administration also granted consent.

4.6.1 Delimitations

The delimitations of this research refer to the sample of participants that I recruited to help me

collect the data. The research participants of this work are delimited to being 18-24 years of

age and to being NEET – not in employment, education, and training at the time of the research

or having recently lived through such a phase. This included young people who were not in

education or training but were engaging in precarious employment.

4.6.2 The pilot project

I conducted the pilot project during February and March 2018, intending to test the research

data collection tool. After obtaining the necessary permission to conduct research at Youth

Guarantee, I arranged to have my research introduced by the manager of the youth sessions,

who consented to act as a gatekeeper. Upon entering the field, I introduced myself as researcher

and answered questions that the young people asked, mainly about where I worked, why I was

doing the research, and what the research was about. All five research participants filled out

the participation form and signed their agreement to be observed during sessions and participate in one or possibly two interviews. I observed sessions with the young people for 4-6 hours a week for two months, depending on my schedule of work at the time. I used an observation schedule (refer to Appendix 9) to make detailed field notes of the young people under study and of the context with which they were relating. The field notes served for me to capture and re-visualise all that I had noticed, felt, and observed during the observation sessions, both in the writing process and while reading and re-reading, to discover dominant themes for each research participant and the group as a whole. After a level of rapport developed, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with them, which I transcribed verbatim and analysed using IPA.

The pilot study outcomes helped me get a closer look at the lifeworld of the young people labeled "NEET" and refine my interview questions, prompts, and interviewing technique.

Table 4.2: The pilot project participants at a glance[21]

	Name	Age	Parents' status	Recruitment
1	Liam	18	Mother – cleaner Father – electrician	Youth Guarantee course attendee and former student at a school where I worked
2	Dylan	20	Mother – beautician Father – deceased	Youth Guarantee course attendee
3	Jane	20	Father – manual worker Mother – housewife	Youth Guarantee course attendee
4	Sarah	22	Mother – messenger Father – estranged	Youth Guarantee course attendee

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[21] In view of the smallness of the island, I have not included participants' locality, to protect their identity.

5	Marie	18	Mother – housewife Father – welder	Youth Guarantee course attendee

Table 4.3: The rest of the research participants at a glance

	Name	Age	Parents' status	Recruitment
1	Laura	18	Mother – restaurant kitchen assistant Father – police officer	Former student at a school where I worked
2	Rachel	18	Mother – housewife Father – estranged	Former student at a school where I worked
3	Anthea	19	Mother – sales assistant Father – driver	Former student at a school where I worked
4	Noel	20	Mother – deceased Father – estranged	Friends of a friend who acted as gatekeeper
5	Kevin	20	Mother – office assistant Father – driver	Youth Guarantee course attendee
6	Stefan	23	Mother – office assistant Father – soldier	Youth Guarantee course attendee
7	Bruno	19	Mother – cleaner Father – clerk	Youth Guarantee course attendee
8	Tom	21	Mother – travel agency assistant Father – factory worker	Youth Guarantee course attendee
9	Alexei	19	Mother – factory worker Father – deceased	Youth Guarantee course attendee

4.6.3 Recruitment - obtaining informed consent

The young people who participated in this research have been recruited via various channels.

Most have been recruited from the sessions organised by Youth Guarantee. A small number of

the participants are ex-students at the school where I used to work as assistant head and with

whom I shared a certain level of rapport that facilitated fruitful communication with them years

later when I was looking for the research subjects that fit my research focus. Only one of the

research participants did not attend the Youth Guarantee sessions and was not an ex-student.

In this case, I recruited him through a common friend.

4.6.4 Recruitment from Youth Guarantee non-formal courses

Young people classified as NEET are difficult to locate for research purposes, and I was

unaware of young people in this situation in my social circle. After discussions with my

supervisor, I approached Youth Guarantee for help with recruitment. Youth Guarantee

recruiters employ different channels of communication to reach inactive youth because they

are mostly off the radar, are therefore highly unlikely to be found in public registers, and often

present the further challenge of being indifferent to any Government intervention (Ministry for

Education and Employment, 2007, p. 34). Youth Guarantee reaches out to young people

classified as NEET by sending them an individual invitation intended to garner their interest in

attending the Youth Guarantee programme. Response rates are often low, so alternative

methods of communication have to be contemplated, including home visits and social media

(Ministry for Education and Employment. 2007, p.34). Non-formal courses of very short

duration (6 weeks) are held for those who attend.

I presented a formal letter to the Youth Guarantee manager in charge of the non-formal courses

for NEETs in November 2016 (refer to appendix 2) that was signed by myself and my

supervisor to obtain permission to perform participant observation, write field notes, as well as conduct recorded interviews with the young people on the premises of the meeting venue(s). The same manager acted as gatekeeper, informing students and tutors about my research. It was important that tutors understood the purpose of my presence in their sessions because their attitude towards me as researcher could influence the students' view of both the researcher and the research. As Cohen et al. (2013) write, it is important to establish good rapport from the beginning with everybody involved in conducting the research, especially when the proposed research will take longer to be completed. All participants were 18 and over during data collection so I did not require parents' or guardians' permission to invite them to participate in the study. Most young people I approached agreed to participate upon my introduction and reading the information letter that included my mobile number in case they needed to verify any details or ask any questions. A small number agreed at first but then backed out of the interview when we had agreed to meet.

In January 2018, before formally commencing my research, the gatekeeper introduced me to the prospective pilot project participants during informal meetings held at the Catholic Institute in Floriana, which was the venue for the YG sessions at the time. I spoke to the young people and explained the purpose of my presence among them, including details about the research. I also invited them to ask me or comment about anything they wanted to ensure they understood everything. Once I had addressed all the necessary details, I handed them an information letter and invited them to fill it in and sign if they agreed to participate in the research. I started observation for the pilot study on 12th February 2018. The five interviews for the pilot study were conducted between 26th February 2018 and 12th March 2018. After the pilot project, I re-entered the field in July 2018, conducting participant observation with a different cohort with the help of the same gatekeeper who had helped me enter the field for the pilot project.

This time, attendance was irregular, and I could only conduct one interview, as the young people who had initially consented to being observed and interviewed preferred not to be interviewed when I approached them after several observation sessions. This interview took place on 25th July 2018. A third and final entry into the Youth Guarantee NEET scheme field commenced on 24th August 2020. The gatekeeper gave me permission to speak about my research with a number of young people attending some of the classes. I told the group what 'observation' entailed, and what I was going to focus on during the observation. It was also made clear to the group that pseudonyms would be used and what actions would be taken to ensure that their identity remained confidential. They were assured that when they were mentioned, a pseudonym would be used, and the information given would be anonymized to ensure that they were not identifiable. The group agreed to take part in the research project so they were asked to sign the informed consent form. We went over the consent form so that I would explain its content.

Once the consent form was signed, I started my observation sessions. I spent different times of the day with the research participants, mostly in different sessions and during breaks. I was sometimes included in random conversations between the research participants outside the classroom. During sessions, I was also sometimes invited to participate in discussions initiated by the tutors to engage the young people with the topic at hand. I conducted four interviews with participants in this cohort, as they were the most regular and available attendees. These took place between 17th September 2020 and 5th October 2020, three of them on the premises and one on zoom, the latter at the request of the research participant who had stopped attending the Youth Guarantee sessions.

4.6.5 Recruitment from other channels

At the time of the research, and years after I had left a school where I had worked as assistant head, I learned that some of the students who had attended the school during the two years that I was there were "NEET." They were all 18 years old and over by that time. I used Messenger to contact them and received a reply from some. Others did not respond. Those that replied were happy that I had reached out to them and agreed to participate in the research after I had given them all the information about what it entailed.

One young man I did not know previously and did not attend Youth Guarantee sessions came to participate in this study via a common friend with whom I had been speaking about my research and who offered to arrange for me to meet someone who fit the criteria. Noel was a regular client at her shop. She introduced us, and after explaining to him all about my research, Noel was interested and agreed to be interviewed.

In all, four of the research participants were not Youth Gurantee attendees. Interviews with them took place according to their availability and at the venue of their choice, between 13th October 3018 and 2nd July 2020.

4.7 Instrumentation

Smith et al. (2012, p. 56) hold that IPA is a particularly useful method for collecting data because it will "invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences" and "facilitate the elicitation of stories, thoughts and feelings about the target phenomenon." Semi-structured interviews are held to be the most frequently chosen method among IPA researchers (Reid et al., 2005), and I felt that this would help me achieve the idiographic element that I wanted (the alternative would have been the focus group) and also provide more support for myself (as distinct from un-structured interviewing). Observation is

also used in IPA research (Smith et al., 2012; Larkin & Griffiths, 2002), and as we shall see in the next section, this has helped me establish rapport prior to interviewing, such that interviewees felt more at ease talking to me and hence richer data could emerge.

4.7.1   Participant observation

Participant observation used together with semi-structured interviews enhances understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, facilitates building rapport, and increases access to information, informants, and activities (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). As Smith et al. (2022) suggest:

> The most important thing […] is to establish a rapport with the participant. They need to be comfortable with you, to know what you want and to trust you. Unless you succeed in establishing this rapport, you are unlikely to obtain good data from your participant. (p. 60)

Smith et al. (2022) advocate that collecting extra data to contextualize the interview content better can be helpful and cite participant observation particularly, as it can be "helpful for understanding particular local contexts and activities" (p. 68).

Participant observation allows the researcher to verify definitions of words and expressions that participants use in interviews, to correct any distortions or inaccuracies that might crop up during fieldwork, and to gain a perspective on what goes on that research participants may not be in a position to share, or when disclosure would be uncomfortable for them (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

In this sample, participant observation was only conducted with ten out of the fourteen research participants. This was facilitated by way of their enrolment in Youth Guarantee non-formal sessions. I gradually built rapport with the young people attending and established my "observer as participant" role (Gold, 1958) among them. I was not a member of the group in the same sense that they were, having established from the outset that I was attending sessions with them for research purposes – to collect data to gain a complete understanding of the research field (Gold, 1958). I describe the first two or three sessions that I started attending the venue of the Youth Guarantee sessions as "observation" because I felt that in the beginning, I was a stranger to the young people concerned. After they had got used to me coming in and sitting with them for some weeks, I gradually started being referred to and spoken to as one of them, even getting invited to participate in discussions. At this point, I felt that my role had developed into that of a participant observer.

I used elements for observation from Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) observation guide to help me write detailed field notes. These include: observing the surroundings and making detailed notes about the setting, writing a detailed description of the research participants, and recording the activities and interactions. My attention was directed at the recurrence and length of those interactions, and I also noted informal, ad hoc activities, symbolic meanings, and nonverbal and physical cues. I was especially attentive to my arising thoughts and views about what may have existed between the lines – about what ought to have happened and did not (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I observed the conversation content, who spoke to whom, who listened, silenced, my own deportment, and how my role affected the observed, what I said and thought. I conducted a total of 65 hours of observation overall. As Schensul et al. (1999, p.95) advocate, I started making accurate field notes at this early stage of the research process, reflectively

taking care not to let my personal biases interfere. Instead, I allowed them to emerge from the research participants themselves.

4.7.2   *Semi-structured, in-depth interviews*

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews provide insight into people's accounts and descriptions. They allow the researcher to enter the world of the individual participants as they freely articulate their narratives (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

This interviewing style facilitates flexibility in the dialogue between the researcher and the research participant. The topics arise according to the flow of the speaker's narrative, and the questions are shaped and included according to the conversation's needs and the participants' responses. The researcher can thus be free to probe unpredictable, unexpected, and important realms of experience that arise in conversation with the interviewee (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

I conducted 20 interviews in all, of which six were second interviews with selected research participants. I selected and framed questions that would facilitate my understanding of the participants' different experiences, which would help me distinguish between them. Above all, the questions had to be put in such a way that would help me gather rich data on which to base the analysis.

I prepared a topic guide and list of prompts (see Appendices 11-13) to help guide the interview if the interviewees were not forthcoming. However, the young people did talk freely when they had warmed up and overcame initial self-consciousness. Some were more articulate than others and explained that the fact that they had got used to me attending sessions with them helped them build enough trust and confidence to speak to me freely. Nevertheless, some needed encouragement to speak clearly and confidently about themselves, even though I had

participated in group sessions and spent time with them during breaks, and some rapport had been built.

All research participants spoke to me at length. First interviews lasted from a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of 60 minutes, whereas second interviews were between 40 and 75 minutes long. Interviews with Youth Guarantee course participants took place at the venue of the Youth Guarantee courses – in an empty classroom and on a bench outside, whereas those with the ex-students were conducted at a cafeteria the first time and online the second time because it was at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic. I interviewed Noel at the shop's backroom of our mutual friend, who acted as gatekeeper.

I analysed the detailed field notes I had made during the observation period and after each interview encounter to look for dominant themes. Although I had questions prepared, as expected, they did not follow the order I had listed them. Very often, the research participant led the conversation according to personal preferences. I only clarified some points occasionally and asked questions about areas the speaker omitted or skimmed over. It was my aim to encourage a natural flow of conversation.

After transcribing the interviews personally, repeated readings, and making notes and reflections about the narratives emerging from the data, I analysed all fourteen narratives to consolidate the process of identifying dominant themes according to IPA guidelines.

4.7.3 Second interviews

While analysing the transcripts of the first interviews with Laura, Rachel, Kevin, Liam, Sarah, and Marie, I felt that the data yielded might need to be richer to conduct IPA, and a follow-up interview would be helpful (Alase, 2017; Larsen & Adu, 2023). During the first interview,

Laura, Rachel, and Marie spoke passionately and at considerable length about family members and friends. I had allowed them to talk freely most of the time, as it would not benefit the interview to interrupt their articulate accounts. In Kevin's case, during the first interview, he mentioned having a new address now since he was no longer living with his parents. This move enabled him to receive more help and support which would enable him to improve. I understood that he was in an addiction treatment centre, but he never said this specifically, and I did not ask directly for ethical reasons, waiting for him to specify. But he did not, and before analysing his account, I needed another chance to confirm this. Liam was articulate during the first interview, but he mostly kept quoting self-help positivity slogans and thinking aloud. I felt that I could not quite grasp his personal experience of being NEET and felt that a second round would allow me to understand him more. Sarah was timid, and parts of the first interview were too sketchy for me to analyse properly.

After consulting with my supervisor and co-supervisor, I contacted the six participants, asking them if they would accept being interviewed a second time. I used their contact details from the consent form they signed at the time of our first acquaintance and sent them a text message. Once they replied, I obtained their permission to call them on their mobile phone to explain my request for a second interview in more detail. All six young people agreed to be interviewed a second time. This was during the Summer of 2020, the time of Covid-19, where everyone in Malta was being advised to practice social distancing as much as possible. For this reason, five of the second interviews were held on Zoom. Rachel preferred to meet in a cafeteria, where we both wore masks and adhered to social distancing safety measures.

Before each second interview, I reminded the participant that the video recording would be used to help me transcribe notes for the research I was conducting. The recordings, including

those of interviews on Zoom, would be stored on my computer, protected by a secret password. I reminded them that the recordings would be destroyed upon research assessment. I informed each participant interviewed online that they had the option to switch off the camera during the interview, and to stop the interview at any point if they felt like it. Two participants interviewed a second time - Kevin and Liam - opted to switch off their camera throughout the interview.

The fact that the second interviews took place close to a year after the first one also yielded the added value of retrospect. They yielded data that enhanced the themes that had emerged from our first encounter. The report of the findings is presented in Chapter 5.

4.7.4 The interview topic guide

The interview topic-guide addressed the following:

i.   the research participants' thoughts about the present and the future;

ii.   the impact of school experiences;

iii.   emotional factors affecting them at the time of the research;

iv.   their personal construction of success and failure.

4.8 Analytical strategy – the transcription process and data analysis

I transcribed each interview personally verbatim from the audio recordings as soon as possible after the interviews. It took eight to ten hours to complete a single transcript of about an hour. This was an intensive and time-consuming stage, also because some participants spoke in a very low voice or had a particular accent that entailed repeated rewinding of the recording and re-listening to gauge the exact word or phrase that at first would have sounded muffled, like something else or incomprehensible. Sometimes it was necessary to go back again to re-examine the tone of voice that could have made a turn of phrase ambiguous. A single word

could carry diverse meanings depending on the tone in which it is articulated, for example, the word "mela" in Maltese, which would be a good example of the chameleon quality that could be imbued to words by the tone of voice and facial expression. Meanings of "mela" could include agreement (fake or genuine), "so" or "listen to this" (wanting to begin telling a story), among others. The advantages of transcribing myself included the ability to recall the individual stories in detail. As I transcribed, I could visualise the entire interview as it happened, such as the participants' non-verbals. This transported me back to the time and place where the interview had taken place, immersing me in the nuances, particularities, and complexity of the young people's narratives as they unraveled.

I conducted all first face-to-face interviews, having to revert to conducting six second ones online during the Covid-19 pandemic. All of these were conducted online except for one in a cafeteria. Two of the research participants whom I interviewed for the second time opted to keep the camera switched off. In contrast, with the other four I had the advantage of seeing them close during the interview. After transcription, I checked the document for any errors, and subsequently made a hard copy, because I found it easier to correct and edit like this. I corrected any mistakes, included notes in the margins about sections that I thought needed re-visiting, all the while returning to the recording to immerse myself in the interview as I read the transcript, to ensure that I made the most exact transcription possible.

When I had finished collecting the data from the semi-structured interviews and the field notes I had made during the observation sessions, I analysed the data according to the stages outlined by Smith et al. (2012, pp. 82-98) for IPA research. These include:

i. "immersing oneself in the original data" by repeatedly reading each transcript and the detailed field notes that helped give more depth and texture to the data derived from the transcripts;

ii. preliminary annotation by "examining semantic content and language" of the transcript to highlight important points;

iii. initial "analysing exploratory comments" to start developing emergent themes;

iv. utilising abstraction, polarisation, contextualisation numeration and function to identify connections among emerging themes;

v. repetition of the process case by case; and finally

vi. identifying similarities and recurring patterns among all the cases.

4.8.1 Limitations and methodological rigour

Smith et al. (2022) state that "the truth claims of an IPA analysis are always tentative, and analysis is subjective", adding that this subjectivity is constrained by way of it being "dialogical, systematic and rigourous in its application and the results of it are available for the reader to check subsequently" (p. 77).

From a methodological perspective, while describing the approach of IPA in a series of "steps", Smith et al. (2022, 2012, 2009) emphasize the non-prescriptive, adaptable nature of IPA and that "there is no clear right or wrong way of conducting this sort of analysis" (2022, p. 76), encouraging IPA researchers to "be innovative in the ways that they approach it" (p. 76). Smith et al. (2022, p. 77) maintain that "analysis is open to change and it is only 'fixed' through the act of writing up", allowing for "the possibility of a creative, insightful and novel outcome".

Larsen & Adu (2022) write that IPA is essentially idiographic, and therefore "the meanings that this approach attempts to uncover are not idealized meanings for the purpose of elucidating

universal truths about the phenomenon" (p .220). They argue that while IPA provides more flexibility in research conceptualization, there can be difficulty in assessing procedures of analysis and reflection.

A challenge for IPA researchers is that of, on the one hand, wanting to adopt an insider's perspective, while on the other hand, wanting to stand alongside the participant, to look at them from different angles, ask questions, and consider what they are saying (Smith et al., 2022). Rigourous IPA research combines both stances: "it is empathic *and* questioning" (p .30). IPA is always interpretative, and it is critical that interpretations at different levels are always grounded in the encounter between the researcher and the text (p. 31).

Methodological rigour in IPA is attained through a transparent account of the analytic process. Better quality is achieved by "bringing the research process to life and reflecting the complex work of the analysis rather than a step-by-step guide" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 151). High-quality IPA embraces convergence and divergence, illuminating the participants within a particular superordinate theme and across all the other cases. This analysis delves into how different participants articulate the same superordinate theme in idiosyncratic ways, while, at times, using individual biographies and contextual detail (p. 152). IPA work of high quality is "often multi-layered, and its narrative moves back and forth between group-level claims, individual-level claims and detailed micro-analysis of the extracts used, to communicate the argument made in analysis" (p.152). Further, the analysis should not focus on events but on the meaning given to them by the participants: the focus should be on how a particular event was made sense of or interpreted by the participants rather than on the event itself.

In this work, I have taken all precautions to ensure methodological rigour in providing all information about the following priorities, in line with Levitt et al.'s (2018) reporting criteria recommended by Smith et al. (2022) for IPA studies:

i.   the research aims - having a clear focus on the experiential or participants' sense-making;

ii.   participant selection – I have given a clear account of the purposive sampling that I used to recruit a homogeneous sample who have lived experience of the phenomenon that the study seeks to investigate, in this case, being NEET, focusing mainly on those who could express themselves verbally;

iii.   data collection - I have provided clear information about the data collection process, including the tools that I used to collect the data and my reflections about the data collection;

iv.   data analytic strategies – I have provided an account of the data analytical tools I will be using to analyse the data. I have also included any reflections and thoughts while analysing the data, as well as underlining any emerging themes for individual cases and across cases, and superordinate themes;

v.   methodological integrity - I have used observation, participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews. The first enabled me to familiarise myself with the participants. Participant observation helped me to explore certain issues on a group basis. I used the data and issues which emerged from these two methods to pose questions during the one to one interviews. So the first to methods enabled me to familiarise myself with the phenomenon, while the semi-structured interviews were used to gather the participants' interpretation of being NEET;

vi.   results – I have illustrated my analysis with visuals in the form of tables and presented my themes in connection to the data, introducing and contextualising citations and including analytic commentary clarifying the inferences extrapolated from the presented data selections that I presented. I made sure that readers were exposed to all participants, and I paid attention to divergence as well as convergence in my write-up.

Smith et al. (2022) often mention doing IPA in a research team and the importance of working with peers to manage data collection better and discuss potential pitfalls, both for the researcher

and the participant. In this PhD research, I was the sole researcher, collecting the data, conducting the analysis, and determining the codes and themes. While reflectively practicing bracketing to ensure that I do not let my pre-conceived values interfere with my work, it is important to realise that the human element had to be present throughout, including in the research outcomes. In addition, variables and perspectives existing beyond the research situation and which did not feature in the research may have enabled other themes to emerge. These factors could have changed the results of the research.

Another concern involves data collection through observation and interviews. Given that the situation of having an observer who sometimes also participated in discussions during Youth Guarantee sessions was new to the research participants, and given that they did not know me prior to my immersion in the field, it may have rendered them cautious about sharing their views and feelings. This may particularly be the case when young people are not clear on how the information shared may be utilised, even though I had previously given them all the information relevant to the research, assured them of anonymity and explained that the data would be destroyed on research completion.

The research participants' views about me as an individual could have helped or even created a barrier in their thinking about whether to participate in the research or not, and these perceptions might have impacted their decision-making about what experiences to share and how to speak of these experiences of being disengaged from education, employment, or training.

4.8.2 Assumptions

To conduct IPA of the lived experiences of young people labeled NEET, I made several assumptions: I assumed that the data collected from the research participants using my data-

collection tools of choice would be sufficient to comprehend and produce a coherent picture of (i.) their lived experiences of being NEET, and (ii.) their interpretation of those experiences.

Another assumption that I made is that the research participants would answer the interview questions honestly and in detail. To this end, the Informed Consent form that I shared with them prior to the start of data collection was intended to facilitate full disclosure and meaningful responses, and also to ensure that participation in the study was voluntary, that the potential recruits were fully aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and to guarantee anonymity.

4.9 Ethical considerations

This research followed the ethical guidelines issued by the Research Ethics Committee. I have been granted the Faculty of Social Well-being Research Ethics Committee's approval prior to conducting the research and I have considered and dealt sensitively with all ethical implications at every stage of this research. The information and recruitment letters explained in simple, unequivocal terms the aims of the study, what participating entailed and assured anonymization and confidentiality. Before data collection, I explained the aims of my research and the research process to the gatekeeper and to potential participants in detail, including how the interview recordings would be used, how data would be stored, and how they could withdraw from the research at any time. I informed them that the data gathered during this research will be used only for this thesis and will be disposed of within two years from research assessment. My contact details were included in the information and recruitment letter in case the participants wished to contact me for further clarification at any point during the research process.

 As a social researcher, I am aware of my responsibility to the quest for knowledge, and also to the individuals participating in the research, and on whom my work depends. During the research process, I have been constantly sensitive to how my research could affect the participants and have taken care to respect their dignity as human beings at all times (Cohen et al., 2013).

Ethical issues must be considered at both the ends and the means of qualitative investigation. Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2007, p.265) outline four fields characterising ethical standards for researchers: "informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher." They conceptualise these four areas as areas of uncertainty that need to be continually reflected upon and addressed by qualitative researchers. Gaining informed "consent" can be a problem if clarity is lacking about what the participant is consenting to and the exact boundaries of "participation".

Miller and Bell (2008, p 61) maintain that consent should be continually renegotiated between the researcher and the research participants throughout the process. Ensuring confidentiality in research means that private data that could reveal the identity of the participants will not be revealed. Ethical and scientific dilemmas within the precept of the research participants' right to privacy problematise the questions of what personal data should be accessible and to whom (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2007). Uncertainty regarding confidentiality concerns the issue that while anonymity is an ethical demand, it can also mask unprofessional or dishonest practices in research. While anonymity can ensure participants' protection, it can also drown "the very voice in the research that might originally have been claimed as its aim" (Parker, 2005, p.17).

As emphasized in the ethical principle of "beneficence", the researcher should ensure that there is the least possible risk of harm for the research participants (Campbell et al., 2010). The total sum of potential benefits to participants and the importance of the knowledge that could be accessed by means of the research should surpass the risk of harm to the research participants and work in favor of carrying out the study. This involves my responsibility as a researcher to consider the potential consequences for the research participants and the larger group they represent (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2007). I declare that to my knowledge, participation in this research has caused no harm to the participants.

The uncertainty we face when considering the consequences of qualitative research may be most complex because of its unpredictability. The researcher's role can contain a tension between professional detachment and a personal rapport. Fog (1992) describes the researchers' ethical dilemma thus: the researcher would like the interview to be as in-depth as possible, which risks "trespassing the person", but then he or she must respect and care for the research participant, which in turn jeopardizes the collection of rich empirical data. Moreover, as Thornton and Gelder (1997) write, the power imbalance between investigators and the researched is a fundamental problem in qualitative research methods.

As Ashby (2011) writes, the researcher must problematise the interpretative act, even though they may have the good intention of giving voice. Researcher bias is always implicated in the act of foregrounding the participants' voices. As researchers, we often enjoy a more privileged position – being better educated and of a higher social class than our informants. As the researcher, I was constantly aware that while my intention to give voice is emancipatory, I could benefit more from the encounter than the researched (Ashby, 2011). Researchers also have the responsibility and authority to write the story and therefore control its representation

to the outside world. As Ashby points out (2011), inherent in the act of designing a research aimed at investigating the experiences of young people who may be considered marginalised, there is the implication that those experiences are somehow separate from those of their non-marginalized peers. There is the risk of essentialising their being NEET, in this case, as belonging to a group seen as intrinsically from other approved ways of being. My act of embarking on a research that focuses on the lived experiences of NEET young people means that I am treating those young people as a separate cohort from EET. This defies the very aims of this research, which seeks to interrogate labels and the act of labeling as working against social justice. Does research attempting to give voice to marginalised groups serve to marginalise them further? How can this be prevented if as researchers, we seek to foreground these voices?

Willis (1997, p.249) suggests that this imbalance can be mitigated through reflexivity; if researchers explain their "consciousness, culture and theoretical organisation", it can help facilitate rapport between researcher and researched. Gary and Holmes (2020) argue that reflexivity necessitates researchers' sensitivity "to their cultural, political, and social context" (p. 2) because the researcher's integrity, values, and abilities impact all aspects of the research. However, they draw attention to the fact that practicing reflexivity does not necessarily mean that the research will be of higher quality because no matter how reflexive we are, we can never capture an objective reality. After all, the medium of language is a "human social construct" (p. 4), as are experiences, interpretations of language, and the meaning of words. Thus, some form of bias or subjectivity in research is inescapable. Besides, as Gary and Holmes (2020) emphasise, even while being reflective and reflexive, aspects of the self can "be missed, not known, or deliberately hidden" (p. 4).

So how are we as researchers to proceed? Gary and Holmes (2020) write that by exploring our positionality, we gradually come to know ourselves and our potential bias better so that we may strive to be as neutral as possible throughout the research process – to practise bracketing, as is requisite in conducting IPA research such as the present one – even though, as argued above, there is no knowledge that is entirely neutral or objective.

Bearing all this in mind, I met with the research participants and explained my research motivation and aims to them, inviting them to ask any questions they wanted throughout the research process. Along the way, several of them were interested in me and asked about my education, my profession, why I had wanted to conduct this research, why I needed to ask for their consent to participate in the research, and why it was important. I answered all questions as clearly as I could at all times. These interactions showed respect, and trust in the encounter between me as researcher and those researched.

Four research participants had formerly been students at two schools where I had been assistant head for two scholastic years respectively – Anthea, Rachel, and Laura used to attend a girls' secondary school where I used to work, while Liam attended a boys' secondary school two years before I met the three girls. Although several years had passed since then, I had to consider the ethical implications of how they might be impacted during the interview. Did they feel comfortable participating, or did they somehow feel obligated to do so based on the role I had in the school which they had attended? Would this have an impact on the data collected? I was also aware that my interpretation, and presentation of the data would be influenced by my prior impression of them.

From the outset and also during their participation, I made it clear that they should feel free to share whatever they felt comfortable sharing and that I was only specifically interviewing them to study their lived experience of being NEET. I used the same interview guide as I did with all the other research participants and did not take advantage of or refer to information derived from our common presence in the same school years before. Nevertheless, there were particular instances where the research participants concerned freely and, as a matter of course, mentioned particular incidents from school that I had not been aware of or since forgotten, also as the school population was extensive at the time, and as assistant head I was not directly in contact with what went on in particular classes, unless I was summoned to intervene, or there were reports about particular incidents. In my write-up, I took scrupulous care only to include details that were relevant to the study.

4.9.1 Anonymity

I anticipated that one of the central ethical concerns that would emerge in my work would likely revolve around potential privacy invasions. Significant factors that I needed to take into consideration were: the smallness of our island, where everybody knows everybody else, the social media, which makes it very easy to access information about everyone, and the fact that the research participants constitute a relatively small group of young people who are currently the target of various national initiatives that categorize them as a "problem". I took the necessary measures to protect their anonymity by changing all the names of the research participants and making sure that they were not identifiable in my write-up, for example, by omitting the names and details of villages and towns mentioned in their narratives, as well as the names of schools, sports centers, workplaces, particular individuals, and school subjects. Any identifying information was left out.

4.9.2 Care for research participants

Asking young people to remember and talk about experiences from their personal life may be of potential risk for discomfort and emotional upset. I was always careful and vigilant to minimize this risk as much as possible during interviews by reminding the participants that they only talk about things they feel comfortable with and that the interview can stop whenever they wished. My training in psychotherapy was an asset in terms of holding safe, sensitive, and respectful conversations with the research participants.

4.10 Summary

I have been drawn to use IPA in this research because I value the lived experiences of young people and of listening to what they have to say. Reflecting on experiences can have a transformative effect (Finlay, 2011) that may create a space for the participants to make more sense of what they have been through.

It is my belief that IPA has allowed me to gain more and better insights than any other tool could have. This is because ontologically IPA is oriented towards privileging the subjective perspective of the research participant – young people described as NEET in this case – and encourages the acquisition of knowledge through meaning-making by the two participants in the conversation.

IPA has been critiqued for not positioning psychological experience in social context, but proponents of the method do not consider this a barrier. Indeed, IPA is being extensively used in a wide range of subject areas and within different research disciplines, such as education and sociology, within which areas the present research is situated. IPA is grounded in the interpretative tradition and derives from influences manifested in its methodology – in the adoption of the phenomenological attitude, in engaging in the hermeneutic circle, and in

focussing on a particular phenomenon – being disengaged from education, employment, or training in this case.

In this chapter, I have outlined the techniques and processes that I have used in this work, including those relating to seeking ethical permission to recruit the participants and the rationale for the makeup and size of the sample. I have also explained the process used to collect the data and conduct the analysis thereof. I have gathered the data qualitatively through semi-structured interviews and participant observation that I have done both before and during the interviews. These methods are widely used in IPA (Smith et al. 2012, 2022). The detailed field notes from the participant observation sessions and the verbatim transcription of all the interviews provided the data for analysis.

The next chapter shall document the findings emerging from the methodological approach and methods outlined and discussed in the present chapter.

Chapter Five

The Lived Experience of NEET Young People in Malta:

The Research Findings

5.0 Introduction

"Naħseb jekk ikolli nikteb ktieb, veru jkun interessanti, ħa ngħidlek!"

"Let me tell you, if I were to write a book, it would be fascinating!" (Laura, line 324)

This chapter aims to present the findings of this phenomenological and interpretative research from the emic perspective of the research participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p.366) - "a close reading of what the participants have said" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 112). In the following chapter, I will then discuss the findings from the lens of Heideggerian phenomenological theory.

Overall, the findings indicate that young persons attending Youth Guarantee sessions to improve their prospects in furthering their education or training or to find a job can experience being NEET as a time of uncertainty and stress – being in the "mist" or in a kind of "limbo", in their own words. In contrast, those that did not attend Youth Guarantee sessions had a more relaxed attitude, taking life in their stride and not necessarily viewing training or further education as important for achieving job satisfaction or personal happiness. This group of young people has also experienced more early childhood adversity than the other one. These experiences led them to view school procedures especially skeptically.

Following data analysis, I have identified the following seven superordinate themes that apply to each of the fourteen research participants. I shall present each superordinate and emerging theme by using a soundbite from the research participants' narratives that somehow captures the spirit of the particular theme:

1. Personal narratives of hardship: "You do not know what I am going through."

2. The influence of compulsory schooling: "Those five years of school have damaged me!"

3. Use of time: "Killing time."

4. Notions of success and failure: "My Idea of Success."

5. Attitudes towards life: "The Way I see it."

6. Coping: "I Can Find my Way."

7. Projections for the future (5 years): "Life is a Journey."

The superordinate themes feed into each other systemically. Existing conditions in the young persons' ecosystem – or put differently, structural constraints – that include mental and physical fitness, well-being, and socioeconomic status, can collude to influence the young person's personality and mind, such that beliefs, values, and attitudes towards life, in turn, have an impact on aspirations and expectations, coping mechanisms and strategies. On the other hand, young people have the potential to exercise agency at any point because they are always in the process of becoming, and there is no telling whom or what they might encounter that causes changes in their script. As Dylan put it: *You never really know me!* He was referring to the arrogant categorization of young people in schools that could be so blind and insensitive to the complexity of the individual. This captures the essence of any intervention or inquiry into the life of a human being and draws our attention to the need for curiosity and caution when confronted with someone's lifeworld.

Each superordinate theme contains related subordinate themes, which are also featured in Table 5.1 below and in the tables I used to process and illustrate the prevalence of subordinate themes across the research participants. Quotations from transcripts (translated into English where necessary) illustrate my interpretations' phenomenological basis. I will present the

superordinate and subordinate themes, respectively. Many themes overlap, even though they were processed and filtered in the analysis, which highlights the importance of considering each theme alongside the whole narrative.

Table 5.1: List of superordinate themes and respective emerging themes

	Superordinate theme	Subordinate/Emerging Theme
1	Personal narratives of hardship: "You do not know what I am going through."	"I wish you were here." Parent lives with illness "I was bullied." "I do not understand what you are saying." "I feel different." "I cut my hands and my legs." "Money!" Taking junk. "It is what it is; I do what I need to do."
2	The impact of previous school experiences: "Those five years of school have damaged me!"	"Teachers!" "School was stressful." "There was school… and then there was life." School as clubhouse. "Some Teachers were special." "I will survive!"
3	Use of time: "Killing time"	Attending Youth Guarantee sessions. "My Space, my tribe." "I have caring responsibilities." "I need a job." Social life
4	Notions of success/failure: "My Idea of Success."	Success: "I want to be free." "I want to be well." "I appreciate what I have." "Making it against the odds." "I am loved." "Someone to look up to" "Can't let myself down." "I must embrace my power."
5	NEET young people's attitude towards life:	"I am a victim".

	"The Way I see it"	"My past does not define me." "I make my own rules" "I am alone"
6	Coping: "I Can Find my own Way."	"My body speaks." "I will get there." "I belong." "I thrive when I am with those I love and trust." "I need to feel safe." "I know myself."
7	Projections for the future (5 yrs): "Life is a journey."	Achieving the dream job "I want to be free." "Who cares about tomorrow?

5.1 A short personal profile of each research participant

1.   Liam

Liam is 18 and lives with his parents and an older brother. He still needs to pass his O-levels and is still trying. During the interview, Liam shared that he was overcoming his shyness and mistrust of people and often felt he did not fit in. Liam would like to graduate from MCAST and find a satisfactory job, but he still needs to be clear about what it should be. In the meantime, he finds inspiration and motivation from "The Rock," the ring name of Dwayne Douglas Johnson, an American actor, producer, and former professional wrestler, whose empowering self-care videos he follows on YouTube.

2.   Dylan

Dylan is 20 years old. He is an only child and lives with his mum. His dad passed away recently, and he especially cares for his widowed mother, who he says has suffered a lot in life because

of abusive family situations. Dylan has recently broken up with his girlfriend and is experiencing financial problems. During the interview, he shared that he struggled with low self-esteem and that he was bullied at school because of his quiet nature. He did not feel like he belonged in school and eventually came to make part of a group of "outcasts," a kind of subculture that distinguished itself from the "bullies ."This helped him survive in the educational system, where he emerged with only one O-level. He dreams of one day working in computer graphics and digital art. Dylan speaks comfortably in English, mentioning his many international friends who work in Malta, mostly older than himself. He claims to have met them at the sports center where he trains.

3.   Jane

Jane is 20 years of age. She is an only child and lives with her parents in a rural village. Jane works in the house, cares for her mother, or attends Youth Guarantee sessions. She said attending these sessions was the highlight of her life because she loved meeting other young people in her group. Jane still needs to pass her O-levels and is determined to keep trying. She attributes her exam failure to blanking out when confronted with exam papers, no matter how hard she would have studied. Jane finds the experience of working with disabled people rewarding, although it is her dream to work as a nurse or as a LSE. Jane claims to feel isolated, especially when she does not find the help and support she needs.

4.   Sarah

Sarah is 21 years old, a single mum of a 4-year-old child. She lives with her mother and her grandparents. Sarah's biological father abandoned her mother soon after Sarah's birth and now lives in the same village with his new family. Sarah's boyfriend, the father of her child, also

lives with her. Sarah shared that she had always been self-conscious due to an eye condition as a child and being name-called for it. During the first interview, she shared that she was finding it hard to find employment due to her child's schedule, which is a priority for her. Sarah expressed how stressed she was, mainly because of financial worries. It had been Sarah's dream to open up her own business. However, during our second interview on Zoom months later, during the Covid-19 pandemic, she had found a job as a salesperson. She said she was satisfied because she got to have sick leave, vacation leave, and decent pay. Also, it gave her a feeling of stability and belonging, and the working hours allowed her to raise her child properly.

5.   Marie

Marie is 18, has a younger brother, and lives in the family home. She has a history of mental health problems and claims to have disliked school, where she often got sent out of the classroom for misbehaviour. She eventually attended an alternative learning center for young people who did not fit in the mainstream but dropped out due to having been bullied. Marie was diagnosed with dyslexia, making things harder at school. She has a history of mental health problems. She recalls being employed as a salesperson some months back but had to leave because of sexual abuse by an older male administrator. She was attending YG and sending out CVs to try and find new employment.

6.   Laura

Laura is 18 and has a baby son. She and her child live with her mother. She has older siblings who have moved out of the family home. Laura's parents are separated, the father having left when Laura was very young. She shared that this experience had left her traumatized and was exacerbated by the bullying she received in school. Laura fell pregnant in the middle of her

first year at a post-secondary school and soon had to stop attending. She still misses her father and appreciates her mother's resilience and hard work to keep the family together. Laura contemplated returning to school to obtain qualifications for a job. She wishes to settle down in her place with her son and boyfriend.

7.   Rachel

Rachel is 18 and lives with her mother and brother in a small town. Her parents are separated, and her family has a history of domestic violence and substance abuse. She was born with an arm disability, which she claimed happened due to physical abuse during her mother's pregnancy. She recalls having to endure bullying throughout school. When her mother was diagnosed with cancer, attending school became especially difficult, and afraid of losing her mum, she decided to drop out to be with her. Her dream job had been to be a PSCD teacher, but she acknowledged that she had no qualifications to pursue it and did not envisage sitting for O-levels. She claimed to be happy with a job in a factory and earning enough money to be independent. Rachel explained that finding a job would be difficult because of her disability and that she could not get by on the small disability allowance that she was receiving. She looked forward to moving in with her boyfriend.

8.   Anthea

Anthea is 19 and lives with her family. She has worked in two different factories since dropping out of post-secondary school. Between one job and the other, Anthea spent six months NEET. At this point, she wants to re-engage with a course she had previously failed, which was also why she dropped out of education and training altogether. Anthea had been diagnosed with mental health issues during childhood, which had worsened during secondary school, where

she had felt alienated. Externalising her emotions got her into trouble at school, and she was referred for psychiatric attention. Her diagnosis resulted in her attending a different school on some days, which did not work out for her.

9. Noel

Noel is 20 and lives with his grandmother. His mother died when he was ten, and his father was unknown to him for most of his life. He recalls his mother's demise as a challenging event that led to behaviour issues, including outbursts of anger and smoking. Noel claims to have no formal qualifications. He dropped out of post-secondary school and tried his hand at various jobs, mostly in petrol stations and carwash stops. Noel believes there is no point in studying to obtain formal qualifications since one can still find work without them if one is capable. He loves hunting, fishing, and trapping. He only plans to get his driving license and buy a BMW.

10. Kevin

Kevin is 20 years of age. He loves drawing, listening to music, and chatting with friends. Kevin experienced mental health issues during school and later participated in a rehabilitation programme. He explained that he found the motivation sessions at the YG programme helpful because he learned how to control his thoughts and feelings better. He experienced bullying and isolation during secondary and post-secondary school, from which he dropped out eventually to take better care of himself. For Kevin, the absolute priority is mental and physical well-being.

11. Stefan

Stefan is 23 years of age and lives with his parents and a younger brother. Although he already had a university degree, he claimed to be attending YG sessions to improve his employability prospects. Stefan describes his university experience as challenging, as the level and expectations were much higher than those in the sixth form. Although he looks forward to furthering his studies, he wishes to take a break from studying and focus on finding employment instead. He refers to himself as awkward around people. His idea of success and happiness is developing a mutually respectful relationship with another human being.

12.   Bruno

Bruno is 19 years old, an aspiring politician and novelist. He says that school has had damaging effects on him because of its extreme rigidity, its punishment protocols, and the bullying, which happened with impunity regularly in his case. He recalls waking up at night in fear of being ridiculed or chastised by certain teachers in front of the class. Despite passing all his O-levels, Bruno could not fit into any post-secondary school due to anxiety. Ultimately, he had to drop out to take care of his mental health. He likes attending the YG sessions because the group is smaller and more intimate than the mainstream. He would like to find a clerical job to have time to write his book.

13.   Tom

Tom is 20 years old. He has had to move a lot as a child, even living abroad for some time. His parents' separation affected him profoundly, and Tom sought refuge on the street, where he also dabbled in drugs. He lives with his grandma and older brother. He loves football and spends much time on YouTube watching football matches.Tom had lost his job due to the Covid-19 pandemic-generated layoffs. He claims to have no formal qualifications, not even a

school leaving certificate, because he dropped out of school. He attributes this decision to the various medications he had to take for ADHD. He attended YG sessions to enhance his chances of finding a good job. Tom does not exclude furthering his studies one day.

14. Alexei

Alexei is 19 years old. He comes from an eastern European country and lives with his mother and older brother. He has been living in Malta since he was a child. His father is deceased. Alexei explained that he did not feel close to his parents, describing himself as solitary and only interested in learning independently. He claims no formal qualifications, as he was often absent from school and finally dropped out altogether. He does not use social media and uses YouTube to pursue subjects of interest. Alexei would like to study engineering at university.

5.2 Report of the findings

5.2.1 Superordinate Theme 1: Personal narratives of hardship - 'You do not know what I am going through'.

> *'Ommi tliftha ta' 10 snin ... missieri kemm ilni nafu?! Sentejn?'*
>
> I lost my mum when I was 10...how long have I known my dad?! Two years maybe?
>
> -Noel

Introduction

Personal themes of hardship have emerged during interviews at various levels. It was clear that the Maltese state educational system could not engage with the personal and often troubled narrative of these young people (see also Azzopardi & Camilleri, 2020), a situation that has resulted in alienating the young people concerned and paving the way for being NEET at one

point or another after compulsory schooling and even earlier. Table 5.3 illustrates the various difficult, even traumatic[22], life events that plagued the young people participating in this research:

Table 5.2: Superordinate Theme 1 and related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 1	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
	Absence of parent or significant other: *'I wish you were here.'*	✔			✔			✔	✔	✔					✔	No
PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF HARDSHIP: *'You do not know what I am going through.'*	Parent living with an illness						✔		✔	✔						No
	Been a victim of bullying at school: *'I was bullied.'*	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔			Yes
	Learning difficulties: *'I do not understand what you are saying.'*		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔			✔		Yes
	Lives with physical disability or/and mental health issue: *'I feel different.'*	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
	Financial issues: *'Money!'*	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔		✔				✔		Yes
	Substance abuse: *'Taking drugs'*		✔		✔				✔					✔		No
	Abuse, neglect and rejection: *'It is what it is. I do what I need to do.'*				✔	✔			✔	✔				✔	✔	No

i.   Emergent theme 1: I wish you were here.

Six of the research participants lived without the presence of a parent, either because of death, abandonment, or both: Dylan, Noel, Sarah, Rachel, Laura, and Alexei. This theme emerges as a powerful narrative showing its devastating effect on their life.

Noel's narrative speaks of loss and rejection and the toll it took on him:

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[22] Throughout this chapter I borrow from Gabor Maté's (2019, 2018) understanding of "trauma" in using it to refer to episodes in the young persons' life where they are wounded without an immediate capacity to heal the wound. Thus, a parent's emotional distance or depression, in the absence of any intended or implied abuse, is enough to qualify as trauma, which for Maté often results in distortions in the way a developing child will continue to interpret the world and her situation in it. Maté maintains that these ill-conditioned implicit beliefs become self-fulfilling prophecies in our lives. We create meanings from our unconscious interpretation of early events, and then we forge our present experiences from the meaning we created (Maté, 2019).

"Jiena ommi tliftha ta' 10 snin ... missieri kemm ilni nafu?! Sentejn? ...Man-nanna, ilni

ngħix magħha 20 sena ... bdejt (inpejjep) mindu mietet ommi. Kont imdejjaq, ta' 12-il

sena miet in-nannu ...t'10 snin qbadt inpejjep biss biss... (L-iskola) tellfuhomli u qbadt

inpejjep!... u darba minnhom – dak iż-żmien kelli problemi – kelli dik il-problema li

taqbiżli malajr. Ma kontx hekk (qabel mietet ommi)... Kien hemm wieħed qalli f'għoxx

ommok! Ma kinitx f'għoxx ommok, għax qbadt is-siġġu u kissirtu fuq dahru. Domt intih

sakemm ma rajtux jiċċaqlaq."

I lost my mother when I was 10 ... how long have I known my father?! Two years

maybe. I have been living with my grandma for 20 years. (Noel, lines 103-112)

I started smoking when my mother died. I was sad. My granddad died When I was

twelve. I only smoked cigarettes when I was ten. Then they pissed me off at school, and

I was smoking – at that time I had problems – anger issues. I was not like that before

my mum died. ... there was this guy he offended my mum – I grabbed a chair and broke

it on his back. And I kept hitting him till he stopped moving. (Noel, lines 274 – 310)

When his father died, Dylan and his mother went through a rough patch financially, and Dylan

worried about his mother:

…everything was stacking on each other – also money problems, also my mum – 'cos

it's like everything was in my mum's hands, she had all the responsibility and I felt so

bad for her and I wanted to help out you know. (Dylan, lines 410-413)

ii.   Emergent theme 2: My mum has changed.

Marie, Laura, and Rachel have been raised by mothers who experienced mental health issues:

*"...ommi kienet tbati naqra b'moħħha, kienet tara 'l wieħed Dr ***"* (My mother used to have

mental illness, she used to see Dr***) (Marie, Lines 177-178, first interview); *"[Il-mummy]għadha naqra differenti minn mindu telaq id-daddy...il-mummy inbidlet ukoll."* (My mum has been a bit different since my dad left and after all that happened ... she is not the same person) (Laura, lines 374-375, first interview).

When Rachel was in secondary school, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. At the time, Rachel claims to have been receiving severe bullying at school due to her troubled home circumstances, including her mother's illness. That is when things got complicated for her – *"żgarrajt"*(I lost my way):

> *"...fil-Form 2 kont niġi bullied, fil-Form 1 għamilt 6 xhur ma mmurx u fil-Form 2 għamilt xi ħames xhur – sebgħa – ma mmurx skola. Imbagħad fil-Form 3 bidluli l-iskola – bdejt immur (skola ġdida), vera ħassejtni kuntenta għax tipo ma niġġieled ma' ħadd, kont immur tajjeb fl-eżamijiet, ġibthom tajbin. Fil-Form 4 erġajt żgarrajt għax bdew jiġuni l-problemi tal-familja. Il-mummy sirt naf li kellha cancer u fil-Form 5 iddeċidejt li nwaqqaf l-iskola..."*
>
> ...in Form 2, I was bullied. In Form 1, I had not gone to school for 6 months, and in Form 2, I was absent for some 5 or 7 months as well. In Form 3 then, I started going to a new school. I was happy there because I did not fight with anyone and I did well in exams. Then in Form 4, I started having problems again – family problems – I learned that my mother had cancer. Then in Form 5, I decided to stop going to school. (lines 38-45, first interview)

iii. Emergent theme 3: I was bullied.

Ten out of the 14 research participants speak about having been bullied at school and the effect this had on them.

Laura used to react to being bullied by self-harming:

" ...għamilt ħafna vera kont niġi mgħajra, darba qaluli anke biex naqbeż għal isfel…
kien ikolli ħafna staples u kont noqgħod ninfexx f'idejja dak iż-żmien, u f'saqajja, u
ġieli kont nitlaq mil-lesson għax vera kont inkun imdejqa, għax kont inkun irrid
noqgħod waħdi, u kont noqgħod ninfaqa' nibki ġot-toilet."

I used to be called names a lot. Once they even told me to throw myself off
somewhere…I used to have a lot of staples and I used to cut my hands at that time, and
my legs. I used to leave class sometimes because I was so miserable to be alone, and I
used to cry in the toilet. (Laura, lines 208-214, second interview)

Liam often found himself the butt of many jokes and a scapegoat. The regular bullying from
classmates and other students characterized his school experience: *"ħaraqli idejja bis-sigarett*
għalxejn." (He burned my hand with a cigarette just for kicks) (Liam, line 45, first interview).
He used to be afraid:

"...ġieli ġratli kont nibża' li jiġu jew jagħmlu għalija eħe... meta darba kelli każ. ...
Darba kien hemm wieħed, ... kont bi żball ilqattu u kienu għamlu għaġeb fuq is-social
media. Tipo bdew jgħidu għax ksirtlu jdejh, għamlu għaġeb...."

I was sometimes scared that they would come for me, do something to me. Once I went
through something awful – I accidentally hit someone during sports and it was all over
social media that I had broken his arm, they kicked up a huge fuss ... (Liam, lines 129-
140, first interview)

The bullying continued online:

"Fuq Messenger, jibagħtuli fuq grupp...dak kellna grupp tal-klassi – kienu bdew jitkellmu: għax kemm inti salvaġġ, kemm inti...! Tipo ma ridtx nagħmilhielu apposta għax m'iniex dik it-tip ta' persuna vjolenti, u tipo għidtlu sorry u ma nerġax – konna qed nagħmlu sports hux!"

We had the Messenger chat group, and everybody was saying how savage I had been. However, I never did it on purpose! I'm not violent, and I wanted to apologize – it was during sports, so... (Liam, lines 146-151, first interview)

Bruno is very critical of the education he received at secondary school. The sarcasm in his voice reveals how much his memories still hurt. He was uncomfortable with the rigidity of school rules that then did not protect him from getting bullied. On the contrary, he recollects bitterly that teachers did not practice what they preached, for while professing to be against bullying in theory in their lessons, they did nothing to effectively fight it, allowing his bullies to prevail with impunity.

" Il-fatt li t-teachers kienu l-ħin kollu strict, l-ansjetà ma kinux jgħinuhieli, bil-bullying, imbagħad ... il-bullying ma kinux jagħmlu xi ħaġa dwaru. Imbagħad l-iktar ħaġa li kienet togħġobni, kienu jmorru ma' tal-PSD l-istess nies li kienu jibbuljawni u jagħmlu l-posters tan-'No Bullying'!"

Teachers' rigid ways did not help my anxiety at all, besides the bullying I got from other students. They did not tackle bullying at all. However, what I used to find very cute was that those same bullies used to make 'No Bullying' posters with the PSD teacher in class!! (Bruno, lines 258-263)

iv. Emergent theme 4: I do not understand what you are saying.

Nine out of 14 participants have spoken about learning difficulties during interviews, as illustrated in the below selection of excerpts from the participants' narratives.

Jane and Anthea failed exams because they blanked out in front of exam papers despite being attentive in class and with painstaking preparation: *"Jien il-biċċa l-kbira li kien jiġrili kien li kif nara l-karta tal-eżami ninsa kollox li nkun studjajt totalment... Ħafna ansjetà. Waħda milli kienet tfottini ħafna fl-istudju, fl-eżamijiet."* (As soon as I am confronted with the exam paper I go blank. I feel a lot of anxiety. This lets me down so often in my studies and exams) (Jane, lines 138-142); *"... meta kien ikollna xi eżami, hemmhekk kont neħel. L-eżamijiet! Dejjem kont inkun moħħi hemm (fil-klassi)."* (When we had an exam, that was the end of me. Exams! I always paid attention though (in class) (Anthea, lines 528-532).

Laura found it hard to concentrate in class, and did not sit for exams: *"...'qas l-eżamijiet ma kont nagħmel – għax kont inkun ħażin ħafna. Ma kien ikolli aptit xejn."* (I did not do exams either – I used to be a mess. I never felt like doing anything) (Laura, lines 440-441, first interview).

Kevin and Marie speak of having had difficulty processing teachers' explanations and needing assistance to understand:

> *"Irrid nistaqsi għall-għajnuna bilfors. Dik minn dejjem kienet hekk... bilfors irrid nitlob għall-għajnuna għax mhux kollox nifhem mal-ewwel u rridha tkun ċara, irrid li min ifehemni jfehemni sew, mhux jgħaġġel – daqshekk. Fuq xogħol, kollox... Għax inkun mitluf il-biċċa l-kbira u l-ħin kollu nistaqsi, għalhekk... ... ma nifhimx x'jgħidu eżatti. Ma nifhimx x'qed jgħidu."*

I have to ask for help. It has always been like that. I have to ask for help because I do not understand everything immediately and I like to have things very clear in my head, I want people to explain to me thoroughly, slowly, and that's all there is to it. At work, with everything... I am distracted most of the time, and keep asking questions, that's why. I do not understand people talking. I do not understand what they are talking about. (Kevin, lines 174-179, first interview)

"Waħdi, xi kultant ma nħossnix daqshekk kunfidenti, jkolli bżonn lil xi ħadd miegħi, ... waqaft mill-ewwel it-tieni sena jiena, peress li ma kienx hemm l-Art. Għedt x'inhu l-punt li nibqa' hawn jien? U kelli nieħu (isem ta suġġett ieħor)... Bdejt nismagħha lit-teacher tgħid ċertu affarijiet, u ma bdejtx nifhimha. Għedt jien mill-bidu rrid nibda, plus jien bid-dyslexia... u waqqajtha".

I don't feel confident sometimes, and I need help. ... Since there was no Art option, I dropped out in the second year. I saw no point in staying on. So I had to take another subject... Then the teacher was saying things that I could not understand and I thought I should start from the beginning. Having dyslexia did not help either, ... so I dropped that too. (Marie, lines 379-389, second interview)

Tom's ADHD and the medication he had to take for it interfered with his learning and resulted in his dropping out of school before completing Form 5:

" Qualifications ... xejn m'għandi, 'qas school leaving. Għax kont waqaft minn Form 4 għax kont bl-ADHD jien. Qabel kienet naqra severe. ... immaġina kont inkun qiegħed fil-lesson, qabel, kont nara dubbiena - il-lesson tiegħi d-dubbiena, bażikament - naraha ddur. Jiġifieri li qed nisma' blurred bażikament. U niftakar ċar, għax kont immur id-

dar nibki għax ma nafx xi rrid nagħmel homework, ma nafx kif ħa nagħmlu, u l-ġenituri

ovvjament qabel saru jafu li għandi dil-ħaġa, ma kinux jifhmuni ... Imbagħad minn Year

5 bdejna mmorru. U morna nsomma, tawni l-mediċina ...

I don't have any qualifications, not even a school leaving certificate. I had to stop in

Form 4 because of my ADHD. It used to be quite severe. Imagine that if I saw a fly in

the classroom, I would pay attention to it only, and the whole lesson would be a blur. I

remember all this distinctly because of how I used to feel when I went home crying

because I did not have the slightest clue of what I had for homework and how to do it.

My parents were at a loss about this until I was diagnosed during Year 5 and then I had

to take medicine for it ... (Tom, lines 30-41)

v. Emergent theme 5: I feel different.

Two of the participants live with a physical disability, whereas 13 out of 14 of the research

participants have varying mental health issues. Laura has a heart condition, Rachel was born

with a disability and struggles with mood swings, Anthea has been on medication for

behavioural issues since she was 11 years old, Marie has been diagnosed with clinical

depression, Sarah is fragile and visually impaired, a condition that affects her interpersonal

communication negatively. Bruno, Dylan, Jane, Kevin, Liam, and Tom struggle with anxiety.

Alexei lives with bouts of depression, whereas Stefan has traits of autism that make his

relations with others 'awkward', in his own words. All research participants spoke about how

their struggles related to their disability or condition affected them in daily life:

"...kulħadd iħares lejja, nibda naħsibhom qed jidħqu bija kif nitkellem, għax inlaqlaq

u ma nafx naqra sew... (Ommi) kienet ħaditni għandu (psychiatrist). Peress li jiena kont

nara d-dots u kelli ħafna nervi u biex jikkalmani. Peress li waqajt depressed... u d-diary

kienet qratuli ommi. ... Kien tani l-pirmli – (isem tal-mediċina, użati f'każ ta'

depressjoni maġġuri). Imma waqaft neħodhom. M'għidtlu xejn, għidt daqshekk – mhux

billi jgħid hu, ... Għidt jien dawn mhuma qed jagħmluli xejn. Ir-rabja xorta hemm

baqgħet."

…seeing them all staring at me, I used to think they were laughing at me, at how I was

speaking, because I stuttered and could not read properly…(Lines193-195, first

interview). (My mother) she had taken me to her psychiatrist – I was seeing dots and

needed to calm down. I had become depressed, and my mum had been reading my

diary. He prescribed pills (used for major depressive disorder), but I stopped taking

them. I said nothing to him; I said enough! They were doing me no good. The anger

was still there. (Marie, lines 158-172, first interview)

Anthea reflected on her adverse reaction to the noise in the school: *"... imbagħad qisu mal-ħin*

kienu jaqbduni dwejjaq, nervi ... kont niddejjaq pereżempju ħafna ġenn u hekk. Kont neċita

ruħi, anke dak il-ħafna studenti ...kulħadd jagħmel l-istorbju u hekk..." (... and then gradually

I used to get sad and nervous ... I didn't like the commotion (in school corridors). I used to get

excited, all those students ... all that noise... (Anthea, lines 271-276).

Kevin recalled his propensity to overthink during secondary school: *"Kont spiċċajt ħafna*

overthinking, ilni snin issa, x'jista' jiġri u hekk, so eħe, ħafna biża' li ngħid aħjar inżomm kwiet

nispiċċa." (I used to overthink a lot – it's been like that for years now, worrying about what

could happen. So yes, much fear, and I used to say to myself that it would be better to just keep

it to myself (Kevin, lines 68-70, first interview). Kevin's description of his emotions as

"imburġati" (erupting or overflowing) is particularly graphic, illustrating the chaotic and

painful emotional state he had to live with during his years of compulsory schooling: *"Bl-*

affarijiet li kienu għaddejjin ma stajtx niffoka, kelli ħafna emotions imburġati, u tliet snin il-ħin kollu nieqaf f'nofshom kont qiegħed. Just ma kontx f'posti, ma kontx f'posti." (With all the stuff going on, I just could not focus; I had so many overflowing emotions, and I was continuously dropping out for three years. I was just totally out of place, out of place (Kevin, lines 88-89, first interview).

Liam reflected on his struggle to control his anxiety and shyness around people, which sometimes caused him to panic: *"... mistħija, u ansjeta' ħafna. Fil-fatt jaqbadni paniku kbir. Nipprova nikkontrollaha imma għalxejn."* (I felt shy and very anxious. I get panic attacks. I try to control them, but in vain (Liam, lines 115-118, second interview). He uses the "worm" metaphor to describe his feelings when he compared himself to his classmates: *"Dak iż-żmien kont inħossni qisni n-nemlu ħdejhom, qisni ... bħala student."* (At that time I used to feel like a worm by comparison, like…as a student (Liam, lines 230-231, first interview).

Sarah admits to feeling overwhelmed by stress, which also manifests itself in her propensity to worry about small things, in her own words: *"Ħafna stress. Ħafna, ħafna, ħafna..."* (Lots of stress. A lot, a lot!) (Sarah, line 82, first interview); *"...jiena ninkwieta fuq ħafna affarijiet – anke affarijiet żgħar. Ninkwieta mix-xejn."* (I worry about many things – even small things. I worry about everything) (Sarah, lines 87-88, first interview).

Excerpt 1 from field notes:

Sarah worries about her son, and often speaks about him. At the start of our interview, Sarah asked me why I would interview her and what I would be asking her. I reminded her that I had previously explained it to the group and also in my recruitment letter and consent form, which she had signed. I also reminded her that we could stop there and then, and not have the interview at all if that is what she wanted. She smiled shyly and said no, it was ok; she had just forgotten what had happened. As I listened to to Sarah's narrative, I was struck by how much she had to deal with growing up.

Rachel finds the disability allowance insufficient for her needs: *"...almenu ċ-ċekk tad-diżabilità jżiduli naqra ... ma nistax inlaħħaq, tipo għandi skużi d-dejn ... minħabba l-mobile, għax qiegħda bla mobile."* (...at least the disability allowance could be increased... I can't make ends meet, I owe money ... because of my mobile expenses, I am without a mobile) (Rachel, lines 20-22, second interview). She is keen to find employment but gets frustrated and disheartened by the attitude of potential employers towards her disability:

> *" Ifhem nipprova nsib xogħol, imma 'ħabba ... kif qiegħda ma nkunx nista' – hi naqra diffiċli. ... meta ppruvajt (name of shop) qaltli l-ewwel mort tajjeb jiġifieri, imbagħad qaltli m'intx tajba, ...jekk tkun trid tibdel lil xi ħadd, qaltli, m'intx tajba. Qaltli għat-toqol, ... għax ma tkunx tista' ġġorrhom, 'ħabba l-piż - biex nistiva u hekk. ...Għamilt ieħor (interview) ta' salesgirl ... ma nafx għala dawn l-iskużi jġibuli ..., ħabba l-cash għax ma nkunx nista' niftaħha b'idi u ntihom il-flus. Niġi naqra f'sitwazzjonijiet koroh ... ma jien tajba għal xejn hux!"*
>
> I try to find work but I can't because of my (disability) – it's difficult... when I tried to find work in a grocery store they told me that I did well at first, then they changed their minds... I would not be able to stand in for another employee, and I would not be able to carry loads when it comes to stacking the shelves. ... Then I went for another

interview for a sales vacancy in a fashion outlet... I do not understand why they make so many excuses about me not being able to open the cash register and give out change. I find myself in bad situations... I guess I'm good for nothing! (Rachel, lines 2-20, second interview)

vi. Emergent theme 6: Money!

Eight out of fourteen research participants mention struggling financially. For example, Sarah is a single mother and unemployed. Wanting to enjoy life and being prevented because money is scarce is painful for her: *"… togħġobni dik il-ħajja li … ikollok il-flus… Bħalissa peress li jiena m'iniex naħdem, anke noħorġu, mhux spiss. Trid tonfoq il-flus. Meta kont naħdem kienet iktar aħjar il-ħajja, u anke dik il-ħaġa li trid toqgħod lura ma niflaħhiex."* (I like having money… right now, because I am not working, we don't go out a lot. So we don't spend money. When I used to work life was better; I hate not having money to spend (lines 103-112, first interview).

Tom has lost his full-time employment due to the current pandemic and hopes that he gets a placement he likes through the YG NEET scheme, and that they employ him after the placement. He worries about how he can make ends meet without a steady income: "*Il-mental health tiegħi (importanti), dik dejjem minn dejjem, imma issa qed ninduna iktar għax dal-aħħar splodut ħabba x-xogħol, x'ħa nagħmel b'15* Euro *fil-bank biss, u għandi l-internet xi nħallas, kull xahar 40 Ewro?!"* (My mental health is a priority for me, always has been, but now I am realising its importance even more because I am broke since I am unemployed. What shall I do with a measly 15 Euro in my bank account when I have to pay 40 Euro a month for internet?! (lines 437-440).

Bruno feels lost without a job, which he says would make him feel more grown-up: *"kieku nibda naħdem inħossni iktar adult. Għax għalissa 'qas naf kif – qisni qiegħed fil-limbu."*(If I started working I would feel more adult. Because right now it feels like being in limbo) (Bruno, lines 56-58).

Laura had training in beauty care before she fell pregnant. She loves make-up and needs to buy the best products to apply on herself and her friends, who sometimes ask her to do their make-up for them when they have a special occasion:

> *"Ġieli mort nagħmel il-makeup lil sħabi għal tieġ ta' jiġifieri. Mhux xi wow ta, ta' li naf. Imma għalihom kien jgħaddi. Ma kienx ikun daqshekk ikrah lanqas. U dak iż-żmien kont għadni bidu, jiġifieri...issa, impruvjajt, naqra aħjar. Imma fottieni naqra dan il-makeup, għax tgħidx kemm nonfoq flus fih! Mela, għadni kemm infaqt mija u fuqhom - niżżilthom minn barra."*

> Sometimes I did my friends' make-up for a wedding. Nothing special, but it was okay for them. It wasn't that bad, either. And at that time, I was just starting, so… now I've got better, a little better. But this make-up has screwed me; it is so expensive! I bought it online because I have just spent well over a hundred euro. (Laura, lines 310 – 318, first interview)

She prefers to buy quality make-up that gives her better results, even though it is costly and she cannot afford it alone:

> *"Nippreferi nonfoq ħafna, ikun tajjeb u jservini u ma jtellagħlix ponot u hekk milli ...ara brushes jaf issib ikunu naqra cheap ikunu tajbin u hekk , imma... u llum ma tantx għadek issib għoljin ħafna ta...Ħa ngħidlek l-għarus tiegħi għadu kemm xtrali palette tal-*

> *makeup … kienet mija u xi ħaġa u ħadnieha… 80 għandu jkun...xorta, imma mhux ħażin,*
>
> *imma tajba ħafna. Tajba, jien meta naraha tajba u hekk … u jien ma nużahx kuljum.*
>
> *Imma tal-inqas ma tibqax tidher l-istess."*
>
> I prefer quality – so it stays and does not give me pimples… You can find cheap
>
> brushes, and they will not be so bad … but nowadays, brushes are not as expensive
>
> either …My boyfriend has just bought me a new palette for my birthday – it cost over
>
> 100 Euro, and we managed to get it for 80 I think…still expensive, I know, but not too
>
> much and it is very good. I don't mind as much spending when it is of good quality…I
>
> don't use make-up every day, but at least (when I do) it makes a difference. (Laura,
>
> lines 322-330)

Dylan is passionate about video and photo animation and music production, but he does not

have access to a laptop at present. He says he can only use his phone to work on the things he

loves:

> I like doing music production, ... *imma iktar jogħġobni* (what I like doing most is)
>
> photo editing u video editing …my friends were teaching me actually. ... I can't actually
>
> do it on a laptop right now, so I'm doing it on my phone – well, I'm working with what
>
> I got. (lines 20 -32)

iv. Emergent theme 7: Taking drugs.

Four research participants speak about coming in contact with drugs to varying degrees.

Rachel's father was a drug addict, and Rachel lived in an environment where her father's

addiction influenced all of her family life, contributing to her experimenting a little with drugs

herself and to her older brother becoming addicted as well. Kevin had to enter rehabilitation

for one year due to his substance abuse related to his mental health issues. For a while, Noel

belonged to a gang that did drugs, only deciding to stop when his cousin overdosed, and Tom

used drugs on the streets as a form of escape when his family fell apart, and he mourned the

love and togetherness of his lost childhood.

Rachel speaks about drug use in her family, and of overcoming the habit: *"Ħija l-kbir meqrud*

bid-drogi. Tipprova l-mummy fuq l-ismoke – kont nieħu 'l hemm u 'l hawn… kien iżommli l-

għarus tiegħi fuq l-ismoke – imma thanks to God inbidlt, kull ma npejjep sigaretti ftit …" (My

elder brother is a drug addict. My mum tries (to get him to do away) with the smoke – I used

to use every now and then too…my boyfriend tried to get me off the smoke, but thanks to God

I have changed. I only smoke cigarettes, sometimes ...) (Rachel, lines 76-79, second interview).

For Noel, stopping taking drugs is an achievement, a sign of responsibility. He feels awe for

his drug-addict cousin who wanted to save him even though he himself was suffering: *" …*

kuġinuwi, kien mandra eh, kien waqa' tliet darbiet b'overdose, u għamilt ħabta npejjep il-

ħaxixa u kien jgħidli ... isma', mhux aħjar tieqaf? Kont qbadt, geżwirtha, u tfajtha l-baħar."

(My cousin was a mess, he had overdosed three times, and there was a time when I smoked

weed, and he used to talk to me; he said, listen ... you should stop. I packed it all in there and

then and threw it into the sea.) (Noel, lines 220-224)

Tom refers to drugs as *"imbarazz"* (junk), now that he has stopped using them. At the time,

however, they provided an escape from the pain of rejection and loss of affection from his

troubled parents:

> *"Iddejjaqt qisni nieħu imbarazz, ... ġej u sejjer ... issa ilni estimate sena ma nieħu ħaxix,*
>
> *... ma mmissx imbarazz. ... affettwatni 'ħabba l-feelings ukoll għax jien kont ħafna*
>
> *mfissed... imma fl-istess ħin imbagħad meta kbirt l-attenzjoni naqset minn miegħi u bejn*

il-ġenituri u jien. ... insomma meta tikber mhux dejjem tibqa' mfissed. U qisni ddejjaqt
..."

I got tired of taking junk, ... coming and going... now it's been a year since I last smoked

weed, ... I don't touch that crap anymore. ... I guess it got to me that I stopped receiving

all the attention from my parents – I was rather spoiled you know... When you grow up

you don't always remain spoiled. And I missed it, I guess ... (Tom, lines 136-142)

Kevin speaks about going into rehabilitation and building himself up:

"Mort rehabilitation insomma, għal sena, u issa ergajt ġejt lura għax kelli bżonn qisu

dak it-tip ... hekk, naqra change... (Kont) Ippruvajt inkompli nsib x'jismu...(kors) minn

mal-Jobsplus, avolja ma tantx sibtha effettiva mbagħad. U just naħseb waqaft

imbagħad. Mainly l-focus kien just rehabilitation, post ġdid. So I tried fitting in.

Imbagħad qisni komplejt infittex xogħol, nagħti CVs 'l hawn u 'l hemm, fejn stajt...u

hekk."

I did rehabilitation for a year, and I'm back now because I sort of ... need a change... I

had tried finding a course with Jobsplus, even though after a while, it did not work for

me anymore. Then I think I dropped out. My main focus was rehab, a new place. So, I

tried fitting in. Then I sort of continued to look for work, giving out CVs wherever I

could, and so on. (Kevin, lines 10-24, second interview)

viii. Emergent theme 8: It is what it is, I gotta do what I need to do.

Six research participants speak of being neglected or rejected by family or others close to them.

In Rachel's case, her father's violence affected her physically, besides the emotional toll all

this has taken on her. She speaks of all that the family has been through emotionlessly, as if

she has become so used to it that she finds nothing extraordinary in it:

" ...kien isawwat lill-mummy, kien isawwat lilna, jaħraqna bic-chaser; qabel konna se nitilqu mid-dar kien qalagħli roqgħa xagħar, kellha teħodni (l-isptar), imma thank God kibritli. Kien isawwatna, miġnun! Kien jixrob, dejjem fis-sakra, dejjem bl-ismoke f'idu. Kien raġel indannat bih innifsu. Imbagħad mar ma' familja oħra u għamel tnejn oħra, u daqshekk hux – lilha jħobbha u lilna le... qalgħet is-swat (ommi), korrielha 'l ħuti – erbgħa! Qasmilha l-għadam, l-irkiekel, ..."

He beat my mum and us, burning our skin with the chaser; before leaving home, he had pulled out a fistful of hair from my head, and mum took me to the hospital, but thank God it grew back. The crazy man used to beat us up. He used to drink, always drunk, always doing smoke. He was a sick, sad man. Then he went off and made another family and had two kids – that is it. He loved them then, not us anymore... she (mum) got battered by him and even had four miscarriages because of that, … he broke her bones, damaged her spine…(Rachel, lines 317-340, second interview)

Alexei's situation appears to be characterized by the absence of rapport and 'normal' communication between family members. His narrative speaks of (self)isolation and a strained relationship with his mother, with whom he lives. He refers to her as a *'flawed'* human, just like his brother. This coldness towards family members extends to people in general, in whom he is not interested, preferring instead the pursuit of self-improvement:

... both my mother and my brother are very flawed human beings. And I try to not be like them. (lines 341-342); I stay in my room for most of the day… and she stays on her PC most of the day, so …(lines 217-219); ...he (his late father) was not a very good person. I disliked him very much. (line 390)

Laura says that she had always been daddy's girl, and claims that she could not get over her dad's abandonment of the family when she was still too young to understand anything except

that she had lost her daddy, his love and his attention. She reports that nothing prepared her for

this separation, and she has had to struggle with grief and insecurity through secondary school,

enduring bullying and inflicting harm on herself. Even at the time of the interview she speaks

of this experience as a trauma that has affected her quality of life:

> *"… għamel żmien li kien telaq id-daddy minn hawn, vera kienet...vera kont ħassejtha u*
>
> *hekk,… ħassejtha ħafna, għadni nħossha sal-lum … jiena naqra fessuda mad-daddy. …*
>
> *Jien li kien għalija mindu telaq minn hawn mort ngħix miegħu. Jiena kont iffissata fuq*
>
> *id-daddy, kont ngħir ħafna, għax filli d-daddy l-ħin kollu jfissed lili u filli…"*
>
> …that time when dad left, I really felt bad, it still hurts. I have always been daddy's
>
> little girl and all I wanted was to go live with him. I was obsessed with my dad, I was
>
> jealous too; I could not get over him not giving me his attention anymore…(lines 150-
>
> 176, second interview)

Being abandoned by her father when she was a baby has had devastating effect on Sarah. She

has felt vulnerable because of this throughout her life. At one juncture during her interview

Sarah commented that *"...in-neighbour kien sabni u għajjarni l-ewwel għax bla missier, u*

mbagħad qagħad jgħajjarni werċa." (...our neighbour had come up to me and shouted that I

had no father and that I was cross eyed too) (Sarah, lines 203-204, first interview).

During our first interview she disclosed that she was not at peace because of the anger and

bitterness she felt towards her avoidant and emotionally unavailable father:

> *"Missieri telaqni meta kont żgħira. Nafu imma ma nkellmux. Sirt iktar ma naħmlux,*
>
> *qabel meta kont żgħira kont naqbeż ħafna għalih, imma ma kontx naf x'ġara eżatti u*
>
> *hekk, imbagħad meta fehmitni l-mummy u kbirt, illum li għandi t-tifel sirt iktar ma*

naħmlux. Hu għandu tifel ieħor – dak orrajt – u jien ma neżistix. Hu ma jgħidx li għandu tifla – allura għamiltu friend u nħallilu l-comments minħabba n-nies. Mhux għax nagħti kasu nħallilu l-comments; biex ikunu jafu li hu għandu tifla..."

My father had left us when I was little. I know who he is but don't talk to him. I have come to hate him even more; before, I used to defend him, I did not know the whole story then. Now that I know and have a son, I hate him. He does not say he has a daughter – I added him on (social media) and I comment on his wall, not because I care, but only so people will know that he has a daughter. (Sarah, lines 200-210, first interview)

Marie said that she had been diagnosed with clinical depression during secondary school:

"Għamilt xahar ma mmurx skola, u indunat il-mummy għax jiena l-kamra mimlija pink, u kelli ħafna stickers tal-butterflies – qbadt u qaċċatt kollox, kollox - kull ma kelli - u bdejt ingerref il-ħajt, u naħarbilha 'l ommi – ma tkunx tridni noħroġ u noħroġ xorta."

I did not go to school for a month and my mum knew something was wrong because my room was pink and I had butterfly stickers all over the walls. I had torn them all down and started scratching the walls and running away. My mum would not want me to go out, and I would leave anyway. (Marie, lines 133-139, first interview)

At the time, she did not have a good relationship with teachers, who she says were disrespectful towards her – a state of affairs to which she responded by shutting down mentally and often sleeping in class: *"Kont niskarta, norqod."* (I used to shun lessons, sleep) (line 14, first interview).

Summary

The theme of personal hardship is very poignant because it illustrates the hurdles the research participants would have had to overcome to achieve the 'orderliness' necessary to engage with the school curriculum, derive benefits from it and achieve the results held up by the school authorities. Very often, social class is cited as being to blame for the disadvantage certain young people have and bear the consequences for. This theme brings to the fore another dimension - the human reaction to adversity and hardship. The consequences on the emotional and mental state of the person concerned impact their propensity to focus and do well in school, given that the education system appears not to be designed to give due value (and adequate support) to the different knowledge acquired through life experiences that different young people bring with them to the educational setting.

5.2.2 Superordinate Theme 2: The impact of previous school experiences – 'Those five years of school have damaged me!'

> "I was very unhappy with school and had a lot of trouble just staying in class. So I ended up skipping a lot." -Alexei

Introduction

Previous school experiences are significant in understanding the lived experience of being NEET. Particular learning environments, teachers, or classmates may be decisive in how young people perceive school, learning, and further education. Dropping out of school early and being otherwise unemployed does not happen in a vacuum; this may be symptomatic of other phenomena, including ones stemming from the school experience. Table 5.4 below demonstrates the emergent themes falling under the superordinate theme of the participants' experience of compulsory schooling.

Table 5.3: Superordinate Theme 2 and related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 2	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
	Mistreatment by teachers: *'Teachers!'*	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔			✔		✔	Yes
IMPACT OF PREVIOUS SCHOOL EXPERIENCES: *'The five years of school have damaged me.'*	School was stressful	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
	The curriculum was irrelevant or boring: *'There was school … and then there was life.'*	✔	✔		✔		✔	✔					✔	✔	✔	Yes
	School as clubhouse	✔			✔		✔	✔	✔	✔			✔	✔		Yes
	Some teachers were special	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔				Yes
	Survival tactics: *'I will survive!'*	✔			✔				✔	✔	✔	✔		✔		No

All research participants have acknowledged that they found it hard to fit in at school at specific points and often felt unseen and neglected. All 14 participants concur that they experienced school like a prison, largely could not trust teachers, and even were bullied by some. They also felt that they were unfairly labeled to some extent and that school only prioritised the absorption of subject content rather than the healthy development of the young person as a human being.

i.   Emerging theme 1: Teachers!

Narratives about this emerging theme suggest that while teachers think they are practicing discipline "for the good of the student," they may have no idea of the students' worldview and what "good" may mean to them personally. In the process, and despite best intentions, they can do more harm than good, as these narratives indicate.

Rachel still remembers how one teacher used to tell her that if she did not pay attention in his class, she would be limiting her future prospects and end up working as a cleaner, a job that she 'deserved':

> *"Onestament ... physics kien idejjaqni ħafna għax qatt qatt qatt ma kont nifhmu – meta kont ngħidlu jfehemni, is-sir kien jgħidli: 'int qatt ma tagħti kas il-lesson, kif tippretendi li ħa nfiehmek?!' U tipo...: 'ok mela, tfehemnix mela, bye!' U mbagħad qabel kont niġi*

għall-iskola kont inpejjep sigarett, għax naf li ħa jkolli double physics… 'eħe, mhux ħa

jkollok futur sabiħ malli tikber! Issib xogħol ta' tbatija!' Jew 'cleaner jixraq għalik!' –

darba qalli cleaner!"

Honestly, I used to hate physics because I never understood anything. When I asked the teacher to explain, he said: 'Why should I explain when you never pay any attention to my lesson?' So I just disconnected. I used to smoke a cigarette before school on the day that we started with double Physics. "You will not have a bright future," he used to tell me. "Your work will be hard; you will be a cleaner like you deserve!" A cleaner! (Rachel, lines 102-106, first interview)

Marie speaks of particular teachers who behaved in threatening and disturbing ways as a form of disciplinary action: *"Għax huma mhux jgħajtu miegħek biss kienu, … jaqbdu joffenduk it-teachers tal-(name of school), jew inkella dak it-tip li qishom se jerfgħu jdejhom fuqek, imma ma jkunux ħa jerfgħuha."* (Because they did not just shout at you, … the teachers at (name of school) hurled insults at you or made you feel like they were going to hit you.) (Marie, lines 127-130, first interview)

Noel used to feel harassed by teachers at school: *"Ċerti teachers kont irrid noqtolhom eh! …kelli teachers iqabbżuhieli istja man, kienu jaqbdu miegħi, kienu jaqbdu ħafna miegħi!"* (I used to want to kill some teachers!... they pissed me off so much, they picked on me, they used to pick on me too much!) (Noel, lines 332-336)

Bruno remembers being humiliated by a teacher in front of the class the one time he was interested in the lesson and wanted to ask a question: *" Darba kelli teacher tal- (name of school subject) u l-unika darba li wrejt ftit interess u staqsejtha mistoqsija, qabdet u ħatfitni: 'Iiii,*

x'jiġifieri ma fhimtnix??' Qisha bħat-tfal iż-żgħar bdiet timitali. Dik li mbagħad twaqqgħek għaċ-ċajt quddiem klassi sħiħa…!" (Once I had a teacher of (school subject) who snapped at me in front of the whole class the only time I showed some interest and asked her a question: "What! What do you mean you don't understand?!" she shouted. She treated me like a little boy, mocking me, and using a childish tone of voice. I could not bear being humiliated in front of everyone.) (Bruno, lines 170-175)

Dylan used to experience school as a prison, because he felt that he was not allowed to be himself there:

> ...since you're all in the same uniform, it's like kind of, they ... it's like in prison, you know what I mean? It's like everybody's in the same uniform...and you don't have that way of expressing yourself with your clothes, so for example if I see someone wearing the same clothes that I do I'd acknowledge him as one of my own. (Dylan, lines 125-131)

Negative experiences with teachers at school have made Noel distrustful of asking for adult help:

> *"Jekk għandi problema nsolviha waħdi, għax dik darba minnhom kont qiegħed guidance, u n-nanna ma kinitx taf li kont inpejjep dak iż-żmien, u kont ftaħt qalbi magħha. L-għada qlajt ċamata tal-beati pawli mingħandha - mingħand in-nanna - u tlift il-fiduċja! Jekk għandek problema solviha waħdek, għax ħadd mhu ħa jaħsillek wiċċek biex tkun aħjar minnu."*
>
> If I have a problem, I will solve it myself because…once I had spoken to the guidance teacher about my smoking, and my grandma did not know about it then. The following day when I went home, she made a big scene, and from then on, I lost faith in asking

teachers for help – if you have a problem, solve it on your own because not everybody wishes you well. (Noel, lines 315-327)

ii.   Emerging theme 2: At school I felt alone - mad and sad.

All 14 young people admit to having experienced high stress levels for varying personal reasons during secondary school and resorting to various coping strategies that exacerbated their troubles at school. For example, for Stefan, it felt isolating to learn how his awkward behaviour made him appear to his classmates: *"Wieħed minn sħabi kien jgħidli li waħda mill-ewwel impressjonijiet tiegħi li kien ħa kienet meta rani - semagħni - nitkellem waħdi."* (One of my classmates told me that one of his earliest impressions of me involved him seeing and hearing me talking to myself aloud) (Stefan, lines 244-246); *"What hurt me most il-fatt li kont inħossni iżolat."* (What hurt me most was the fact that I used to feel isolated (Stefan, line 317).

Laura also experienced isolation at school, feeling out of place: *"Ma kontx inħossni komda. Hekk, anke fil-private ġieli qgħadt waħdi, ġieli fil-break qgħadt waħdi. Fil-(name of post-secondary school) ma kellix ħbieb ħafna, … u fil-break kont noqgħod fit-toilet niekol…U nipprova naqbad l-internet."* (I did not feel comfortable. Even on the bus, I used to be alone and during breaks. At the (name of post-secondary school) I did not have many friends … during break, I used to go to the toilet to eat and try to connect to the internet.) (Laura, lines 255-261, first interview)

Anthea's negative emotions at school isolated her:*"…Kien ikolli balla dwejjaq u hekk. Ħafna dwejjaq, inħossni li jien waħdi."* (I used to feel so mad. So mad and sad. I felt alone (Anthea, line 256). She vented her frustration by acting out and walking about the school: *"Meta kien ikolli ħafna nervi u dan, ġieli anke …Miss (the teacher's surname) kienet tispiċċa tikkalmani.*

Għax jew insabbat kont... nitlaq mill-klassi, indur mal-iskola – l-iskola kont nafha bl-amment!"
(When I felt mad, sometimes even Miss (the teacher's surname) tried to calm me down. Because I used to slam things, run off from class, and wander around the school – I knew the whole school like the back of my hand) (Anthea, lines 83-89). Her isolation was exacerbated when she was referred to SEBD classes: *"Meta kont Form 3 kienu jibagħtuni skola (name of town). Ma kontx inkun il-ġimgħa kollha (name of town), 'qas niftakar x'kont nagħmel eżatti hemm, ...kont inkun waħdi."* (In Form 3, they sent me to school at (name of town). It was not every day. I do not even remember what I did there... I used to be alone) (Anthea, lines 103-117). She recalls a particularly distressing episode when she lost control:

> *"...Kienet tatni waħda bl-ikrah – l-iskola kienu għamlu kamra biex ... għal studenti bħali u hekk ... konna mmorru f'ċertu ħin hemmhekk... Imma darba kienet tatni bl-ikrah u bdejt insabbat, inkisser u nwaddab u li kellha kollox ta' taħt ta' fuq ġibtilha. Fil-fatt lanqas ridt nitla' fuq, u ċemplu 'l ommi u 'l missieri, kellhom jinżlu ommi u missieri isfel... Qabduni ħafna nervi u dwejjaq..."*
>
> Something terrible came over me that day – they had set up a room for students like me and so on … we used to go here at certain times… But one day, something terrible came over me, and I started throwing and smashing things. I wrecked that room. In fact, I did not want to go upstairs, and they called my parents. They had to come down for me… I felt crazy mad …(Anthea, lines 288-304)

Bruno speaks of having been regularly bullied during his years at secondary school and how this has affected his mental and emotional well-being both then and now. He blames the school for not taking an appropriate stand against bullying:

"...ma tantx kienu juru dixxiplina mal-klassijiet. Ir-rebels, jekk kienu jaħdmu bil-punti, bil-punti! - x'jimpurtahom?! Imbagħad fl-aħħar anke jien irrealizzajt li ma jagħmlu xejn il-punti. U bdejt nittraskura kollox. Jiġifieri m'għandhomx sistema sura, għax nifhem li qisek forsi trid tkun iktar ħanin magħhom, biex forsi jinteressaw ruħhom, imma mbagħad jekk qed itellfu l-edukazzjoni ta' ħaddieħor, mhux sew hux."

They did not discipline the rebels. They used a point system – as if they cared a whit for points! Even I realised at a certain point that that was a useless system. Furthermore, I gave up making an effort at anything. This means that they do not have any system in place at all. I do understand that they have to somehow get through to them by using softer methods, but not at the cost of the education of all the others. It's just not right. (Bruno, lines 196-206)

Bruno also maintains that school procedures had triggered his anxiety:

"L-iskola nnifisha kienet tikkontribwixxi għall-ansjetà, just ...! Għax tal-homework pereżempju, ġieli kont inqum billejl. Nibda nimmaġina li jien m'għamiltx homework. Mhux għax m'għamiltx il-homework, għax ħa jaqbad jgħajjat u ħa naqa' wiċċi l-art quddiem il-klassi sħiħa. U iktar ma niġi bullied, dik għandi bżonn!! Allura, dik probabbli kienet l-iktar ħaġa li kienet iddejjaqni - l-iskola nnifisha. Għax imbagħad l-istudenti l-oħrajn ovvjament ma tantx kienu jgħinu. Nifhem…huma l-awtorità hux, teknikament, tajtni xi ħaġa x'nagħmel, imissni nagħmilha. Imbagħad trid tifhem li jien tifel żgħir, x'jimpurtani milli qed ittini! Għax issa li kbirt nifhem. Imma ta' tfal żgħar iridu jifhmu li ... kemm hemm li jifhmu d-dixxiplina? Ħeqq, u l-homework, ma tistax tgħidilhom sorry insejt il-ktieb, sorry insejt dan ... ma tistax! Missek kont responsabbli, ħa punti, ħa għajta, ... wisq, wisq strict!"

The school contributed to my anxiety...! I used to wake up in the middle of the night because I would have dreamed that I had not done my homework! Not that I had not done my homework as such, but how the teacher would yell at me, and I would be humiliated in front of everyone for not doing it. And that would be the last straw, besides all the bullying I got. That is what stressed me out most as far as the school is concerned because the other students did not help either. I understand that school is technically the authority, so if they gave me a piece of work, then I had to do it. But on the other hand, they ought to reflect on the fact that I am just a boy. What do I care for that piece of work? Now that I am older, I can understand, but as a boy, you do not comprehend the concept of discipline or understand that you cannot forget your book or this or that. You do not comprehend why you get shouted at, told to be responsible, and that you will now get points for misbehaviour … it was abominably strict! (Bruno, lines 208-225)

Jane was also negatively impacted by what she calls the school's lack of discipline and insufficient attention to the education of all students. She was pressured to perform better in academic subjects because she had failed her Junior Lyceum exam and had to remain in secondary school with all the other students who also had not made it. She was also aware that she had no time to lose, for the O-levels loomed ahead, and she wanted to succeed this time:

"Tliet kwarti minnhom (l-istudenti fl-iskola sekondarja) kollha mqarbin. Ma ridux jitgħallmu, infatti l-aħħar sena tefgħuna ġo klassi mħalltin, għax l-erba' snin l-oħra konna klassi magħquda ħa nitgħallmu, ħa ngħaddu – l-aħħar sena tefgħuna kollha mħalltin. Infatti f'suġġett minnhom kien hemm studenta partikolari tant kemm dejqitni li tlaqt mil-lesson, addio t-teacher, inżilt għand l-assistant head, għidtilha ara x'ħa

tagħmel għax ma nifilħuhiex iktar; resqin għall-O levels, hemm il-futur tagħna wara,

ma nistgħux nibqgħu għaddejjin ittellifna lesson sħiħa, u aħna mhux moħħna hemm.

Kienet iddejjaqna ħafna. Jien li ddejjaqni skola sekondarja ma jarawx kif se jaqsmu

lit-tfal liema huma t-tajbin li jridu jistudjaw biex jilħqu fil-futur, u l-oħrajn ..."

Three-quarters of the students were all up to no good. During the first four years, there

was no problem because we had been streamed, but not in the last year. One particular

student was unbearable – one day I just ran out of class and went to report at the assistant

head's office. 'Please do something,' I told her, 'this can't go on. Because of her, we

can't do lessons, and our O-levels are looming ahead.' This girl disrupted everything

for us. I could not understand why they did not differentiate between students who

wanted to study and those that did not …(Jane, lines 31-43)

Excerpt 2 from field notes:

Marie dropped out of post-secondary school. After the alienating experiences at her
secondary school, she had hoped to fit in there. Furthermore, she liked it there for a while
until some students spread a malicious rumor about her, calling her a lesbian, so she just quit.
It all boiled down to how she expressed her emotions to other people around her, including
teachers and the LSE, who understood her. Schools are still xenophobic, failing students who
behave or feel differently from what is held to be the norm. The mainstream schooling system
has rejected Marie due to her mental health issues, and then that same school that was set up
to serve as an alternative for students like Marie let her down as well, simply for being
herself.

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iii Emerging theme 3: Maths has no meaning; life is my teacher.

Eight of the fourteen research participants said that they lost interest in school because lessons

did not reflect real life and were only targeted at teaching subjects for which they would have

to sit for exams. In these participants' view, there was no "life" in school. From the research participants' narratives, education almost comes forward as anachronistic in some ways. Sarah, for example, stated that: *"...tgħallimt English u Maths u hekk, imma nħossni iktar il-problemi tal-ħajja hemm barra li għallmuni milli ġol-iskola."* (I learned English and Maths and stuff, but life's problems were my teacher really) (lines 60-62).

Alexei also commented on his frustration at school:

> I wasn't very happy with school, that's the main problem. It was way too easy for me. And also the classes - I would basically go in, and what will happen is we talk about a concept or like a topic, and usually the topics … were pretty simple. They weren't hard to understand, but the thing is we would still go on talking about them for way too long. And it was just like repeating the same things over and over and over. Which is very frustrating. I didn't enjoy it at all. (Alexei, lines 104-112)

Bruno reflected that his friends made all the difference at school:

> *" .... il-ħin kollu tgħodd il-minuti, u iktar jgħaddi bil-mod. ... Meta l-lessons tisma' wieħed iredden bilkemm qed tifhem xejn, speċjalment fil-Maths, ... imbagħad speċjalment jekk m'hemmx sħabek fil-klassi, allura tispiċċa iktar kwiet, iktar bored, iktar ma tifhem xejn ..."*
>
> … the more you count the minutes, the more time goes by slowly. … When doing lessons means listening to someone droning on endlessly without you understanding anything, especially in Maths, …especially if your friends aren't in class with you, then you end up quieter, more bored, more uncomprehending …(Bruno, lines 286-291)

iv. Emerging theme 4: School as clubhouse.

Eight research participants say that meeting and being with their friends made school bearable. This research finds that young people feel most at ease with significant others, a safe harbour for them, a place where they feel accepted for who they are. Bruno recalls that *"Kont immur għal sħabi. Litteralment dik l-20 minuta sakemm tibda l-iskola filgħodu, xħin naslu, imbagħad għall-break u għall-break."* (I used to go (to school) for my friends. I went for those 20 minutes before school started, when we arrived, and then for the first and second breaks (lines 283-285). This is reflected in Tom's narrative, where he remembers going to school simply to meet his friends and play football: *"Kont immur biex inkun ma' sħabi. Daqshekk. Mhux għal-lessons."* (I used to go to school to be with my friends. Just for that. Not for the lessons) (lines 288-289); *"Kont immur għall-football."* (I used to go (to school) for the football) (line 296). For Dylan "school was like the clubhouse let's say – where we'd all meet up and enjoy experiences u hekk together" (lines 246-248), and Rachel recalls "*noqogħdu nagħmlulu d-dwiefer waqt il-lesson, jew nagħmlu l-make-up, jew nagħmlu x-xagħar..."* (we used to do our nails during the lesson, or make-up, or our hair…) (lines 98-99). Laura recalls that *"Xejn ma kont nagħmel lessons...jiena qisni belha kont eh - il-ħin kollu ndaħħak."* (I did not do any lessons … I clowned around all the time) (lines 222-223). Noel comments that it was due to the support of his friend that he passed exams: "*Kelli ħabiba tiegħi...kienet tridni nistudja, bis-saħħa tagħha jiġifieri għaddejt jiena..."* (I had a friend, she wanted me to study, and I owe passing my exams to her) (lines 108-110).

v. Emerging theme 5: Some teachers were special.

Although there was general agreement that teachers were largely exasperating and mostly distant, the research participants also have fond memories of special educators who made all the difference for them and whom they found to be supportive and helpful, as expressed in Marie's narrative: "*Kienet tieħu paċenzja bina - kien hemm ħafna – kellna teachers li kienu*

orrajt." (She used to be patient with us – we had some nice teachers) (lines 266-268). Positive school experiences are all linked to relationships with other students or exceptional educators who know how to connect with the human being inside the student, as Tom's and Laura's narratives show:

" ...minn dawn it-teachers li ... din kienet minn dawk li ttik individual attention ukoll. Tarak. Kienet tinduna li għandi xi ħaġa. Anke tarani naqra inkwetat, kienet tinduna, allura qisha kienet soft spot għalija dik il-ħaġa li tinduna mingħajr ma ngħidilha."

… she was one of those teachers who also gave you individual attention. She saw me. She used to understand when I was not OK. And when she saw that I looked worried, she would notice and have this soft spot for me, for understanding me without my saying anything. (Tom, lines 303-307)

"… kien hemm klassijiet li kont nieħu pjaċir – għax it-teachers kienu jmorru orrajt – mhux jekk tagħmel ċajta, tħares bl-ikrah u tgħajjat ... eżempju s-sir tal-Malti tgħidx kemm kont inħobbu! Ara, ħin is-serjetà, ħin is-serjetà, u ħin iċ-ċajt, ħin iċ-ċajt! ... Darba ma kontx qiegħda sew, u bdejt niċċassa u tgħidx kemm beda jgħajjatli ...U ħabibti tatni daqqa ta' minkeb u għedtlu: 'Hawn Sir! Present!' Qalli: 'mhux qed nagħmel ir-rassenja!!' Imma hekk, mhux għax jiġifieri qabad jgħajjat, bħal speċi jiċċajta miegħek hux."

There were classes where I used to enjoy myself – because the teachers were all right, they could take a joke. For example, I used to love the Maltese teacher. When it was time to be serious, he would be serious, but then he could also joke. One day I was not feeling well, I was distracted, and he kept calling my name. My friend nudged me, and

I said 'Present, Sir'! He said he was not doing a roll call! But he said it nicely, not sarcastically. (Laura, lines 227-232, first interview)

Particular educators left their mark on Rachel and Anthea for their special kindness and care, when things were not going well in their lives. Rachel felt that there was someone who rooted for her: *"Miss (surname of assistant head of school) dejjem kellha tama fija. Qaltli għax kieku titfa' moħħok hemm tasal fejn trid…Nimmissjaha ħafna."* (Miss (surname of assistant head of school) always had faith in me. She told me that if I only put my mind to it, I would succeed in whatever I wanted to... I miss her a lot (Rachel, lines 161-162, first interview). Anthea recalls having someone at school who helped her in her difficult moments: *"…kienet orrajt miegħi, kienet tgħinni ħafna. Kull meta nkun ħażin dejjem sibtha…Mill-Form 1 bdiet tgħinni."* (She was all right; she helped me a lot. Every time I was not well, she was there for me…She helped me from Form 1 onwards) (lines 500-505).

Noel appreciated a particular teacher whom he describes as "vera relaxed" and who made him feel that he belonged, even though his was a difficult class, in his own words: *"Darba minnhom kellna sir vera relaxed – kont naqlagħlu l-ħara. Konna noffenduh u jkompli magħna! Dak it-tip. Darba minnhom anke sparar garajtlu. Kompla magħna!"* (Once we got this very relaxed teacher, I gave him a hard time. We used to call him names, and he used to go along with it! He was that kind of guy. I even threw things at him one day, and he just went along with it!) (lines 350-355). He recalls this teacher's ability to be on the students' level: *"…kien jaqa' għal-livell tagħna. Aħna konna klassi naqra ħamalla, …"* (He used to come down to our level. We were a bad class) (line 371), and that he made him feel loved: *"Kien iħobbni, kien iħobbni."* (He used to love me; he loved me) (line 387).

vi. Emerging theme 6: I will survive!

Seven research participants – Dylan, Noel, Stefan, Anthea, Rachel, Laura, and Tom - spoke about tactics and maneuvers that helped them make sense of and survive school. In Laura's case, *"Fil-break kont noqgħod fit-toilet niekol…u nipprova naqbad l-internet."* (I used to eat in the toilet during breaks… and try to connect to the internet) (line 281).

For Dylan and Tom, reputation was extremely important at school and affected their status within the student subculture. They speak of how students manipulate the school system to gain stature among peers, even if it involves getting into trouble on purpose to gain extra points:

> ...there's always a back door in the system. No matter what you end up doing, there's always like... for example a student can do something for reputation's sake, and that's like a back door – you're manipulating the system ... He wouldn't care if he gets punished so he can do whatever he wants in the school – because in reality he's not going to be sent to prison or something. (Dylan, lines 334-342)

Excerpt 3 from field notes:

Dylan has obtained only one O-level – English - because he did not feel like sitting for all those O-levels then. He decided not to as a way of surviving a difficult period in his life. I am inclined to think that this an example of self-reflection, maturity, and agency on his part.

" …Qbadt lil xi ħadd mill-flokk u sabbattu mad-desk. Għax ġew jaqbdu miegħi, waqt klassi tal-art. Kieku ma qajjimtx rixi jiena kont nibqa' hekk jiġifieri. Imbagħad bdejt il-football, u ovvjament it-tfal meta jarawk tajjeb fil-football jgħidu dan tajjeb, jagħmlu

ħbieb miegħek ...Li tkun tajjeb fil-football u tkun taf ħafna nies, illum il-ġurnata (jiswa), mhux għax tkun ġentili u dawn l-affarijiet."

… I grabbed someone by the shirt and threw him onto the desk. Because they were hassling me during Art. Had I not stood up for myself, things would not have changed. And then I started playing football, and obviously when kids notice that you play well, they say there is no messing with this guy, and they become friends with you … nowadays, it's not about being kind, and that sort of stuff; instead, what counts to get a good reputation is that you can play football and know lots of guys. (Tom, lines 354-362)

Anthea speaks of how she used to walk about the school to process her emotions: *"... L-iskola kont nafha bl-amment, għax kont indurilha mal-iskola kollha!"* (I knew the school like the back of my hand because I used to walk all around it so often!) (Lines 86-87), whereas Rachel recalls how she and her mates *"...konna ngħadduha l-ġurnata!"* (we used to while away the time), avoiding lessons that she found extra stressful or tedious:

"...konna ngħadduha ta l-ġurnata!... Pereżempju konna mmorru l-canteen, intuha l-karta, nordnaw, ħalli mbagħad, xħin niġu tgħidilna: ħa, erfajthomlkom. Konna noqogħdu... jidħol kulħadd ġewwa mill-grawnd wara li ddoqq, u wara xi kwarta nidħlu għal-lesson kollha kemm aħna."

We used to kill time! … For example, we would go to the canteen, give her the order and take our time to pick it up. We used to stay there then …everybody would go inside after the bell rang, and we would go to class together fifteen minutes later. (Rachel, lines 135-142)

Summary

All the research participants mentioned their personal school experience related to the situation they find themselves in, which the authorities call "NEET." In most cases, various forms of bullying were strongly associated with the school environment, implicating fellow students, teachers, and administrative staff. The findings from this superordinate theme show that the education system affected the participants. They spoke about what they needed from it and the qualities they were most touched by in teachers. The findings also reveal that the participants exercise agency, have a mind of their own, and look upon school procedures as alienated from their lifeworlds. The school presents reality as if there were no alternative when young people know there is. However, school procedures negate this knowledge and relentlessly impose their ideology on them. At the same time, young people seek to be understood and connect with adults and the school milieu as part of their search for meaning and purpose. The findings shed light on what appears to be a gulf between the definition of the world of the school and that of the research participants.

5.2.3 Superordinate Theme 3: Killing time.

'X'ħin ngħajew immorru d-dar.'

We stay out till we drop. -Rachel

Introduction

I was interested in how NEETs spend their time because the particular environment they each come from will influence their outlook on life – their construction. For this reason, I asked them to walk me through a typical day in their life, what they enjoy doing most, and why. I thought this would help me discover how they make meaning of or interpret their current

situation. Table 5.5 shows how I processed the theme of 'Use of time' emerging from the 14 interviews:

Table 5.4: Superordinate Theme 3 and the related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 3	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
	Attending Youth Guarantee sessions	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔				✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
USE OF TIME: *'Killing time.'*	Time on social media: *'My space, my time.'*	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
	Physical exercise	✔			✔						✔			✔		No
	'I have caring responsibilities.'					✔		✔		✔						No
	'I need a job.'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔		Yes
	Social life	✔			✔		✔		✔	✔	✔			✔		Yes

i. Emergent theme 1: Attending Youth Guarantee Sessions

All participants except Noel, Anthea, Laura, and Rachel were attending Youth Guarantee sessions at the time of my first contact with them. They attended because they had been informed that this would be a second chance to make something out of themselves and improve their prospects of finding a satisfactory job. Alexei was cynical, though, maintaining that he had attended not because he particularly wanted or needed to but because he felt pressured into putting himself in a favorable position by benefiting from what the authorities in Malta said was the reasonable and responsible thing to do.

The young persons attending participated in lessons about how to write a CV, prepare for an interview, teambuilding, learn to learn, know your rights, budgeting skills, communication skills, dealing with social anxiety, and sessions about motivation and behaviour. In general, all of the course attendees, except Alexei, seem satisfied with the courses and say they found them beneficial, albeit for different reasons, some more than others. In general, all research participants intimated that the best thing in the Youth Guarantee JobsPlus sessions was meeting

others who were in the same boat as themselves and in small groups where they could relax and feel validated.

Jane explains that attending YG sessions helps her make new friends. For her, the best time is *"... xħin niġi hawn niltaqa' ma' ħbieb oħra... qatt ma kont iltqajt magħhom u issa sirna veru close dan l-aħħar."* (My favorite time of the day is when I come here and meet the people in this group ... we have never met before, and now we have become close (lines 15-16).

For Dylan, attending YG sessions makes him feel occupied, after dropping out from post-secondary school:

> After I had dropped out of (name of school) I had spent two years not doing anything. Literally just going out with my friends all the time, and for two years it was getting really boring, and I wanted to do something – I wanted to occupy myself and not having the same routine – I felt like I was on a computer programme – always doing the same thing every day, every day… (Dylan, lines 393-399)

Excerpt 4 from field notes:

The content of the YG sessions is often basic. One lesson dealt with the importance of personal hygiene, which the tutor emphasized more than necessary, in Sarah's view. Being a shy person, her reaction reflected her frustration at having to hear so much of what she already knew, and at assumptions that tutors seemed to be making: she rose in protest, asking the tutor in a louder than usual voice: "Are you implying that I am dirty? I assure you that I am a very clean person! In fact, I am obsessed with cleanliness." Her reaction seems to encapsulate the helplessness and defiance that a NEET young person can feel when treated according to a deficit model.

Tom is apprehensive because he lost a job that he liked due to emergency Covid-19 measures taken up by the company he had been employed with. However, he finds meaning in attending the YG sessions because of the connection that he has formed with the other young people attending. He uses the term *"bond,"* which reflects the value he gives to cultivating genuine relationships with others:

> *"Tgħallimt affarijiet rigward xogħol, kuntratti u hekk – dawk għalija affarijiet żgħar li jekk tfittixhom fuq l-internet titgħallimhom. Fl-istess ħin sirt naf ...kemm bond tista' tikber ...f'jumejn biss. Biex għedtilhom jekk ikollkom bżonn, tkellmu fuq il-group chat! Biex għedtilhom hekk jien, ma nafx!"*
>
> I learned about work, contracts, and so on – small things you can check out on the internet. However, at the same time, I learned how fast (human) bonds can grow – in just two days! I would not have imagined that I of all people, would advise them (classmates) to check into the group chat if they needed anything! (Tom, lines 661-667)

Kevin has not felt helped at school during his experiences of emotional turmoil, and now the motivation and communication sessions are proving useful for him. In his own words, the sessions were an *"eye opener"* (Line 142, first interview), because *"...kelli xi problemi li ma kontx naf kif tiħħendiljahom u minn dal-grupp sirt naf iktar kif għandi nieħu ħsieb dil-ħaġa."* (I had some problems that I did not know how to handle, and from this group, I learned how to deal with them) (lines 150-152, second interview).

Excerpt 5 from field notes:

Stefan's case is particular because, having a university degree, he is academically overqualified compared to the others in the group. He told me he had achieved excellent grades in all his university exams. Admitting that he has always struggled with communicating with people, he said he could not find a job after graduating. While learning nothing new at the YG sessions, he hoped that his employer would offer him a full-time job upon job placement.

Bruno also speaks of isolation. His discomfort around people is expressed in his struggle to *"make an effort,"* which he manages to do in the YG sessions, viewing them as a fresh start:

> *"...kelli ħafna social anxiety, kont nispiċċa ninqata' waħdi, ... qisni iktar komdu f'din il-klassi ma' dawn in-nies. ...meta kont (name of a previous post-secondary school he used to attend) m'għamiltx l-effort biex nissoċjalizza iktar, u nħossni għalhekk m' impruvjajtx. ...hawnhekk qisni għedt kemm ħa ndum nirrepeti l-istess ħaġa, qisni skomdu kemm jien skomdu just hemm dawn in-nies – ħa noqgħod magħhom, ħa nkellimhom."*
>
> I had a lot of social anxiety and used to isolate myself. I feel more comfortable with these people here – during my time at (name of a previous post-secondary school he used to attend). I did not make an effort to socialize, and I feel that this was why my condition did not improve. In coming here, I wanted to stop repeating the same thing and was determined to be with them and talk to them. (Bruno, lines 77-87)

At the YG sessions he says he feels seen, whereas, at school, he used to feel misunderstood. His use of the word *"intimate"* accentuates the value he gives to meaningful connection with significant others and to being known by the small number of people (mostly boys) in the

group: *"... l-ammont ta' studenti fil-klassi (at YG sessions) ... tħossok naqr' iktar ... intima, mhux qisek għoxrin persuna, u anke l-istaff – hekk, friendly. U anke l-istudenti friendly."* (The number of students in class here (at YG sessions) makes a difference – you feel more comfortable because it is more intimate, unlike when you are twenty in a class. The staff is friendly too, even the students) (Bruno, lines 150-153).

Excerpt 6 from field notes:

Overall, the YG sessions are a continuation of school in style and design. As an educator, I noticed the lack of engagement expected from the young attendees in most sessions I observed. I do not know if my presence has anything to do with it. It is more "banking education," in Paulo Freire's terms, even though the opportunity was excellent, given the small groups and the particular situation of the young people concerned. Positive comments that the participants made about the YG sessions referred to the motivational classes facilitated by an educator with a psychotherapy background. Perhaps this should be taken into consideration in policy addressing well-being in schools. Psychotherapists specializing in youth issues could be more involved in students' personal and social development, collaborating with PSCD teachers as necessary. This would not be embarked upon from an intervention perspective, but as an education provision intended to offer professional support to young people as they navigate the world and teach them skills to help them cope with difficult life situations that are part and parcel of being human.

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ii. Emergent theme 2: My space, my tribe.

An important theme emerging from the participants' narratives is that of the random place, such as the football pitch in Tom's case or Marie's random sunny spot, where the research participants feel free to do the things they enjoy and meet up with friends. This is a place that gives them a sense of meaning and belonging. Sometimes, it fills their days, as in the case of

Rachel and Marie. In Rachel's case, her view of life seems to be encapsulated in the comment:

"Ma' kuġinuwi noħorġu bil-karozza jew ir-raħal – imbagħad xħin ngħajjew immorru d-dar."

(We go out for a drive or hang out in the village with my cousin – we stay out till we're ready

to drop) (Rachel, Lines 8-10). For her, it is all about being with the friends she loves and having

fun:

> *"...matul il-ġimgħa nħobb ...ġieli noqgħod relaxed, ġieli nħobb noħroġ, ... mhux dejjem*
>
> *l-istess… (inħobb l-iktar) fil-weekend Paceville! ... għax sħabi kollha xogħol ħafna*
>
> *minnhom – u toħroġ magħhom hux, fis-sens tmur u tieħu gost..."*
>
> … during the week I like to relax, sometimes I go out …it's not always the same … (I
>
> love most) going to Paceville in the weekend! … because most of my friends work –
>
> so we can only meet on the weekend, have some fun …(Rachel, lines 16-22, first
>
> interview)

Marie speaks warmly about being with her tribe, gazing at the sun:

> *" ...jekk inqum fit-tlieta, jew fis-sagħtejn jew fis-siegħa, nara x'ħa nagħmel jekk ma*
>
> *noħroġx. Jekk tkun ġurnata sabiħa, nibgħat 'l sħabi, immur ħdejn il-mummy, ...*
>
> *tagħmilli niekol ... imbagħad nidħol ninħasel, nieħu kollox bil-mod, imbagħad nagħmel*
>
> *il-make-up bil-mod. ... imbagħad wara, skont, għax ġieli noħorġu xi l-erbgħa hekk, dak*
>
> *il-ħin nibda nlesti u nkun biex ngħaġġel – imbagħad nieħu żball, nerġa' nneħħih,*
>
> *imbagħad wara noħorġu ...Meta tkun ix-xemx, ġurnata sabiħa, noqgħod nagħlaq*
>
> *għajnejja hekk fix-xemx, u noqgħod inħares lejn ix-xemx…. ġieli ma nitkellmux meta*
>
> *noħorġu…Noqogħdu nħarsu lejn ix-xemx."*
>
> If I wake up at 3 pm or even at 2 pm or 1 pm, I think about whether I want to go out. If
>
> it's a beautiful day, I contact my friends and go to my mum … she prepares something
>
> for me to eat. Then I shower, take it easy, and put on my make-up slowly. Sometimes

we agree to meet at 4 pm, and I would need to hurry up, often getting my make-up wrong and having to do it all over again … Then we go out. On a sunny day, I just turn towards the sun and close my eyes. Sometimes we do not talk at all… we just gaze at the sun. (Marie, lines 51-59, first interview)

Excerpt 7 from field notes:

Marie's idea of happiness is to be surrounded by lots of friends. She reminded me of a young hippie in how she dressed and behaved during the YGsessions – all about love, peace, and harmony. On one occasion, she told the group about how she stays online late at night chatting and how she often gets woken up very early by one of her boyfriends who wants to smoke a cigarette with her online.

For Noel hanging out with friends means sharing common interests. He loves to share his passion for his hobbies, such as bird hunting and trapping, with like-minded people, even if they are older than him. It is a third place where he can feel validated and free. One of Noel's fondest memories involves an unorthodox teacher who entered his world and accepted him as he was without judgment. His risk-taking, devil-may-care attitude towards life is externalized in his: *"Closed season eh!,"* referring to breaking the law when hunting birds at a time when this is not permissible:

> *"...Morna flimkien għall-kaċċa! Closed season eh!! Lanqas suppost morna! Jiġifieri... u sifirni miegħu. Is-Siberja... kien iħobbni, kien iħobbni. Kien mill-agħar eh. Dejjem ħames minuti tard. ...f'nofs il-lesson joħroġ ipejjep sigarett. Kien joħroġ ipejjep sigarett miegħi. Mela!"*

> We went hunting together! It was closed season; we should not have gone! He took me
>
> to Siberia, too … he was fond of me. He was the worst – always five minutes late. …
>
> he used to go out for a smoke in the middle of the lesson. We used to go out and have
>
> a smoke together. That is how it was. (Noel, lines 302-308)

Friends are everything for Dylan. He speaks of remaining unseen and unknown by an education system that only saw what it wanted to see and neglected or rejected what is often the most important part of people and relationships. The time he spends with his friends, no matter the venue, serves as a third place because he feels acknowledged and can be himself. His friends provide an anchor for him, and he would "… go to school literally just to go see my friends and I felt really at home with them, and then, when I would be alone, not knowing where they are I'd feel really out of place" (Lines 197-200). Then he "… would try and find them... I wouldn't even know where to go" (Dylan, lines 201-202).

Dylan's experiences during secondary school and beyond are also expressed in his repeated use of the terms *"outcast", "lower class",* and his reference to not being rich when speaking about how he believed people looked at boys like him who practised (name of particular sport):

> … and it's the same with (name of sport). Before, it was like you're the outcast kind of,
>
> you know – in the eyes of the general public – it's like you're the outcast, people that
>
> ... aren't rich or whatever, etcetera etcetera, like lower class people they'd say...
>
> Nowadays I'm pretty happy because it is... not like that anymore. (Dylan, lines 210-
>
> 215)

The internet offers young people the opportunity to visit websites and groups they feel drawn to, and interact with knowledge and people that are freely accessible online. For the participants, the internet serves as a bridge to the rest of the world, helping them communicate via email and pursue interests such as films, music, photography, and entertainment. Alexei is an exception in the group of research participants because while he uses the internet to research whatever interests him, he states that "I don't use social media, no" (line 143). He feels comfortable investing in his favorite pursuit – knowledge – spending time online for him is a reliable and therefore comfortable activity, unlike relating to people of whom he says: "I don't really take an example from people that much. I don't look at people that much" (lines 176-178).

Rachel uses social media to pass the time and connect with her friends, *"Noqgħod fuq il-mobile, nagħmel sa xi t-3 ta' filgħodu. ... Nibgħat lil sħabi, nilgħab, nara l-films."* (I'm on my mobile, till about 3am. …I chat with my friends, play games and watch films) (Rachel, lines 10-11, first interview), whereas Noel also used the internet to look up school-related content when he was excluded or otherwise not attending school: *"...inkompli nistudja fejn naf jiena, fuq l-internet, infittex l-imbarazz u hekk..."* (I'd continue studying on my own on the internet, look up stuff by myself…) (Noel, line 160).

Liam uses the computer daily to check emails, play and practice hobbies: *"... nibda nixgħel il-computer – nara x'daħal u ma daħalx... emails u hekk... niċċekkja...imbagħad inkompli daqsxejn fuq il-computer – fuq logħob u hekk."* (I start the day by switching on the computer – I check what's come in… emails, and so on … then I continue playing online games) (lines 5-10, first interview); *"...bħalissa fuq il-computer nagħmel il-hobbies tiegħi: fotografija, editing u hekk. Nara kif nista' nagħmel biex inkompli iktar napgrejdja fih."* (…at the moment

I use the computer for my hobbies: photography, editing and so on. I try to discover ways of upgrading my skills) (lines 21-23, first interview).

Bruno spends most of his time "*nagħmel il-PlayStation*" (I'm on my PlayStation) (line 37), and views the internet as better than real life in certain aspects, reasoning that:

"*...jekk pereżempju nara kunċert fuq l-internet u kunċert live, xorta qed nisma' l-istess. ...narani qisni with the press of a button nista' nfittex li rrid, nista' nara post, nista' nara ... allura għalhekk qisni...intih valur daqshekk l-internet.*"

… I feel that there is no difference between watching a concert on the internet and being physically present at a live concert. I think I can find anything I want with the press of a button, which is why I value the internet so highly. (Bruno, lines 93-98)

Four participants spoke about physical training or being physically active – Dylan, Tom, Anthea, and Noel – which may also be viewed as time spent in a third place. Anthea goes walking " *... bil-headphones u hekk, ... nisma' kull tip ta' diski jiġifieri. Skont il-burdata li nkun.*" (I go walking with my headphones on, … I listen to all types of songs, depending on the mood I'm in) (Anthea, lines 424-428). Tom loves football and despite his limited time, he catches the bus to go to train early in the morning:

"*Il-hobby tiegħi football – ħafna football.*" "*...inqum fil-5.30, fis-6.05 naqbad tal-linja, fis-6.30 nibda nitrenja, ...Tgħid għallinqas qed nagħmel xi ħaġa futbol. Nagħmel siegħa hemm, ġieli sagħtejn, jiddependi s-sħana, meta jkun ix-xitwa sagħtejn nagħmel qisu.*"

My hobby is football – lots of football (Line 7). I get up at 5:30, at 6.05 I catch the bus, at 6.30 I start training... At least I'm doing some football. I spend an hour there, two sometimes, depending on the weather. In winter, I train for about two hours. (Tom, lines 256-260)

iii. Emergent theme 3: I have caring responsibilities.

Sarah and Laura's motherhood has significantly impacted their life, mainly transforming what was previously free time into committed time, a new responsibility for the life of a child that now depends on them. Both said that it was not a planned pregnancy but decided to shoulder the responsibility and do their best with their respective families' support. Laura had felt neglected by her family during her pregnancy, perceiving it as a punishment for being careless and irresponsible, especially since her family was still reeling from the impact of abandonment by the father. Sarah had more support but felt overwhelmed by her responsibilities and the financial sacrifices she is burdened with. Both young women were trying to find their feet during the first interview that I conducted with them but appeared to have got a better hold on things during the second one about a year later. Sarah had found a job, and Laura was looking to do a course that would facilitate her entry into the labour market. However, their time is primarily taken over by caring for their child and, in Sarah's case, for her boyfriend too.

Laura:

"Filgħodu jqum għall –bottle, intih bottle, imbagħad nerġa' nraqqdu u norqod naqra miegħu. Għax peress li ġieli ma jħallinix norqod, ... ġieli 'qas norqod billejl. Għax joqgħod jibki u hekk, għax issa qed jikber, u hekk... qed isir naqra antipatku biex jorqod. Jew jorqod fuqi, ma joqgħodx fil-pushchair il-ħin kollu, u ġie li għamel ħabta, mal-ħamsa jqum u ma jorqodx. Imbagħad jerġa' jqum, nerġa' ntih bottle, inlestihulu minn qabel, imbagħad ninżel, sakemm joqgħod jara t-television u hekk, ninżel nagħmel it-

thermos, naħsel il-bottles, inħallihom jinxfu, imbagħad naħslu, inlibbsu, jorqod, u

sadanittant nilħaq niżbarazza l-kamra, u nagħmel l-affarijiet."

He (her baby son) wakes up for his bottle in the morning. I give him his bottle, then I put him to sleep again, and we sleep together. He does not let me sleep at night. Sometimes I do not get any sleep at all. He cries. He is growing now, and putting him to sleep is getting harder. Alternatively, he sleeps on me, not in his pushchair, and there are days when he wakes up at five in the morning and does not go back to sleep. When he wakes up, I give him a bottle that I'd have prepared beforehand. While he watches TV, I go prepare him a thermos, wash bottles and put them to dry. Afterward, I bathe him, dress him, and then he usually falls asleep, giving me time to clear up and do whatever needs doing. (lines 22-31, first interview)

Sarah:

"Bħalissa nqum, inlesti l-lunch lit-tifel, inlesti t-tifel, nilbes, inwasslu l-iskola,

imbagħad niġi, ngħin 'il mummy – xogħol tad-dar – qadi, xiri, u hekk. Imbagħad inlesti

l-ikel, immur għat-tifel… intih jiekol, naħslu, … jara naqra television, imbagħad

nagħmlu naqra revision – ġieli meta jkun għajjien u jgħidli m'għandix aptit ngħidlu

orrajt, inħallih jilgħab jew jara t-television. Imbagħad …inlesti l-ikel għall-boyfriend,

jiekol, naħsel il-platti, nieħu shower, imbagħad nidħlu fis-sodda, daqqa bit-tifel, u

noqgħod nara xi film."

I prepare my son's lunch first thing in the morning. I prepare him for school, dress him, and take him to school. Back home, I help my mum with the housework, errands, shopping, etc. I prepare food for my son, pick him up from school, feed and wash him. He watches some TV, and then we revise a bit together. Sometimes he does not feel like it, and I let him watch TV or play. I prepare dinner for my boyfriend, and after

dinner, I have a shower, and then we watch a film together in bed, sometimes with our

son. (lines 2-15, first interview)

iv. Emergent theme 4: I need a job.

All participants except two – Laura and Alexei – directly or indirectly said that they were

looking for a steady job or that it would be ideal if they had one. Laura has her hands full being

a full-time mum and not having or affording a babysitter because her own mother works outside

the home, and her siblings are married with children of their own. She relies on her partner

financially and seems to be content with that.

Rachel wants to find a job because she does not visualise remaining dependent on her parents

for money, but is in no hurry. Having fun is more important for her at this stage:

> *"Xtaqt immur (name of post-secondary school), imma ma dħaltx – għax hemm ħafna*
>
> *kesħin, u kemm-il darba ħabibti tispiċċa bullying, allura bdejt naqta' qalbi...imbagħad*
>
> *tipo, dil-ġimgħa ċempilt għax-xogħol u għandi interview nhar it-Tnejn… Għidt das-sajf*
>
> *nieħdu relax, għidt imma fix-xitwa rrid nibda naħdem... nixtieq nibda naħdem għalija*
>
> *hux... ma niddependix fuq il-mummy ..."*
>
> I wanted to go to (name of post-secondary school), but I did not do it – 'cos lots of
>
> bullies go there. My friend was bullied very often, so I gave that up… then this week I
>
> called for work and now have an interview on Monday … I said to myself that I will
>
> just chill this Summer, but then in Winter I will start working … I want to start working
>
> for me, so that I do not depend on my mum …(Rachel, lines 51-60, first interview)

Noel was engaged in precarious work when I interviewed him; he provides rich insights into

the world of disadvantage and being NEET with occasional dips into precarious employment.

He is content living the life of an adventurer, taking on and leaving jobs as he pleases. He says qualifications are overrated, and schools only pressure students to make life harder for them:

"U mhux xorta! Bihom (l-eżamijiet) u mingħajrhom...illum il-ġurnata mhux kemm taf, kemm int kapaċi, f'kull tip ta' xogħol. ...saqsewni – qalli għandek xi affarijiet fuq il-kċina? Għidtlu għandi, imma kapaċi biżżejjed biex immexxi waħdi...Daħħalni mill-ewwel ċum bumm paqq." (They (exams) make no difference! … today, it's not what you know. It's all about what you can do in any type of work … they asked me whether I had any qualifications on catering. I said I have, but I am capable enough to manage very well without them anyway. … He took me in there and then.) (Noel, lines 184-196)

Anthea had failed her exams at (name of post-secondary school) after five difficult years of secondary schooling. She had just started her first job – assembling plastic dolls at a local factory. She knows she could do better if only she believed in herself more. Now she wants to finish the (name of vocational subject) course to finally get the job she wants: *" ...kieku nerġa' nitħajjar nerġa' nagħmel il-kors ta' (name of vocational subject) ... Dejjem tajjeb hux. Inġib ftit x'jgħidulhom...(qualifications)...għax kont ilni minn dejjem ngħid ... jew f'xi* (name of place of work)*, nieħu ħsieb it-tfal..."* (… I would be interested to go back to do the (name of vocational subject) course … It would be good to get some … (qualifications)… because I've always been saying that I would like to work … or in a (name of place of work), taking care of children …) (Anthea, lines 50-64)

Excerpt 8 from field notes:

Liam wants to be like 'the others' who have 'made it' and are on their way to reaching their goals. He claims to be confused about what to do with himself, undecided whether to further his training or look for work. During one session, when asked what his dream job was, he listed some jobs with nothing or little in common: clerk, police officer, soldier, something to do with history, something in IT. Some young people are not ready yet, and educational discourses that expect them to be goal-directed at such a young age seem unfair and unrealistic.

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v. Emergent theme 5: Social Life.

Seven of the fourteen research participants appear to have an active social life. The rest of the participants experience isolation to varying degrees.

Liam and Kevin are suspicious of "friends," largely due to school bullying experiences. Nonetheless, Liam dreams of having a best friend:

> *"Illum il-ġurnata għadni bħas-sekondarja, imma għidt il-ħbieb ħa ssib xi darba jew oħra. Veru mhux se ssibu mill-ewwel, imma jekk taħdem u toqgħod bil-għaqal nies bħalek ħa ssib; veru li llum nies bil-għaqal mhux se ssib mill-ewwel, imma nies bil-għaqal hawn ħafna. Ħadd ma ġie fid-dinja biex ikun għalih waħdu."*
>
> Nowadays things haven't changed from secondary school. But I tell myself that I will find friends eventually. Maybe they are not easy to find, but if you work hard and do things right, you will attract people like you. Good people are hard to find, but they exist. No man is an island. (Liam, lines 46-53, first interview)

Jane spends a lot of time at home, looking up job vacancies and cleaning the house while her parents work outside the home. Attending YG sessions and meeting the other group attendees

is a major highlight for her. She rarely goes out and refers only vaguely to a friend she sometimes meets. She says that she will not go out unless all her work is done:

> Researcher: *"Ma tagħmilx affarijiet għall-gost, biex tirrilassa?"*
>
> Researcher: Don't you find time to relax, have some fun?
>
> Jane*: "Ma tantx… Once in a while forsi ngħid 'il waħda minn sħabi imxi ħa nqattgħu nofstanhar barra, kemm noħroġ nofstanhar mid-dar...imma l-ewwel niċċekkja li l-affarijiet tad-dar, l-istudju, u jekk ikun lest..."*
>
> Jane: Not really … Once in a while, maybe, I go out with one of my friends, just for half a day away from home … but first I check that things at home are in order and that I would have finished studying … (lines 97-100)

Excerpt 9 from field notes:

On observing Jane, I could not help thinking that this girl may be in an abusive situation. She did not seem like a girl to me, but rather a grownup woman full of worries and cares about her home and family. She behaved like an adult in the group and in such a way that she always appeared to know best and be one up on the others. Was this perhaps a result of having to replace her sick mother, who was in hospital? Later on in our interview, she admitted to suffering from very low self-esteem and to feeling powerless in finding her path toward a job that she would like. Doing chores made her feel competent, but she knew this was not what she should be doing.

Alexei claims to feel uncomfortable socialising:

> It never feels like it's natural to talk to them (friends), because I always feel that I interact with them because I have an obligation to interact with them, because we're friends, rather than because I want to. And so most of the time that makes me feel like

I don't want to be with them. And so I end up – even when I have friends – just separating, and I stop talking with them. (Alexei, lines 358-364)

Sarah and Laura – the two mothers in this research group – both say during the interview that they cannot continue with the social life that they had before having their child, mainly because of financial limitations and new responsibilities. Laura now enjoys the company of her older sisters more: *"Issa li għandi t-tifel, kulħadd hekk...anke jgħiduli biex immur magħhom nixtri u moħħhom fit-tifel u hekk."* (Now that I have my baby boy, everyone is like … they invite me to go out shopping with them, and they are very interested in my son and all that (lines 391-393, first interview).

Sarah has mixed feelings as she reflects on the changes in her life as a result of her pregnancy:

> *"Ifhem, inqbadt pregnant mhux għax ridt jiena. Imma mbagħad... orrajt... il-ħajja nbidlet totalment. Imma... jiġifieri t-tifel ma jiddispjaċinix li ġie, anzi melieli ħajti. U ħajja sabiħa li tkun omm u hekk, imma ..."*
> I didn't want to fall pregnant. But then … okay … life changed completely. But … I am not sorry to have had my son. He filled my world. Motherhood is beautiful, but…(lines 87-91, first interview)

Noel loves hunting, fishing, and trapping. He also has like-minded friends with whom he often spends time on these activities. He expresses the priority of spending time with friends over anything else:

"…Għandi ħabib tiegħi, ili nafu żmien u għomor, ilna nafu 'l xulxin żmien – jekk jiġi jgħidli 'isma' sieħbi ejja mmorru nistadu' – pupp! Għal hemmhekk! …Inħobb il-hobbies kollha! Kaċċa, sajd, insib, ninżel bil-ħarpun…"

I have a friend, have known him for a long time. If he comes and tells me to go fishing, I drop everything and go! I love all my hobbies! Hunting, fishing, bird trapping, harpooning …(Noel, lines 132-140)

Summary

Each research participant spends their time according to personal priorities and circumstances. They may also be influenced by what significant others expect, such as attending Youth Guarantee sessions to make themselves more "employable." It is important to remember that most young people in Malta stay in their family home upon coming of age to find work or to further their studies or training. This is due to the island's small size, where every location can be reached in a short time. This fact may make it harder for many young people not to absorb the same values and beliefs of their parents or extended family.

Some daily activities are common to all research participants, such as the use of the internet and social media during free time. However, in other ways, they differ because of particular variables, such as having a child to raise, being engaged in precarious work, living with a disability, lacking stability in one's personal life, and not living with one's parents.

5.2.4 Superordinate theme 4: 'My idea of success'.

"looking forward to the future"   -Kevin

Introduction

I asked the participants to tell me what being successful means to them to understand their priorities, what they value most, and whether they have assimilated the achievement ideology propagated by the education system. This would also enable me to better understand how and to what extent they exercise agency in independent thinking. The findings here show that the idea of being successful transcends the notion of academic achievement for each research participant. They all associate success with being free to live as they want. They also recognise the importance of mental health to live life to the full, including beating the odds that may be stacked against them and cultivating meaningful relationships.

Table 5.5 below illustrates how each of the 14 research participants defines success and failure.

Table 5.5: Superordinate Theme 4 and related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 4	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
	'I want to be free.'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
MY IDEAS OF SUCCESS	'I want to be well.'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
	'I appreciate what I have.'	✔					✔						✔		✔	No
	'I will make it against all odds.'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔					Yes
	'I am loved.'	✔				✔	✔		✔	✔		✔	✔	✔		Yes
	Someone to look up to	✔		✔	✔	✔			✔	✔		✔	✔	✔		Yes
	'Can't let myself down.'	✔		✔										✔	✔	No
	'I must embrace my power.'					✔		✔							✔	No

i. Emergent theme 1: I want to be free.

For all 14 research participants, success as being free to live according to their own rules was significant, as in the case of Noel, who argues *"…'qas naħseb għal għada, aħseb u ara! … nimxi ġurnata b'ġurnata u daqshekk!...* (… I don't even think about tomorrow! … I live day by day, and that's it for me! (lines 83-85). He sees no sense in thinking too much about the future, asking: *"Biex toqgħod tifqa' moħħok??…Toqgħod timmira lejn ħaġa, tasal għaliha,*

imbagħad ma tasalx?..." (Why bust your brains for something that may not happen for you even if you reach it?) (lines 94-96) *"...Li naf naf. Daqshekk!"* (…What I know is enough. End of story!) (line102).

The theme of being free to live independently was also associated with finding employment since it was generally agreed that money enabled financial independence and, therefore the freedom to make personal choices. For example, for Liam, finding employment meant finally arriving, winning the race, so to speak, because he is convinced that this is what he needs to do to be "normal." It is his wish *"Li jċempilli employer – interview! Jgħidli ok – second interview - intgħażilt! Ċempilli, telefonata, ngħid għandi xogħol."* (To receive a call from the employer – interview! He says ok – the second interview – you have been shortlisted! He calls – a phone call! It means I have got myself a job) (Liam, lines 241-243, first interview).

Kevin's words express his search for meaning in his life, having experienced emotional turmoil and mental health issues throughout his adolescent years that have prevented him from feeling content and free. Now his wish is *"...inkun ferħan. Flus deħlin ġol-but, u ħadd ma jdejjaqni ..."* (…to be happy. Money in my pocket and no one hassling me...) (line 119, first interview).

ii. Emergent theme 2: I want to be well.

For all 14 research participants, success meant being free of anxiety and negative thoughts. This has special meaning for Kevin, who mentions dealing with mental health professionals for many years during our interview, including rehabilitation. His idea of success is reflected in his aspiration to be well and happy, free from negative thoughts: *"...ma jkollix ħsibijiet koroh, hekk... u looking forward to the future."* (...no ugly thoughts, looking forward to the future) (line 121, first interview). Similarly, Tom now prioritises *"Il-mental health tiegħi, dik dejjem*

minn dejjem, imma issa qed ninduna iktar" (My mental health, always. But now I am realising it even more) (lines 442-444), after having experienced his parents' stormy relationship and breakup during childhood.

It is frustrating to have hopes, dreams, and aspirations and fail to arrive at one's projected destination. This is Jane's conundrum – she cannot understand how being determined is not enough to achieve her goals, as others her age appear to be doing. She is struggling to make sense of things, and in her words, her view of being successful is *"Li nkun ilħaqt l-għanijiet li rrid nilħaq fil-ħajja, step by step, ikolli bżonn l-għajnuna nara kif nagħmel, insaqsi u nilħaq fejn irrid jiena."* (To have reached my goals in life, taking it step by step, having the self-confidence to ask for help and achieve what I set out to achieve) (lines 105-107). Jane's use of the phrase *"step by step"* seems poignant here, perhaps expressing new knowledge emerging from her previous experiences in school, an intuition that she needs to take her time to find her path and rhythm to achieve her goals.

Anthea mentions still living in the shadow of the psychological interventions she has had at school. She has learned to see herself as *"gravi"* (a serious case) and still thinks about how they did not let her sit for her exams: *"...ħdejn qabel irranġajt, m'għadnix daqshekk gravi, ... lanqas l-eżamijiet ma ħallewni nagħmel."* (I'm not as bad as I used to be … they wouldn't even let me sit for my exams) (lines 398-404). Interestingly, it was not her decision not to sit for her exams – it was *"they"* who did not allow her to do them. There is a sense of helplessness here, a powerlessness on her part to decide for herself. I could feel bitterness and indignation in her words as she spoke to me during our interview. It is as if she is still ruminating about her experiences at school, whether that is who she was and why she had received that treatment.

During our interview, she expressed relief that she is okay after all. She is not as *"gravi"* as they said she was when she was at school. This is success for her.

iii. Emergent theme 3: I appreciate what I have.

Four research participants articulated this pearl of wisdom after being tried by respective thorny life experiences – Bruno, Sarah, Alexei, and Dylan.

For Bruno, in particular, success also translated into learning to connect with himself, coming to know and accept himself as he is. He associates success with taking control of his life rather than letting himself remain in the shadow of the bullies who made life difficult for him at school: *" ...Imbagħad qisni ddeċidejt, pruvajt naħseb jien x'inhu l-aħjar mod kif ... insib xi ħaġa mix-xejn. Insib naqra pożittività anke fin-negattiv."* (And then I decided for myself, I tried to find my own well-being… to find something meaningful in what I had not valued before, derive something worthwhile even from what seemed negative) (Bruno, lines 408-410).

Bruno associates success with financial wealth, but he differentiates between having enough money to live a decent life and having more money than one can know what to do with:

> *"Hemm livelli differenti (ta' suċċess). Jien għalija, jien naf, għandi xogħol, għandi*
> *biżżejjed flus mhux just biex ngħix, biex nonfoq xi kapriċċ 'l hemm u 'l hawn, għandi*
> *familja, għandi l-bżonnijiet, u għandi biżżejjed biex ikolli naqra kapriċċi. Jien għalija*
> *dak l-aħjar. Imbagħad hemm is-suċċess li jien naf... għandek balla flus, liri li tista'*
> *tarmihom…"*
>
> There are different levels (of success). For me, having work, enough money not just to
> scrape through but also to live decently - having a family, enough for basic needs, and
> to afford something extra now and then. I think that is best. Then there is the other kind

of success – having so much more money than you know what to do with…(Bruno,

lines 296-301)

Sometimes during the interview, the notion of success blurred into that of "happiness" or

something that the young person felt fortunate to have, such as when Sarah says that she has

no role models or anyone she admired in particular because she liked her life as it was:

"Illum il-ġurnata l-atturi tismagħhom ... imutu, jew bid-drogi ... allura billi għandhom

il-flus u laħqu fejn laħqu xorta ma kinux kuntenti. Allura nippreferi l-ħajja tiegħi. Li

m'iniex daqshekk popolari u m'iniex daqshom sinjura ... u l-ħajja tiegħi sabiħa għax

m'għandi 'l ħadd min idejjaqni, jiġri warajja biex ikun jaf fuqi."

Nowadays, you hear about actors … who die, overdose … so their money and fame

did not buy them happiness. So I prefer my life, not being famous or rich … and my

life is beautiful because I do not have anyone stalking me. (Sarah, lines 76-79, first

interview)

For Dylan, success is "being healthy, to be honest, and just being happy with what you've got.

And just appreciating what you have. You don't need a lot. Just enough" (lines 357-360).

iv. Emergent theme 4: Making it against all odds.

Overcoming the odds might mean different things to different people, like not allowing oneself

to be dragged along by older friends who could get one into trouble, as in the case of Laura, or

discovering something you're good at when you had previously thought that you were not

particularly good at anything, like Marie:

> *"...Jiena kienet is-suċċess tiegħi meta għamilt l-ECDL u l-arti. Kont ilni naħdem fuqhom... meta għaddejt u qrajt il-marka hekk tiegħi, li ġibthom kollha nineties u ninety seven ...qisni kienet ħafna xi ħaġa kbira għalija. Għax għidt eh, sibt xi ħaġa kapaċi fiha!"*

It was a success for me to have passed the ECDL and Art exams. I had been working a lot … when I passed and saw that I had got nineties, ninety-seven and so on… it was huge for me. I said to myself: Hey, I had finally done well. I had succeeded in something! (Marie, lines 164-170, first interview)

Laura struggled to deal with the changes in her life as a child. She got into trouble at school, was often absent, and her friends were older than her. Nonetheless, she says she was aware of what was going on, and she was in control of herself then, even if it did not seem like it to the casual observer. She now takes pride in challenging herself to do things that had seemed beyond her reach before:

> *"...Għalkemm kont għadni żgħira, dejjem kelli naqra maturità ...Għax jien dejjem għamiltha ma' nies ikbar minni. U jekk ħa jagħmlu ħażin huma mhux ħa nagħmel ħażin jiena...u li eżempju jkun hemm xi ħaġa li ngħid ma nistax nagħmilha u mbagħad nagħmilha."*

… Although I was young, I always had some sense in my head … I always have had older friends, and I never did what they did … and (success is) managing to do something that I had previously thought I couldn't do. (Laura, lines 385-394, first interview)

Anthea's idea of success is to overcome her fears and achieve her goals:*" … Hekk għedtilha lil ommi – għedtilha nixtieq nagħmlu (l-kors), u jekk ma ngħaddix nerġa' nipprova. Mhux*

naqta' qalbi mall-ewwel." (That's what I told my mum – I told her I wanted to do it (the course) and that if I didn't pass I would try again. I would not give up so easily (Anthea, lines 450-452).

Liam speaks about how past experiences have taught him that success is achieved by accepting failure as part of one's growth process and being patient and willing to make the necessary sacrifices in order to beat the odds: "It's ok to fail. If you're always doing the same thing in life, you're stuck. The thing is if you fail, don't worry. Just move on. There's another chance." (Liam, lines 159-161, first interview).

v. Emergent theme 5: I am loved.

Eight of the research participants spoke more about the importance of friends, directly and implicitly, by describing painful episodes they overcame because they found support and comfort from people around them. Having friends to spend time with and share life experiences – even making school bearable – and supportive family members emerged as all they needed in life and, therefore, the definition of success.

Tom feels like he has found a treasure when he meets his girlfriend, and being in a relationship with her is his life's achievement after having been in other volatile and disappointing relationships: *"Importanti wkoll ovvjament it-tfajla. Importanti għax rebħet ir-rispett tiegħi u waħda minn dawk il-ftit li tifhimni. U tesprimi ruħha miegħi u tħallini nkun jien magħha bażikament."* (My girlfriend is important to me obviously, because she has won my respect and is one of the very few who understand me. And she speaks to me and lets me be who I am with her) (lines 456-459). His use of the term *"rebħet"* (won) when referring to his respect for his girlfriend seems to reveal his disappointment with other significant people, especially his parents, who split up and built other lives within which he often felt excluded. Tom's use of

this term appears to express his conviction that respect is won, not taken for granted, or freely given because of consanguinity. Tom has learned that human connection is a condition for happiness. He speaks of having experienced rejection and disappointment: *"...Batejt ... ħafna - ċertu ħbieb, ċertu heartbreaks, għax jiena mhux bħal ħafna mis-subien, iħobbu jużaw in-nisa u viċi versa."* (I have suffered … some friends, some heartbreak, because I am not like many guys who use women and vice versa) (lines 151-152). Success for Tom amounts to overcoming those painful experiences and pursuing the cultivation of a meaningful relationship - love.

The conviction that human connection is everything is also reflected in Stefan's narrative. His intention has always been to connect with others and make good friends, which he describes as his idea of success in life:

> *"Is-suċċess huwa meta tkun imdawwar b'nies li tagħtihom valur inti – tgħid dawn huma nies speċjali f'ħajti, u li huma jtuk valur lura. Jgħidulek int ukoll persuna importanti f'ħajjitna. Irridu nkunu f'ħajtek u rriduk tkun f'ħajjitna. Nies li tista' tafdahom u li jafdawk,…"*
>
> Success is when I am surrounded by people I respect – people I consider special in my life who value me in return. These people tell you that you are important to them, that they want to be in your life, and that they want you to be in theirs. These are people you can trust and who trust you …(Stefan, lines 481-486)

Since Stefan had to repeat his final year at university, fellow students were not there to share graduation day with him, which he felt was very alienating and disappointing, spoiling the joyful event to a great extent, even though his family was present. The importance of wearing a *"kappell"* (graduation hat) with his classmates is particularly poignant because of the great

value that he attaches to knowledge and qualifications, things that he excels at, and which would have helped him feel part of a community of like-minded beings:

"Mhux falliment, imma ħeqq, sħabi ggradwaw qabli. Ridt niggradwa ma' sħabi. Inkunu kollha flimkien. Imma sħabi ggradwaw qabli spiċċaw. Għadha sal-lum, għax għall-gradwazzjoni hux, ... I mean il-ġenituri tiegħi, il-familja tiegħi, ġew, orrajt – I mean sodisfatt kont, imma ma mortx after-parties wara. U ma mortx... u ma kellix nies bil-kappell bħali biex inkellimhom u ngħidu ara spiċċajna l-esperjenza issa."

It is not failure, but my friends graduated before me. I wanted to graduate with my friends and be together. They graduated before me, and I still feel disappointed today. I mean, yes, my parents and my family were there, that was nice, but I did not get to go to after-parties or to be with others wearing the hat like me, to look at them and say, hey, we have done it. (Stefan, lines 552-562)

Rachel spoke about having been bullied at school, primarily because of her physical disability and difficult family circumstances. She speaks warmly of a network of friends and cousins from her community who had always supported her:

"...Għandi ħabiba tiegħi naqra bil-problemi, kienet (name of a mental health institution), imma vera tifla OK u dħulija u nħobbha. Toqgħod ħdejja wkoll. Għandi ħabib tiegħi iżgħar mill-età, imma vera OK, dħuli. Joqgħod ħdejja wkoll, immur il-baħar magħhom, ... Għandi mbagħad l-oħrajn ..."

One of my friends has problems – she was in (name of a mental health institution) – but she's really nice and friendly. I love her. She lives nearby as well. I also have a younger

boyfriend, he's really nice and friendly. He lives near me too. I go to the beach with

them, ... I have other friends too …(Rachel, lines 159-163, second interview)

Rachel describes herself as a loyal friend, making it a point to be there for whoever needs her

help. *"Ma jitradukx"* (they will not betray you) here is especially meaningful for her because

she has learned that trust is a rare and invaluable quality, and it is worth its weight in gold

wherever it is found:

> *"Ma' min nitkellem ... nippreferi ħbieb. Il-ħbieb li għandi gays – magħhom ħassejtni*
>
> *komda. Ma jitradukx, fhimt? Għax tipo, tfajla tmurlek mar-raġel tiegħek, ...u jifhmuk*
>
> *iktar inħoss jien, anke meta nitkellem ma' kuġinti hekk, tifhimni iktar – pero' karattru*
>
> *kollha flimkien, magħqudin,…"*
>
> I prefer friends when I need someone to talk to – I have gay friends – they're much
>
> more loyal than girls, don't take your boyfriend away, and are more understanding.
>
> That is how I feel when I talk with my cousin (she is gay), but we're great together, all
>
> good friends. (Rachel, lines 131-134, first interview)

vi. Emergent theme 6: Someone to look up to.

The question about role models was meant to explore further the research participants'

understanding of success. Nine of the fourteen research participants admire people who

overcome almost impossible odds and prevail under challenging situations. In most cases, the

participants speak of a parent who does his or her utmost to keep the family together or behaves

selflessly during difficult times.

Laura and Dylan, for instance, look up to their mothers for their resilience and courage in the face of adversity.

Laura:

"...Tkun muġugħa u ma tkunx muġugħa, xorta tmur għax-xogħol. Dik kienet għadha kif għamlet operazzjoni u wara ġimgħa reġgħet marret għax-xogħol, ... U mhux suppost marret, imma xorta marret."

…(my mum) goes to work even if she is in pain. She had just had an operation, and after a week, she went to work … and was not supposed to. But she still went. (lines 344-347, second interview)

"Il-mummy xogħol ta' tbatija għandha – taħsel il-platti u hekk. Qabel kienet ġo fabbrika. U kienet tagħmel ġranet sħaħ, bilkemm kont naraha. Marret ix-xogħol wara operazzjoni ..., ġurnata bilwieqfa, taħsel il-platti. Ikollhom ħafna nies u twaġen u borom – anke f'darha tgħejja, aħseb u ara ġo ristorant!"

My mum's work is hard – she washes the dishes. Before that, she used to work in a factory. And whole days would go by without me seeing her. She went to work just after her operation … a whole day on her feet washing dishes. There would be lots of clients and pans and pots – even at home it's tiring, go figure in a restaurant! (Laura, lines 351-354, second interview)

Dylan:

… my mum was like a huge role model for me because she's been through so many things when she was younger – she got abandoned by her parents and she had to live with her grandparents, and she didn't even know that she had another brother...because

the other brother was living with the other grandparents – and she had to become like the leader of her siblings – she's been through so many things and she never takes it badly – she takes it as a lesson. I took it from her to become like that. I want to be like her with everything. (lines 467-476)

Jane's role models are her parents and a close friend:

Researcher: *Għandek role models inti, nies li jispirawk?* Do you have role models?

Jane: *Il-parents tiegħi, ... xi ħbieb close...* My parents, and some close friends…

Researcher: *U x'inhuma l-kwalitajiet li tammira fihom?* What qualities do you admire them for?

Jane: *L-imħabba li jagħtu, ... pereżempju ħabiba tiegħi taħdem ma' persuni b'diżabilità wkoll, u bil-ħila tagħha ħa nidħol naħdem hemm – u hekk, hi għinitni u jien ħa ngħinha. Għalija għamlet xi ħaġa kbira*

The love they give me … for example, my friend works with people with disability as well, and it is because of her that I shall be working in this area too – she helped me, and I will help her. She did something big for me. (lines 75-81)

vii. Emergent theme 7: Can't let myself down.

Notions of failure during the interviews amount to disappointment at not having done one's best, thereby letting oneself down. This is articulated by Liam, for example, for whom failure is *"Ma tkunx għamilt il-100% tiegħek...jew ġaralek li ġejt blank..."* (You wouldn't have given your 100%... or you went blank…) (line 143, first interview). Similarly, according to Alexei, failure amounts to "Failing to live up to my expectations and to what I think I can achieve. That has happened quite a lot" (lines 303-304). Dylan also describes failure as "…that sense of regret that you could have done more, and you cannot do anything else to change it" (lines 388-390).

Tom associates failure with lack of self-respect: *"Stajt għamilt aħjar meta l-grupp ta' ħbieb tnejku bija, u erġajt mort magħhom għax ma kellix ħbieb ma' min noħroġ. Flok għedt ħa nżomm kumpanija lili nnifsi, ħa nitgħallem kemm jien ta' valur ... irnexxieli, meta sibt it-tfajla!"* (I could have done better when a group of supposed friends betrayed me, and I went back to them because I was alone, instead of keeping my own company to learn my true value, … which I did when I found my girlfriend. (lines 527-531); *"Persuna li falliet tilfet lilha nnifisha ..., għadha ma tafx lilha nnifisha min hu... 'qas għall-flus ma nittrejdja lili nnifsi jien personalment."* (One fails when one loses oneself…. One does not know oneself … I would not trade myself for any money) (lines 516-518).

viii. Emergent theme 8: I must embrace my power.

Each participant navigates this particular phase according to their beliefs and values. In general, to various extents, all the research participants came across as not being sure about what is out there for them – opportunities, possibilities, helpful knowledge, and tricks or shortcuts that could help them make more sense of things or see ahead better. Navigating this state of uncertainty and insecurity is described as *"a place full of mist"* by Tom (line 654) and as a *"limbo"* by Bruno (line 53).

Sarah said that although she liked to find her own way, *"... kultant jiġi perjodu fejn jekk ikun hemm xi ħadd jikkoreġini nieħu iktar pjaċir... li ngħid nagħmlu imma."* (Sometimes there comes a time when I prefer to have someone helping me out … but I do what I say I will do) (Sarah, lines 120-121, first interview). Similarly, Jane knows that she cannot make it alone, and that asking for help makes things easier: *"Tfalli meta ma jkollokx biżżejjed knowledge. Ma tistaqsix għall-għajnuna, issib ħafna sfidi, ma tifhimx xi jkun qed jiġri."* (You don't ask for

help, you feel challenged, and you do not understand what is happening … you fail when you do not have sufficient knowledge) (Jane, lines 109-111).

Alexei pursues knowledge as a form of self-empowerment. He goes beyond what the school offers because he feels that to be successful, he must do more and learn more: "Flexibility (is important to me) I guess. And information about what I can do and where I can go" (lines 223-224). He feels frustrated whenever his motivation deserts him, and he cannot achieve his goals:

> I would have a burst of motivation, and I would start studying, but when the motivation runs out I don't really have any discipline whatsoever to keep going. So I would immediately burn out and stop. And then it would take me several months for me to get a burst of motivation to start again. And every time I stopped I just … it's pretty much a failure to me. (Alexei, lines 300-308)

Eleven of the fourteen research participants mentioned experiencing phases of feeling powerless. For example, Anthea did not believe in her abilities: *"...kelli ħabta ngħid li m'iniex tajba".* (I used to say that I'm good for nothing …) (line 480). Rachel felt conditioned by bullying: *"... xtaqt nibqa' l-iskola. ...imma nibża' li niġi bullying..."* (I wanted to stay on in school. … but I'm scared of getting bullied) (lines 275-279, first interview).

Liam strives to overcome his doubts, and feels *"...irrabjat, għal xiex hekk ...għax – għala? X'għandi ħażin jien??"* (I feel angry because … why? What is wrong with me?) (line 329, first interview). He realises that he needs to believe in his ability to overcome: *"...irid ikun hemm is-self esteem, għax inkella ħa tagħmel iktar żbalji..."* (…you have to have self-esteem because otherwise you will make more mistakes…) (Liam, lines 303-304, first interview). Kevin also seeks to work on himself to move on from a sense of failure that emerges from *"Problemi,*

stress, ħafna sptar, psychologists, ..." (Problems, stress, lots of hospital visits, psychologists…) (line 104, first interview).

Stefan holds that being disrespected is tantamount to failure, and illustrates the point by giving an example of an episode from school:

> *"sexual innuendo kont domt ħafna ma nifhmu. U ma kontx irrid nitkellem fuq relazzjonijiet at all. 'Qas naħseb sa Form five. U niftakar kien hemm ċertu nies ħamalli bdew jistaqsuni mistoqsijiet fejn jiena bdejt nippretendi li nifhem iżjed milli kont naf. U spiċċaw jidħku bija. U mal-ewwel indunajt x'farsa kont għamilt…għax ridt naqra iktar rispett."*
>
> I did not understand sexual innuendo for a long time. Furthermore, I did not want to talk about relationships at all either, up till Form 5, I think. I remember specific vulgar individuals started asking me questions (about sex), where I put on knowing more than I did. And I made a laughing stock of myself. I just wanted a bit more respect, you see. (Stefan, lines 359-369)

For Bruno failure is lacking resources: *"tgħix ħajja just biex tgħix. Just litteralment kemm tgħaddi. Ma tistax tgawdiha, taħdem u taħdem just biex taqla' ftit, surviving not living."* (living just for the sake of living. Just getting by. You cannot enjoy it. You toil and labour just to earn precious little. You are surviving, not living) (lines 320-322).

Summary

This section has shown the research participants' beliefs about what constitutes success and failure. What is immediately noticeable in these narratives is the research participants' priority to do what they can to feel safe and in control of what happens to them. Despite challenges that

are often beyond their control, the participants' priorities manifest their agency and the capacity to self-reflect beyond widespread notions of academic success. The following superordinate theme number 5 is closely related to theme number 4 because it deals with the participants' attitudes and beliefs about their lives.

5.2.5 Superordinate theme 5: 'The way I see it.'

'*Ħadd ma jibgħat għalik.*'

Nobody calls you. -Sarah

Introduction

This superordinate theme captures the effect of previous life experiences on present-day expectations and beliefs. On the one hand, there is a sense of uncertainty and apprehension that is often caused by structural challenges beyond these young people's control. On the other hand, there is also a sense of hope and possibility.

Table 5.6: Superordinate Theme 5 and the related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 5	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
	'I am a victim.'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		Yes
NEET YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDE TO LIFE: *'The way I see it.'*	'My past does not define me.'	✔	✔	✔		✔			✔	✔	✔	✔	✔			Yes
	'I make my own rules.'				✔		✔						✔	✔	✔	No
	'I am alone.'		✔	✔		✔		✔		✔					✔	No

i. Emergent theme 1: I am a victim.

Albeit in different ways, all research participants expressed the feeling of being a victim of circumstances and incomprehension regarding how things work in society and how they are affected by such workings. For example, Jane is frustrated at what happens to her during examinations: "*Inkun studjajt ħafna...iljieli mqajma...inqum filgħodu kmieni qabel l-eżami*

nistudja, imbagħad xħin nara l-karta daqshekk! Qisu xi ħadd tfieli bozza fuq il-karta u ġara xi ħaġa." (I would have studied hard … nights awake … I wake up early before the exam to study, but when I look at the exam paper, that is it! It is as if something had just happened and someone had switched off the light on me) (lines 86-89). Jane's incomprehension is clearly expressed through the metaphor of the light bulb that is suddenly switched off (interestingly, it is someone who switches it off rather than going out on its own). Sarah echoes the disappointment as she speaks about giving out her CV in vain: *"Jien ma nistax nifhem kif tibgħat kemm tibgħat CVs ħadd ma jibgħat għalik."* (I don't understand how come nobody ever gets back to me, no matter how many CVs I send out) (lines 179-180, first interview). Liam also feels frustrated when his opinion does not count for others: "They give you opinion, but they try to make their opinion the first one" (lines 163-164, first interview).

Laura's victim attitude at a vulnerable point in her life is reflected in her unreserved trust in a new (and first) boyfriend with whom she had unprotected sex. She looks at the event of becoming pregnant as his will to claim her, and therefore at herself as powerless, at the mercy of a boyfriend's will: *"...ġie li ngħidlu int apposta taqqaltni."* (I tell him that he got me pregnant on purpose) (line 244, first interview).

Kevin felt that he did not receive the help and support he needed at school to deal with his emotional and mental health issues. He trusted in the psychological support provided by the school *"il-ħin kollu"* (at all the time), but he admits that things still did not improve: *"...sekondarja l-ħin kollu kont immur guidance, counsellor u hekk ... avolja s-sitwazzjoni baqgħet l-istess."*(During secondary school, I used to go to the guidance teachers and counselor all the time … but nothing ever changed) (lines 69-71, first interview);*"Qisu ma tantx kien jgħodd dak li qaluli. Qisu nbidlu, l-affarijiet li kienu jiġru, allura ma kienx jgħodd."* (What

they said to me was not helpful. Different things kept happening, so what they told me just did not count) (lines 84-86, first interview).

Marie, too, speaks of how she felt victimised by the school, mainly because it sought to punish her for what was construed as misbehaviour. When she transferred to a school set up to offer an alternative learning and teaching style to mainstream secondary schools, she still felt vulnerable and had to drop out for self-protection. She emerged from compulsory schooling feeling insecure: *"Nibża'. Dik hi l-biża' tiegħi – li mmur, jitnejku bija, jew inkella ngħid xi ħaġa ħażina, jarawni kerha mill-ewwel u jgħidu daqshekk! Mhux tajba din!"* (I am scared of going (to work), that I would be made fun of, or that I would say something wrong. They would hate me from the start, judge, and reject me!) (lines 181-182, first interview).

Noel also speaks of being victimized by the school. At the time, he had behaved like a victim because he had succumbed to drowning his misery in alcohol: *"Kont qbadt il-vizzju tal-alkoħol ukoll 'ħabba fih (asst. head), il-ħin kollu nixrob, nixrob, nixrob, ...jien qlajt il-bajd nistudja, u ma jgħaddinix!"* (I had started drinking because of him (assistant head of school). I drank all the time…I bust my balls studying, and then he failed me!) (lines 46-47).

Dylan speaks of being a victim of bullying and his fear of going to school:

> Dylan*:* I remember at certain times I would actually be a bit scared to go to school.
> Researcher: Why?
> Dylan: Not 'cause of the teachers or anything, but because of the students. I'm serious, I'm serious ! … or even like, for example, you defend yourself from somebody and you get the blame too…(lines 263-270)… (The popular bully) wanted me to neglect my friends and make new friends...but even if I would stay with these guys, I wouldn't feel

at home at all, because even the way that they joke around, it's like bullies, you know, and I didn't really like the way that they would treat each other. 'Cos it's like no respect at all. (lines 311-316)

The school as a place where the participants felt victimised emerges as a poignant narrative. Rachel and Bruno speak of stress, depression, eating disorders, and psychological damage: *"Fil-Form 4 il-mummy ndunat li kelli stress qawwi u depression."* (In Form 4 my mother noticed that I had a lot of stress and that I was depressed) (Rachel, lines 77-78, first interview); *"Fil-Form 2 kont ġejt anorexic."* (In Form 2 I became anorexic) (Rachel, line 81, first interview); *"Inħoss li l-ħames snin li għamilt hemmhekk (l-iskola sekondarja) iddemiġjawni."* (I feel that those five years that I spent there (at secondary school) have damaged me) (Bruno, line 238).

At last, Marie overcame her insecurities and found a job as a sales assistant in a fashion retail outlet. It was her dream job, and she really would have wanted to settle in, but then she realised it was not that simple. Life kept throwing obstacles in her way. This time they came in the shape of her boss, who made her the target of his unsolicited sexual attention. On top of this harassment, Marie experienced the injustice of being blamed; the other female sales assistants believed she had brought it on herself. Despite being hurt and disgusted at the sexual harassment and not being believed by the staff, Marie believed that such things should not be reported because the boss was involved – *"mhux suppost."* Her hushed voice during the interview reflected her fear of being singled out for some crime just because she was speaking out against a privileged man who had abused her. She felt that she had to leave if she did not like it, even though she knew it would not be easy to find another job she liked:

" ...Kien hemm wieħed, skużani li ħa ngħid, mhux suppost – beda jaqbad qisu miegħi. Hekk, kien kbir dan. Beda jieħu ċerti kunfidenzi li mhux suppost. Beda jgħannaqni, u ħasbitni li jien għannaqtu lura, fhimt? Qisu jien ridt. U ħadt għalija, infqajt nibki. Imbagħad tlaqt, peress li qisha ...jiena kont għadni żgħira hux, għax taħseb li jien qed naqbad ma' xiħ?! ...Anke pereżempju nidħol ġot-toilet, jistaqsi għalija, noqgħod nistaħba minnu – nidħol ġot-toilet. Għalxejn, jagħmel xi siegħa hemm biex jipprova jsibni. Ħa nagħmel siegħa ġot-toilet?! Kieku neħilha jiena! ... Qaltli ħa toqgħod tibki qisek tifla żgħira! Issa jiena ma tantx ngħidha lin-nies din, għax mhux suppost hux!! U għedtilha mhux ovvja jekk int qed twaħħal fija, li qed naqbad ma' wieħed xiħ! U jiena żgħira man! Jien l-iżgħar waħda kont hemm ġew... U lili tħobb tqabbad peress li jien iż-żgħira, ngħid iva għal kollox. Imbagħad qisni bdejt ngħid għandha l-wiċċ tgħidli hekk, li jiena bdejt naqbad miegħu?!"

There was a guy, sorry, I have to say this, I know I'm not supposed to – he started giving me the eye. He was one of the bosses. He started taking liberties with me – it's not allowed. He hugged me, and she thought (the manager) that I had hugged him back. She thought I wanted it. It was unfair; I started crying. I had to leave, because what was she thinking, that someone as young as me could want to start something with an older man?! For example, I would hide from him in the toilet. He would ask for me, wait an hour for me to get out. What was I supposed to do? Stay a whole hour in the toilet? What would they think? She (the manager) told me off for crying. I do not tell this to anyone because I know I'm not supposed to; what do you expect, I told her, when you are accusing me of carrying on with an older man? I am young – the youngest one there. And she keeps asking me to do things just because I am the youngest and would not refuse. How dare she tell me that I was to blame? (lines 50-67, first interview)

Sarah felt victimized by an employer who *"kicked her out" (keċċietni)* on learning that she had to undergo an operation:

> *"... kelli nagħmel operation. U kienet keċċietni. Għax kont għamilt operation, ... u ma stajtx nidħol għax-xogħol mal-ewwel. Għax kien ikolli ħafna uġigħ. U kienet keċċietni, qaltli ma nistax nibqa' nżommok. Qaltli għax m'għandix inħalli r-reception area waħedha. Imma jiena speċi ma nistax niċċajta mas-saħħa hux?"*

I had to have an operation, and she let me go. The reason was that I could not get back to work soon afterward. I had to have an operation, and I used to be in pain. She said she could not let me stay because someone must always be in charge of the reception area. What was I supposed to do? It is a medical condition, after all. (lines 12-15, second interview)

Laura believes she attracts bad things to herself:

> *"...kelli ħafna affarijiet jiġru barra mill-iskola, allura qisni la kelli moħħ, la kelli aptit xejn...Affarijiet tat-tfal iż-żgħar ta jiġifieri. Nistħi ngħidhom, għax għalija llum veru affarijiet bla sens. Imma dak iż-żmien vera kienu jinħassu ħafna. ...Għax ħa ngħidlek, jien inħossni jien għalija li l-ħajja tiegħi dejjem b'xi ħaġa. Iktar aħbarijiet ħżiena milli affarijiet tajbin."*

Many things were happening out of school, so I did not care about anything … silly things they seem now, but at the time, they hurt a lot. …You know, I think my life is always full of problems—more bad news than good. (Laura, lines 143-149, second interview)

Laura explains that she also suffered because she could not trust the school authorities with her problems out of fear of being misunderstood, even though what she was going through was very serious. This hesitation in speaking about her life could have also stemmed from the fact that she has been made to feel small and unimportant. At the time, so much was happening to her that she was left reeling, not knowing what exactly was going on and what she was supposed to do:

> " *... inti tibda tibża' kultant tgħidlhom ċertu affarijiet lil tal-iskola, għax qisek ma ttihomx tort li forsi jdaħħlu ċertu nies, eżempju, qed tifhem? Għax forsi anke ta' tifla li tkun, forsi tinftiehem ħażin ma' dak li jkun, forsi fil-verità ma tkunx daqshekk...allura jiena...għamilt ħafna vera kont niġi mgħajra, darba qaluli anke biex naqbeż għal isfel.*"

> … sometimes you're scared of speaking about certain things at school because they might involve other people in your case – you cannot blame them. Because maybe as a child you could be misunderstood, and maybe, in reality, things might not be that … (serious) … so I … you know there was a time when I received a lot of verbal abuse, and they even told me to throw myself off from somewhere. (Laura, lines 204-209, first interview)

Laura recalls how she could not deal with school at one point, and she did not believe in reaching out for help:

> "*L-iskola kienet l-inqas ħaġa ... minn banda nieħu pjaċir ta, għax qisek kull mewġa kbira li tiġi, qisek tgħumha waħdek, qisek mingħajr l-għajnuna ta' guidance u hekk, u nieħu pjaċir li ngħaddi minnhom waħdi, għax dak li jagħmlek b'saħħtek, dak li jagħmlek mara b'saħħtek. Allura...qisek la ġiet fuqek sħaba kerha, kultant billi tmur*

issib l-għajnuna xorta għalxejn, għax ġie li 'qas inti stess, lanqas tkun tista' tifhem lilek innifsek."

School was the least thing (least of all my problems). On one hand, I liked it that way because I could overcome any wave that came over me on my own, without the help of guidance teachers, and I like that because that is what makes you strong, a strong woman. It is useless to ask for help when you find yourself under a black cloud because maybe not even you can understand what you are going through. (lines 228-234, second interview)

ii. Emergent theme 2: My past does not define me.

Despite feeling like a victim in some respects, all fourteen participants expressed that they are looking ahead to improve themselves and that their past does not necessarily affect their future. For example, Rachel is conscious that she is growing up and her parents will not be there forever. Her tone is defiant, as can be felt by her use of the word "*nippretendi*" (I expect and want), which has emphatic undertones in Maltese: *"Imma llum il-ġurnata nippretendi li għandi l-età tiegħi, u naħdem għal dak li rrid jien, mhux ħa nibqa' niddependi fuq il-mummy u d-daddy, għax jekk jiġu neqsin mhux se niddependi fuqhom."* (But nowadays, I am old enough, and I will work for what I want. I will not keep depending on my mum and dad because if they should pass, I wouldn't have anyone left to depend on (Rachel, lines 65-68, first interview).

Laura speaks about how new motherhood has been life-changing for her. She had been feeling lost and unloved before, bullied and rejected by her peers, and abandoned by her father, whom she idolized. Now she feels that her motherhood has given her a new status: *"...la għandi t-tfal issa, kulħadd jara ...ma tantx jarawk bħala tifla żgħira."* (Now that I have a child, I am seen…not as a child anymore) (lines 173-174, first interview). She is a "*mara*" (woman) now, as distinct from the "*tifla żgħira*" (little girl) that she had been: *"... anke mill-familja u hekk,*

issa xorta rrid nagħmel kollox għal rasi…mara, mela." (…even for my family, I do everything on my own… I am a woman now (lines 176-177, first interview).

From being bullied and shy at school, Dylan now looks forward to making his dream come true – finding work to do with the sport he loves: "…that would be really nice I guess, I get sponsored by some companies from abroad and also they could pay for my tickets, you never know – to go (practice his sport) there …" (Dylan, lines 45-51).

Dylan had felt "*lower class*" before, without a "*voice*" and "*unacknowledged*," but now realises that one can never really know anyone else and what they are capable of:

> Nowadays I just go with the flow of life. I used to feel like I wouldn't get acknowledged by people if I spoke. Nowadays I'm realising that I actually have a voice, like I'm getting much more feedback from people – it makes me feel better to speak. I would feel lower class; I wouldn't even be here, for example. (Dylan, lines 238-243)

> When I meet some people that I used to go to school with, and they see me example like (practising his sport) … they're like wow, you know, I never thought that you would be like this, you know...it's pretty cool, you know, and I tell them, it's like – you never really know me ay! (Dylan, lines 116-121)

Anthea seeks to redefine herself and shake off the shadows that had gotten stuck to her during compulsory schooling. She had wanted to sit for her O-levels, which she never did because of how she was diagnosed: *"Meta kont iċċekkjajt il-kors, qaluli trid tagħmel l-O-level. U kont nitħajjar nagħmlu, ħa ngħid hekk… qed nitħajjar nerġa' nagħmel il-kors, u qed nipprova nitgħallem il-karozza wkoll. Peress li ma nsuqx."* (When I checked about the course, they told

me that I needed the O-Level. I would be interested in doing it (lines 157-159) … I am thinking about giving the course another try, and I am also trying to learn how to drive a car since I don't drive) (lines 177-179).

Tom's turbulent childhood led him astray, and he had to endure rejection at a very young age. He also started doing drugs, but nowadays, having journeyed further, he feels that he has become a new person: *"…Ommi u missieri għadhom ma drawx il-karattru l-ġdid tiegħi."* (My mum and dad have not yet got used to the new me) (line 460). He emphasizes this newfound sense of self by speaking depreciatingly of the drugs he used to do, calling them *"imbarazz"* (junk) and declaring himself *"proud as such"* to have been clean for a year: *"Iddejjaqt qisni nieħu imbarazz – bil-Malti – ġej u sejjer. U nsomma, issa ilni estimate sena ma nieħu ħaxix, bażikament. Jien komdu nitkellem, mhux niddejjaq… u proud as such li ilni sena ma mmiss imbarazz."* (I am sick of taking junk, honestly. Anyway, it's been a year now since I smoked weed. I don't mind talking about it; I'm proud that I haven't touched junk for a year now) (lines 136-139).

iii. Emergent theme 3: I make my own rules.

According to Noel, Alexei, Tom, Bruno, and Marie, it makes no sense when one's life is influenced by decisions that other people make on their behalf, or so-called common sense. For example, Marie has experienced mental illness, a chaotic journey that she describes as "*xebgħa nejk*" (crazy stuff). She has learned the hard way that anything can happen in life in the blink of an eye and that, therefore, it makes no sense to plan and strive for things: *"… ifhem, għax jiena peress li kont waqajt depressed … u xebgħa nejk...kont waqajt depressed jiena, kont inqaċċat xagħri, kont naqta' idi, allura qisni...il-ħajja għalija mhix worth it daqs kemm jaħsbuha n-nies."* (I had fallen into depression, you know … stuff like that … I used to pull my hair out, and cut my hand, so life for me is not as worth it as people think) (Marie, lines 81-

84, first interview); *"Ifhem, għax qisni, kif taqbad tgħid, int ma tafx jekk hux se tgħix fil-futur. Qas taf li ħa tgħix s'għada, aħseb u ara."* (Understand that nobody knows whether they are going to live another day) (Marie, lines 146-148, first interview).

Noel, too, has learned that there are no certainties or guarantees in life: *"Nimxi ġurnata b'ġurnata u daqshekk! ...Għal xiex trid taħseb fit-tul? Biex toqgħod tifqa' moħħok?"* (I take it day by day! Why would I want to think about the future? Why drive yourself crazy?) (Noel, line 85-88). His experience of dashed hopes and disappointment is poignantly expressed here: *"Toqgħod timmira lejn ħaġa, tasal għaliha, imbagħad ma tasalx?"* (Do you want to set your hopes on something that might elude you even when you finally catch up with it?) (Noel, lines 92-94). He has felt as if he were losing his mind, and this has taught him to adjust and live life according to new rules: *"Day by day. Bilfors. Inkella titlef moħħok.* (I say take it day by day. There is no other way. You will lose your mind otherwise) (Noel, line 102).

Alexei lost interest in school and made his own choices:

> It (leaving school) didn't really feel like anything, because by that time I had pretty much lost all interest in my academic career, so it was just kind of like I did not know what to do, and it was …. I didn't need to do anything, so I just didn't think about it for a long time, and I just stayed at home pretty much. (lines 149-154)
>
> […] after Form 3 I was very unhappy with school, and I had a lot of trouble just staying in class. So I ended up skipping a lot. In Form 4 I had a 52% attendance. I did not attend school. (lines 167-170)

I decided to study (an oriental language), basically in my last month of Form 5 … (lines 304-305)

Bruno describes how his anxiety was exacerbated by the extreme rigidity of school rules and regulations, especially the large load of homework and the inflexible deadlines. The extreme anxiety and fear of humiliation interfered with his sleep. Now he knows that studying so as not to waste his potential, as other people think of it, is not worth sacrificing his mental health. No qualification is worth this loss for him, as is also expressed in his dismissive tone of voice, the use of the word "*just*," and the pause until he articulates "*A-level*": *"Jgħiduli ħafna li qed naħli l-potenzjal tiegħi – inkompli l-iskola, imqar inġib l-A - levels, biex insib xogħol sura. … Imma mbagħad tkun worth it li niġi agħar milli jien? Nibqa' sejjer downhill, just biex inġib… A level?"* (They tell me that I am wasting my potential, that I should at least stay in school to get my A-levels, to get a decent job. … But would it be worth it to feel worse and go back downhill (referring to his mental health) just for the sake of getting… an A-level?) (lines 133-136).

iv. Emergent theme 4: I am alone – *'niddejjaq waħdi'*

The research participants spoke about how they felt isolated going through particular life experiences. This was the case for Sarah and Laura, who had to go through pregnancy as a lone teen, and deal with medical complications, as in the case of Laura: *"Waqt li kont tqila kelli ħafna kumplikazzjonijiet, u żammewni ħafna l-isptar…. Ma kontx irrid noqgħod l-isptar, niddejjaq waħdi."* (When I was pregnant I had many complications, and I had to remain in hospital … I did not want to stay in hospital, I hated being all alone) (lines 373-375, first interview).

Sarah is overwhelmed as she tries to balance her needs as a young woman, her sense of duty towards her son, helping in her mother's home, and taking care of her boyfriend's needs:

"…intih jiekol, naħslu, jara naqra television, imbagħad nagħmlu naqra revision – ġieli meta jkun għajjien u jgħidli m'għandix aptit, ngħidlu orrajt. Inħallih jilgħab jew jara t-television, imbagħad nieħu shower u hekk, u... indaħħlu fis-sodda t-tifel u jkolli naqra ħin għalija, wasal naqra ħin għalija! Għax bħalissa wara nofsinhar jiġifieri, jien inkun diġa' kilt u mbagħad inlesti l-ikel għall-boyfriend ...jiekol, naħsel il-platti, nieħu shower, imbagħad nidħlu fis-sodda, daqqa bit-tifel ...bħalissa qiegħda fi żmien li qisni l-ħajja hekk, qed infottiha."

…I feed him (my son), wash him, and then he watches some television. Afterward, we do some schoolwork – sometimes, when he is tired and does not feel like it, I let him play or watch television. Then I take a shower and put him to bed. Some me-time, finally! I would have already eaten in the afternoons these days, but then I have to cook for my boyfriend. When my boyfriend has eaten, I wash up, shower, and then go to bed, sometimes with our son in the middle… (lines 11-18, first interview)

… at the moment I feel that I'm wasting my life) (Sarah, lines 113-115, first interview)

As they deal with their various challenges, the research participants do not feel like they can ask for help or reach out, thus making their state of isolation worse. Laura recalls the dread she used to feel throughout her school years:

"...minn mindu mort is-sekondarja – mhux minn mindu, minn dejjem – l-iskola dejjem b'xi ħaġa kont. Dejjem! Jew kienu jaqbdu miegħi, jew it-tfal, jew it-teacher, u minn mindu mort is-sekondarja, iktar u iktar! Mill-Form one. ... jiena, jien m'iniex waħda tal-ġlied, kont inkun hekk... – nibża' u nibki fil-verità."

Ever since I was in secondary school, and always really – there was always some problem. Always! I got picked on by other kids or by teachers, even more so in secondary school! From Form one onwards. I never was one to fight – I was just scared and used to cry a lot. (Laura, lines 237-242, first interview)

Laura used to think that pleasing her so-called friends was the panacea for feeling that she belonged, but then she learned that when she did not please them, they had the power to make her feel more alone than ever:

"xħin ma tkunx togħġobhom joqogħdu jgħajruk. Jew għax kerha jew għax ħoxna, jew għax hekk…Allura jien kont noħroġ ma' sħabi l-ħin kollu nitnejjek u hekk...bħal speċi jien x'għamiltlek ħażin lilek, biex tgħajjar lili?? Jien ma ġejtx hawn biex nogħġob lilek – jien ġejt hawn biex nieħu pjaċir. Mhux biex nogħġob lilek!"
(when they don't like something about you, they just turn on you and start calling you names – that you're ugly, fat, or whatever. So I used to clown around with them, wanting to make them understand that they have no right to call me names, that I was not there to please them or anybody else. I was there for me, to have fun and please myself. (Laura, lines 261-265, first interview)

As a result of these experiences, Laura preferred to be alone: "*Ma kontx inħossni komda! Hekk, anke fil-private ġieli qagħdt waħdi, ġieli fil-break qagħdt waħdi. Fl-(isem ta' skola sekondarja) ma kellix ħbieb ħafna... fil-break kont noqgħod fit-toilet niekol.*" (I did not feel comfortable! On the coach I very often sat alone, even during break. At the (name of secondary school) I did not have many friends. I used to eat in the toilet) (Laura, lines 304-308, first interview).

Liam, Kevin and Stefan also experienced isolation, finding it hard to trust and make friends: *"... ħbieb kważi 'qas xejn m'għandi!"* (…I can't say I have any friends) (Liam, Line 63-64, first interview); *"...ħbieb sal-bieb. Jużawk u jitfgħuk 'l barra. Kelli ħabib... ħabib?!"* (…friends should be kept at arms' length. They use you and then throw you away. I used to have a friend…a friend?!) (Liam, lines 34-35, first interview); *"Kont waħdi, ħadd ma jkellimni."* (I was on my own, nobody spoke to me) (Kevin, line 116, first interview).

 Moving to a new school without his friends was difficult for Stefan:

> *"Jien wieħed minn dawk ...ftit mistħi ...u riservat, imma parti l-fatt illi ma kellix (ħbieb) fis-sekondarja meta bdejt – kull min kont naf mill-primarja ma ġiex l-istess skola miegħi. Ma kont naf 'il ħadd. U naħseb akkwistajt naqra r-reputazzjoni ta' stramb, ta' bniedem stramb u awkward."*
>
> I am a bit shy and reserved, but this might have all started at secondary school, where I had no friends who had moved on with me from primary school. I did not know anybody then and may have acquired a reputation for being strange and awkward. (Stefan, lines 232-238)

Alexei cannot bear what he perceives as the *"obligation"* of friendship when he would much rather be on his own:

> I feel like when I have friends, I kinda have an obligation to spend time with them, and usually I have the sentiment that I would rather be doing something else by myself, …because it never feels like it's natural to talk to them. (lines 350-360)

Particular family circumstances can also isolate and oppress – *"taqa' balla, ballun kbir fuqek"* (a weight, a big ball falls onto you), as Jane puts it. Jane was brought up in a small rural village where people live in a close-knit community. Her father works all day, her mother is often in hospital, and she is an only child. Village mentality often discourages people (women in particular) from asking for help due to a sense of shame and honour – "*trid tagħmel kollox int fid-dar"* (you have to do everything yourself in the house):

> **"***Qisu taqa' balla, ballun kbir fuqek - trid tagħmel kollox int fid-dar. Ġa kont qed nagħmel, imma kienet tgħinni l-mummy fejn neħel u hekk, imma dawn l-erbat ijiem li għamlet l-isptar, irrid nara kif ħa nlaħħaq, kif ħa naħsel il-ħwejjeġ, kif ħa naħsel l-art, nitla' ħdejha… Kont norqod xis-siegħa s-sagħtejn, norqod siegħa, nqum, naħsel il-ħwejjeġ, nilħaq naħsel l-art, u noqgħod nibqa' sejra ħdejha."*
>
> It's like a huge ball on your back, crushing you – you must do everything at home. I used to do chores before, but my mum used to help me when I got stuck. These days she is at the hospital, and I have to find a way of coping by myself - do the laundry, wash the floors, go visit her... I used to sleep at about one or two in the morning, sleep for one hour, get up, do the laundry, wash the floor, and go visit her at the hospital. (Jane, lines 208-217)

Summary

The "NEET" label masks the lifeworld of young people who are disengaged from education, employment, and training; it masks their humanity, various realities, and complexity. Most have struggled on various levels, often feeling rejected and unseen. Their struggles and troubled histories often serve to isolate them and make them feel like they are indeed alone.

5.2.6 Superordinate theme 6: I can find my own way.

'*Ommok għamlet djamant.'*

Your mother made a diamond. -Rachel

Introduction

An overarching theme across all fourteen interviewees is that of coping or resilience. Despite the hardships that these young people went through and continue to experience, they find their *'djamant'* (diamond), in Rachel's words – precious and special ways of being, connecting with who they are, and using that knowledge to fend for themselves. They prevail by "daring" to be different, countering the educational system's priorities, and finding strength and inspiration from their ecosystem – relatives, family, and friends – who acknowledge their individuality, help them make sense of life, and make it despite everything.

Table 5.7: Superordinate Theme 6 and related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 6	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
	'My body speaks.'							✔	✔	✔				✔		No
COPING: *'I can find my own way.'*	'I will get there.'		✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔				Yes
	'I belong.'		✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔		Yes
	'I thrive when I am with those I love and trust.'	✔			✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔		Yes
	'I need to feel safe.'	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	Yes
	'I know myself.'	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔			✔	✔	✔	Yes

i. Emergent theme 1: My body speaks.

Beating the odds and coping with oneself and life, in general, was experienced differently by all fourteen research participants. Four of the fourteen research participants shared an emergent theme concerning the physical body and how adjusting it somehow helped them cope better with what they were experiencing.

For Rachel having tattoos on her body gave her a sense of identity – a strong young woman who will prevail despite her troubled family history and her disability; the tattoos symbolise belonging to her tribe, for whom she says she would be ready to die – "*immut għaliha*." The tattoos serve as a badge of honour or a signal that transmits the message and self-reassurance that she is "one of us" as far as her close-knit community is concerned:

"Jiena meta nagħmel tattoo dejjem ifisser għal xi ħaġa, eżempju għandi djamant – ġie naqra sfigurat – djamant ifisser djamant li ħarġitni ommi bih ... ommok għamlet djamant jgħidu, ... eżempju dis-sieq kollha irridha fuq (name of a local sporting club). Inħobb ħafna (name of a local sporting club), immut għaliha – jien sapporter ta' (name of sport team). U dahri rridu b'ritratt tal-(name of patron saint) u tal-(name of patron saint), għax għalihom imsemmija. U fin-nofs, allaħares qatt tmut ommi, bejniethom nixħet tiegħi u t'ommi rrid, ommi dejjem kienet ta' spalla għalija."

Each time I get a tattoo done it has a special meaning for me, for example I have this diamond – it's a bit disfigured – a diamond means me as the precious stone that my mother gave birth to – people say your mother made a diamond as a compliment. For example, I want this leg to be tattooed with pictures of the *(name of a local sporting club)*. I love the *(name of a local sporting club)*, I'd die for it – I'm an avid supporter. And I want to have the faces of the *(name of patron saint)* and *(name of patron saint)* on my back because I have been named after them. In the middle, heaven forbid my mother dies, I would like a portrait of myself and my mother – my mother has always been my rock. (Rachel, lines 264-273, second interview)

On the other hand, Laura's tattoos symbolise her newly-found zest for life, and they represent catharsis for her – facing and overcoming her fears, in this case, her fear of pain and needles.

They also represent her newly discovered strength and power. It took birth to make her realise how strong and capable she was. Laura now takes pride in her strength, as distinct from the powerless little girl she had been when her dad left his family and she could do nothing about it:

> *"Dik kienet l-iktar ħaġa li kont nibża' nagħmel...U rnexxieli nagħmilha. Għalija kienet xi ħaġa li qisni sfidajt lili nnifsi, avolja mhi xejn fil-verità, għax biċċa tattoo...mhux li tgħid xi ħaġa fil-ħajja li għamlet xi differenza, imma dik kienet l-iktar ħaġa li nibża' minnha – il-labar. ...Kultant jekk ma tagħmilx hekk qisek tibqa' fejn inti. Biex timxi 'l quddiem, jekk pereżempju hemm xi ħaġa li tbeżżgħek, u ħa tibqa' tibża', se tibqa' fejn int."*
>
> That was the thing that scared me the most. And I did it. I challenged myself; it's not earth-shattering, and it's not going to make a difference to my life as such, but I find needles the scariest things ever. If you don't challenge your fears, you get stuck in the same place. (Laura, lines 312-319, second interview)

Sarah's determination to make the best out of herself and her situation is reflected in how she went through a costly breast augmentation procedure, despite being hard up and in deciding to have tattoos to feel confident with her body image: *"Ridt nagħmel operation tiswa l-flus. Kont ngħidilha 'l ommi li kif ikolli t-tfal irrid nagħmilha...tlett elef. Għedtilha issa nfaddal u rrid nagħmilha, 'qas jekk noqgħod ma nixtri xejn għalija."* (I wanted to have an expensive operation. I told my mum that as soon as I had children, I would do it three thousand. I told her I would save money to do it, even if I would not buy anything else for myself) (Sarah, lines 152-157, first interview). She thinks of this achievement as symbolic of her determination to succeed in life: *"Ngħid la wasalt s'hawn u għamilt dawn, allura ma naqtax qalbi. Ngħid nasal*

li jkolli d-dar u s-salon tiegħi. Nasal ukoll – avolja qisu iktar flus, mhux tlett elef..." (I tell myself that since I persisted and succeeded in doing this, I will not lose hope. I will eventually have my own house and salon. I will get to do it, even if it costs more than three thousand ...) (lines 170-174, first interview).

Tom's tattoos symbolise events connected to people he loves and is *"close"* with. For him, *"life is a journey,"* and he prioritises relationships with special people he meets on this journey. The tattoos connect him to these significant persons as if he is willing to share in whatever they go through, like his friend who almost committed suicide – *"nagħmilha miegħek, rispett tiegħek."* This is especially important for him, who has had to experience the breakup of his family at an early age, rejection, and a sense of fragmentation and loss of all that he held dear:

> *"Dan zijuwi, kien miet, kellu cancer – kienet Santa Marija 2011, kont close miegħu, allura ħassejtha. U 'qas il-funeral ma ħallewni mmur. Għax kont għadni żgħir. Kelli 11. Ma ħallewnix immur, ma kontx nifhem dak iż-żmien. Imma għamilt l-isbaħ xahrejn ma kontx norqod sew, għax kont noqgħod naħseb... Din it-tattoo ... ħabibti kienet għaddiet minn xi ... kważi suwiċidju, u din bażikament semicolon ... meta tiddeċiedi li tieqaf imma tkompli. Għalhekk għandek full stop u comma. L-istess bħall-ħajja. Allura għedtilha ħa nagħmilha miegħek, rispett tiegħek, u għamiltha magħha...ħadtha bħala I would like to journey – life is a journey, allura hekk it-tir..."*
>
> This (tattoo) is my uncle – he died of cancer on the feast of (name of saint), in 2011. I was close to him, so it was a big blow. I was not even allowed to attend his funeral because I was only 11. They did not let me go, and I did not understand then. But I could not sleep well for about two months after that because I could not stop thinking about him. This tattoo here is from the time that my friend almost committed suicide.

It's a semicolon when you stop and then decide to continue. That is why you have a full stop and a comma. It's the same as with life. I told her I would do it with you out of respect for you, and I did it with her. I understand it as symbolising my wish to journey – life is a journey. (Tom, lines 405-421)

Excerpt 10 from field notes:

I have become acutely conscious of my adult bias vis-à-vis money matters and what I hold to be "right." I found myself judging, thinking that it is remarkable that despite being in dire straits due to being unemployed, these young people are determined to engage in body-enhancing treatments such as tattoos and cosmetic surgery, no matter the cost. It helps them express who they are or whom they aspire to be, but it may also reflect cultural trends that send out messages regarding how to be in order to be desirable and "in." For example, Sarah and her partner have a small child and live with Sarah's family because they cannot afford a place of their own; he is on minimum wage, and she is unemployed, and yet both include tattoos on their to-do list even though tattoos are quite expensive. This phenomenon could also indicate that for such individuals, the desire to fit in one's tribe is stronger than the need to live independently, which reflects a finding of this research that choosing a safe harbour by belonging to a group of significant others constitutes an act of resilience, an act that facilitates coping and surviving.

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ii. Emergent theme 2: I will get there.

The narrative of determination and hope for the future is shared to a substantial degree among the nine research participants. While aware of the challenges, the participants demonstrate their resolution in moving forward.

Liam however felt disheartened because of a perceived lack of "certain" skills or qualities that he needs to move on, while on the other, he acknowledges the process necessary to reach his

goal. Liam makes use of the building metaphor to describe his preparation for the future. Each step is likened to a building block patiently and gradually being put into place to form a solid structure. Liam appears to trust in his ability to make progress in his own time and according to his rhythm: *"qiegħed daqsxejn kwiet u kkalmajt għax qisni ħlist dak il-kbir, imma sakemm ikollok ċertu strengths tilħaq taqa' down qisek. Terġa' tibda bil-mod il-mod tibni."* (at the moment I am taking it easy, and I have calmed down because the worst part is over. But you can be dragged down until you acquire certain strengths. You will have to start over, building up gradually) (lines 191-193, second interview). He is making plans to acquire qualifications gradually:*"Jien qed nippjana li forsi nlesti sa baċellerat. Level 6. Bħalissa ħa nsib dak il-ħin fis-sajf, dak iċ-ċans li naħseb iktar fuqu."* (I am planning on getting a Bachelor's degree, Level 6. I intend to find the time to think more about it this Summer) (lines 213-214, second interview); *" Qisni qed nimxi pass pass l-ewwel, mhux...naħseb fil-futur, imma qed nipprova nimxi ġurnata b'ġurnata."* (I am taking it step by step, not thinking in the long term, just trying to take it day by day) (lines 67-68, second interview). The idea of taking one's time to reach one's goals is also expressed by Jane: *"...huma qegħdin step iktar 'il quddiem, jien qegħda step iktar lura, imma ħa nimxi bil-mod il-mod. Triq twila, imma m'għandix għalfejn naqta' qalbi."*(...they are a step ahead, and I am a step behind, but no matter, I am going to take my time. The road ahead may be tough, but there is no reason to lose hope) (Jane, lines 102-105).

Liam speaks about the necessity of action, or agency, when it comes to learning and experiencing life more fully. His narrative appears to embrace failure as a part of this process, and in his view, people's judgment makes no sense or should play no role in his trajectory. His emphatic, sometimes defiant, manner of speaking during the interview made it appear as though he were arguing with someone:

"It's ok to fail. Once *li tibda' xi ħaġa ġdida* (Once you start something new), jekk ma tagħmilhiex (*if you do not do it*), you're never going to succeed or fail. You're always doing the same thing. If you're always doing the same thing in life, you're stuck. So if you make a mistake, people are going to judge you, ok. That's my point. The thing is if you fail, don't worry. Just move on. There's another chance. No one can judge you. No one." (line 250, first interview)

His confusion is reflected in how he approaches studying, believing he will achieve more if he obsesses. In his own words, this has a harmful effect on him:

… *"Meta niffoka ħafna fuq l-iskola mbagħad jiġrili l-oppost - tant kemm nibda naħdem. U nibqa' xi ljieli mqajjem, li fil-fatt tgħidli ommi – għax jiena ġieli nqum kmieni u norqod tard. Jiġifieri ħażin ħafna, imma qisni bħalissa ġej is-sajf u rrid nikkalma naqra."*

…when I focus too much on school, then it has the opposite effect – I work so hard that I can't fall asleep at night, and my mother worries about me – because I sometimes wake up early and sleep late. So that's bad, but it's like since Summer is coming, I need to relax a bit. (Liam, lines129-132, second interview)

Kevin persevered in improving his situation, committing to a rehabilitation programme, and working towards reaching the primary goal of being well and becoming independent:

"mort rehabilitation insomma, għal sena, u issa erġajt ġejt lura …. Mainly l-focus kien just rehabilitation, post ġdid so I tried fitting in … Dak iż-żmien kont on my own…ma tantx stajna kuntatt …kulħadd ikollu l-pjan tiegħu, … nippruvaw naħdmu fuqu kif

nistgħu, affarijiet personali u hekk, anke fis-soċjetà, just to be better u speċjalment il-main objective – kif inkunu indipendenti."

I was in rehabilitation for a year, and now I'm back (Line10, second interview)… My main focus was rehabilitation, a new place, so I tried fitting in (Lines 26-27, second interview)… At that time, I was on my own … we could not have contact … everyone had their plan, … we try working on things as best we can, personal stuff, also in society, just to be better and especially the main objective – being independent. (lines 34-40, second interview)

Excerpt 11 from field notes

I found Kevin waiting for me in the dark corridor where the classroom is. He was wearing large headphones, apparently listening to music. From his body language, I felt that today was not one of his good days. During the interview he shared that he "changed address" recently; he is no longer living with his parents, now lives in a home, and referred to his parents as "il-ġenituri". He comes across as friendly and playful in the lecture room, but he revealed another side of him during our interview, where he shared experiences of bullying and isolation.

Laura and Noel have learned that one must be fearless to get on. Laura had been passive before, taking life's blows and reeling from them. Now she realises how far she has come. She has discovered new strength that makes her an agent: *"flok tistenna l-ħin, tagħmel il-ħin"* (instead of waiting for time to be given to you, you yourself make time). She is not scared anymore, *"tfendi għal rasha jiġri x'jiġri"* (fending for herself, come what may). She has grown so much that she has come to be proud of her journey, looking at her life as if it were a book:

"Biex timxi 'l quddiem, jekk pereżempju hemm xi ħaġa li tbeżżgħek, u ħa tibqa' tibża' se tibqa' fejn int... allura jekk mhux se tieħu ċans, tgħid għall-inqas pruvajt, ... mhux qgħadt hawn, nistenna li se jiġri xi ħaġa. Qisek flok tistenna l-ħin, tagħmel il-ħin. ... Illum ħajti qisha storja ġiet. Tipo anke nara xi quote jew hekk, ngħid din għalija għamluha... Naħseb jekk ikolli nikteb ktieb, veru jkun interessanti ħa ngħidlek...Inħobb infittex films ...pereżempju min ikollu ħajtu mhux daqshekk faċli u taf inti, films ta' nies bħali tipo – tkun xi tifla bħali, qisha tfendi għal rasha jiġri x'jiġri. Inħobb narahom dawk, ituni kuraġġ ukoll kultant."

(To move forward, you must face your fears, and you have to take a risk so that at least you can say that you tried and not keep waiting for something to happen. It's like instead of waiting for time, you make time yourself. Nowadays, my life feels like a story. Even when I see a quote somewhere – I say to myself that they invented it just for me. Let me tell you, if I were to write the story of my life, it would be fascinating! I like films where people who do not have it so good in life, like me – some girl like me – make it in spite of everything. I like those films; they give me courage too, sometimes). (Laura, lines 318-329, second interview)

Noel has learned that the secret of a happy life is to be content with who he is: *"Jien għandi l-mira tiegħi, nasal fejn nasal, kuntent bih."* (I have my compass, I am happy to go wherever it takes me) (line 248), whereas Bruno vaccillates between his fear of being mentally unwell, and going for his dream of writing a novel: *"...Inħobb nikteb. Jiena kelli teachers jgħiduli li jien kittieb tajjeb. Imma mhux li ħa... ma tantx ktibt, biex inkun onest. Imma qisni qed naħseb biex xi darba niktibha. Actually niktibha (in-novella) insomma."* (I love writing. I had teachers tell me that I write well. But I ... haven't really written much, to be honest. I am thinking of writing

it (the novel) one day. Actually write it) (lines 37-40). Besides thinking about writing his novel,

Bruno contemplates a political career:

> *"Ħa ngħid hekk – kieku ma nħossnix tajjeb, kieku ma nitħajjarx nikteb. Għax jiena*
> *nemmen li għandek tara l-limiti tiegħek. Mhux ħa niffoka fuq xi ħaġa li se tkun fruitless.*
> *Ma nafx għaliex, inħoss li nkun tajjeb fil-politika. Kieku noħroġ għall-politika...kieku*
> *kapaċi mmur l-Università, inġib naqra kwalifiki. Ħa ngħidlek, nista' noħroġ bħalissa,*
> *imma kemm ħa tagħmel suċċess..."*
>
> Let me put it this way – if it did not feel good to me, I would not contemplate writing
> in the first place because I believe that one needs to be aware of one's limitations. I
> would not invest in something that is bound to be fruitless. I think I would be good for
> politics. I would consider that possibility ... if I could go to university, that is, get some
> qualifications. Honestly, I could start doing it now, but whether it would work out is
> another question ... (Bruno, lines 421-428)

Alexei aspires to study at university:

> I would like to be in university. As for a job, I don't really know, at the moment I am
> thinking that I like engineering, just because there is a lot of variety in it. I'm not
> working on the same things at all times, so I'm leaning towards that, but I'm not sure.
> (lines 247-251)

Earlier on in the interview, Alexei had spoken about his disengagement from school, his

absenteeism and lack of motivation to study. Nonetheless, he expressed his wish to study at

university, fully aware of what he needed to do to fulfil this aspiration: "Researcher: What do

you think you need to do to get there? Alexei: Getting my O-levels and A-levels" (lines 249-250).

iii. Emergent theme 3: I belong.

The emergent theme about the need to belong and fit within social spaces that the young people concerned held to be important was shared across 10 participants.

Stefan articulates succinctly his need to fit in with other young people around him and his frustration at sometimes not knowing what to do to win their acceptance in the group: *"trid ir-rispett, u trid il-popolarità u li ħaddieħor jistmak, u tispiċċa… għax ma tafx kif iġġib ruħek, … takkwista l-kontra ta' dak li ridt."* (You want respect, popularity, and recognition but end up getting back the opposite of what you wanted because you need to learn how to behave around them) (lines 461-464).

Marie is not interested in "becoming" anything. She only wants to be happy and well with her friends. This clearly emerges through her passionate *"xejn, xejn, xejn!"* (*nothing at all*), which seems to be releasing all the defiance she has bottled up inside her as a reaction to other people expecting and wanting her to "become" something. Marie whispers and widens her eyes as she talks about this as if she were divulging a secret: *"…jien qisni rrid naħdem għall-flus biss. Għax ma rrid xejn, xejn, xejn!"* (I only want to work for the money. I don't want anything else. Nothing at all) (Marie, line 245, first interview). Nonetheless, she explains that it is important to her to find "her" workplace, where she can belong, which in her view is what "normal" people do: *"Biex niffittja ndum naqra jiena. U peress li jien inbati bid-dyslexia, insibha iktar diffiċli, fhimt? Mhux li ma nikkomunikax man-nies, imma qisha…irrid insib ix-xogħol tiegħi, hekk… li nibqa' fih. Li nipprova ma nitlaqx, fhimt? Li qisu tiegħi tiegħi."* (It takes me a while to feel like I fit in anywhere. And because I have dyslexia, I find it harder, you understand. It's

not that I do not communicate with people, but it's like … I need to find my own work, work I can stay in. Try and remain there, do you understand? Work that is mine, mine) (lines 40-44, second interview).

Jane struggled to fit in academically, and she found participating in theatre backstage a good place to contribute by doing something she was good at – seeing that everything was done *"sew" (correctly, efficiently): "...Kont nagħmel kollox ... nara li l-programmem (school concerts) isir sew"* (I used to do everything ... see that the programme (school concerts) was executed well) (line 73).

Kevin is aware that he needs support to understand better what is expected of him. This necessitates that people explain slowly, *"mhux jgħaġġel,"* because he finds it hard to concentrate: *"bilfors irrid nitlob għall-għajnuna għax mhux kollox nifhem mal-ewwel u rridha tkun ċara...irrid li min ifehemni, jfehemni sew, mhux jgħaġġel daqshekk - fuq xogħol, kollox..."* (I have to ask for help because I do not understand everything immediately, and I want things to be clear ... I need someone to explain to me slowly – at work, everywhere ... (lines 164-167, first interview). He is gradually learning how to take control and be the person he wants to be: *"Kelli xi problemi ma kontx naf kif niħħendiljahom, u minn dal-grupp sirt naf iktar kif għandi nieħu ħsieb ta' dil-ħaġa, u nikkontrolla sew. Qabel kont nippanikkja pereżempju, u issa naf li għandi noqgħod kalm u hekk..."* (I had problems I did not know how to deal with, and from this group, I learned how to tackle things better to take control. Before I used to panic, for example, and now I know that I have to stay calm) (lines 150-154, first interview).

iv. Emergent theme 4: I thrive when I am with those I love and trust.

This emergent theme highlighting the importance of the presence of loving and caring people was shared across nine research participants. These narratives draw our attention to the

dilemma that the participants would experience in situations where they have to choose between investing in their educational progress on the one hand vis-à-vis tackling challenging situations in their personal life on the other. The illness that befell Rachel's mother taught her that nothing can come before the ones we love. She became acutely aware of her mother's mortality and the necessity to be close to her: *"Kont nippreferi nkun dejjem magħha. Kont ngħid jekk jeħodhieli llum il-mummy l-Mulej ... ma nafx jekk narahiex għada."* (I used to prefer to be always by her side. I used to say that if God were to take my mother today ... I don't know whether I would see her tomorrow) (lines 51-52, first interview).

Like Tom and Stefan, Marie believes that human connection gives meaning to life. Friends give her a sense of belonging, and security. Her emotional hardship has taught her that love and friendship are the most important things in life. Like Noel, she maintains that one should live in and enjoy the present moment, for tomorrow is never guaranteed: *"...Int ma tafx jekk hux se tgħix fil-futur. 'Qas taf li ħa tgħix għada, aħseb u ara!"* (You don't know whether you will live another day) (lines 221-222, first interview). Gentleness appears to be a luxury for Marie. She maintains that good relations with others – *"bil-ħlewwa" (gentle)* - are essential for her well-being:

> *"Inħossni kunfidenti jekk pereżempju nkun ilni ġimgħa hemm, jew iktar, u nkun drajt il-persuna... L-iktar li nħossni kunfidenti qisni pereżempju anke meta ma nkunx nafek, qisek inti trid tkellimni bil-ħlewwa, u rrid inkellmek lura hekk, u rridu nidraw lil xulxin, u nkun nafek iktar – hekk nidra jiena."*
>
> (I feel confident if for example after a week or more I feel that I get along well with the person … I feel most confident when even if I don't know you, you speak to me kindly, and I speak back to you kindly, and so we get used to each other and get to know each

other better gradually. That is what works for me). (Marie, lines 218-222, first interview)

Similarly, Rachel knows the difference that one person can make in life. She speaks of how her boyfriend has completely transformed her: *"Bidilli l-karattru għall-aħjar tiegħi"* (He changed my character for the better):

"Rabbejt naqra għaqal, ma nidgħix, ma taqbiżlix, ngħin lil ħaddieħor, nafda f'Alla – jien hekk ta. Ara kemm nidher hekk, wiċċ ta' waħda m'aħniex u hekk...u kif ġie ġie, imma hekk, anke familti rawni tbiddilt għall-aħjar tiegħi ... anke relazzjoni ma kontx inżommha qabel – issa kemm ilni għarusa ma' dan… Bidilli l-karattru għall-aħjar tiegħi. Żgur. Anke kif nidgħi, kif nilbes, kif naġixxi ruħi, iżommli – hekk irridu, raġel safe. Jgħir. Jgħir ħafna eh!"

I am a good girl now, I don't cuss, I don't get mad, I help others, I trust in God – that's me. I may look like a careless, crazy girl, but even my family has noticed that I have changed for the better … even in relationships. Before, I did not stay for long, but now, since I have been with this guy … he changed me for the better. For sure. Even the way I cuss, dress and behave – he keeps me in check – that is how I want him, a safe man. He's jealous too. Very jealous. (lines 52-61, second interview)

Rachel speaks passionately about her loved ones and professes that she and her family would go through fire – *"nidħlu san-nar"* – if that is what it took to defend family. Having gay and transgender friends and relatives who are often subjected to abuse and prejudice, she has experienced this necessity to defend loved ones: *"Min imiss il-familja tagħna nidħlu san-nar. Hekk nirraġunaw aħna. Jien kuġina gay għandi, transgender minn boy ġiet girl u magħha biss*

naqbel." (If anyone messes with our family, we will mess back with them. That's how it goes. I have a gay cousin, transgender – from a boy, she became a girl – and she's the only one I get along with) (lines 109-111, second interview).

Laura derives comfort from knowing that her friend is always there for her: *"... Xħin inkun irrid niżbroffa, ġie li nċemplilha, ngħidilha għandi bżonn inkellmek ...U mill-ewwel iċċempilli. Qisna għalkemm ma narawx lil xulxin u ma nitkellmux kuljum ... meta jkollna bżonn xi ħaġa dejjem ħa nsibu hemm lil xulxin."* (When things get rough, and I can't take anymore, I call her, I tell her I need to talk to you and she calls me back immediately. Even though we don't see each other or talk every day when we need something, we are always there for each other) (lines 243- 246, second interview).

v. Emergent theme 5: I need to feel safe.

The emergent theme of needing to feel safe as being a priority was shared in all the fourteen narratives. The research participants sought to find their safe haven, each in their own way.

Music helps Anthea keep well – she finds courage and inspiration from the lyrics of her favorite band: *"...Il-band jisimha* Motionless in White[23] *– iktar tip ta' rock. Għandhom diska pereżempju sabiħa għaġeb - jisimha Legacy. Biex ma taqtax qalbek u hekk."* (The band is called *Motionliess in White* – a type of rock. They have a beautiful song – it is called *Legacy*. It's about not giving up and so on). (lines 322-324).

Dylan escapes the trials and tribulations of life when he is in his creative zone:

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[23] See lyrics in Appendix 16

I visualise things, like I'll be looking at some leaves moving, for example and then it's like I visualise it in an artistic way – I'm just like hearing a song in the background and it's like I'm isingvisualising how I could edit it – video, you know, I visualise it ... it's with everything actually ... like if I see something that I like I keep staring at it and I start thinking about it, you know – I mean seeing how I could change it into something to express myself ... (Dylan, lines 85-96)

Kevin and Bruno had to drop out of (post-secondary school) because it was exacerbating pre-existing anxiety. Self-imposed isolation was the antidote to the extreme stress that had got hold of Kevin: *"Ħassejt wisq stress fuqi u f'nofs is-sena just waqaft. Tliet snin għamilt hekk...l-(name of post-secondary school) ma flaħtx iktar u kont waqaft mill-kors għax ma stajtx nikkonċentra...Kont waħdi, ħadd ma jkellimni."* (I felt too much stress, and I just dropped out in the middle of the year. I spent three years like that ... I could not bear it anymore at (name of post-secondary school), and I dropped out of the course because I could not concentrate. I was alone, and nobody was talking to me (lines 105-110, first interview). After changing schools to find a place he could fit in, Bruno realised that he had better make some space for himself and reach out for help:

"...Jiena kelli problema bl-ansjetà u depression. Allura meta mort l-(name of post-secondary school) l-iktar li laqtitni, u waqaft jiġifieri f'nofs is-sena. Ma stajtx inkompli. Mort nieħu naqra għajnuna. U mbagħad l-(name of a different post-secondary school) kont erġajt bdejt għax ovvjament hemmhekk mhux ħa jgħidulek oqgħod id-dar dawn. Imma qisni bdejt nerġa' mmur għall-agħar."

(I had a problem with anxiety and depression. So when I went to *(name of post-secondary school)* it worsened, and I had to stop in the middle of the scholastic year. I

could not go on. I went for help. Then I took another chance at *(name of a different post-secondary school)*. I had to attend because they would not allow me to follow lectures from home anyway. But then things started deteriorating for me again). (lines 66-70)

Being safe is what counts for the young people in this study. Rough experiences in life have taught them the value of stability, of finding one's niche or *"lane,"* as Marie puts it: *"Ifhem, jekk nilħaq insib xogħol u nilħaq infaddal, nixtieq hekk …inlesti l-courses tad-dwiefer, u nibqa' f'dik il-lane…"*(If I find work and manage to save money, I would like to finish the nail technician courses and stay in that lane (lines 133-135, second interview). Similarly, Laura learned the value of stability: *"Naħseb li llum l-aħjar forsi ssib xi kumpanija taħdem magħha, ikollok paga tajba, ikollok minn ħin sa ħin u tgħid tlaqt id-dar."* (Nowadays it is better to work for fixed hours with a company. You get well paid, and you go home at the end of the day) (lines 111-112, second interview). She is aware that everything can change: *"Tbiddel il-ħsibijiet tiegħek, inti trid tara maż-żmien hux… Pereżempju jien nibda naħseb fuq issa, imma li ġej ma nafx x'se jiġri."* (Your thoughts change. You have to change with the times … For example, while I am thinking about what is going on in my life now, I can have no idea what the future will bring) (lines123-124, second interview).

These conversations reflect the importance that the participating young people attach to personal well-being and safety. They appear to be immune to the achievement ideology propagated by the education system and are more engaged in ways that make them feel secure. Kevin knows that being well is his top priority and knows that the way forward is to continue working on himself:

Researcher: "*X'inhu importanti għalik at this point in time?"* (What is important to you at this point in time?)

Kevin**: "***Just infaddal naqra flus, inkompli naħdem fuqi nnifsi, għalissa għal tul ta' żmien dik ħa tkun. Imbagħad eventually inġib karozza pereżempju, u l-liċenzja, hekk – just taking it slow."* (Save some money, and continue to work on myself – that should be my main target in the long term. Then eventually, I would get a car, for example, my driving license – just taking it slow. (lines 95-98, second interview)

Rachel would rather stay without qualifications than continue her education at a post-secondary school and face the possibility of being bullied again. On the other hand, being unqualified prevents her from finding a job – it is a vicious circle:

Researcher: "*Ġieli taħseb biex tagħmel xi kors biex issib xogħol aħjar? (Name of post - secondary school) jew hekk?"* (Do you ever think of doing a course to find better work? At (*name of post - secondary school*), for example?)

Rachel: "*Le, (name of post - secondary school) le. Le, hemm ħafna tfal kesħin, le."* (No, not (*name of post - secondary school*), no. No, there are lots of bullies there, no).

Researcher: "*Lanqas xi ħaġa oħra, bħall-Customer Care perezempju?"*(Not even something else, like Customer Care?)

Rachel: "*Ġieli daħlitli f'moħħi tal-Customer Care. Jew receptionist jew office, imma m'għandix skola."* (It did sometimes occur to me – work as a receptionist or office, but I do not have any qualifications).

Researcher: "*Int O-levels ma kont ġibt xejn?"* (You did not sit for your O-levels then?)

Rachel: "*Le. Ma kontx għamilthom."* (No, I did not do them) (lines 204 -210, second interview)

vi. Emergent theme 6: I know myself.

The research participants manifest self-knowledge or self-reflection in their decision to prioritise one thing over another and qualify their choices. Interestingly, Alexei says that since he often succeeds at what he does, this is a part of who he is - his *"natural state"*– it is no big deal, nothing to be proud of. Making an emphasis on success as an exception rather than a natural state of human beings appears strange to him: "…For me succeeding and being good at things is just a natural state, so that happening is not really anything spectacular – it's just how things are. It's not something I'm proud of" (lines 295-298); "My success is inevitable! It is usually what I stick to. It's always been what I've thought" (lines 336-337).

Excerpt 12 from field notes:

I have often found myself thinking of Alexei's situation, what it must be like for a teenager like him to feel estranged from his parents, calling his mother a *"deeply flawed human being"* and his father *"not a good person"* emotionlessly, matter-of-factly, even though his father has died some years back. His solitary state and disillusionment with people are striking. In such cases, the label "NEET" rings much more meaningless and dehumanizing.

Sarah learned that sometimes one must compromise to achieve one's goals and be safe. In the second interview she mentioned settling for working as a shop assistant in a sporting goods outlet. She needs to save money to buy a place of her own: *"Ifhem, bħalissa l-futur hawnhekk fejn jien għandi ċ-ċans fejn nikber aktar jiġifieri u diġà smajt kliem bħal nilħaq supervisor u hekk, jiġifieri…u rrid nixtri l-post fl-aħħar, jiġifieri…"* (Well, right now, the future is where I am, where I can move up. There has already been talk of the possibility of me being promoted

to supervisor – that's good because I want to buy a place of my own finally …) (lines 37- 43, second interview).

Past experiences have taught Bruno the importance of seeking help: *"Jiena kelli problemi bl-ansjetà u d-depression. Ma stajtx inkompli. Mort nieħu naqra għajnuna."* (I have had problems with anxiety and depression. I could not go on. I went for help) (lines 65- 67).

Summary

The theme of 'Coping' (I can find my way) sums up the experiences of these 14 young people referred to as NEETs. They have survived the educational system, fending for themselves and putting their emotional and mental well-being first and foremost.

5.2.7 Superordinate Theme 7: Life is a journey.

'Għadni fit-triq it-twila.'

I have a long journey ahead of me.

-Jane

Introduction

The participants' perception of where they see themselves in five years' time is important because it can shed more light on how they interpret their current situation as NEET. This may help us understand how they may be using their agency to pursue the life that they want for themselves.

Table 5.8: Superordinate Theme 7 and related subordinate themes

SUPERORDINATE THEME 7	EMERGENT THEMES	1 Dylan	2 Kevin	3 Liam	4 Noel	5 Jane	6 Marie	7 Sarah	8 Rachel	9 Laura	10 Anthea	11 Stefan	12 Bruno	13 Tom	14 Alexei	Present in over half the sample?
PROJECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE: *'Life is a journey.'*	*Achieving the dream job*	✔	✔	✔		✔		✔			✔	✔	✔		✔	Yes
	'I want to be free.'		✔			✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		Yes
	'Who cares about tomorrow?'	✔		✔	✔		✔		✔	✔						No

i. Emergent theme 1: Achieving the dream job

When asked where they saw themselves in five years, nine research participants expressed their wish to find their dream job. In contrast, the other five visualised a future where they would be in meaningful and stable relationships, mentally well, living a decent, stable life, with the possibility of participating in education to understand better what work might be suitable for them. Those who mentioned the dream job often acknowledged that they would first need to acquire the necessary qualifications.

During the interview Jane mentioned being interested in becoming a nurse, but considered the position of Learning Support Assistant as well. However, she acknowledges struggling academically, which would make it harder for her to gain the requisite qualifications: *"…Wara hawn irrid nagħmel tliet snin nistudja għall-O levels li ma ġibtx, u nidħol l-Università għal LSA."* (… after this, I have to spend the next three years preparing to get my O-levels. I want to get into university to do the LSA course) (lines 134-135). In the meantime, she would be content working as a carer with disabled children until she can pass her O-levels:

> *"Għalissa ħa mmur ma' nies b'diżabilità, 'l quddiem ma nafx...jekk nidħolx ners jew jekk nidħolx LSA. Għadni... fit-triq it-twila; għalissa ħa nagħmel step li nidħol naħdem ma' nies b'diżabilità, imbagħad 'il quddiem naraw. Għadni żgħira u bil-mod...mhux li ħa jtellifni..."*

For now, I will be working with people living with disability, but I don't know for how long … whether I will get into nursing or be an LSA or not. I am still in the process – it's a long road; at this point, I'm making a choice to work in disability, then we will see. I am still young, so this will not be an obstacle …(Jane, lines 167-172)

Rachel has yet to obtain any O-levels, but her dream job is to be a PSCD teacher:

Researcher: "*Immaġina l-job li tixtieq inti*." (Imagine your dream job).

Rachel: "*PSD teacher …imma … naħseb li ma jirnexxilix"* (PSD teacher … but … I don't think I could get there). (lines 366-367, first interview)

Stefan would like to further his studies at university to have a career:

"Il-bieb inżommu miftuħ li mmur nagħmel xi masters. Għall-futur. Però rrid nieħu break, għall-inqas għal dis-sena u ta' warajha naħseb, għax hekk … il-livell tal-Università kien ogħla mill-livell ta' 6th form u sekondarja. Ħassejtni... kultant ħassejtni overwhelmed ftit. Allura rrid nieħu ftit break minnha l-esperjenza. Kif inħossni? Hekk … l-edukazzjoni jiena naf li ma tispiċċax l-iskola – u ċertament jiena m'iniex taħt l-illużjoni li jien naf kollox. Imma l-ewwel darba li ġġib degree f'ħajtek tgħid spiċċajt fażi fejn issa qiegħed ... issa sirt adult veru hux. ... U issa ngħid issa l-karriera jmissni. Irrid nagħti valur lili nnifsi għas-soċjetà nsomma. Tibda tħossha r-responsabbiltà veru, nammetti, speċjalment issa li ggradwajt."

I am considering doing a Master's degree course eventually. But I need a break, at least this year and the next because the level at university was higher than that at sixth form or secondary school. I felt overwhelmed sometimes. So I need to take a break. How do

I feel? I know that education does not end with school, and I am certainly not under the illusion that I know everything! But it is the end of an era when you obtain your first degree – you feel like you are now an adult. You know that getting into a career is next. I must value myself and contribute to society. I felt the responsibility, I admit. Especially now that I have graduated. (Stefan, lines 77-90)

Bruno is still undecided, attending YG sessions because they do not feel like school – "*mhux skola skola,*" and because they might help him obtain more qualifications:

"*Onestament nixtieq li nkun sibt xogħol stabbli, li jogħġobni, issa dan ngħid jekk jogħġobni x-xogħol, għax jista' jkun, jien naf, ngħid ix-xogħol ħa nħallih naqra u mmur nistudja jiġifieri. Għadni indeċiż. Għadni qed nesperimenta, ma nafx… Ġejt hawnhekk biex nagħmel naqra li nista' nagħmel, li mhux skola skola, imma just biex naqla' xi ħaġa iktar x'nuri, xi kwalifika iktar.*"

I honestly wish that I would have found a steady job that I like. *If* I like it that is, because I might decide to leave it and further my studies. I am still undecided. I am experimenting. I don't know…I came here to do what I can, somewhere that is not quite school, but just a place where I could get some other qualification. (Bruno, lines 126-135)

ii. Emergent theme 2: I want to be free.

Ten out of fourteen research participants expressed their wish to live independently. This reflects an emergent theme addressed in section 5.2 of this chapter, which deals with the meaning of success as being independence and autonomy. In the case of Sarah and Laura, this means settling down with their child and boyfriend: "*Bid-dar, ikolli d-dar tiegħi u nkun ftaħt business... Bil-beauty, ħa nagħmel kors f'September.*" (I want to have my own home, have my

own business...with beautician service too – I am taking a course in September) (Sarah, lines 36-40, first interview); *"Nispera li nkun qed naħdem. U nispera li nibqa' mal-għarus tiegħi, ovvja. U forsi jkollna d-dar tagħna wkoll. Inkunu hekk – bħala familja."* (I hope to have a job. And that I would still be with my fiancé - maybe we'd have our own home. Like, be a family) (Laura, lines 397-399, first interview).

For Kevin, being independent means *"nagħmel li rrid jiena,"* being free to do whatever he wants with his life, which will involve *"xi ħadd illi nħobb," "ħbieb,"* and *"insiefer"* (someone I love, friends and travelling). He looks forward to a future where he does not feel powerless and alone anymore:

> *"Fil-post tax-xogħol, hekk, sew, naqla' l-flus, ġo dar waħdi, jew ma' xi ħadd illi nħobb, jew forsi ma' ħbieb, nixxerjaw – nippreferi xi darba nagħmel hekk forsi – emm, jew anke forsi nsiefer hekk... Ma nafx x'ngħidlek fuqha, imma... nagħmel li rrid jiena."*
> I would have a good job, earn money, live in a house on my own or share it with someone I love, friends – I prefer to do that, or maybe travel as well … I don't know, but I would be free to do whatever I like. (Kevin, lines 28-37, first interview)

Stefan wishes to have a place of his own, considering this as part of becoming an adult:

> *"Nixtieq nakkwista dar, ... kieku d-dar fejn ngħix nibqa' ngħix fiha, imma ovvjament hija parti mit-tranżizzjoni tal-ħajja ... wara kollox m'iniex tifel wieħed. Tirrappreżenta r-responsabbiltà li għandek issa ta' adult hux…Għax ma nistax nieħu dak li għandi bħalissa for granted ... ħadd mhu awtonomu kompletament. Li nakkwista dar għalija mhijiex għax iddejjaqt id-dar, jew għax il-ġenituri tiegħi issoffokawni, ... ma nħossni mkien iżjed liberu mid-dar. ... Grat ħafna, ...imma ma rridx inkun it-tip li nassumi li*

dan ħa jibqa' tiegħi mingħajr ma nagħmel xejn jiena, allura nifhem li parti mill-proċess

huwa li nakkwista post għalija hux."

I want to get my own place. I would stay where I am, but it's part of life's transitions, and I'm not a single child after all. It represents my responsibility as an adult. I cannot take what I have now for granted, nobody is entirely autonomous. I do not want to find a place of my own because I'm fed up at home or because my parents are suffocating me. Indeed, I feel nowhere as comfortable as at home. However, while being very grateful, I cannot assume that things will remain the way they are now without doing anything. I understand that getting my own place is part of the proċess. (Stefan, lines 170-182)

Tom looks forward to being financially independent so that he can afford to help his girlfriend if she ever needs it.: *"Taħdem hi, imma nieħu gost inkun parti mill-għajnuna tagħha. Naf li għandha ommha u missierha jifilħu u hekk. Imma nieħu gost li ngħinha jien, minn jeddi."* (She has a job, but I'd like to help her (financially) if she needs it. I know her parents can afford it, but it would make me happy to help her myself because I want to) (Tom, lines 451-454).

Rachel would also like to be financially independent from her parents: *"Imma llum il-ġurnata nippretendi li għandi l-età tiegħi, u naħdem għal dak li rrid jien, mhux ħa nibqa' niddependi fuq il-mummy u d-daddy. Għax jekk jiġu neqsin mhux se niddependi fuqhom."* (But these days, I know I am not a child anymore and should earn whatever I need instead of remaining dependent on my mum and dad. They will not be around forever after all) (Rachel, lines 84-89, first interview).

iii. Emergent theme 3: Who cares about tomorrow?

Six of the fourteen research participants expressed the idea that thinking too hard about tomorrow is not worth it: *"Inġib il-liċenzja, nirranġa l-BMW u nitlaq għall- kaċċa."* (I want to

get my driver's license, fix my BMW, and go off hunting) (Noel, line 356); *"Nimtela bit-tpenġija. Ikolli mutur tal-isport, karozza BMW. Naħdem u ngawdi, ...!"* (I will have tattoos all over my body. And I will own a sports motorbike and a BMW car. I will be working and enjoying myself !) (Rachel, lines 368-373, first interview).

Liam sees himself taking things "step by step" and "day by day" (see Section 5.2.6ii, p.252). He is aware that life is fast-paced and short, and that therefore one needs to respect the particular circumstances one lives in:

> *"you need to be ...realistic – ma tistax taħseb ħafna fil-pożittiv – trid tkun realistiku fis-sitwazzjoni, u għalhekk inti tgħix ħajja pass pass. Ma tistax taqbad... peress li aħna qed ngħixu...f'dil-ħajja mgħaġġla...kollox mgħaġġel, imma ma tistax tagħmilha, għax mhux kull bniedem l-istess. Hawn min jasallek sa kilometru u hawn min jasal sa żewġ kilometri bil-ħsibijiet. Mhux kulħadd l-istess. U kulħadd needs time... in life - veru short life għandna."*

> Thinking positive does not always work. You have to look at your situation and be realistic, and that is why you should take one step at a time. You can't… since we are living in a fast-paced life, everything is fast. You can't do it, since not everybody is the same. Some people have a lot going on in their heads, others have less. Not everybody is the same. We all need to take our time, since life is really short. (Liam, lines 147-155, first interview)

Dylan attributes his focus on the present to his spirituality:

> I get those positive vibes nowadays...like no worries about things, and also my mindset has really changed … – for example why worry about something that hasn't even happened yet, you know? The thing is that spirituality really changed me. You need to

understand what you're in control of and you're only in control of the now... and you

get much more understanding with everything and... just that just made me super-happy

…" (Dylan, lines 441-450)

As illustrated in Section 5.2.6v, Marie mentioned that if she could get a job and save enough

money, she would like to finish the nail technician course and settle into the position she calls

her "lane". However, as quoted in Section 5.2.5iii, she is conscious that nothing is guaranteed,

and tomorrow may never come. At the moment, she is figuring things out, reaching out to a

trusted professional when she needs support:

> *"Skont dik il-burdata... il-ġurnata kif tiġi – jekk ikolli ħafna nervi, ma nkunx naf x'jien*
>
> *nagħmel hekk..., imma mbagħad għandi guidance jiena – ilha miegħi mill-Form ...– u*
>
> *lilha biss kont nafda... u qisni dejjem inżomm lilha u kienu jkellmuni ħafna nies. U jien*
>
> *dak it-tip: lili aqtgħuli – ħafna nies ma nkunx irrid inkellimhom ..."*
>
> It depends on my mood and how the day turns out – if I'm stressed, I would not know
>
> what I am doing, but I have a guidance teacher whom I have known since secondary
>
> school – I only used to trust her and her only, even though many other professionals
>
> used to talk to me. I'm like, I tell them to shut up – I don't want to talk to people).
>
> (lines 102-108, first interview)

For Laura, the future is ambivalent. On the one hand, she lives for the present, over which she

feels she can have some control, but on the other hand, she thinks about it with some

trepidation. Planning for the future implies thinking that one has control over it. She does not

feel that she has this control, especially when she looks back and understands how much has

happened to change her life, which she compares to a "book" (Section 5.2.6ii) – meeting her

boyfriend, falling pregnant, going through the pregnancy with all the chaotic emotions it brought with it, giving birth, and raising a child without any financial security that would facilitate stability. She realises that everything can depend on one decision or an event. The future is unknowable. She wants to have her own home with her boyfriend and their child but knows that so much can change. She can only be sure about the present. She would like guidance and counseling on the way forward, just like there had been at school, as now she feels alone and a bit lost. Significantly, she uses the word *"deċiżjonijiet"* (decisions) very often during the interview, which might indicate that making good decisions is uppermost in her mind now more than ever: *"Jien nibda naħseb fuq issa, imma li ġej ma nafx x'se jiġri. Allura qisek iktar ma jgħaddi żmien, iktar tibda tinduna ċertu affarijiet li naħseb li… tkun ħadt deċiżjoni mhux daqshekk tajba."* (I only think about the present; I do not know what will happen in the future. As time goes by, I realise that certain things … I may not have made such a good decision) (Laura, lines 125-127, second interview); *"Ngħidlek il-verità ma nafx x'ħa nagħmel għax qed nipprova nsib lil xi ħadd – għax taf inti meta tkun ġol-iskola jkun hemm bħal guidance u hekk biex jgħinuk tieħu ċerti deċiżjonijiet u hekk."* (I do not know what I am going to do. I am trying to find someone – you know, like at school – guidance teachers and so on, to help you make certain decisions and so on) (lines 71-72, second interview).

Summary

This superordinate theme indicates that being in meaningful relationships, wanting to be independent, earning money, and living the life they want is the most prevalent idea concerning the future among the research participants. Earning money is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end – to help them be independent and to be able to enjoy the life they want. It also emerges that they may not have thought things through yet because they are not

ready, and things are not straightforward. This experience of the present necessitates taking it one step at a time to be in a better position to consider all available options.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has documented the findings from this study that seeks to shed more light on the lived experience of being NEET, thus also addressing the gap in research about the lifeworlds of young people classified as NEET in Malta. The findings yield rich, critical insights into young people's interpretations of their NEET situation, and their attitudes, perceptions, and choices (Bussu & Pulina, 2020; Pastore, 2018; Ripamonti & Barberis, 2018; Agasisti et al., 2014).

I have conducted this phenomenological research with fourteen young people who were NEET at the time of data collection or up till a few months prior. The data was collected by means of participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews during a pilot project and subsequent entries into the field to collect data which I have processed and analysed according to IPA guidelines.

The first superordinate theme in this report is 'Personal narratives of hardship' ('You do not know what I am going through'). It sheds light on the hard circumstances these young people have had to battle on a personal level throughout their school years, circumstances that put added pressure on them, a weight on their shoulders that they often bore silently out of shame, fear of judgment, or the inability to articulate their suffering.

This leads to the second superordinate theme: 'The impact of previous school experiences' ('Those five years of school have damaged me!'), which unravels the lived experience of being a student at school while dealing with personal obstacles and challenges. It is a theme that

draws attention to school practices that tend to perpetuate discrimination, potentially alienating different young people from engaging in education and training.

Superordinate theme 3 deals with the young people's 'Use of time' ('Killing time'), showing how the research participants spend their time while being NEET. This in turn, reveals what they may have uppermost on their mind, what they are attracted to most. Many of them invest time looking for a job and attempting to get more qualifications, but others spend their time doing what they love as well, looking to preserve their emotional well-being and also aspiring to find fulfilling employment eventually.

Superordinate theme number 4 deals with the young people's notions of success and failure ('My idea of success'), which demonstrates their values and beliefs as independent human beings searching for meaning. This superordinate theme is closely linked to Superordinate theme 5: NEET young people's attitude towards life ('The way I see it'), which reveals how these young people look at life, whether they feel that they are victims or whether they feel that they have the power to determine their destiny and the extent to which these beliefs reflect their choices. The following superordinate theme of Coping ('I can find my own way') is especially significant because it reveals an essential life skill: resilience, or how the research participants deal with challenging situations.

Finally, the superordinate theme 'Projections for the future' ('Life is a journey') tells us how these young people look at their future, how they visualise themselves in five years, and how this might reflect how they look at themselves at this stage.

The following chapter discusses the findings just presented here.

Chapter Six

Youth in Flux - Discussion of the Findings

6.0 Introduction

International research about NEETs is mainly focused on their sociodemographic characteristics, with analysis mainly engaging with the origins and ramifications of the phenomenon (Alvarado et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2012, 2016; Tamesberger et al., 2014; Yates et al., 2011), rather than who the young people referred to really are, and how they make sense of and experience this phase in their lives that – in all probability unbeknownst to them – has been given the blanket classification of 'NEET' (Reiter & Schlimbach, 2015; Thompson et al., 2014;). In Malta the urgency to keep as many young people in education and training as long as possible, or at least until they have acquired sufficient skills to enter the labour market, has led to the setting up of policy leading to various services that often overlap (see Chapter Three, section 3.4), indicating a possible lack of engagement with the lifeworld or habitus of young people in Malta, and the myriad reasons why they resist and reject the ideology of the Maltese education system. It might seem that, despite good intentions, rather than offering a solution to a problem, policy itself could be contributing to it. For this reason, it is essential that analysis of education policy transcends the objective framework to include engagement with conflict and with the struggle over meanings in the process (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2021).

The present phenomenological research is a unique contribution to knowledge about NEET young people in the Maltese context, filling a critical research gap by exploring the lived experience of being disengaged from education, employment, and training (NEET) in Malta. This research also corroborates previous critical literature that questions the validity and usefulness of the term "NEET" in view of its failure to embrace the complexity and flux of human lives and, therefore the humanity of the young people concerned (Vancea & Utzet, 2018) in favor of looking at them either as a problem, a potential resource for economic growth or both (Castellano et al., 2019; Klees, 2017; 2020).

The research journey has helped me confirm the essential value of attempting to walk a mile in the shoes of those we judge and classify. I have come to understand that there is no one lived experience of being NEET. Rather, there are many lived experiences, as many as there are NEET young people themselves (Alexander et al., 2020; Furlong, 2009), and therefore this thesis is an attempt at bringing to the fore a fragment of the whole which is also forever in flux.

This research has also made me more aware that the NEET label itself and how it is used in European and global hegemonic discourses to examine young people's life situations cannot be viewed as a neutral act. It must be considered a political move that reproduces societal inequalities. The consequential importance attached to standardized outcome indicators expected to be achieved within normative timeframes is symptomatic of a limited hegemonic discourse of success. More attention must be given to facets of young people's multi-layered and fluid lives that defy measurement (Batchelor et al., 2020). There needs to be increased awareness of their spatial, temporal, and socio-political contexts, including understandings of how the young people concerned understand "doing well" (Bakketeig et al., 2020). The notion of success must be interrogated as a relative and contextual concept (Rees & Munro, 2019). Educational attainment may be one form of success, but focusing exclusively on education dangerously overlooks other important aspects. This means that a different kind of thinking is needed – about what it means to do well in the broadest sense and attending to the contexts in the lives of young people (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Brady & Gilligan, 2018; Simmons et al., 2020).

In Malta and globally in general, there is insufficient knowledge about how students described as "at risk" interpret and perceive their life, and qualitative research such as the present one is therefore much needed to complement quantitative studies about them (Pikkarainen et al.,

2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Most poignantly, the findings from this research show the futility and the injustice of the labels and classifications that the education system adopts and uses on young people, purportedly to help them but also serving to dehumanize them in the process. Engaging with and investigating these young people's perspectives is of special value because they can help us understand them and what they need from us as educators, policymakers, leaders, mentors, youth workers, and social actors.

Rather than about NEETs, this is a study about youth in transition, a phase characterized by fluidity, complexity, risk, and uncertainty. This is of special relevance to policymaking, where transition is often assumed to be a linear, uncomplicated trajectory (Sanderson, 2020).

This notwithstanding, understandings of youth transitions continue to be debated (Smith & Dowse, 2019; Wood, 2017). To mention but a few significant contributions, Wood (2017) focuses on understandings of genealogy, wayfaring (the mundanity of change in the lives of young people), and flux, whereas for Smith and Dowse (2019), studying young people with multiple support requirements, transition means more than simply advancing; most importantly it involves simultaneously navigating through the complex and chaotic terrain of myriad life situations. France (2008) conceptualises youth as encompassing both "being" and "becoming," recognising youth as a particular stage but also as part of the continuum on the journey of life or the life course. Alexander et al. (2020) argue that young people's complex experiences defy pre-determined, normalised notions about youth and youth trajectories. In continuation of this ongoing conversation, and in the hope of making an important contribution to existing knowledge, the questions that this research has attempted to answer are:

15.   How do young people labelled NEET make sense of their situation?

    a.   What is it like for them to be done with secondary school?

    b.   What is their outlook on life?

    c.   What is important to them?

16.   What was their experience of school like?

    a.   What made them leave school early?

    b.   What would have made a difference?

17.   How do they visualise their future?

    a.   What do they see themselves doing in 5 years' time?

    b.   What does the life they want for themselves look like?

Finding the answers has meant sifting through vast amounts of data that I have collected by means of field notes from participant observation sessions and semi-structured in-depth interviews. During an ongoing cyclical analytical process, I have coded this data to elicit dominant themes that characterized the lived experiences of each individual participant, and to explore how these related to those of the other research participants in the sample.

The objective of this chapter is to consider the research findings using Heidegger's analytic of Dasein (Heidegger, 1927/1962), which also forms part of the theoretical foundations of IPA, the research approach that this research has utilised. Heidegger's view of human beings as constantly self-interpreting provides a framework for examining the situation of young persons' disengagement from education, employment, and training and their temporal understanding of having-been and being-towards. The theoretical framework shaped by Heidegger's philosophical tenets reflects an epistemological stance of generating theory inductively, facilitating the possibility of inductively eliciting the meaning participants ascribed to their lived experiences of being NEET in Malta.

6.1 The findings

In investigating the lived experience of being NEET, this research sought to ask related important questions: If the young people concerned are not experiencing/engaged with education, employment, or training, what are they experiencing/engaged with instead? What does their "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1927/1962) at this point look like? These concerns are reflected in the research questions this work seeks to answer. As we have seen in the previous chapter where the findings are presented, the interpretative phenomenological analysis has brought forth seven superordinate themes that respond to the questions asked by this research. Although they are listed as separate, they often overlap and may be viewed systemically as extensions of each other.

The superordinate themes that emerged were the following: narratives of hardship; the influence of compulsory schooling; use of time; notions of success and failure; attitudes towards life; coping; and projections for the future. I have found that these superordinate themes resonate in various aspects with the Equalities Literacy Framework developed by Stuart et al. (2020) to establish a sociocultural perspective of young people and the phenomenon of early school leaving and "NEET". The framework contains six interrelated and dynamic elements: 'pre-existing context', which resonates with the theme of 'narratives of hardship' in this research; 'personal lived experiences' embraces all the narratives informing this research; 'positioning by others and technologies of oppression or liberation' can be linked to the theme of 'the impact of compulsory schooling'; 'self-position' can relate to the theme of 'research participants' attitudes towards life', whereas 'impact and trajectories' can connect with the theme of how the research participants project themselves into the future.

I shall now present and discuss each superordinate theme in turn.

6.1.1 Narratives of hardship: 'You do not know what I am going through'.

The personal narratives of the research participants show how life is much bigger than anything that school can be or represent. Young people already "are" and school is extraneous to that; it is a tool offered to the young person with the intent to improve their quality of life. The injustice occurs when school is presented almost as a world on its own, a place where the young person has to fit in because it is held to be the passport to what is depicted as a good life, or a life worth aspiring to. This theme reveals understandings of how challenging experiences, adversity, and hardship constitute learning experiences and knowledge in and of themselves. Viewing them as problematic because they can interfere with schooling appears to be incongruous.

Heidegger held that human beings do not exist somewhere parallel to the world they live in. Indeed, we live submerged in it, and our ability to interpret the world emerges from the interrelation between both. It was for this reason that Heidegger coined the term "Being-in-the-world" or Dasein (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). In the analytic of Dasein, selfhood is defined as a "way of existing" (Heidegger, 1927/62, p. 312), which is presented as human beings' intentional relationship with the world and existence. Heidegger interestingly articulated this relationship as care (Sorge), concern (Besorge) and solicitude (Fűrsorge). In the context of the findings from this research, including this superordinate theme, "Being-in-the-world" can be illustrated in the young person living in a particular home, in a particular ecosystem in Malta, and who is always situated within that world, regardless of whether at school, at work, or anywhere else. It is thus the task of this research to ask the text what it means to be a NEET young person coming from their particular context. The participants' accounts speak of adverse experiences from an early age such as disability, mental health issues, loss, rejection, socioeconomic disadvantage, domestic violence, instability, and substance abuse. These circumstances do not comply with the characteristics that are generally upheld as requisite for

a healthy, happy childhood and that require a high degree of adaptation to overcome (Duffy et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Rahal et al., 2020). The negative effects on their overall health are exacerbated when they face multiple stressful situations (Choi et al., 2021; Collishaw et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2020), as in the case of Laura, Tom, Sarah, Noel and Rachel in this study. It emerges from their accounts that these effects served to increase the possibility of school alienation and early school leaving. The participants' adverse experiences cannot be viewed as separate from their experiences of schooling and being NEET, for as Heidegger advocated, examining a phenomenon (e.g., being NEET) entails studying "average everydayness" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 65), as our experiences of the world are unitary and "must be seen as a whole" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 79). It is a central tenet of Heidegger's philosophy to acknowledge existence as "being in the world," which is understood as immersion and inextricability from the world (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016).

The findings of this research highlight the impact of adversity or hardship on the participants' decision to disengage from education and remain out of employment. They appear to contradict findings from previous studies that identify the main reason for alienation from education, employment and training as being: the need for money (Rosales, 2015), parents' lack of education (Odoardi, 2020), social contagion (Dupéré et al., 2021), low academic performance (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2020; Ogresta et al., 2020; Pov et al., 2020); engaging in deviant and criminal behaviour (Azzopardi & Camilleri, 2020; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012), amotivation (Su et al., 2020), or lack of 'grit' (Mendolia & Walker, 2015; Van Uden et al., 2014), whilst corroborating other findings that show that young people tend to be NEET as a result of: (i.) psychological factors (Bumbacco & Scharfe, 2020; Choe, 2021; Lee et al., 2020); (ii.) stressful life events or situations (Dupéré et al., 2018; Parviainen et al., 2020;); (iii.) consumption of alcohol and psychoactive substances (Henkel, 2011; Mo & Lao, 2020; Ogresta

et al., 2020); (iv.) peer victimisation (Goulet et al., 2020; Ogresta et al., 2020); (v.) health issues (Mascherini, 2017; Ogresta et al., 2020); (vi.) absence or death of a parent (Ntuli et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2020); (vii) lack of parental support (Alfieri et al., 2015); (viii.) parent living with illness (Bilige & Gan, 2020; Farahati et al., 2003; Goulet et al., 2020; Maltais & Normandeau 2015); (ix.) difficult family situation including domestic abuse (Bilige & Gan, 2020; Goulet et al., 2020; Keizer et al. 2019; Piché et al. 2016; Ramsdal et al. 2015); and (x.) learning difficulties (Mo & Lao, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Emergent themes within this superordinate theme were related to the absence of a parent or significant other, having a parent living with illness, bullying, learning difficulties, physical disability, mental health issues, financial issues, substance abuse, and domestic abuse. Four of these emergent themes have been found to be present in over half the sample: mental health issues (affecting all 14 research participants), bullying (affecting ten participants), learning difficulties (affecting nine participants) and financial issues (affecting eight participants).

Peer victimization, especially peer harassment and verbal victimization, emerged as a dominant theme in this research, impacting the research participants' mental health. The findings related to peer victimization in this research reflect previous research that has revealed how it affects the self-concept of the young people concerned, as well as their mental health in general, also in the long term (Norrington, 2021).

Intertwined in participants' accounts under this superordinate theme are narratives of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Kevin, Laura, Rachel, Stefan, Bruno, and Liam are afraid to go to school because of bullying from peers; Laura in particular, who fell pregnant towards the

end of compulsory schooling, was terrified of needles and of delivering her baby. The leitmotiv of fear is present in all the narratives of the research participants:

Kevin: *" ...ħafna biża, (line 68, first interview)...Ma nifhimx x'qed jgħidu (line 179, first interview) (...very scared...I do not understand what they are saying);* Laura: *"...nibża' mit-twelid (line 49, first interview; ...nibża' u nibki (line 248, first interview) (I am afraid of delivery, I get scared and cry);* Stefan: *"…nibża' napprowċjah (lill-lecturer) (line 583) (I was afraid of talking to the lecturer);* Sarah: *"jiena ninkwieta fuq ħafna affarijiet – anke affarijiet żgħar. Ninkwieta mix-xejn (lines 91-92, first interview) (I worry about a lot of things – even the smallest things. I worry about everything);* Jane: *"...il-biża' tiegħi ...(line 73)(it is my fear);* Dylan: *"There are some things I get afraid of (line 48)... Worried about things that didn't happen even yet... Fear of the future (lines 320-321).*

The research participants speak of problems originating from their families that often act as barriers to being well and thriving in school. The narratives of Rachel, Noel, Laura, and Tom that tell of their struggles with such emotional turmoil during their school years are very poignant, as are the narratives of research participants who speak of being neglected or/and rejected by family or others close to them. Noel stops during the interview to ask a rhetorical question: *"how long have I known my dad? Two years maybe?"* He says this matter-of-factly as if it is all water under the bridge now, and he has moved on. Indeed, he has had to move on and be strong to face life alone. In his accounts, this is reflected in his devil-may-care attitude and toughness. He seems to have made his peace with the loss and rejection that he has had to endure, even making sense of his troubled times at school by adding *"biss, biss" (let me tell you when it started) (line 275)* , before he listed some of the troubling incidents he had got himself into from as early on as ten years of age when he lost his mother.

Nine of the research participants speak of struggling with learning difficulties and perceptions of them in school that served to make them feel different from the rest. The research participants have spoken of how they felt so badly about themselves that they became isolated and had to stop going to school because they could not cope anymore. Tom's narrative poignantly illustrates this – having to be a guinea pig from an early age, experimented on until the correct medicine for his ADHD could be found, during which time he had disconnected from school and its exclusionary teaching methods. He clearly remembers not being able to focus on what the teacher would be saying, using the word "blurred", and compulsively following the movements of a fly all the time instead of paying attention: *"nisma' blurred … nibki għax ma nafx x'irrid nagħmel …ma kinux jifhmuni (lines 30-41)*. Nobody could understand why he cried, and why he did not know how to do his homework.

Eight out of fourteen research participants spoke about worrying about insufficient financial resources, which affected their general well-being and peace of mind. This corroborates findings from previous research (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Deighton et al., 2019; Evans & Cassells, 2014; Kiernan & Mensah, 2009; Kirby et al., 2020; Mendoza et al., 2017; Reiss et al., 2019). It is a fact that young people's clothing and leisure activities have become more costly, especially gadgets that enable participation on social media platforms, such as the smartphone and the corresponding internet connection, which can be expensive for young people with no income to speak of, or who struggle financially (Damelang & Kloß, 2013; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Välimäki et al., 2020). This is an issue that also features in the narratives of the research participants who, interestingly, speak of being hard up while appearing to have enough money for tattoos (Laura, Rachel, Sarah, Tom, Noel) and cosmetic treatments on their bodies, such as gel nails (Sarah, Rachel, Laura, Jane) and more expensive ones such as cosmetic surgery, as in the case of Sarah, who must think of her young son and his future and must make sacrifices to

provide him with a decent life. This appears to indicate the importance these young people attach to their presentation of self to others (Goffman,1990). From a Heideggerian perspective, however, these young people's investment in enhancing their body image appears "inauthentic", where "Dasein forgoes individual meaning and possibility and instead is swallowed up in the anonymous 'They' of the public everyday world" (Dasein, 2018, p.146).

It appears that the young people in this research, despite personal and familial challenges, have taken charge and responsibility for themselves by doing what they needed to do to protect themselves from others' attempts to impose their (foreign or irrelevant) definitions on them (Doyle & Keane, 2019). They may have left school early, and they may be NEET for a while, but they are captains of their ship, so to speak, and ready to take the risk of remaining authentic to themselves, and they may be seen as exercising their freedom in making a life for themselves. This appears to resonate with Heidegger's philosophy where the self is conceived of as inextricably linked to the actualisation of the care-relations: "When fully conceived, the care-structure includes the phenomenon of selfhood" (1927/1962, p. 370). Shared concern about the world and solicitude to others are inextricably bound together by care, and in the analytic of Dasein, the idea of selfhood is intertwined with the way we relate to Being as actualized in daily life. This includes how we relate to problems and phenomena surrounding us and impacting our state of mind and body. Dasein is rooted in the world, but we must ask ourselves who the person going through daily life actually is. Departing from the 'I' discloses the fundamental relatedness of the self with other selves. In experiencing 'myself' I discover that besides what is 'myself', there are elements that are coming from outside: one would need to pay attention, for example, to the origin one's habits, manners, words, and thoughts. This reflection can be applied in our consideration of NEET young people and their narratives of hardship that have impacted their current situation. Heidegger's philosophy invites deep

reflection on who NEET young people are, and what has caused their 'NEETness', whether it is only 'themselves' or whether 'others' contributed to their situation and its origins and contexts.

Often educators tell students to "believe in yourself". However, within the educational context of schools, this has a specific and narrow meaning, speaking to those who already embrace school culture, who are motivated and ambitious, so that they do not falter and achieve their goals. Indeed, believing in yourself means "believing in *your self*", as in your ability to prevail and overcome, your ability to create, to love, to explore and discover, to be useful to society, and to be well. Further reflection on the participants can shed more light on their resilience and "authenticity" in Heidegger's terms. According to the analytic of Dasein, a human being has to retrieve his or her own authentic self "from the fallenness of the everyday worldliness in order to encounter the other as another Dasein." (Joensuu, 2012, p.423). In other words, the participants' views, decisions and behaviours make sense to them uniquely as a reflection of their experiences of Being-in-the-World, of which official understandings of education, training and employment may only be a small part. The participants' narratives speak of the disadvantages they were born into and had to live with, and of their capacity to find alternative ways to survive. This is no mean feat when one considers all that they had to overcome to swim upstream, so to speak, veering off the beaten track that is facilitated by the state and its hegemonic education system (Clandinin et al., 2013; Doyle & Keane, 2019).

Personal agency is an "active process of choosing the appropriate institutional involvements, organizational memberships, and interpersonal relationships" (Shanahan, 2000, p. 675). The research participants were unaware of the NEET classification that statisticians used to describe their status, so we cannot say that they exercised agency in resisting this label specifically.

However, reflecting Heidegger's (1927/62) notion of "Being-in-the-world", the term NEET refers to a complex, multifaceted, and multilayered set of circumstances that combine in its encapsulation. And it is in this complexity that the research participants live and act, exercising agency to ensure their well-being and survival. Examples of agentic actions and gestures emerging from their accounts include the following:

- They live according to a belief system formed as a result of individual experiences of hardship (Noel, Dylan, Laura, Rachel, Sarah, Alexei, Marie);

- They took on caring responsibilities in the home when their parent is unable to cope (Dylan, Jane, Rachel);

- They practiced self-reflexivity, such that they chose what was best for their well-being, even if the choice was difficult or unpopular (Marie and Tom – stopping medication that they did not feel was helping them; Noel and Laura – acting on the feeling that asking for help from guidance teachers was not as safe as they thought; Alexei and Kevin – skipping school because of how it affected their mental health; Stefan - persevering in reaching out to others despite communication issues);

- They persevere in living a normal life, seeking employment and defying judgmental attitudes from others, even though living with a disability (Rachel, Stefan, Sarah);

- They adapt to difficult and new situations, such as falling pregnant and having a child at a very young age (Sarah, Laura);

- They stopped substance abuse when faced with the possibility of death (Noel) and with the awareness that it would not help to heal emotional wounds (Tom);

- They define success on their terms, rising above judgment by school authorities (Anthea, Noel, Alexei, Tom, Bruno, Marie, Laura, Dylan);

⋮ They realise that asking for help is ok and take necessary action (Jane, Bruno, Kevin);

⋮ They critically reflect on education and school procedures (Noel, Bruno, Laura, Dylan, Alexei, Jane, Marie);

⋮ They do what is necessary for them to feel connected to others and to the world: e.g. tattoos, cosmetic surgery (Sarah, Laura, Rachel, Tom);

⋮ Most participants seek to establish connections with others and nurture relationships because they have learned that this helps them cope in challenging times (e.g. Bruno, Stefan, Tom, Rachel, and Jane).

The research participants have expressed a pervasive feeling of uncertainty and confusion during and after school while being NEET. Nevertheless, they unfailingly decided upon their fate in various instances of their lives when they had to: Marie and Tom took a stand about taking pills to treat their mental health issues because they believed in their own ability to cope, and they are succeeding – *"għedt daqshekk – mhux billi jgħid hu ...jien dawn mhuma jagħmluli xejn."(I said enough! Those pills were doing nothing for me - Marie, lines 158-172, first interview);* Laura wants to be a make-up artist, and knows that quality make-up is essential for the best results. Despite lacking financial resources, defying those around her cautioning her about how she should spend her money, she still purchases the more expensive, quality products that will enable her to do the best job possible: "*Nippreferi nonfoq ħafna, jkun tajjeb u jservini, u ma jtellagħlix ponot" (I prefer quality – so it stays longer and does not give me pimples, lines 322-330, first interview);* Noel and Kevin decided that guidance teachers do not help as much as they tell you they do. For Noel, they are "manipulators" – they report what you confide in them to your guardians. He experienced the guidance teachers' duty to notify his grandmother that he was smoking as a betrayal of trust. Kevin noticed that what they said

was not helpful to him vis-à-vis to what he was experiencing in his life – nothing changed after he regularly went to speak to them. Things got worse, if anything.

The research participants feel like they are at a crossroads, with many openings around them, but not knowing which would work best for them, or indeed, whether they are at all attracted to or interested in any of the options available. Their thoughts and actions or lived experiences are impacted by experiences and knowledge derived from other people, processes, and structures in their world, which relates to Heidegger's construct of "being with" - Mitsein (Heidegger, 1927/1962). From a Heideggerian perspective, "being with", while affirming interaction with other human beings (Dasein), also acknowledges relating with other entities (such as the home, school and third spaces) that impact Dasein's (the research participants') existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

6.1.2 The impact of compulsory schooling: 'Those five years of school have damaged me!'
 While the research participants acknowledged the impact that experiences of adversity and hardship have had and continue to have on them, they expressed ambivalent feelings about the school: on the one hand, they recognise its authority and its beneficial contribution to their lives because they learned things there that they would never have discovered or learned otherwise, but on the other hand they felt let down because their (involuntary) reaction to adversity – often described as deviant or problematic – cost them the opportunity of finishing secondary school properly. In their view, the school did not see or relate to them for who they were but in terms of who or what it wanted them to be.

According to Heidegger, each of us is constituted by our immersion or embeddedness in the things we live with daily. We find ourselves in "tending them," and in being "distressed by them" (Heidegger, 1982, p.281). We are what we pursue and care for. Heidegger argues that:

"The Dasein (we) does not need a special kind of observation, nor does it need to conduct a sort of espionage on the ego in order to have the self; rather, as the Dasein gives itself over immediately and passionately to the world itself, its own self is reflected to it from things" (1982, pp. 282-282). Thus, the young person cannot be conceptualised separately from all the things in their life, everything that impacts them in various ways. This superordinate theme indicates that hardship caused by mental health issues – mainly anxiety and depression – was caused or exacerbated by the school itself, which is highly concerning, given that schools are universally regarded as safe places that should foster the well-being of the child (Brown & Donnelly, 2020, p.17; Govorova et al., 2020; Hanley et al., 2020), and considering the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This concern engages with Heidegger's view of modernity as a technical age ruled by 'enframing' (Heidegger, 1954/1977), where all entities are understood as submitting to the 'logic of calculation'. In this scenario people are reductively considered resources available for 'calculative thinking', objectified for measurement and control, viewed as potential cogs in the machine of efficiency (Peters, 2002; Rae, 2013). Engaging with this critical awareness enables us to reflect on the potential role of education in such a cultural-historical background (Brito et al., 2021), including liberating education from the "shackles of performativity and its emphasis on achievement for its own sake", towards a "more significant role for the development of wholeness and authenticity, incorporating processes of self-cultivation alongside care for the social and natural world" (Brito et al., 2021, p. 304).

The research participants spoke of unchecked bullying by peers and teachers in some cases, which severely affected their sense of belonging in the school. They brought about the onset of mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and interference with sleeping patterns. These findings appear to reflect those from the studies conducted by Cefai and Cooper (2010) and

Magri (2009) in Maltese schools. They also corroborate previous findings that associate a lacking sense of belonging in school with depressive symptoms in young people which if unaddressed, could persist into future mental health problems (Bumbacco & Scharfe, 2020; Korpershoek et al., 2019; Pikulski et al., 2020; Schochet et al., 2006). The school has emerged as a dominant source of discomfort and alienation to the research participants in this work, especially procedures that did not adequately engage with their contexts and home situations.

Jane panicked at secondary school when her teachers could not deliver lessons because of students' unruly behaviour; she worried because about their collective future (*"hemm il-futur tagħna wara"),* and having failed her Junior Lyceum examination previously, she now wants to have another shot at "being a success." Her parents dote on her to make something of herself, so that she would not have the hard life that they had. Nevertheless, Jane encounters frustration and powerlessness because she cannot handle the stress that academic schooling causes her. It seems to her that she is stuck in a rut because of this.

The research participants speak of not being helped by such school mechanisms. Bruno says it succinctly, having experienced exacerbated levels of anxiety caused by exaggerated disciplinary measures: *"Imma ta' tfal żgħar - iridu jifhmu li ... kemm hemm li jifhmu d-dixxiplina*?!" (*lines 208-225*) (*They have to understand that children live in their own world and do not understand 'discipline'!)*

From a phenomenological perspective, the research participants' understanding of their challenges and difficulties may not reflect adult values and judgments about life and its problems. For example, adults and authorities could view Noel's and Tom's dabbling with drugs as the "real" problem. In contrast, for the young men themselves, the problem was

oblivious, meddling, or arrogant adults who (mis)behave or use their adult power to control them, not understanding that they were barely staying afloat in the stormy waters of their life.

6.1.3 Use of time: 'Killing time'.

This superordinate theme reflects the research participants' priorities in how they spend their time. Emergent themes that were present in over half the sample were: attending Youth Guarantee sessions (ten research participants); time on the computer/social media (all of the participants), looking for employment (11 research participants); the importance of third places (9 research participants).

The findings from this superordinate theme show that contrary to widespread beliefs (Välimäki et al., 2020; Deakin et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2014) that NEET young people are not interested in working, the research participants in fact, look forward to work. Eleven of the research participants said they were looking for employment, and ten of them attended Youth Guarantee sessions to improve their work prospects. All participants in this research used the internet to inform themselves about job vacancies and other information related to finding work, among other topics. Three of the research participants engaged in precarious work to find a satisfactory job. Anthea's feelings of low self-worth, which she says have been exacerbated by previous academic failure, have prevented her from persisting in a course she liked, so she fluctuates between one low-paid job and another; Tom and Noel are adventurers, changing jobs whenever it suits them, or when something crops up that they are not happy with. None of the research participants visualised a future where they get by on welfare, except Rachel, whose disability restricts her job opportunities, despite persisting in finding work. Conscious of lacking qualifications, she says nobody wanted to employ a manual worker with a disability. As she emphasizes, the disability allowance she was getting was not enough for her to live decently.

Research participants' accounts about their uses of time shed important light on the meanings attached to participating in a programme such as the one organised under Youth Guarantee. These meanings emerge from what Heidegger calls Befindlichkeit - mood, or disposition (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), which is impacted by all that is going on in the young persons' life. Heidegger maintains that disposition arises out of Being-in-the-world, and is the result of interrelation with things, events, and people in our ecosystem. In terms of this superordinate theme, namely about how the research participants spent their time, we must understand the young people's feelings in deciding what activities to engage in every day, their Befindlichkeit in dealing with the time available to them. For Heidegger, no experience can stand alone, separate from context, and thus, disposition is imbued with ideas preconceived in relation to Being-in-the-world (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). This understanding is significant in interpreting the meanings about the particular use of time by the research participants during the stage of being NEET.

Several research participants have articulated the reason for their attendance as being to meet other young people, and to feel less alone, besides the obvious one of improving their skills and knowledge in view to finding employment. They have been advised and even directed to do this on being perceived as "at risk" of exclusion by the authorities. During participant observation at Youth Guarantee sessions, I could notice a certain ambivalence – on the one hand, at times they appeared distracted, bored and forced somehow, while on the other, they appeared to be keen to "make it," to compensate for past school disappointments, to give themselves another chance. It appeared that they were taking more of what they had rejected – or that which had rejected them first – to avoid the stigma attached to being idle, or "NEET". Participants speak of school procedures that made them feel misunderstood and isolated. There is a sense of injustice at being seen reductively in terms of breaking the school rules or simply

as a "problem," interfering with the smooth running of the school machine. Being in an educational environment that pathologizes or disciplines those that deviate from what is held to be the norm was described as isolating. Attending remedial sessions such as those held by Youth Guarantee could be seen as a coping mechanism to address the negative feelings associated with being seen as not living up to the expectations of those who matter, and the solitude of feeling "other." The findings from this work consolidate results from previous studies (e.g., Hammond, 2018; Keller et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2014) that reveal the isolation and resulting lack of control suffered by groups of young people across the spheres of home, education, and work. The research participants deal with this sense of alienation by seeking safe harbour in third places – comfortable surroundings they know well, and where they can exercise autonomy, to some degree. The participants in this research all inhabit third places that vary according to their preference and way of life, such as Marie, for whom sheer enjoyment of being in the sun represents the getaway, where she can be herself, in tune with her emotions. This warm place contrasts sharply with how she often encounters the world, especially when she feels misunderstood and rejected. Her description of being with her tribe in the sun reveals her gentle nature – she has no ambitions or pretensions whatsoever; all she wants is to be surrounded by those she loves and have a decent job to be able to live well. Similarly, Rachel also feels comfortable with "misfits" like herself, trans and gay individuals who, like her, have been bullied and ejected from a school system that made them feel unsafe due to their difference. She seeks the company of these friends whom she considers family and spends most of her time in their company. She is someone else when surrounded by those she trusts, someone with dignity, someone valid and important, acknowledged by others, who seek her help, and who are there for her in times of need. This third place offers Rachel a saving grace.

The findings of this research also point at the large amount of time that the research participants spend online in places of their liking that may be referred to as "digital third places" (Memarovic et al., 2014; Soukup, 2006). Regular social media presence and activity indicate attachment and shed light on the fact that this can serve as a third place for all these young people, a place where they can be themselves, feel comfortable, away from home (first place) and school or work (second place). For example, Marie is often woken up in the morning by a friend so they can smoke their first cigarette of the day together, Tom is frequently online with his girlfriend every day, Alexei regularly researches areas of personal interest, and Bruno plays online games every chance he gets and follows areas of interest. He even prefers to watch concerts online rather than attending physically because he feels more in control.

Most of the research participants said they regularly watched videos on YouTube, searched for job vacancies, chatted, and played games online in their free time. Most research participants stayed up late every night to chat with friends online. This helps them feel connected to the world during uncertain times, satisfying the essential human need for belonging and safety.

6.1.4 Notions of success and failure: 'my idea of success'.

In Malta and elsewhere, performance outcomes are propelling reforms in many educational systems today, and global standard indicators such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) greatly influence education policy and reform globally as schools prepare students for the labour markets of the future (Heng et al., 2020). However, as argued in the literature review (Chapter Two), performance-oriented consequences of school restructuring impoverish the value of education (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; Biesta, 2009;), not least by downplaying the importance of students' participation in their learning processes, so that they can flourish as human beings (Fielding, 2012; Shirley, 2015). This reflects the concern Brunila et al. (2020) (see Chapter Two) expressed regarding how notions of success are presented to

young people from within entrepreneurial discourses emerging from neoliberal ideology, communicating that self-management can guarantee success.

As the findings from the current research show, an exaggerated emphasis on the rational and the intellectual, together with a preoccupation with the ends (utilitarianism), can make the young persons concerned feel that they are defined by their obedience, performance, and achievement, rather than by their uniqueness, creativity, and personal strengths; participants' accounts appear to indicate that the educational system does not perceive them as having an imagination, a soul, and a mind of their own (MacMurray, 2012). In Heidegger's terms this state of affairs may be viewed as an example of Enframing, where established procedures and forms of teaching, measurement and assessment in education and the curriculum itself are presented as natural and unquestionable (1927/1962). In light of Heidegger's phenomenological theory of authenticity, the participants' school experiences indicate that they were not allowed or encouraged to be authentic. For Heidegger, authentic existence is achieved when we know who we are and understand that each human being is distinct. Once we realise that we have our destiny to fulfill, we will no longer allow ourselves to follow the others or the crowd. We will become our "authentic" selves and seek to achieve our potential in the world (Warnock, 1970). Heidegger's notion of inauthenticity is enacted when we view ourselves as isolated subjects "whose only relation to the community is to be dominated by it. In this case, rather than being an individual *part* of the community, we are *subjected* to it" (Stroh, 2015, p.255). For Heidegger, when we cannot recognise our dependency on the community as a form of domination, we might conceive of ourselves as autonomous beings in submitting to it (Stroh, 2015). The participants' accounts indicate that the consequences of resisting "inauthenticity" in Heidegger's terms appear to be mental health issues, cynicism, a sense of isolation, defiance, and anger.

The notion of success did not mean anything at first for most of the young people in this study. I had to rephrase my question for them to understand what I was asking during the interview from: "What does success mean to you?" to: "What would need to happen for you to feel satisfied at this point – to feel that you have achieved your goal(s), or made a wish or a dream come true?"

It appeared that the word "success" may not be part of their vocabulary at all. Perhaps it was not something they even thought about. However, once they understood what I was asking, they spoke about what made them happy, what conveyed meaning to them (success), what causes them disappointment and sorrow (failure), and about how these values have influenced their decisions to leave school early and being "NEET." What they say shows that very often they were attempting to be "authentic" in Heidegger's terms – they have not always absorbed the same values prioritised by the education system, largely due to other ways of being, other knowledge derived from their ecosystem, and experiences of the world beyond school.

The young people in this research appeared to respond to educational system procedures and values in a range of ways: acceptance (Liam, Jane, Stefan), victimhood (Rachel, Kevin, Dylan, Sarah, Bruno, Liam), rebellion (Anthea, Noel, Tom, Alexei, Marie, Laura) and deviance (Noel, Tom), for example. For Stefan, who struggles with communication issues, the feeling of connection most resonates with his idea of personal success – to feel the love of family and the respect and acceptance from friends. On the other hand, the meaning of success for Noel is the ability to feel free, to enjoy life on one's terms. Like Rachel and Laura, he knows what it is like to suddenly find oneself in chaos when familiar things dissolve in the blink of an eye. This knowledge renders planning and striving for an uncertain future meaningless for the young people concerned.

Narratives from this research bring to the fore the reality of day-to-day survival for the research participants, whose experiences of school have often been marred by oppressive systems, such as labeling and shaming (Dorling, 2010; Stuart et al., 2020). Heidegger's concept of *Sorge* (care) can help shed more light on this superordinate theme about what the notion of success and failure mean to the research participants. For Heidegger, "Dasein's being (the lived experiences of research participants) reveals itself as care" (Heidegger, 1927/ 1962, p. 227). Put simply, Heidegger's care structure refers to human priorities or what we care about the most – "it exposes the human being's circumspective concern and angst" (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016, p. 3). This is significant for the present theme, particularly when we consider what the participants care about and value regarding aspirations, hopes, desires, or ambitions (success). All research participants associated success with being independent, autonomous, and mentally healthy rather than with academic achievement. Most research participants have emphasized the vital importance of relationships. In school, good relations with some teachers made all the difference. In contrast, experiences of severe bullying marked them profoundly, causing them or even exacerbating existing anxiety and making them leave school prematurely. On a personal basis, solid relationships with friends and family served as a safety net or refuge from distress caused by outside pressures. The young people in this research struggle to find their path in life, exploring and experimenting with different meanings in a complex world that is continually in flux. Nonetheless, they are aware of their capacity to exercise agency to survive and thrive.

6.1.5 Attitudes towards life: 'the way I see it'.

The phenomenology of being NEET is depicted in how the research participants live with and interpret the complexity in their life. This complexity is illustrated by how they juggle feeling powerless with forging ahead on their terms. The emerging theme of feeling like a victim of

circumstances is counterbalanced here by an equally significant theme of self-creation and possibility concerning the future. On the one hand, the participants feel constrained by structures, and on the other, they are determined to beat the odds, as do their role models or people they say they admire. They are inspired by stories that depict people who have known what it is to be troubled and disadvantaged but who manage to succeed anyway (Liam, Bruno, Laura, Tom and Rachel).

Liam admires Dwayne Douglas Johnson, a famous American celebrity and former wrestler known by the ring name The Rock. As a teenager, Johnson was described as "a troubled teenager with a history of run-ins with police" (Wikipedia). A football coach, however, saw athletic potential in Johnson, and recruited him to join the football team, which proved the beginning of a personal transformation for the teenager. The "from darkness to light" narrative fills Liam with hope. He said that he tends to feel small when he looks at peers who are steps ahead of him in obtaining qualifications and being in an optimal position to choose a career to their liking. The metaphor of being a worm (*kont inħossni qisni nemlu, line 230, second interview*), which he uses to describe how he felt in such situations, is poignant. Listening to The Rock, who exudes strength, power, and determination, inspires him, and helps him cope with feelings of self-doubt.

Anthea listens to *Motionless in White* during her daily walks. Her narrative reflects a journey filled with turbulent emotions caused by incomprehension of structures and procedures that sought to mold her, and frustration at being misunderstood by those around her. She speaks of struggling and wanting to fight to be the person she wants to be. The lyrics of their song *Legacy*, in particular (see Appendix 16), inspire her because they seem to speak to her own thoughts as she asks herself who she wants to be, what story she will write for herself, what legacy will be

hers, and whether she is ready to fight till the end: *"What kind of scars will you leave? What kind of blood will you bleed? When fear sets the stage for defeat, what will your legacy be?"*

Some research participants have tattoos on their bodies that document special persons or events, their struggles to overcome and "make it," and also as a form of self-expression (Armstrong et al., 2004b; Cadell et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011). In addition, as is manifested especially in the narratives of Rachel, Sarah, and Tom, having body art enabled the communication of mutual values and earning of recognition among peers, which positively benefited their emotional well-being (Hill, 2020; Notara et al., 2022). These coping strategies and actions indicate agency on the part of the research participants and show that although structural constraints may circumscribe individual agency, young people are actors in their own development as human beings as well.

This agentic quality across the participants' accounts is also reflected in Jane's narrative of experiencing powerlessness but persisting in forging her path out of her darkness, as is poignantly illustrated in her use of the metaphor of the light bulb that somebody switches off at the very moment when she needs to perform. At the time of the research, she was well on her way to finding out what works for her. Her description of what she went through each time an examination paper confronted her brings to the fore the anxiety and fear that used to come over her. These were accompanied by feelings of injustice at the intuition of how she was at the mercy of the powers that be who make the rules that define her life and her chances of success as she seeks to apply herself.

From the young people's point of view, they may be living the life they want for themselves, as in the examples of Laura, Dylan, Stefan, Rachel, and Noel, who express satisfaction with

their way of life but viewed from the outside, they may still appear to be constrained by structural factors. For example, from an etic perspective, it would be a good thing if they found training opportunities or employment to their liking, where they can experience a sense of stability and belonging. However, the findings from this research show that the young people themselves are not particularly driven by what is generally held to be common sense. Instead, they hold idiosyncratic beliefs and values that may or may not necessarily result from structural constraints (see also Caroleo et al., 2020; Lőrinc et al., 2019; Hoskins & Barker, 2018). Heidegger's construct of "being with" - Mitsein - can help shed light on the value that participants placed on relationships with other people in their lives and on significant events that had impacted their sense-making of choices available to them and notions of their future self (Heidegger, 1927/1962). According to Heidegger, "It is understanding that first of all opens up or … reveals something like being. …Being is given only if there is disclosure, …if there is truth" (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 72-73), and "Dasein (our self) can understand itself primarily via intraworldly beings which it encounters" (p. 455).

6.1.6 Coping: "I can find my own way."

"How much adversity should resilient[24] individuals endure before social arrangements rather than individuals are targeted for intervention?" (Bottrell, 2009, p. 335). This section discusses NEET young people's way of coping with adversity and disadvantage and therefore, their agency as human beings to strive for the life they want for themselves. Upon further reflection, where I attempted to deconstruct my understanding of the term "resilience," I found that I was uncomfortable with the notion that we should leave these young people to their devices because they had whatever it took to make it on their own. Perhaps I was imposing my own personal

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[24] The thematic focus of the term "resilience" has varied, becoming associated with various other key terms such as foster-care, psychology, migration, delinquency, sexual orientation, wellness, stress at work, and education programmess. The concept of "resilience" emerges from positive psychology, and its importance has been acknowledged by the US military in combat troops training (Garrett, 2016).

experiences and views on their situation, a view that I had not processed sufficiently. Perhaps I, too, have been caught up in dominant discourses about the merits of being "resilient," rather than seeking to understand more deeply what this meant and the consequences it implied. This section, in fact, could be seen as a preoccupation with and a critique of the term "resilience," which at first presented itself as what is universally believed to be an asset or a strength on the part of the research participants. One way of looking at the findings in this section is that these young people are engaged in staying in or achieving safety in a comfort zone, finding a sense of security in distracting themselves from anxieties caused by their inability or perhaps unwillingness to re-engage with education or with employment. Another lens could help us see how they are, in fact, seeking to strengthen themselves to face an uncertain and often confusing world. This superordinate theme indicates that they go about this by investing in relationships with significant others and by working on self-appreciation. The latter endeavour "inauthentically" (Heidegger, 1982) includes opting for cosmetic surgery and tattoos, for instance, as they attempt to enhance their body image in relation to dominant norms of attractiveness. These choices beyond the educational realm in favor of dominant norms of beauty may be seen as revealing what Heidegger calls being "not as we at bottom are able to be known to ourselves…(1982, p.283). For Heidegger, this genuine, albeit inauthentic understanding of the self "takes place in such a way that this […] self of our thoughtlessly random, common, everyday existence, "reflects" itself to itself from out of that to which it has given itself over" (p.283). Put simply, what Heidegger's theory may contribute to this discussion is that deep down the participants (as beings, Dasein) know themselves, and are conscious that what they are doing is a coping tactic, another way of achieving a feeling of belonging to their desired community.

Perseverance at taking a second chance with education by attending Youth Guarantee sessions indicates their belief and hope in making it through alternative pathways. The findings from this research indicate that what they liked most about this second opportunity was being in smaller groups and the social aspect of it – an edited version of the school model they had rejected. For most of the research participants, this was their way of attempting to "fit in" and be "normal", according to the precepts of the school system. Perhaps some part of them has absorbed the judgment imposed by the school upon those who deviate; perhaps the school has partly succeeded in making them feel guilty at having deviated from the sanctioned norms.

From another perspective, the research participants also show self-knowledge and authenticity when they act in favor of what works best for their well-being. Bruno, for example, knows that his chronic anxiety may prevent him from furthering his education. However, he attends Youth Guarantee sessions because he has discovered that he can feel well in a small group where he does not feel threatened. He knows it might not lead anywhere and is a "limbo" for him, but it is better than staying isolated at home. Kevin also struggles to overcome mental health issues that have plagued him throughout his childhood by attending Youth Guarantee sessions. He hopes to find a job he likes and finally become independent of his parents, with whom he has a troubled relationship. Jane, Liam, and Stefan refuse to let an adverse past define them. They attend Youth Guarantee sessions because of the promise of finding a job they could like.

On the other hand, Noel, Rachel, Anthea, and Laura appear to express authenticity in staying away from programmes such as those held by Youth Guarantee and spend their time according to their preferences. Their way of coping is by living within the margins of the familiar, a safe place with rules they know and within which they can feel autonomous. This may be seen as a

way of coping with adversity, or "resilience." However, the open question remains whether being resilient will save them from disadvantage.

6.1.7 Projections for the future: 'life is a journey'.

This section will discuss the seventh superordinate theme of how young people in this research look at their future and how they see themselves in five years. Taking to task this superordinate theme and viewing it as significant, stems from my assumption (and that of educators and policymakers in general) that young people have "aspirations" for the future. The general assumption is that aspirations are formed from within the person's ecosystem – in social, cultural, and economic circumstances (France et al., 2020). This is where our self-efficacy, confidence, and motivation take shape. This concept resonates with Heidegger's notion of "thrownness" – the situations and circumstances within which we are born - and the impact this may have on our possibilities in life.

For Heidegger, human beings make sense of their lives through what he calls "thrown projection" (Heidegger, 1927/1962). To be thrown, for Heidegger, is to have a starting point wherefrom we project ourselves. We make sense of things constrained by the situatedness and context of our lives. This impacts what we have to make sense of and how we can understand. Further, we go through life constituted by our identity and all that has happened to us in our past, which makes us who we are in the present and determines how we perceive our future, including our aspirations. According to Heidegger, this personal positioning in the world is where we have been thrown and thus located, "our sense-making is constrained" (Whity, 2011, p. 66). In this work, the research participants' aspirations for the future are similarly impacted. For example, Laura's and Sarah's aspirations may be seen as impacted by their gender, being both teen mothers committed to raising their child, their socio-economic situations, their history of paternal rejection, and their experiences of being bullied while growing up. Noel's

and Rachel's apparent lack of aspirations may reflect their culture and experience of life's chaotic nature, which has taught them that planning for the future is futile.

From an educational perspective, similarly to the possession of "resilience," having "aspirations" purportedly[25] protects young people from becoming caught into an impasse where those living with disadvantage and who are seen as underperforming from an educational viewpoint miss out on opportunities on the labour market and are condemned to hardship in the long term (Pimlott-Wilson, 2015; Simmons et al., 2020).

The emergent theme of "living for today" – despite not being dominant in the narratives of all the participants in this research – flies in the face of the idea of "aspirations," or having a "standard" life course (Gaspani, 2018; Leccardi & Ruspini, 2006) that unravels according to established stages – i.e., what often translates into finishing one's education; becoming employed; achieving economic and residential autonomy; starting a family (or leaving home) (Bahrs et al., 2022; Shanahan, 2000).

This emergent theme is imbued with distrust in the idea of a "future", or indeed a friendly-looking one. Interestingly, this theme emerged from the narratives of the participants who suffered most throughout their lives. They have learned the futility of banking on an unknowable tomorrow because the present moment is all that they can be sure of. Gaspani (2018) interprets the weakening of individuals' ability to plan for the future in terms of disconnection between life trajectories and social institutions, the latter being perceived by the

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[25] A wide range of literature outlines the negative consequences of early school leaving (Eurostat, 2022), but this theory has been disrupted (Symonds et al., 2016; Stuart et al., 2020) by the Longitudinal Study of Symonds et al. (2016) in England, who compared the trajectory of alienated students to those of engaged ones in terms of behaviour, mental health, use of substances, employment, and attainment. At the outset, there was a higher likelihood for alienated young people to be workless and to encounter mental health issues, but the disparity evened out gradually after the age of 20 (2016, p. 993).

participants in his research as largely unreliable. The findings from the present research with a younger cohort of NEET young people from that in Gaspani's study (2018) paint a different picture because they indicate that the lack of preoccupation with the future may instead be an act of self-preservation or survival for the participants concerned (Dylan, Kevin, Noel, Marie, Rachel). Reflecting the findings of Simmons et al. (2020), this could also be viewed as the young people's attempt to resist being caught up in areas where their knowledge or capital would likely be devalued or disregarded, and therefore where they would find themselves at a disadvantage. They seek to assert themselves as subjects of value in familiar environments where they can exert control and feel that they count. In this sense, knowledge from past experiences influences their choices that will impact the future.

For Heidegger (1975/1982), too, humans only have the present, "composed of a manifold of existing nows" (p. 391). This present contains our past, and the future is as yet non-existent: "That which we are as having been has not gone by, passed away, in the sense in which we say that we could shuffle off our past like a garment. The Dasein can as little get rid of its bygoneness as escape its death. In every sense and in every case everything we have been is an essential determination of our existence" (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 435).

 Writing about the orientation towards the future, Heidegger (1975/1982) sees human beings as "carried away" to their past "capacity-to-be" (p. 437), implying that our outlook of our future is impacted by our past experiences. This idea may be seen as reflecting Heidegger's belief that our location, or "thrownness" largely determines our expectations of our future. However, in turn, these are impacted by the meaning we give to our being (Dasein), which for Heidegger (1975 /1982) is care - Sorge – the concern we have for our existence. Our understanding of the future emerges from the meaning that the past and the present hold for us. For Heidegger, "our

lives are the possibilities we have for a finite existence, possibilities that are socially given but individually experienced and, in some cases, individually chosen or accepted as our own" (Nielsen & Skotnicki, 2019, p. 117). Our future orientation is reflected in our concern with "what can be taken care of, what can be done, what is urgent or indispensable in the business of everyday activity" (Heidegger, 1927 /1962, p. 322).

All five research participants whose narratives relate to the theme of "living for today" have experienced trauma throughout their lives, including the death of a parent. Focusing on making today good is all that matters to them at this point, which may be viewed as the ultimate agency – taking over so that nothing comes between them and their well-being. This response to life could be linked to Heidegger's conceptualization of agency as being the result of understanding our existence in terms of moving inevitably towards death, which we experience upon the death of another person (Nielsen & Skotnicki, 2019), before we die ourselves. For Heidegger, when death is accepted as a possibility, and the finite nature of life is deeply reckoned with, we find ourselves compelled to look at life differently, even fearfully. This fear is powerful, as it can drag us out of our mundane absorption to face ourselves (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger calls this state authentic being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Thus situated, we embrace the unknowable future as a universe of possibilities, including the possibility of transformation (Nielsen & Skotnicki, 2019).

The young people in this study continuously evaluate themselves according to broader social categories – of class, gender, (dis)ability, being young, being grown up, and so on (Alexander et al., 2020; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997a). Their lived experiences are multi-layered, containing elements that fit in poorly with normalised beliefs about being young and moving toward a beckoning future promising "success". This intricacy may stand in stark relief against

normative discourses about socially acceptable options at their disposal when they finish compulsory schooling (Furlong, 2009).

Finally, most participants in this research seek "normality," wanting to find a job, earn money to live a decent life, and be independent. This is also reflected in the research of Russell, Simmons, and Thompson (2014) and in that of Simmons, Connelly, and Thompson (2020) in England, for example. They found that pragmatic rationality appeared to be the significant factor in the progression aims for most NEET young people who simply wished for a job.

6.2 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the seven superordinate themes that have emerged from IPA analysis of the data gathered for this research using participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 young people classified as NEET at the time of data collection. I have discussed the superordinate themes using Heideggerian phenomenology as the main theoretical framework.

The concluding chapter provides a synthesis of the research findings, including an outline of this work's limitations, recommendations for further research, and implications for policy, professional development for educators, pre-service teacher training, youth workers, and educational leaders.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways;

the point, however, is to change it.

(Karl Marx, 1845, Theses on Feuerbach, Thesis XI, p.15).

7.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the research's central conclusions. It discusses how these can inspire policy, practice, and further research in the field and includes personal reflections on the methodology and the Ph.D. journey.

To my knowledge, this is the first study in recent years to research the lived experience of being NEET in Malta. I have attempted to address this research gap by seeking an insider's point of view to the experience of being NEET using participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen young people classified as NEET. The main research questions that I sought to answer through this work engage with the research participants' interpretation of their "NEET" situation, and of being done with compulsory schooling. I have also explored their attitudes toward life and what they consider to be most important in it.

Given that their being "NEET" is so closely bound to their experience of compulsory schooling on the one hand, and with hopes for the future on the other, the research questions have also engaged with the research participants' lived experience of school and with their vision of themselves in the coming years.

7.1 What is young people's lived experience of being NEET in Malta?

The themes that emerged from the young people's narratives reveal a complex blend of home circumstances, parenting, schooling, community, and societal factors that could lead to an endpoint or a situation where a young person is taking a break or is disengaged from education, training, or employment. This research identifies issues emanating from this complex blend of factors that render the educational pathway of groups of young people complex from a very

young age. These issues point back at society as having the responsibility to distribute resources fairly such that disadvantage is effectively addressed.

The phenomenological data yielded by this research shows that judgment (also pre-judgment) disrespects young people and stunts their healthy development on various levels. One significant consequence of being labeled and judged is shame, which has been used to explain social exclusion as a result of deliberately avoiding public sociability and engaging with selected groups or relationships (Monticelli et al., 2016; Välimäki et al., 2020). Another consequence of structural marginality is stigma, which according to Goffman (1963), is related to a character failing. For structurally marginalized young people, the stigma may impact everyday interactions with people in general (Goffman, 1963), because by adhering to common sense (including what ought to be considered stigmatic), the community cultivates shared meanings and values, enshrining them as self-evident for all its members (Gadamer, 2019; Gasparatou, 2017; Snir, 2017).

The findings of this phenomenological research indicate that, rather than the "problem" that policymakers and politicians make of it, not being in education, employment or training (NEET) has the same meaning as the semicolon tattoo on Tom's arm: *"basically when you stop and then decide to continue… life is a journey"* (Tom, lines 405-421). This phase is a fertile ground for self-creation for the young people concerned, a time of self-reflection at a place outside the system that seeks to channel and form them according to its agenda, where they can see things more clearly. They do not think in terms of being "out of education, training and employment," for that is only political jargon and does not pertain to the lifeworld of young people trying to find, or indeed make their way *'in the mist'* (Tom, line 654) or in some kind of *'limbo'* (Bruno, line 53).

Contrary to policymakers' and statisticians' view of NEETs as a homogeneous category, the NEET young people participating in this research have their own particular and various reasons for finding themselves in this situation. These interpretations are often creative, demonstrating the will to be their ship's captains rather than let others lead and drive for them. This agency is often ignored in education discourses that privilege competition and achievement in the service of capitalism. The research participants' views of themselves defy those of the school authorities who look upon them as lacking in some essential or preferred personal quality rather than as proof of a flawed system that fails young people – "*The school itself contributed to my anxiety*" (Bruno, line 208). This finding goes against dominant discourses that seek to collapse complexity into totalising discourses of inadequacy and failure where non-compliant students are concerned.

Being done with secondary schooling is a relief for most research participants. However, they miss good teachers who were understanding and kind, those who 'saw' them, as in the case of Rachel, who remembers fondly an educator who saw her suffering and showed her loving kindness: "Miss *** *(surname of an assistant head of school) always had faith in me*" (Rachel, line 161). Young people going through tough times – and adolescence is itself a difficult time – need and appreciate attention and care, being loved for themselves, not on condition of becoming better or something else.

Being independent, having healthy relationships, belonging, and being mentally well matters most to the research participants. The dream for mums Laura and Sarah is having their own home: *"And maybe we'd have our own home. Like, be a family"* (Laura, line 399, first interview).

An interesting finding is that the research participants blame themselves or a condition they live with, such as anxiety or ADHD, for not having done better at school rather than viewing this as an unjust state of affairs where their individuality was intervened upon and repressed by the colonial school procedures: "*I did not continue school because I could not take the bullying*" (Rachel, line 74, first interview). This resonates with Paulo Freire's theory (2000) that the oppressed internalize the oppressor's image and adopt the oppressing system's guidelines.

It emerged that these students were punished for reacting to insensitive and unfair school procedures, and made to feel alone, inadequate, and disapproved of, as in the case of Anthea, who was made uncomfortable by the loud and noisy school environment that made her "*sad and nervous*" (Anthea, line 271). Disengaging as a coping or defense mechanism was the natural consequence: "*I lost faith in asking teachers for help – if you have a problem, solve it on your own because not everybody wishes you well!*" (Noel, lines 326-327).

Interestingly, the value of qualifications was acknowledged mainly by research participants attending Youth Guarantee sessions, who appeared to be unhappy with their perceived failure to obtain "*certificates*" (Jane, line 168), and at "*having nothing to show*" (Bruno, line 343).

This group appeared to be ambivalent: on the one hand, they wanted to give school another chance, to be "normal," or "good," and "*moving forward*" (Liam, line 115), and on the other hand, they manifested an awakening of the capacity to self-reflect – to think for themselves, beyond obtaining qualifications. They were growing wings, so to speak, as distinct from the other research participants who did not attend Youth Guarantee sessions. The latter had taken off on their own already, self-reliant and feeling that they were "*enough*" (Noel, line 86).

The latter did not attend Youth Guarantee sessions, believing that striving for qualifications is *"futile"* (Noel, line 83), that one can still feel *"comfortable"* (Laura, line 167, first interview) and *"do whatever I want"* (Noel, line 64) without them. There emerged the idea that, in the end, having qualifications does not necessarily mean that one will do a particular job better than others who do not, for it is not a matter of *"how many qualifications you have, but how capable you are as a person"* (Noel, line 197).

This group of young people believes that unique personal attributes help make one's "destiny," and that there are mysterious forces that *"save you"* (Rachel, line 84, first interview). The main idea was that you are who you are, and your character will make *"your story"* (Laura, , line 321, second interview). I felt that these particular research participants were the ones most in touch with their *"overflowing emotions"* (Kevin, line 88, first interview), those who were most sensitive to who they were vis-à-vis what others thought of them or wanted them to be. What counted most for these young people were nurturing relationships with significant others and being free to live as they wanted. This was associated with the priority of personal well-being.

The school experiences of most research participants were negative, with narratives of intense bullying, including by teachers. Cyberbullying was a part of this as well, leading to self-harm – *"cutting my hands and legs in front of my laptop screen"* (Laura, line 212, second interview,) in some cases and prolonged anxiety in others. The school itself exacerbated pre-existing anxiety, making some prone to vent their frustration in unhealthy ways such as *"drinking myself numb"* (Noel, lines 47-48), especially through exaggerated disciplinary measures, lack of empathy, lack of respect for difference, lack of knowledge about mental health and support services, and through general totalising procedures that *"make me sick of life"* (Noel, line 43).

It emerged that many teachers have no training in adolescent mental health, conflict – resolution, and relating to and building rapport with all kinds of students in their classes. "*Some of them are not dedicated and tell you that they are only there for the pay*" (Bruno, lines 170-171), while "*preferential treatment*" (Bruno, line 174) and "*humiliation in front of the whole class*" (Bruno, line 182) still appear to be common practice in schools today.

Most research participants held that "*life's problems were my teachers really*" (Sarah, line 60, first interview), experiencing the curriculum as irrelevant and out of touch with real life. Home situations, including personal issues, could sometimes be traumatising, causing the individual concerned to feel "*so mad and sad, ... alone*" (Anthea, line 256). The school largely unacknowledged these turbulent emotions, and if it did, there were no systems in place designed to "*really know me!*" (Dylan, line 121), and support the young person in dealing with these problems while continuing with their education at the same time. The feeling of being unknown or misunderstood created an either/or situation for the research participants, such that they had to choose between survival on a personal level and bearing school to the detriment of their mental health.

This sense of agency on the part of the young people comes out poignantly because of an innate need to feel well and in a safe place. In most cases, disengaging from school or staying away after being formally excluded was a "*decision that I took responsibility for*" (Tom, line 76) because it made sense to them at the time, for example, due to feeling misunderstood at school "*when I was in Form 4 because of my ADHD*" (Tom, line 31), because "*teachers shouted at you and made as if they would hit you!*" (Marie, lines 159-162, first interview), or because they "*wanted to be known rather than preached at*" (Dylan, lines 99-102).

Colonialism and capitalism thrive on definitions, closures, classifications, and divisions. The capitalist class defines, identifies, and classifies (Holloway, 2005; Rikowski, 2021, p. 105), a process that has taken over education systems and is symptomatic of the methods of big business (Rikowski, 2021). This is of concern because, as Holloway argues, definition imposes limits and denies openness and creativity (2005), such that it impoverishes and weakens our will to envision and strive for alternatives to what is imposed on us.

Albeit largely unaware of such definitions and conceptual categories, the research participants struggle within and against them – they "*overflow*" (Kevin) and exceed definitions stamped on them by representatives of capital. They "defy all definition" (Holloway, 2006, p.5). Herein, most emphatically, lies their agency. As Freire argues, "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift," and it is essential "for the quest for human completion" (2000, p. 47).

Most of the research participants sought *"togetherness, with friends"* (Rachel, line 131; Stefan, line 553), and "*being with someone I love*" (Kevin, line 29, first interview), which was the only thing that rendered school bearable for them. Some lived from one break to the other to finally be with their tribe.

It emerges from this research that what could have made a difference to these young people classified as NEET was a school system that made space for their feelings and thoughts without necessarily pathologising or disciplining them, a system based on the sharing of knowledge and experiences, prioritising the normalization of coping, self-care and a sense of community rather than a false sense of general well-being, keeping up appearances and therefore isolation – *"on my own, nobody spoke to me"* (Kevin, line 116, first interview). These young people would have wanted school to be "real," engaging with their realities, such as feeling continually

"crushed by a huge weight on your back" (Jane, line 208), rather than being obsessed with uniformity, a false neutrality and inflexible syllabi that would ultimately be useless to the young people seeking job opportunities in an ever-changing job market of the future. They have a lot to contribute if they are invited into the conversation. As it was, the general finding was that they were "*very unhappy with school"* (Alexei, line 167), having *"a lot of trouble just staying in class"* (Alexei, line 168), because their lifeworld was always exhaustingly in conflict with the school world.

With regard to the future, the research participants saw themselves as doing a job they liked so that they could be independent and free to live their life as they chose. They acknowledged that this might entail a willingness on their part to further education and training, but this would need to involve subjects that *they* wanted to learn more about, such as *"doing nails"* (Marie, line 134, second interview), and not necessarily subjects considered "core."

Finally, all research participants visualised their future in terms of being in nurturing, stable relationships with significant others. They saw no point in *"driving yourself crazy"* (Noel, line 88) about tomorrow, for life is there to be lived and enjoyed *"day by day"* (Noel, line 89).

The perspective of resistance that is socially determined and agentic (Collins, 1995) is an important part of the findings of this research. This resistance, which is closely connected with the formation of identity (Collins, 1995; Miron & Lauria, 1995), has emerged as existing on various levels for the research participants and may be viewed as an expression of their "authentic" selves, in Heidegger's words: "The Self of one's own Dasein" (1962, p. 166), as distinct from "the Self of the Other" (1962, p. 128). This "authenticity" expresses agency and

points to the fact that human beings are not mere victims of structures but can act on their own devices to transform themselves and their circumstances.

It is not my intention here to romanticize or celebrate resistance, but I would like to be able to perceive agency and resistance as desirable, even necessary, to the development of thoughtful, critical thinkers. Also, I would like my research findings to help develop a more complex understanding of resistance from young people, moving beyond dichotomous discourses that blame them.

7.2 Summary of the findings

1. The young people participating in the research have had to battle against difficult circumstances on a personal level throughout their school years. They mostly bore this weight silently out of shame, fear of judgment, or the inability to articulate their suffering.

2. The participants felt that they did not fit in the dominant school ideology.

3. The research participants expressed lack of trust in the psy-professionals within schools, since using their service was mostly unhelpful from their point of view, not least because there were often unwelcome consequences to whatever they shared.

4. The research participants prioritise their emotional well-being and engage in activities they enjoy doing while investing some time looking for a job and attempting to get more qualifications to make this easier.

5. For the research participants, being successful transcends the notion of academic achievement. They all associate success with being free to live as they want.

6. They recognise the importance of mental health to live fully, beat the odds that may be stacked against them, and cultivate meaningful relationships.

7. The research participants express a sense of uncertainty and apprehension at structural factors beyond their control, but a sense of hope and possibility counterbalances this.

8. Despite periods of self-doubt, the participants exercise agency by doing what is necessary to survive and thrive, even if their decisions are unpopular with the authorities.

9. They find their unique ways of being, and use that knowledge to fend for themselves.

10. They find strength and inspiration from relatives, family, and friends, who acknowledge their individuality, making them feel free to make it on their own terms.

11. The research participants prioritise having meaningful relationships.

12. Things are not clear or straightforward for them at this point, and this makes them hesitant and causes them anxiety.

13. Educators and school administrators need to learn about youth cultures and receive training in related communication and conflict-resolution skills.

14. The research participants' actions and decisions may be seen as manifesting their rejection and resistance to the structures that seek to mold them. Their position at this time bears witness to the system's failure to embrace them for who they are and ensure that they receive the education that is rightfully theirs.

7.3 Contribution to knowledge

This study is significant because it seeks to fill a critical research gap, addressing the dearth of qualitative data about the complexities and realities of young people reductively classified as NEET worldwide, including in Malta (Holte, 2018; Macedo et al., 2020; Ogresta et al., 2020). This consequential gap is inextricably bound up with meaning and values, necessitating a high degree of interpretation and judgment (De Witte et al., 2013; Kleif, 2021). I therefore hope that the narrative and phenomenological data yielded by this research will significantly contribute

to the body of knowledge about NEETs in Malta, informing policymakers, experts, and leaders in society, helping them gain nuanced insights into the complex realities of young people, their essential role in society, how society reflected in our educational system can be failing them, and into how we can make it more human and fair.

This research's findings can better inform teacher training courses and educators' and school leaders' professional development. I hope that they will help widen stakeholders' perspectives and deepen their understanding of young people's rejection of schooling, such that rather than thinking in deficit terms, they can also become aware of the role of students' agency and the importance of respecting and listening to what they have to say. In Henry Giroux's words (2015, p.89):

"Any discourse about the future has to begin with the issue of youth because more than any other group they embody the projected dreams, desires, and commitment of a society's obligations to the future."

Moving towards a reality where young people can "contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future" (OECD, 2018, p.4) entails that society and its education system respect and act upon the needs of young people, which is their inalienable human right (UNICEF, Articles 13, 14, 28).

This qualitative, in-depth research transcends statistics and yields a trove of knowledge on the factors that helped lead this diverse group of 18–24-year-old young people into being NEET and their complex lifeworlds. Heidegger's theory of Dasein (Heidegger, 1927/1962), which is the theoretical lens used to analyse the data in this research, further emphasizes the complexity in young people's lives that emanates from their experiences of being in the world - their

particular situations and circumstances that have formed them, and continue to form them as human beings. This reality needs to be taken into account in discourses and policies about youth, for Heidegger's Dasein theory (Heidegger, 1927/1962) speaks of the human condition and helps us understand that young people cannot be and act in ways other than what their experiences of being in the world shaped them. It is hoped that the new knowledge yielded by this work will contribute to the enhancement of contemporary debates about youth, NEET, education, youth (un)employment, and training in Malta.

7.4 Strengths and Limitations of the research

Stemming from psychology, IPA values how the research participants make sense of personal experience, distinguishing it from phenomenological approaches focusing more on describing experience (Smith, 2004). This investigation into the lived experience of being NEET was essentially exploratory research, using IPA to research the phenomenon in depth. The research participants were 14 young people who were NEET at the time of the research, which is a small number when compared to the estimated number of those who fulfilled the same criteria at the time (according to the ETC as on April 2015, the number of NEET young people in Malta was 6,749). Although smaller sample sizes might be seen as limiting in IPA studies, Smith et al. (2012) assert that smaller participant numbers facilitate more profound insights and depth of analysis, which would not be achieved with larger numbers.

This intensive interpretative analysis could also be viewed as distancing the researcher from the rudimentary meanings, but Smith et al. (2012) recommend that researchers transcend manifest and immediate content while illustrating elicited themes and findings using quotations from the participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2012). I have used participants' words and turns

of phrases in theme titles and descriptions to further anchor my analysis directly in their articulations. This is also what makes IPA aims exceed thematic analysis (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

According to Willig (2001), IPA is distinguished from other approaches because it facilitates more creativity and freedom. These qualities render it particularly useful when researching unusual groups and situations, where particular experiences may be more challenging, or in the case of researching groups that are often off the radar (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), as is often the case with NEET young people.

Thus, it was not the purpose of this research to obtain generalizable knowledge, but rather to gain a profound understanding of young people's lived experience of being NEET in Malta. With IPA, a smaller sample size will allow a deeper and more detailed analysis (Smith et al., 2012). IPA opens up a valuable, much-needed space where the words of NEET young people in Malta can be articulated and broadcast. Given that the lived experiences of young people classified as NEET have not been extensively explored in the published literature both locally and abroad, this research privileges the participants' accounts such that significant insights could be obtained by focussing on individual experiences and understandings in alignment with the idiographic approach of IPA (Smith et al., 2012).

Smith et al. (2012) acknowledge that IPA procedures or steps are to be adapted according to the given research situation. The complexity of such openness can alienate those of a more positivistic persuasion. IPA conceives human beings as inherently self-reflective, which means that in the face of difficulties or unexpected events, human beings automatically attempt to make sense of what happens to them. This process occurs independently of the researcher or

any external intervention whatsoever. My primary role as the researcher has been to invite the research participants to share their sense-making with me, to witness their articulation of their sense-making. I then reflected on and interpreted all that they shared with me. This process renders IPA a hermeneutic endeavour, according to Heidegger's conceptualisation of hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith, 2018).

A possible limitation relates to the fact that I was the sole researcher. Despite acute awareness of bracketing, the human element would have been inescapable, and therefore it would have impacted the research results. This could also have led to the exclusion of variables and perspectives beyond the research situation, which could have permitted different or supplementary themes to emerge. Further, the research situation's novelty may have made the participants cautious about sharing their views and feelings.

 IPA analysis is inherently the discernment of one person – the researcher (Smith et al., 2012), and it is not the goal of the approach to identify one answer or truth. Instead, IPA attempts to achieve rigourous work that respects the words of the research participants (Pringle et al., 2011).

7.5 Reflections on the methodology

As a variant of Phenomenology (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006), IPA takes an idiographic approach, focusing on one individual case at a time during an interpretative process that involves the researcher attempting to make meaning of the participant's interpretation of phenomena – a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2004). The researcher then studies how important individual themes relate to the other cases in the sample.

Malim et al. (1992) described IPA as an approach that embraces the entirety and uniqueness of the person to assemble a picture that is as complete and as nuanced as possible. They argued that this could also be a weakness since, according to them, idiographic studies were potentially biased, spontaneous, and allusive. They could therefore interfere with identifying important variables, particularly when considering the small number of participants usually recommended for IPA studies in general (Smith et al., 2012). Adding to the debate about IPA, Reid et al. (2005) maintain that common factors among narratives and investigative observation can yield significant insights with broader significance.

I have found using IPA to be an enriching experience in the research process, making me more acutely observant of the research participants' behaviour, body language, and words, and sensitive as to what all this incoming "data" could be telling me, or what meanings I was deriving from it. During participant observation, I could get to know the young people better because I was spending time with them, observing how they spoke, what they said or left unsaid, how they presented themselves, and what they found important. I developed a keener eye, and wrote detailed field notes about the messages I was getting, reflecting on my "foreknowledge," and doing my best not to let this prevent me from "seeing" the research participants. This influx of information continued during the in-depth interviews, where the participants' words took on even more meaning when seen through the knowledge of them that I had gained during observation sessions. It felt like I could understand what it would be like to be in their shoes for a while. I tried very hard to be constantly aware of myself as an "outsider," to avoid any enmeshment in the analytical process, which was a challenging balancing act.

I think that what helped me overcome this danger was allowing myself time to reflect on my feelings first – my reactions, where they were coming from, and the meaning-making of the participants' narratives from my perspective – to get them out of my system. Following this, after some time and with a clearer mind, I would then sit with each narrative, visualising the person and listening to their voice openly, believing and acknowledging everything they said without judgment, embracing their thoughts, fears, joys, pain, and dreams as though they were my own. I found this exercise of attempting to "walk a mile in their shoes" a profound learning experience, which reflects Gadamer's (2019) argument that the presence of the observer does not only refer to proximity, but to impact as well – being affected by the phenomenon of the presence itself, or a conceptualisation of presence as active or organic.

This fluid openness to the other person is essential, as distinct from allowing personal bias to interfere and impose limits on the encounter. Without self-awareness, one cannot do IPA, for it is very easy for humans to filter and color phenomena according to our personal bias. During the research, this awareness imbued the "moment" of our encounter with a historic importance, for indeed, the research participant and I were engaged with a moment in time that would be over as soon as our time was up. I was aware that I was being exposed to a fleeting and unique fragment of their present while inhabiting mine: "Even though the trace or whisper of both past and future conspire to imbue the moment with its irrevocable continuity, the present-now is the meeting place for lived time in the 'contemporaneous'. Our automatic, involuntary, habitual establishment and recognition of meaning in the contemporaneous is what congregates all the seemingly disparate elements of the world into the nexus of meaningfulness – that is, into the moment" (Engel, 2019, p. 7).

IPA highlights the importance of being reflexive and the hermeneutic aspect: the data and the researcher are to be subjected to the same scrutiny because we cannot truly engage in the experiences of others without first identifying pre-conceptions and assumptions. As I have acknowledged earlier, the research participants were not aware that they were referred to as NEET. Thus, while I was investigating the lived experience of being NEET, from their perspective, they were telling me about themselves and their lives per se. Despite my focus on their being NEET – which meant that I would be looking for information about how they interpreted being not in education, not in training, and not in employment (a lot of "nots") – they were speaking to me about what "was," about their life that was not concerned about being NEET. This label meant nothing to them. It was as if only I possessed the knowledge that they were NEET, or only I that imbued it with a value they were unaware of. In this sense, the situation felt unfair. Or else I was looking for something that did not exist: there is no "lived experience" of being NEET! Maybe there is just lived experience of being a teenager, in the normal position of standing in the middle of a crossroads. They did not distinguish between being NEET and simply "being." Maybe the concept of being NEET is really "much ado about nothing", and perhaps we should re-frame how we look at young people.

Furthermore, IPA, being most suitable for data collection, which will "invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first person account of their experiences" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 56), has the limitation that it entails that participants can articulate their experiences. This emerged during my research, as Sarah, Marie, Kevin, and Liam sometimes struggled to articulate what they wanted to say during the interview. The situation was exacerbated by their being shy. Although all four interviews yielded rich data, they were, in fact, more challenging to analyse, and this led me to venture into holding a second interview with them to help me in the analytical process. This postulation of IPA that language equips research participants with the requisite

tools to do justice to their experiences depends on our trust or belief in the efficacy of language as a reliable medium for truly expressing human thoughts and emotions (Willig, 2013). Upon reflection, it would not have been possible for me to use IPA if my research participants were not mostly linguistically forthcoming, had linguistic or speech difficulties, or if Maltese or English were not their first language. Had they experienced difficulties in self-expression and comprehension, the interviews probably would not have been as rich, making it very difficult for me to access their experiential worlds. Thus IPA is likely to exclude research participants with weak language skills, which could lead to their experiences being lost or excluded. An alternative methodology would perhaps be more appropriate in such cases.

A challenge in using IPA in my research was knowing or deciding what was most important out of all the information I was receiving and attempting to process. The inductive nature of open questions and interviews that are led by the participants themselves can open up unanticipated horizons in IPA research (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The fact that in IPA, respondents are held to be the experiential experts of the phenomenon under investigation means that the researcher should explore uncharted territories. Smith et al. (2012) hold that such unforeseen occurrences are often the gems of interviewing: "on the one hand they tell us something we did not even anticipate needing to know; on the other, because they arise unprompted, they may well be of particular importance to the participant" (p. 58). In this sense, IPA may be viewed as being driven by the data rather than by theory (Griffiths, 2009).

I was constantly preoccupied with doing justice to the research participants as human beings and to their life experiences while not losing track of the research questions that I aimed to answer. This entailed that I regularly re-visited the research questions, reflected on them, and

sought to make them clearer as I gradually gained more knowledge about the subject, both from my encounters with the research participants and the literature I was engaging with.

7.6 From assuming to "being with"

In this section, I shall consider some of the assumptions I made as I embarked on this research, personal reflexivity, and how my thinking has evolved throughout my research trajectory. As I have mentioned earlier, upon embarking on this research, I assumed that NEET young people would know that they were NEET, and that they would have their own "explanation" and views about "it". I felt that I, as the researcher doing IPA, would somehow be doing them a favor by wanting to listen to their side of the story and make it known. However, "NEETness" meant nothing to the participants, and this reality helped me see clearly the chasm that separated me as researcher, representing authority and tradition – or at least acting to contribute to their knowledge – and these young people attempting to make sense of the world, doing the best they could in their circumstances while being seen, labeled and intervened upon because they were supposedly "inactive" or "idle."

Having worked in schools with young people like themselves in the past, I was aware of the paradoxes and complexity that such young people represented. However, this research revealed to me the importance and essence of the internal state of young people as they navigated through an environment that very often presented itself as a threat. The struggle to be strong and to deal with sabotaging emotions and thoughts appeared to characterize their lives at that point, including their thoughts about the future. It gradually became clear that most participants were so immersed in their struggles and challenges that they could not appreciate their strength. The adversity most of them had to endure was tremendous, and in some instances, I wondered how they had managed to stay safe and speak so maturely and articulately about themselves

and their experiences. These insights made me reflect more deeply on the need for qualitative research that privileged people's lived experiences, including NEET young people. Diagnosed students are amply addressed in the literature, but this was not the case with young people who had become alienated from school and become NEET, unless to chart the dismal consequences being NEET would have on their lives in the long term. I often felt like an imposter as I treaded into the young people's space to conduct my research, getting to know them, being trusted by them, and then having to part ways as soon as I had collected my data. Being with them during participant observation and chatting with them allowed me to tread on the uncharted territory of these young people's realities while continually asking myself questions such as: "what does this mean?", "how can I understand more?", "should I not help them?", and "what can I do with this?" It was very difficult for me to receive access to insights, containing them, and yet not do anything with them except record them for processing as part of the research continuum. The educator and activist in me felt that this was not right – I felt that I needed to "do something". As I reflected on all this, I became acutely aware of the gaps in understanding created by quantitative approaches. More than ever, I felt concerned at how the language of comparative groups, norms, and validity glosses over the complex realities in people's lives and how this can obscure the "truth."

7.7 Recommendations

In opting to use IPA for this research, I consciously decided to privilege the voices of the research participants themselves. Therefore in this section, I shall include their recommendations for an improved praxis concerning how policymakers, leaders, educators, and experts conceive of young people and their trajectories through the educational system and beyond.

During the research process, the participants spoke directly about how the educational system could be more equitable. I was also sensitive to the implicit meanings in their narratives of their recent memories of school. The following recommendations are aimed at government, policymakers, leaders, managers, and practitioners supporting young people.

7.7.1 Putting the young person at the centre

"Malta's students are set up to fail by a rigid national curriculum that values drowning people in a flood of outdated information over fostering a love for learning that would help them build a future after leaving school." (Bonnici, 2021, para. 1)

All the research participants have expressed their desire to be "seen" by school teachers and peers. They did not feel like they were a priority – the rules were. This necessitates a paradigm shift, where the young person is truly at the center of policy rather than vice versa. This is also reflected in the work of educational anthropologist Erickson (1987), who argues that when we say that young people are "not learning" or that they resist schooling, what we are saying is that they are:

… "not learning what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn as a result of intentional instruction. Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance" (pp. 343–344).

Narratives of living with a disability – physical and intellectual – show how living with a disability constitutes an added burden in young people's everyday life and frustration at not ever being able to "catch up" or being what everybody holds to be "normal."

Ableism provides a challenge and a barrier for young people to thrive in education settings and elsewhere. It is manifest in the inaccessibility of physical structures, in ingrained beliefs about the body and mind – having a "fit" and healthy body, and the notion that one can control one's emotions and mood – and the normalization of segregated environments for people who appear to be "different" or "other" (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017; Davis, 2018; Danforth & Gabel, 2016; Timberlake, 2020). Ableism is spread by fostering beliefs about the intrinsic superiority of some and the inferiority of others based on group traits (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019), and this is at work in systems of education, as the findings from this research indicate.

The research participants have expressed their need for affirming, meaningful, co-created, participative, and flexible learning environments in educational spaces. This would entail revisiting curricular and pedagogical requirements and prioritising learning to be a citizen of the world rather than learning "subjects." This might also necessitate discarding the destructive standardized testing currently dominating our education system in favor of methods that value and affirm individuality and creativity rather than uniformity (Chomsky, 2015).

Biesta (2020b) posits that we can only speak of education when students are subjects in their learning process and that the absence of subjectification signifies that training is taking place rather than education. According to John Dewey, training is something we do to others, rather than with them, by approaching them as subjects. Biesta (2020b) continues that no matter how important we might think that socialization and qualification are as a function of schools, the crux of the matter is that these could not happen without the decision of the young person to "invest." It would be misguided to talk about education in terms of acquiring knowledge and skills because these never exist in a vacuum – having skills or being knowledgeable about

anything cannot occur without a subject, a "being-in-the-world", in terms of Heidegger's theory of Dasein (1927/1962).

The moment we understand that education is about subjectification too, then the "subject-ness" of the student does not remain a problem. Instead, it becomes the raison d'être of our work. This means that there always is and should be a possibility or risk that our students take their freedom and decide to reject what we offer them and our intentions. Holding this as a risk to annihilate or as a problem that needs to be "solved" might distance us from the true meaning of education.

The preoccupation about and search for the "educational" is about a return to the "original" education, so to speak, which is concerned with the value of protecting young people's freedom to decide for themselves, and of upholding and protecting their creative force (Arendt, 1977/ 1961).

7.7.2 Prioritising relationships

Young people cannot thrive without connection with the people they spend their days with. Their relationships with peers, families, educators, and communities impact them, for good or for worse. In the participants' words, for them to grow into healthy, valuable citizens of the world, they need networks of people who value them for who they are and take a genuine interest in them. This might appear a simple, even romantic recommendation, but it is pivotal, entailing a paradigm shift in how we conceive of education (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Smyth, 2006; Wamsler, 2020). As these findings show, personal factors and dynamics are a determining factor in the propensity of young people to attend school and apply themselves to learning (Anderson et al., 2004; Coelho et al., 2020; Daily et al., 2020; Flores & Kyere, 2021; Phan & Ngu, 2020; Smyth, 2006).

Empirical studies have shown that a democratic school climate fosters discussions in the classroom (Domitrovich et al., 2022; Geboers et al., 2013; Kahne & Sporte, 2008) while encouraging student decision-making about issues that concern them within the school has been shown to develop civic responsibility and engagement (Bron et al., 2022; Lenzi et al., 2014; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013), as does students' awareness of fairness at school (Domitrovich et al., 2022; Foster et al., 2022; Lenzi at al., 2014; Resh & Sabbagh, 2017). Research has shown that students' perception of being treated fairly by their educators facilitated their view of authority as more trustworthy (e.g., Nivette et al., 2022; Tzankova et al., 2021).

If young people could partake in decisions about their education, then we might not speak of early school leavers and being NEET at all. Maybe we would not be speaking in terms of "early" or "late" and flexibility would become normalised in education because, in reality, we never cease to learn or seek to know more about whatever interests us and what we are passionate about. Perhaps we should reconceptualise school as an open, accessible place, which, in fact, resonates with an older, perhaps forgotten history of the school, where it was conceived as a place:

"in between 'home' and the 'street,' in between the private life of the family and the public life of society, a halfway house that is neither 'home' nor 'work,' but a place and space for practising, for trying things out." (Biesta, 2019, p.662).

"Schole" for the Greeks meant leisure, free of demands or societal pressure as to how it should be used (Biesta, 2019). It is such a space or place that can allow our youth an opportunity to experience themselves in the world, have the time to process what they encounter in this space,

and learn to be in touch with their emotions, not to be driven by them. This is the school that allows precious time for our children to freely experiment, fail, and keep trying and failing as long as they need to.

7.7.3 Investing in critical pedagogy

Rather than teaching them early that regardless of where you come from or what you earn, we are all equal, Malta has created an environment where some students have access to better resources simply because they can afford it…An overwhelming number of Maltese people still lack the capacity to think critically, regurgitating opinions fed to them by either state-controlled or party-run media. It's not even limited to people with lower levels of education. University lecture halls regularly fall silent when asked to give an opinion or an answer. Students, who are often a bastion for activism and protests, are quite the opposite in Malta. (Bonnici, 2021, para. 8, para.13)

The research participants have expressed being alienated from school with all its procedures and expectations. They are impacted by what happens to them in their lives, and schools remain inflexible and anachronistic in this regard. Young people – as also all of us - are constantly in a relationship with themselves, with others, and with the world around them. A child- or youth-centered approach encapsulates all this and can be effectively addressed through critical pedagogy. A shift towards a critical pedagogy in our educational system would mean a paradigm shift that recognises the power of young people to think for themselves and consider critically what is meted out to them. It would entail viewing education as a culturally-sensitive debate, a shared quest for knowledge or "truth," rather than dead knowledge that students are forced to absorb unthinkingly and regurgitate as requested during examinations (Giroux, 2011b; Smyth, 2011). This is essential for democracy, also because young people in Malta have the right to vote in general elections at 16. Research shows that curricula informed by critical

pedagogy increase the interest of young people to pursue various forms of political participation, thus contributing to democracy (See, for example, Malafaia et al., 2021; Nelsen, 2021; Themelis & Hsu, 2021; Ting, 2016).

Young people in Malta are traditionally uninterested in politics, often echoing the ideas and voting according to their family of origin. Since, until recently, they did not vote before the age of 18, they were often "told by adults that their opinions did not matter, that they were "all sizzle but no steak" and they were "too young to have a say". During a special parliamentary session attended by youth organization representatives where legal amendments to lower the voting age in general elections to 16 were discussed, the then-leader of the opposition Adrian Delia said that "his vision was not for youths to be influenced by politics but for politics to start being influenced by youths". Further, the speaker Anġlu Farrugia "urged youths to be conversant with the country's history. For them to understand what was happening today, they needed first to know where the country had come from". Albeit making perfect sense, both comments refer to principles that are not being practiced, both on a political level with regard to the former and on an educational level, with regard to the latter. Maltese youth can hardly be "conversant" with the country's history when the curriculum on offer in schools is considered. They thus cannot be expected to make the connections between where we are today and how things developed historically till the present day and be activists in this regard unless they are exposed to critical conversations about Malta's history outside of schools. The thinking skills, the debating, and the critical dimensions do not appear to be part of the design of our education system.

Allowing voting rights now means that our youth may make their voice heard, but whether they are prepared to think with their own minds and "dare" challenge the status quo where

necessary is another question altogether. In this research, the participants sometimes replicated the authorities' mantra in questioning themselves for not fitting in the education system rather than evaluating the dynamics at work in schools and their lives. As Zammit Marmarà had written way back in 2006, "our examination-oriented education system continues to turn out many students who, after leaving school, seem to be content with living a passive, mediocre type of life characterised by non-participation in most social events not immediately affecting their personal life" (Zammit Marmara, 2006). Not much has changed apparently, as findings from a study published by the WHO Regional Office for Europe (Calleja, 2020) tell us that Maltese young people have the most problematic social media usage across Europe (Calleja, 2020). Worryingly, the report also found that there was a decline in life satisfaction and a relatively low level of school satisfaction among Maltese teens.

7.7.4 Making the education system "real".

> Malta is dumb to the worrying signs that the country's education system is failing despite millions in investment. It is clumsy, test-crazed, and plagued with inequities – and we are paying the price for it… The situation is improving somewhat, with the number of early school leavers dropping from 25.7% to 16.7%. But that's still one of the highest in the EU, a clear sign that Malta remains years behind the rest despite steps forward. (Bonnici, 2021, para. 1, para. 8)

The recommended changes would entail making education "real" rather than "textbook." Heidegger's work about what it means to be fully human invokes an education that cannot be calculative or prescriptive. For Heidegger, education should allow for human flourishing in the openness and freedom inherent in Dasein, with less focus on efficiency and performance and more on human relationship and the freedom to be and to learn (Dasein, 2018; Heidegger, 1927/1962). In this sense, the challenge for an education that wishes to consider these ideas

is to conceive of a non-hegemonic, heterotopic space where ideas derive from the lived experience of free Beings, fostering democracy and freedom: "The quiet heart of the clearing[26] is the place of stillness from which alone the possibility of the belonging together of Being and thinking, that is, presence and apprehending, can arise at all (Heidegger, 1993, p. 321).

Such a shift would entail re-thinking how we do education: a reduction in neoliberal procedures regarding measurement, control, and centralism in favor of professional autonomy, localism, and practice-based evidence. The curriculum could be rendered more flexible and faith in the professional competence of teachers restored; they should be trusted to teach pupils according to their interests and needs in educational spaces where they can effectively engage with critical pedagogy. Schools would embrace and engage with the community as part of the students' educational process, prioritising methods that acknowledge the messiness and complexity of the real world as it presents itself, warts and all (Fink Chorzempa et al., 2019).

This paradigm shift requires an economic reinvestment toward appropriately resourcing schools in terms of space, furniture, teaching resources, teachers, and support staff. An essential shift would involve dominant discourses in society that invoke teachers as being to blame for anything perceived to be amiss with our children and young people.

While significant, the above recommendations can only be effectively implemented on some essential conditions: equitable access to resources across the board, including taking seriously and normalising support for parents who struggle in their parenting, and caring, respectful communities. The findings from this research corroborate previous scholarship (e.g., Ledwith, 2020; Macedo et al., 2020; Sprague Martinez et al., 2020; Stuart et al., 2020) that shows that

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[26] The 'Clearing' in Heidegger's analytic of Dasein refers to finding a way out of the Enframing - a space of possibilities where freedom reveals itself in letting-things-be (Dasein, 2018).

these changes are essential for a world where all young people are valued for their uniqueness and can grow and contribute towards a healthier, fairer and happier society.

In the current research, the participants' rejection of what the school had to offer is a manifestation of them as subjects, taking their freedom to decide for themselves. Failure to understand this act as agency on their part, and viewing it instead in terms of deficit may be "un-educational." This research has sought to learn about the lived experience of their disengagement, and the findings include the fact that young people cannot be well and succeed at school without human connection, without being acknowledged, valued, and cared for as individuals. This lack impacts their happiness and, therefore, their decisions to protect themselves from perceived harm, including resisting compulsory schooling, dropping out entirely, and becoming NEET.

An educational strategy that seeks to ensure "inclusive and quality education for all" (Ministry for Education and Employment 2020, p. 13) needs to consider this. How is it inclusive? Treating inclusion as charity or something extraneous to the "actual" and sanctioned education system may be seen as another form of discrimination. It also important to reflect on what we mean when we speak about quality in education. Whose understanding of quality is being presented? Quality for the business corporation does not mean the same for the neglected, disadvantaged, or traumatized child whose basic needs are not being met. Competing definitions of quality reflect competing underlying values (Biesta, 2019). Since appreciation of quality results from discernment regarding the virtue or goodness of something (therefore necessarily a subjective act), the concept of quality in education is deeply political.

As Ridge (2004, p. 5) argues, a state interest in children as future workers results in policies that are qualitatively different from those that have happy childhoods at heart:

> "Children who are poor are not a homogeneous group, although they are often represented as being so. Their experiences of being poor will be mediated by, among other things, their age, gender, ethnicity, health, and whether or not they are disabled. In addition, children will interpret their experiences of poverty in the context of a diverse range of social, geographical, and cultural settings."

Further to this, research shows us that poverty negatively impacts children's health overall, including their cognitive development (e.g., Adjei et al., 2022; Hammami et al., 2022), and this is something that goes beyond what any education system can address (Ledwith, 2020). With this in mind, it is incomprehensible how disadvantaged children and young people are expected to perform like their more privileged peers, calling them NEET when they reject the schooling and training for employment that is offered to them and expecting change to happen if money is invested in initiatives to redeem them and cut costs resulting from youth inactivity. The NEET label appears to be inadequate in this sense. It is a poor excuse for not eradicating poverty, mainly the root problem of early school leaving and youth disengagement.

There is symbolism in exclusionary and punitive practices in the educational system (even if unconscious or unintentional) when dealing with young people who reject the educative model on offer. This is because such procedures speak to the students about their identities, perhaps that of being part of the "underclass," "trash" (Avis, 2014; Preston, 2003) or potential criminals, which reflects a function of an ideological state apparatus. This manifests as labeling and the expulsion of students from school (English & Mayo, 2012; Mayo, 2011, 2014).

The current research has found that young people's disengagement from education, training, and work is part of their journey of self-discovery and should not be assigned a label as if it were a failure or a stigma. Their choice or decision may be understood as their expression of selfhood as a reaction to that which makes no sense to them (Arendt, 1958; Butler, 1990; Levinas, 1981; Osberg & Biesta, 2021) – something that occurs as we encounter the "other" (Osberg & Biesta, 2021). Our lives on this planet (what Osberg & Biesta (2021, p. 66) call the "political realm") cannot be determined by a ready-made set of regulations devised by autonomous, rational selves somewhere "out there"; we make our lives as we act and interact with the world, and with the other, accepting and expecting that we have to encounter and deal with conflict rather than concord (Dewey, 1938; Osberg & Biesta, 2021). This means that human lives are fluid and cannot be approached from an objectivist perspective.

The findings from this research indicate that possible solutions to reducing or even eliminating early school leaving and being NEET may be found in re-thinking and re-designing education for these times, characterized by fast change (Bauman, 2005). The solution cannot be crisis management or watering curricula on the pretext that students lack intelligence or suffer from a "deficit". In this case, we would probably be short-changing these children, denying them access to powerful knowledge essential for living a full life (Mayo, 2014).

7.8 Recommendations for further research

More and continuous qualitative research is needed to shed light on the nuanced and complex intertwining elements that are pivotal in young people's individual development and growth in a constantly changing world. Recommendations for such research that could help eliminate the perpetuation of inequity include:

i.   Research designs that focus on NEET young people in Malta according to categories such as NEET young people who are volunteers, immigrants, LGBTIQ+, or young mothers (Menzies & Angus, 2021; Redai, 2021). In combining such approaches and further recruiting by "snowballing," researchers may meet different individuals who can be classified as NEET, thus sampling a variety of experiences (Holte, 2018);

ii.   Research addressing the impact of gender in the lived experiences of NEET young people. Defining the NEET category as gender-neutral may be masking the particular realities of girls and women in Malta. This renders gender a significant aspect for analysis (Lüküslü & Çelik, 2021; Malo et al., 2021; Ralson et al., 2021);

iii.   Research for Malta that looks at the intersectional aspect of being NEET, where intersectionality is used as an analytical strategy, such as that of Zuccotti & O'Reilly (2019) in the U.K. This would be useful because it will serve to bring to the fore the myriad experiences of disadvantage in cohorts of young people, allowing for comparison between experiences of inequality both between and within these groups (McBride et al., 2015). Identifying inequality in its various manifestations helps us understand better the possible causes and solutions to these;

iv.   Emancipatory Action Research, which Ledwith (2020, p. 136) suggests, is "the glue that binds community development theory and practice as a unity of praxis, keeping it critical." EAR involves co-researchers in action for social change. This process seeks to dismantle the power relations associated with traditional research that starts from the researcher as expert, in favor of a mutual, reciprocal inquiry of equals that takes place in critical public spaces that are created to

facilitate dialogue, involving all participants in co-creating knowledge (Ledwith, 2020). The work of Tofteng and Bladt (2020) in Denmark can be a good example here: their research focuses on designing strategies that encourage the genuine participation of young people, as distinct from tokenism; [27]

v. Researching the lived experience of being NEET among groups attending Youth Guarantee sessions as compared to those who do not. This research has identified a difference in their outlook on life, an area that could be further investigated. This would help increase understanding of the lived experience of being NEET of diverse young people and serve to inform better the design and implementation of post-compulsory school services, including those delivered by YG;

vi. More qualitative research about the views of educators in Malta regarding their encounter with students who present themselves as "different," or resist school. This would be particularly useful for both teacher training and policy (Beaton et al., 2021; Obsuth et al., 2021; Southall et al., 2021). Despite all efforts at making inclusion work, meeting the needs of all students across education systems in Europe is proving difficult due to the rich diversity in populations. This is also reflected in some of the findings of the current research, which show the need for improved inclusive practices in our schools.

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[27] They are inspired by the work of Sherry Arnstein (1969): "Upturned Participation" – initiatives that invite young people to take over and own planning and implementation of activities. Tofteng and Bladt (2020) argue that behind most initiatives ideated for young people, there is a patronizing "quid pro quo" expectation – the young participants will have to "pay it back" somehow, as a kind of token of appreciation for their leaders. In turning the tables around, the organizers can learn about new perspectives, and the change in power dynamics will facilitate a move from a behavior management program towards a more collaborative exchange.

7.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the key findings and contribution to knowledge of this research. In the process, I have considered the research methodology, outlined the limitations, and reflected on my research trajectory. The chapter also includes recommendations for policy and further research about young people outside of education, training, or employment.

This work is a call for all stakeholders, policymakers, education experts, and leaders in education to engage critically with our education system and to put back on the table the concept of the good of education, beyond reductive notions of measurable learning outcomes, as determined over the recent decades by an international industry dedicated to turning education into a measurement machine.

Society is implicit in the process via personal beliefs, choices, actions, policy, and practice – young people, mentors, parents, communities, the media, education experts, teachers, youth workers, school administrators and leaders, religious workers, other professionals, and governments. I want to think that my work is helpful in an endeavour to create fairer, alternative education systems for a more just society. In Foucault's words:

> So many things can be changed, being as fragile as they are, tied more to contingencies than to necessities, more to what is arbitrary than to what is rationally established, more to complex but transitory historical contingencies than to inevitable anthropological constraints . . . My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. (1983, cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, pp. 231-232)

Finally, it has been a responsibility and a privilege to share a fragment of the research participants' lives, discover and reflect on their truths, learn from and be inspired by all they entrusted me with, and read widely to understand better. Young people disengaged from education, training, and employment are not simply a statistic. They are complex human beings striving to find meaning in the world from within their particular circumstances in their unique ways.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Approval of Research Ethics Proposal by UREC.

Research Ethics Proposal - Accepted by UREC following amendments
Inbox

R

Charmaine Agius <charmaine.agius@um.edu.mt>   Tue, 30 May 2017, 08:38
to me, Albert

Reference Number: SWB 050/2017

Dear Ms Friggieri,

Reference is made to the **submitted amendments** which were **requested by UREC**.

I am pleased to inform you that **UREC has now accepted your ethics proposal**.
Hence, you may now **start your research**.

Thanks and regards,
Charmaine

Ms Charmaine Agius
Secretary
Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)
Faculty for Social Well-being
Room 113
Humanities A Building (Laws & Theology)
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080

Appendix 2: Introductory letter to ask permission of Jobsplus to collect the data for the research.

L-UNIVERSITÀ TA' MALTA
Msida - Malta
FAKULTÀ GHAT-TISHIH TAS-SOĊJETÀ
DIPARTIMENT DWAR L-ISTUDJU TAŻ-ŻGHAŻAGH
U L-KOMUNITÀ

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
Msida - Malta
FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING
DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH AND COMMUNITY STUDIES

16.11.2016

To whom it may concern:

My proposed PhD research is aimed at gaining more understanding of the individual experience of being an early school leaver, and therefore of not being in education, employment or training at the time of the research. It shall seek to understand this situation as described by the young people themselves. Data shall be collected via participant observation and in-depth interviews with 20 18-24 year olds participating in Youth Guarantee initiatives.

For observation purposes, I shall need permission to attend course sessions, whereas for scheduling interview sessions I have to request permission to access clients' telephone numbers, email and addresses from Jobsplus. Interviews (please see topic guide attached) shall be recorded, transcribed and analysed to elicit dominant themes. I assume responsibility on the processing of any personal data obtained through the assistance of Jobsplus in accordance with the Data Protection Act, CAP 440.

Audrey Friggieri , student/researcher

Dr Albert Bell, supervisor – Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta

TEL: (+356) 2340 3359; (+356) 2340 3192

Appendix 3: Gatekeeper's signed letter to consent to act as gatekeeper for the research:

Jobsplus Head Office
Hal Far
BBG 3000
Malta

T (+356) 2165 4940
E jobsplus@gov.mt

www.jobsplus.gov.mt

Consent to facilitate research

- I, (name and surname)........Amber Darmanin........
  voluntarily agree to help facilitate this research.

- I understand that even if I agree to help now, I can withdraw at any time.

- I have had the purpose and nature of the research explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research.

- I understand that I will assist in introducing the research, distribute recruitment letters and consent forms and collect those that are completed and signed by young people who agree to participate in the research.

- I understand that all data collected in this study will be confidential and anonymous.

Signature of gatekeeper

_____ 08/05/2017
Signature of gatekeeper   Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

_____ 10/05/2017
Signature of researcher   Date

Appendix 4: Signed letter of approval from JobsPlus regarding collection of qualitative data for this research

Jobsplus Head Office
Hal Far
BBG 3000
Malta

T (+356) 2165 4940
E jobsplus@gov.mt

www.jobsplus.gov.mt

Date: 9th May, 2022

Title: Student approval from Jobsplus

To whom it may concern,

Jobsplus has granted approval to Ms Andreana Friggieri in December 2016 who was reading for a PhD with the University of Malta to reach her qualitative sample. Her dissertation was focus on the lived experiences of NEET young people in Malta.

In order for Ms Friggieri to reach her qualitative sample, participant observation and interviews with Youth Guarantee participants aged between 18-25 within the NEET cohort were held. Prior to data collection, the latter cohort were briefed about the research and invited to participate on a voluntary basis. Interested young people were provided with a covering letter and a consent form which they were required to sign. The interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Felix Borg
Digitally signed by Felix Borg
Date: 2022.05.09 13:49:45 +02'00'

Felix Borg
Head of Division
CORPORATE SERVICES

Jobsplus Gozo
Sir Arturo Mercieca Street
Victoria VCT 2024
Gozo

Jobsplus Valletta
St. Zachary Street
Valletta VLT 1131
Malta

Jobsplus Mosta
274, Main Street
Mosta MST 1017
Malta

Jobsplus Birgu
Kumpless Access
St. Edward Street
Birgu BRG 2020

Jobsplus Birkirkara
Birkirkara Civic Center
Tumas Fenech Street
Birkirkara BKR 2526

Jobsplus Qawra
Kumpless Access
Fregatina Street
Qawra SPB 1273

Jobsplus Registration Unit
72, Kumpless Access
Melita Street
Valletta VLT 1120

EURES

Appendix 5: The Recruitment Letter for NEET young people, in English.

PhD Research: The Lived Experience of NEET young people in Malta.

Hello!

My name is Audrey Friggieri and I am a student at the University of Malta. I am performing research about young people who are not in education, training or employment. The aim of my research is to find out the personal views of such young people about:

    i.   What it means for them to be disengaged from education, employment and training;
   ii.   their previous school experiences;
  iii.   life after secondary school;
  iv.   their future.

Research findings will contribute towards improving our education system and youth policy.

This research shall be carried out by means of participant observation and interviews, which shall be recorded. Audio recordings will be password protected and deleted immediately after the research has been completed.

All names shall be changed for the sake of anonymity, and all information will be treated with confidentiality and for research purposes only.

Would you like to participate? If YES, please fill in below:

Name: _____

Telephone Number/Mobile: _____

Address: _____

_____

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Audrey Friggieri

Mobile: _____

Appendix 6: Recruitment letter for NEET young people, in Maltese.

Riċerka PhD: The Lived Experience of NEET young people in Malta

Hello! Jisimni Audrey Friggieri. Jiena studenta tal-Università ta' Malta. Qed nagħmel riċerka dwar żgħażagħ li mhumiex jattendu skola, jitħarrġu jew jaħdmu bħalissa. L-għan ta' din ir-riċerka huwa li jinġabar għarfien dwar:

    i.   kif iħossuhom żgħażagħ li mhumiex jattendu skola, jitħarrġu, jew jaħdmu f'dan l-istadju ta' ħajjithom;

    ii. l-esperjenzi li kellhom fl-iskola;

    iii. il-ħajja wara l-iskola kif qed jesperjenzawha huma;

    iv. il-futur tagħhom.

Riżultati li joħorġu minn din ir-riċerka jistgħu jgħinu biex tittejjeb is-sistema edukattiva tagħna, kif ukoll il-policy indirizzata lejn iż-żgħażagħ. Din ir-riċerka se ssir permezz ta' osservazzjoni, fejn jien nattendi laqgħat għal żgħażagħ organizzati minn JobsPlus, kif ukoll permezz ta' intervisti li jkunu rrekordjati. Ir-recordings ikunu protetti permezz ta' password u jiġu mħassra hekk kif ir-riċerka tkun kompluta. L-ismijiet kollha jiġu mibdula sabiex tiġi rrispettata l-anonimità tal-parteċipanti, kull informazzjoni tiġi trattata b'kunfidenzjalità u għall-iskopijiet tar-riċerka biss.

Imla hawn taħt biex tieħu sehem, jekk jogħġbok:

Isem u kunjom: _____

Numru tat-telephone/Mobile: _____

Email: _____

Indirizz: _____

Grazzi tal-ħin tiegħek!

Tislijiet,
Audrey Friggieri
Mobile:_____

Appendix 7: Consent form in English for research participants

INFORMED CONSENT: ENGLISH

Please read carefully and tick YES or NO.

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the information letter.	YES	NO
1a.	<u>In case of difficulty in reading:</u> I have understood the information about the project that has been read out and explained to me, as provided in the information letter.	YES	NO
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	YES	NO
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	YES	NO
4a	I voluntarily agree to be observed during sessions organised by JobsPlus.	YES	NO
4b	I voluntarily agree to be interviewed by the undersigned researcher.	YES	NO
4c	I voluntarily agree that the interview be audio recorded by the undersigned researcher for research purposes only.	YES	NO
5.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons.	YES	NO
6.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	YES	NO
7.	The interview and observation procedures have been explained to me.	YES	NO
8.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	YES	NO
9.	I, along with the researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	YES	NO

Participant:

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Researcher:

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

Mobile number: _____

Supervisor:

_____   _____   _____
Name of Supervisor   Signature   Date

Appendix 8: Consent form in Maltese for research participants

KUNSENS INFURMAT: MALTI

Jekk jogħġbok aqra sewwa u immarka IVA jew LE.

1.	Jien qrajt u fhimt l-informazzjoni dwar ir-riċerka, skont kif ġiet mogħtija lili fl-ittra ta' informazzjoni dwar ir-riċerka.	IVA	LE
1a.	F'każ ta' diffikultà fil-qari: Jien fhimt l-informazzjoni dwar ir-riċerka, li ġiet moqrija u spjegata lili skont kif ġiet mogħtija lili fl-ittra ta' informazzjoni dwar ir-riċerka.	IVA	LE
2.	Jien kelli l-opportunità nistaqsi mistoqsijiet dwar ir-riċerka u l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi fiha.	IVA	LE
3.	Jien nagħżel li nipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka.	IVA	LE
4a	Jien naċċetta li niġi osservat/a mir-riċerkatriċi hawn taħt iffirmata waqt sessjonijiet organizzati minn JobsPlus.	IVA	LE
4b	Jien naċċetta li niġi intervistat/a mir-riċerkatriċi hawn taħt iffirmata.	IVA	LE
4c	Jien naċċetta li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata mir-riċerkatriċi hawn taħt iffirmata għall-iskopijiet ta' din ir-riċerka biss.	IVA	LE
5.	Nifhem li nista' nirtira l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta rrid mingħajr ma nkun obbligat/a li nagħti r-raġunijiet.	IVA	LE
6.	Il-proċeduri tal-kunfidenzjalità ġew spjegati lili (eż. tibdil ta' ismijiet u anonimità).	IVA	LE
7.	Jien qed niffirma biex nagħti l-kunsens infurmat tiegħi sabiex isiruli intervisti rrekordjati u sabiex niġi osservat/a waqt laqgħat fi grupp għall-fini tar-riċerka biss.	IVA	LE
8.	Il-konsegwenzi u l-użu tal-informazzjoni miġbura minn din ir-riċerka ġew spjegati lili.	IVA	LE
9.	Jien, flimkien mar-riċerkatriċi, naqbel li niffirma u nikteb id-data fuq din il-formola tal-kunsens infurmat.	IVA	LE

Parteċipant:

_____   _____   _____

Isem il-parteċipant   Firma   Data

Riċerkatriċi:

_____   _____   _____

Isem ir-riċerkatriċi   Firma   Data

Numru tal-mobile: _____

Superviżur:

_____   _____   _____

Isem tas- Supervisor   Firma   Data

Appendix 9: The Observation Guide

Observation Guide
1. The Physical Environment /Context
2. Detailed description of research participants
3. Nonverbal communication of research participants
4. Physical clues
5. Activities going on
6. Who speaks to whom?
7. Who listens?
8. Tone of voice
9.. Symbolic meanings
10. Who silences?
11. Duration of interactions
12. Content of conversations
13. What should happen that has not happened?

Appendix 9: The Observation Guide

14. What I as researcher say and do
15. What I think
16. How my presence affects the observed

Appendix 10: The Topic Guide.

Topic 1: Personal Profile

  i. Participant's age

  ii. Description of participant's family

  iii. Parents' profession/jobs

Topic 2: Life at Present

  i. A typical day in the life of the research participant

  ii. Preferred activities at present

  iii. Current inspirations

  iv. Current feelings and thoughts

  v. Priorities

Topic 3: Projections for the Future:

  i. Thoughts about the future

  ii. Personal goals

  iii. Plans, strategies

Topic 4: Impact of school experiences

  i. Difficulties/ obstacles present in personal life during school years

  ii. ii. Difficulties/obstacles present at school

  iii. Relationship with teachers

  iv. Relationship with classmates

  v. The Learning experience

  vi. safety

Topic 5: Constructs of success/failure:

  i. Personal definition of success and failure.

  ii. Perception of obstacles

  iii. Personal motto

Topic 6: The Impact of Relationships with significant others on participants:

    i.   The influence of family/family members on the participants' perception of education/life

    ii.   The influence of friends on participants' perception of education/life

    iv.   The influence of teachers, youth workers, mentors on participants' perception of education/life

    v.   The influence of role models

Topic 7: Emotional factors

    i.   Present sources of satisfaction and/or discontent

    ii.   Coping

    iii.   Support

    ii.   Personal strengths, achievements

    iii.   Belief in one's power to act/self determination

Appendix 11: The Interview questions and prompts in English.

1. How old are you?
2. Tell me about your family? (Prompts: Parents'/Guardians' jobs, siblings, family home, pets, significant extended family...)
3. What does a typical day in your life look like? (Prompts: What time do you usually go to sleep, wake up? Do you spend time learning something new, doing homework, research, doing sports or hobbies? Do you help in the home?)
4. How do you spend your free time?
5. How are you feeling now that you're done with secondary school? (Prompts: Do you feel like a grown-up? Do you feel free? Do you feel like it's good riddance? Why is that? Do you miss it? Why?)
6. What do you consider important to you now? (Prompts: Why do you think that is?)
7. What do you wish to do in life? (Prompts: Why do you think that is? How did you arrive at this knowledge/decision?)
8. Where do you see yourself in five years' time? (Prompt: How do you think you have come to that knowledge/awareness?)
9. What do you think you must do to get there? (Prompts: How will you go about it? Whose help do you think you could use/need? What would help a lot to get there?)
10. How was school for you? (Prompts: How did school/classmates/lessons/teachers in general make you feel?
11. Did you have favourite lessons/teachers/activities? (Prompts: Can you give me some examples? Why were they your favourites?)
12. What kind of experiences can you remember particularly during the school years? (Prompts: can you give me an example or two? Why do you think you remember those in particular?)
13. What does success mean for you? (Prompts: Why do you think this? How do you think you arrived at this opinion/belief?)
14. Can you tell me about an experience of success in your life? (Prompt: How did it make you feel? Why?)
15. And how do you define failure? (Prompts: Why do you think this? How do you think you arrived at this opinion/belief?)
16. What would your personal motto for life be? (Prompt: Advice you would give to a younger brother/sister/friend. Why?)
17. Would you say your family affects your decisions and the way you look at things? (Prompts: Who influences you most? Why do you think that is?)
18. Do you think friends influence you? (In what way do you think? Why is that? Why not?)

19. Have any teachers/ youth workers/ mentors had particular influence over you? (In what way do you think? Why is that? Why not?)

20. Do you have role models? (Prompts: Who?/why not? Why do you admire them?)

21. What makes you happy? (Prompt: Why is that?)

22. Where do you find support? (Prompts: Why there in particular? What kind of support do you look for?)

23. What would you say is your personal strength? (Prompts: Can you give examples of when you use/d this quality of yours? How did you feel then? Why do you think that is?)

24. Do you think people are just born the way they are and stay that way or can they change if they wanted to? (Prompts: Why do you think this? Can you give me any examples from your life?)

Appendix 12: The Interview questions and prompts in Maltese.

1. Kemm għandek żmien?
2. Tgħidli xi ftit dwar il-familja tiegħek?
3. Kif qed tħossok f'daż-żmien li issa m'għadekx l-iskola?
4. Kif tgħaddiha l-ġurnata?
5. X'tagħmel biex tirrilassa jew tiddeverti? (Fejn tmur? Ma' min?)
6. Għandek xi ħaġa f'moħħok li tixtieq tagħmel fiż-żmien li ġej? (Xi xewqat, pjanijiet?)
7. *Kif kont tmur mat-teachers tul iż-żmien tal-iskola?*
8. Kif kont tmur ma' sħabek l-iskola?
9. Tħoss li l-iskola kienet utli għalik?
10. Kont tieħu sehem f'attivitajiet tal-iskola?
11. Kont tħossok komda/safe l-iskola?
12. Hemm xi esperjenzi li baqgħu miegħek miż-żmien tal-iskola? (sbieħ/koroh/partikulari).
13. X'kien li ġiegħlek titbiegħed mill-iskola/ jew saħansitra ma tibqax tmur?
14. Taħseb li jinfluwenzawk il-ħbieb? (Għaliex?/B'liema mod?)
15. Hemm xi persuna jew persuni li int tammira? Għaliex?
16. Xi jfisser suċċess/falliment għalik?
17. X'inhu importanti għalik fil-ħajja? (X'jagħmlek kuntent/a?)
18. Min tqis bħala persuna/persuni li huma importanti f'ħajtek? (Għaliex?)
19. Fejn issib is-sapport meta jkollok bżonnu? (Min jagħtik is-sapport?)
20. X'inhi l-iktar ħaġa li int tajjeb/tajba fiha?
21. Xi ħaġa li għamilt li int kburi/ja biha?
22. Xi ħaġa li għamilt li kieku tista' tbiddilha?
23. Skont l-esperjenza tiegħek tal-ħajja, taħseb li veru meta jgħidu min jitwieled tond ma jmutx kwadru? (Tista' tispjega/ttini eżempju?)
24. Għandek xi motto personali għall-ħajja?

Appendix 13: Sample interview transcript with preliminary annotations.

MY INITIAL NOTES	Dylan Interview transcript -55.50	SPECIFIC THEMES	HIGHER ORDER THEMES
I interviewed Dylan outside the lecture room at the Catholic Institute. He was cooperative and articulate. He is 20 years old, lives with his mum. Dad passed away recently. He was bullied at school, belonged to a group of 'outcasts', a kind of subculture that distinguished itself from the 'bullies', dreams of one day work in computer graphics, digital art etc.. Struggled with low self-esteem. He has always appeared very cool and relaxed during my observation sessions, and I can't help wondering sometimes about how he might smoke weed or be on something... but he is very lucid and smart; he reflects on life like an older person – wise beyond his years, I believe. He is very forthcoming, with examples even, to illustrate points he makes. He speaks comfortably in English, says he has many foreign friends, most of them older than he is, who work here and frequent the skating park, where he loves to hang	1. A: A typical day in your life: 2. D:Wake up, breakfast, stretching, and 3. then normally I go out to skateboard. That's my 4. normal typical day actually... 5. A:Jigifieri kuljum inti tmur skating? 6. D:Mhux kuljum immaaa meta jkolli free 7. time. Meta jkolli ġurnata free, immur niskejtja. 8. A:Tagħmel xi xogħol fid-dar... tipoooo, you 9. Live with your mum, right? So, tinvolvi xi 10. housework your day or ... 11. D: Normally I cook, clean my room for 12. example or I clean dishes – nothing really 13. major – 'cos we live in a flat, a small flat, so... 14. A: Apart from skating, what do you do in 15. your leisure time? 16. D: Either skating or I'll be watching the 17. movies at home. 18. A: What kind of movies do you like? 19. D: Erm...anything actually – comedy, some 20. action... not really really action...you know... 21. A: You have Netflix or other ...? 22. D: Netflix, or I stream online... 23. A: So you're a movie lover... 24. D: Erm... 25. A: Or you just enjoy? 26. D: I just enjoy, yeah 27. A: Skating's number one.. 28. D: Skating – but not only skating... I like 29. doing music production, I used to... how do 30. you call it? I used to produce music on the 31. computer, laptop 32. A: Wah! You're bright! 33. D: Thanks. Laughs 34. A: Ġie li kkunsidrajt dat-tip ta' xogħol 35. jiġifieri? 36. D: Ehe..ijja anzi ħafna drabi. 37. A: Ehe? 38. D: Emm, imma iktar jogħġobni photo 39. editing u video editing – iktar. 40. A: Ġie li għamilt hekk, dat-tip... 41. D: Ijja, ġie li għamilt 42. A: For friends imma, or for money? 43. D: No, no, not for money at all. It was 44. more for fun, for friends, for myself, yeah, my 45. friends were teaching me actually. So... 46. A: ok	Favourite pastime/ passion/ sport – skating Responsibility music production Creativity Friends, learning from peers, social life	Physically active, social life Identity Relationships

out. I don't know why I feel suspicious – it's just his calm, there's –all- the- time –in-the-world - manner, so rare in young people his age. He said he enjoyed the interview and offered to be interviewed again if necessary.	47. D yeah, I mean... I can't actually do it on 48. my laptop right now, so I'm doing it on my 49. phone, well I'm working with what I got... 50. A: And your friends are older than you, or 51. are they the same age as you?... How old are 52. you? 53. D: 20, ...erm, actually, some of my friends 54. they're younger than me and they teach me! 55. They're really talented anzi... 56. A: istra 57. D: ehe, cos they've kind of, they've done it 58. when they were younger – me I def didn't 59. when I was younger, so.. 60. A: Illaaa 61. D. Its' pretty cool actually... 62. A: tal-ġenn! Jien din xi ħaġa li ma nafx 63. nagħmilha – lanqas idea! 64. D: Jien ma kontx vera tajjeb fiha, immaaa 65. just, jgħallmuni sħabi hux. I learn from them 66. and they learn from me also 67. A: So, for your future, timmaġinak 68. tagħmel dan it-tip ta' xogħol? 69. D: Iva! 70. A: So, how do you see yourself in say 5 yrs 71. time? 72. D: Five years time! Oh, wow... hm...I have 73. a lot of thoughts actually...it's either 74. something to do with graphic design, maybe 75. working with a company...or... maybe I get 76. sponsored in skating – you never know – that 77. would be really nice I guess, I get sponsored by 78. some companies from abroad and also they 79. could pay for my tickets, you never know - to 80. go skate there – but then it's like saying you 81. turn your hobby into a job, so ... it's like – you 82. have to try even more you know, and also 83. especially in skating it's like there's a huge 84. mental factor in it, so for example, it's that fear 85. factor – it always comes up in skating. 86. A: You're afraid ...? 87. D: There are some things I get afraid of for 88. example like jumping from a high place – you 89. know, like, a gap, or doing a trick off a high 90. place ... 91. A: But you do it actually... 92. D: I do it, yeah. But it's not something I'm 93. really into 'cos there's many fields in skating 94. you know... there's many... 95. A: You have to tell me, I have no idea! 96. What do you mean – many fields?	Lack of resources? Opportunities, peer group, Identity Humility Self-esteem Dreams Aspirations hopes Fear	 Projections for the future

	97. D: 'Cos example there's people that just do 98. flat ground tricks, then there are some people 99. which are more technical, so example, they 100. do a trick up something and then they do a 101. grind for example, and then they do another 102. trick out and.. . technical - is basically saying 103. you have a... jack of all trades – I'm like that – 104. I dont' focus on one thing. 'Cos there's either 105. like street – ledges and stuff like that or park, 106. where you flow around ... u hekk... you 107. know... or gaps you know, like doing tricks 108. from high places landing off a roof – people 109. do that, and I'm like – uff! It's crazy. You 110. know... 111. A: It is! Alright... so that's how you see yourself... 112. D: Yeah – either it's skating or something 113. with graphics...computing but on the artistic 114. side of computing... 115. A: ok 116. D: So like photoshop or illustration... I 117. really like illustration too ... I used to study 118. that in Art and Design... 119. A: You mean like for example book 120. illustration? 121. D: Yeah – there's book illustration or even 122. posters... 123. A: So you're good at drawing? 124. D: I'm not good at drawing physically – I'd 125. rather do for example, art through 126. illustration, for example like you have to 127. programme ... 128. A: Using a programme.. 129. D: Exactly.	Jack of all trades – freedom of expression/ free spirit artistic	Keeping options open Meaning-making

Appendix 14: Sample transcript from a second interview with annotations.

Initial thoughts	Marie (19) 2nd interview on Zoom, 48 mins	Dominant themes	Higher-order themes
She did not get what she needed at school and she just switched off, got lost. She now suffers the consequences of the unfair deal she got from school and structurally. She's struggling to survive anyway, (agency), but has the odds against her – her anxiety and her dyslexia. It's not being NEET that causes later suffering in life. Being NEET is only a symptom of much bigger problems that the child is born into without any fault of her own. The ecosystem you are born in determines your quality of life (agency is part of the human makeup). That kids are NEET is the fault of the system. She has internalised the 'commonsense' beliefs generated by neoliberalism	148. M: U cleaner?! Kulħadd beda jgħidli Cleaner?! Everybody was telling me that 149. int għadek żgħira, ma ħaqqekx you are too young, you don't deserve that, 150. hekk, fhimt? Għal cleaner. U you know? To be a cleaner. And 151. qisha bdiet titfagħni post...u bdiet she started sending me ... she started 152. twassalni hi jiġifieri, kienet vera giving me a lift, she really 153. tħobbni lili, kienet twassalni, u loved me, she used to drive me, 154. hekk, mhux li bdejt ingerger I was not complaining 155. daqshekk. Bdew jgħiduli inti so much. They were telling me that I was 156. għadek żgħira ma ħaqqekx li just too young, did not deserve to 157. inti cleaner. be a cleaner. 158. A: U kif kont tħossok meta bdew 159. jgħidulek hekk? And how did this make you feel? 160. M: Bdejt inħossni mbagħad li vera hux. I started feeling that this was true then. 9.07 161. Kieku ma bdewx jgħiduli hekk Had they not said this to me, 162. kont qisni niddejjaq bil-mod u I would have got fed up slowly 163. kont nagħmel iktar, imma kont and it would have been worse, 164. niddejjaq bil-mod. Qisu ma tafx slower. I don't know what was happening with me, 165. kif, hekk. Ma nkunx nista' I cannot understand why I cannot 166. niffittja mkien! Ma nafx fit anywhere! I do not know 167. x'irrid jiena! Ifhem mhux li what I really want! It's not that 168. tgħid li ma nafx xi rrid eżatt, I do not know, actually, 169. għax kont inħobb l-arti ħafna, because I really loved art,	negative self-talk of loss, chances missed disappointment craving attention and acceptance from others who am I? Need to fit in Creative, talent	Being safe Agency finding safe harbour The importance of well-being — feeling safe, feeling good, wanting to be happy..

that perpetuate injustice, working against herself, blaming herself for structural injustice dominant discourses that tell her what she should aspire to, what to believe. Since she is not clear about what she wants, she internalises these messages and acts on them.	170. imma qisni bdew jgħiduli li bl- but people were telling me that 172. arti mhu se tieħu xejn. art will get me nowhere. 173. A: Min beda jgħidlek? Who was telling you this? 174. M: Zijiet u hekk. U... xtaqt tad- Aunts, uncles and such. And... I wished I 175. dwiefer jiena. Inħobbhom ħafna could train in nail art. I love that. 176. d-dwiefer. U dak għandu parti And that's art, you know? 177. minnu l-art, fhimt? Imma l-ħaġa But the thing is 178. biex nieħu l-korsijiet privat, li to take private lessons, where 179. nkun waħdi biex nitgħallem sew I would have to be the only student 180. – għax jiena li jkun hemm - you see, I do not learn 181. ħafna nies ma nitgħallimx. if there are other people there with me. 182. Għalxejn ħa mmur u nitgħallem It would be useless to try to do a course 183. hekk. Biex immur privat irrid like that. And to pay for one-to-one lessons 184. ikolli l-flus. Jiġifieri rrid insib I would have to have the money for it. 185. xogħol l-ewwel. Inkella mkien I would need to find a job first, otherwise 186. mhu ħa nasal. there's nothing doing. 187. A: Il-korsijiet li kont tieħu l-Youth 188. Guarantee għenuk b'xi mod? Were the Youth Guarantee sessions helpful? 189. Dawk iż-żminijiet iva għenuni At the time, yes, they helped 190. ħafna. Għax jiena issa, peress li a lot. You see, now that I 191. m'għadnix naħdem u hekk, no longer work and so on, 192. telqitli kollha l-kunfidenza u l- I have lost all confidence in myself, and 193. affarijiet li kont naf qabel I have forgotten all the things that I 194. insejthom. Għax issa għadda knew before. Because now it's been 195. ħafna żmien. Dak iż- a long time. At the time 196. żminijiet kien tajjeb. Qisni it was good. It did me good 197. għenitni tajjeb anke bil-	Being influenced by the judgement of others Lack of assertiveness Knowing what works for oneself Personal needs Financial issues Lack of self-esteem	Self-knowledge

	for my self-confidence. 198. kunfidenza. Bdew jgħinuna, They helped us with things like 199. anke kif inpoġġu, u affarijiet how to sit, and things 200. hekk. U jiena interview ma like that. And I knew nothing 201. kontx naf ukoll, interviews u about interviews, and 202. bdew jgħinuna. Qisni hekk They helped us. And then it kind of 203. imbagħad – meta ma tibqax helped me to change when 204. hekk – man-nies, qisek il- I am around people, because it's like 205. kunfidenza kollha tiegħek tispiċċa. you'd have lost all your self-confidence.	Basic skills for employment	
	207. A: U semmejtli li Facebook kont 208. neħħejtu. Dak għala? You mentioned earlier that you had deleted your Facebook account. Why? 209. Ifhem, li qisni kull darba nara n- Well, seeing what other people posted 210. nies jitfgħu – mhux li tgħid li - it's not that I disliked following or 211. niddejjaq ta u hekk, għax kont anything like that, because I 212. inħobbu hafna jien Facebook, loved Facebook, I was 213. kont iffissata fuqu, litteralment, obsessed with it, literally, 214. imma qisni... anke għax dħalt but then it's like... I had a steady 215. għarusa u hekk, mhux għax l- boyfriend - not that we were 216. iktar dħalt għarusa imma bdejt engaged, but I felt uncomfortable that... 217. niddejjaq li ...jien m'għandix I should not have to know what 218. inkun naf x'inhuma jagħmlu other people are doing. 219. n-nies. Nieħu gost nara l-videos I enjoy watching videos and all that - 220. u hekk - għalhekk għandi that is why I have YouTube; 221. YouTube; bdejt ngħid jiena, I started saying to myself 222. għedt allura FB inneħħih, that I should delete Facebook,		
	223. m'għandix bżonnu, u daqshekk. I do not need it, and that is that.	Detrimental effects of social media	

	224. Qabel meta kont żgħira dejjem *Before, when I was younger I had always* 225. problemi kont nieħu bih *had lots of problems with it, you know.* 226. ifhem. Imma… *Anyway, …* 227. A: Xi problemi kien itik mela? *What kind of problems did you have with it* *then?* 228. Pereżempju tarahom jiġġieldu *For example you would watch them fighting* 229. ikollok, qisek, kif taqbad tgħid? *and you feel this urge, how should I say it?* 230. Ikollok aptit tidħol, imma ma *You feel the need to join them, but* 231. tkunx fiha – mhux għax tkun trid, *it is really none of your business, but you* *cannot help yourself,* 232. fhimt? Bil-Malti taraha hemm, *You understand? You simply see it there,* 233. taqraha, jew li jitfgħu in-nies *you read it, or it's something people shared,* 234. hekk hux, tkun trid tagħmel *just like that, you want to post something* 235. fuqhom, dik il-ħaġa hekk. Jekk *to be on top, it's how it is. Like, for* 236. pereżempju xi ħadd jitfa' 'dal- *example someone starts complaining* 237. fan mhux vera hekk, għax dak *about some fan, that it is not really as* 238. hekk..' Imbagħad taqbeż inti – *it says in the advert; and then you comment:* 239. 'il-fan tiegħi tajjeb imma!' Qisni *'But mine works just fine! 'It's like* 240. ma nkunx irrid hekk u dik *I did not want to do that anymore, and* 241. il-ħaġa li kelli ħafna friends *the fact that I had so many friends* 242. għalxejn – ħadd minnhom ma *that were false or useless – I spoke to none of* *them* 243. nkellem ħlief il-familjari, *except to relatives of mine, so* 244. x'nambih il-FB *what use was Facebook to me* 245. għall-familjari, jekk gandi t- *just to speak to relatives,* 246. telephone?? Allura qisni ma *when I could use the telephone? So…* 247. bqajtx hekk hux għal FB. *I stopped being such a huge fan of Facebook.*		

Appendix 15: Extracts from field notes:

24.2.2018, 14.30-16.30

The Youth Guarantee sessions are taking place at (name of venue). The room on the second floor is light and airy. There is a small E.U. flag on the lecturer's desk, as well as E.U. funded sandwiches and water-bottles. All the young people in the group carry rucksacks, except Jane, who carries a Nike sports bag. Liam always wears the same clothes, and Jane tucks into the sandwiches often. Her nails are bright red. The session is about 'How to write a CV'. It is a small group – six in all, sometimes seven, and everyone pays attention, or so it appears. I wonder whether this has something to do with the fact that I am there. Jane snuggles into her woolly polo top, covering her mouth in the process. This is her normal body position as she listens to the lecturer, whose session is a replica of all lessons in the secondary school classroom. There is nothing alternative about it, except the smallness of the group. Now and then someone glances at their mobile phone or yawns. Maybe they are not paying attention after all. Dylan often looks up at the window.

Jane leans sideways onto her Nike bag in a sleeping position. She told me later that she was sleepy because she was not getting any sleep this week because her mother had been hospitalised due to a stroke, and she had to do all the housework and cook for her dad.

They have accepted me, I think. We chat during break, and they share personal information about themselves effortlessly in my presence.

20.7.2018, 14.00-16.00

The session today is about handling stress. Nadja and Jean are irregular attendees. Jean leaves and Nadja keeps his chair free. She wears long sleeves, a polo collar, and pants in the stifling Summer heat, which I find odd. It occurred to me that she might be self-harming and wanted to cover up. But then I became aware of the judgemental thought and reasoned that she may be self-conscious about her figure, felt more comfortable like that, or maybe had some health-related condition. I could not help but wonder. She says she practices mindfulness as she is often prone to a lot of stress. The group is sitting in a circle. The attendees appear to be in awe of the lecturer – an older, middle-class man. He dominates the discussion, speaks in English most of the time and uses expressions that reflect his educated social background and age. I do not think that some of the attendees quite followed what he was saying all of the time. They just stared at him blankly at times. Kevin addressed the group at one point, said that he had set up a camera over his bed to monitor his sleep patterns. He considers himself to be charismatic, and a problem-solver. Nadja spoke to the group about mindfulness.

19.11.2018, 15.30 – 17.30

Mary owns a business in the village, and she knows all the young people in the surroundings, as most of them are clients of hers. I had met her at school, where she was employed, and all the students loved to spend time out at her room – the only place where they accepted being talked at by a figure of authority at school. She had a unique rapport with the most difficult students, and after a while it occurred to me that she could be my gatekeeper – helping me gain access to one of 'her' older kids in the village for my research. She accepted and we agreed that I should go to the salon to meet a girl who was NEET at the time. When we met, we

recognised each other. Years ago I had been one of the assistant heads at her school, but I had only known her a little and for a short while. Rachel was born with a disability due to domestic violence that her mother experienced during her pregnancy, as she mentioned during our interview. Now she was a grown young lady. She had long pointed shellac nails and voluminous, fiery red hair, piercings, and lots of makeup. We sat in the back room of the shop, with only a thin partition separating us from the shop full of clients chatting and shouting. Rachel seemed comfortable enough, used to being there every Friday.

She would not accept the chocolates I brought her as a small thank you, so I left them for Mary and her clients. I could not help thinking that Rachel only spoke to me because of her trust in Mary, my gatekeeper. I was not dressed like her – I was 'other' in her eyes. Mary was more her sort, in her skin-tight jeans and top, dark pointed nails and bleached head of curls. But the interview went well.

24.8.2020, 10.15 – 12.45

This time the sessions are taking place at (name of venue). In this group there are ten young people – nine boys, one girl. She's just there to be with her boyfriend however, because she had passed all her exams and wanted to be a lawyer. Lessons take place in the same way as in secondary school. The attendees are of different nationalities, so the lecturer speaks in English. Those sitting in the back know each other and chat a lot. One of them has many tattoos on his body, his neighbour is constantly drawing, and the one sitting behind him lowers his head and is on his phone. The session is about learning to learn. I am still new to this group, so I try to be as unobtrusive as possible. I only participated when invited by the lecturer, who was very cooperative. The young people just sit and listen, answering when asked a question by the

lecturer. None of them ask questions or speak their minds. The atmosphere is relaxed, sleepy even.

1.8.2020, 12.15 -15.15

Today I was a restless observer. I felt repulsed by the scenario that I was attempting to study. My teacher-training and experience were rebelling inside me; those sessions were 'dead', the students were not being invited to participate, make them their own – they were just passive witnesses of a lesson! All that they had rejected at school! Or maybe I needed to practise some self-reflection? Maybe I am not 'in the zone'. I am confused while I observe, and strive to connect with my inner workings, my messy thoughts about what I was doing and what I was observing. I could not be a passive observer. My role is active, because I am alert and trying to make connections between all that I was exposing myself to, or all that they allowed themselves to expose to me... My co-supervisor was right: In reality, essentially, I cannot be a 'participant' observer with NEET young people, because I am not NEET myself. I cannot 'be' one of them or 'participate' in their being NEET. I can only try to understand. What I can do is observe them in an activity they are engaged in.

Appendix 16: The lyrics of Anthea's favourite song

Legacy by Motionless In White (Source: LyricFind, Songwriters: Chris Cerulli / Ricky Olson / Ryan Sitkowski / Justin Morrow / Vinny Mauro)

Motionless in White

Forged in blood

Etched in bone

The sacrifice

The war we know

I can feel it in my veins

Laced with gold but rich with pain

Do you want it? Die for it

Nothing is ever given 'til you work for it

The choices that we make echo eternity

I'm not afraid to stand up

Fists up

Never gonna give up

I'm lightning, no fear, just adrenaline

Jet black

Heart attack

Thunder for a soundtrack

(Whoa-oh-oh, whoa)

What kind of scars will you leave? (hey)

What kind of blood will you bleed? (hey)

When fear sets the stage for defeat (hey)

What will your legacy be?

The darkest nights, the bitter cold

Live or die

Our truth be told

I can hear it in my chains

A requiem for better days

I will fear not my death or destiny

Because death fears me

What will I become?

Forsaken or beloved?

Too far…