

# Book Review: Education, Work and Social Change by Robin Simmons, Ron Thompson and Lisa Russell

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*The number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is rising to alarming levels across the globe and costing the economy billions. This book is based upon a longitudinal study of the lives of a set of young people in the north of England classified as NEET, or at risk of becoming NEET. Drawing on ethnographic data from over two years of fieldwork, it looks beyond dominant political and media discourses on NEET young people to provide a rich, detailed account of young people's experiences on the margins of education and employment in post-industrial Britain. **Claire Forbes** reviews.*

**Book Review: Education, Work and Social Change by Robin Simmons, Ron Thompson and Lisa Russell. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014**

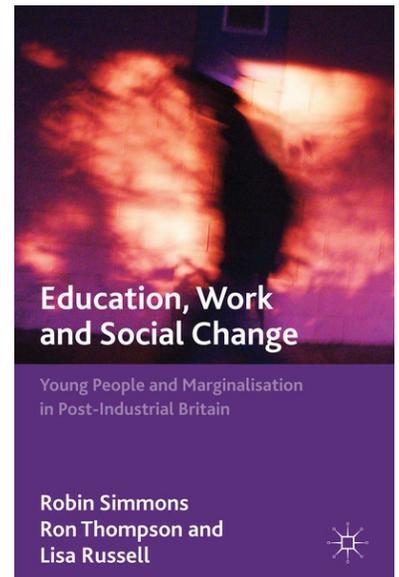
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In recent years, English educational policy has been increasingly preoccupied with attempting to bridge the gap between the most and least educationally advantaged. Solutions have been sought, yet for the most part these improvement strategies have not achieved their intended outcomes. We remain in a situation where the number of young people described as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is rising, globally. Drawing upon ethnographic data collected over two years in the field, *Education, Work and Social Change* by Robin Simmons, Ron Thompson and Lisa Russell seeks to consider the experiences of NEET young people by enabling their stories to 'illuminate the experiences of marginalised youth in post industrial Britain'(p.1).

Simmons, Thompson and Russell open this study by introducing one of the main themes of their research: young people and marginality. They begin by evoking the media perpetuated image of the 'hoodie' or the 'pramface girl' (p. 1), before alluding more fully to the negative portrayal of an 'out of control youth' (p.1). However, the authors are quick to point out that this is not the whole story. Far from demonising young people as morally reprehensible on an individual level, it is important to recognise that 'phenomena such as mass youth unemployment and disaffection from education are related to changes in society on a global scale' (p. 2). As such, the book sets out to explore aspects of youth disengagement through a critical materialist approach, more specifically Loïc Wacquant's concept of 'advanced marginality'. Drawing upon some 280 hours of participant observation, the writers unveil a glimpse of 24 NEETs within the context of global shifts in employment and available opportunity structures. They begin by considering the notions of poverty and social exclusion.

Chapter 2 starts by conceptualising poverty. Defining poverty as absolute can be problematic and, yet relative conceptualisations are equally contentious, particularly when measured in relation to income or material differentials. Ultimately, in its relative conception, Simmons, Thompson and Russell view poverty as 'both dynamic and contingent' (p.20); as something that can only be considered in relation to others within the same society at the same point in time. Ways of making sense of poverty and social exclusion fall broadly into two camps: 'One sees them as structural phenomena caused largely by social, economic and political processes, whilst the other emphasizes individual and cultural shortcomings' (p.24).

Despite structural explanations being in ascendance throughout much of the twentieth century, recent discourse reflects a revival of the latter interpretation, placing poverty as directly linked to moral degeneracy on an individual



level, highlighted by Iain Duncan-Smith (2010): 'For someone from a family or peer group where no one has ever held work, the pressure to conform is enormous, underscored by the notion that taking a job is a mug's game' (p.25). Although such deficit views do appear to have rippled through public opinion, the authors' findings suggest that the participants within their study did ascribe to traditional aspirations of getting a job and starting a family.

Furthermore, the commonly held belief that unemployment is automatically repeated in subsequent generations was similarly unfounded. There was little evidence to suggest that NEETs are in a state of permanent joblessness. Indeed, paid employment did feature within their lives, although it was often intermittent and precarious, leading to varied and changing levels of poverty and living situations. With this in mind, the authors preferred to view their participants as 'marginal' rather than excluded and within their research, they were interested in exploring 'their circulation between liminal positions' (p.35), leading to varying degrees of social isolation, rather than the more 'fixed' idea of social exclusion.

Simmons, Thompson and Russell focus upon two overarching themes that emerged from their case studies, namely the young NEETs' participation in education and training courses, as well as their socio-economic background including family poverty, living environment and early experiences of school. Chapter 5 examines the nature of the UK labour market, before reviewing educational provision for those who have disengaged with formal academic education, in particular pre-vocational 'employability' training. Chapter 6 presents the reader with the story of a young man who participated in such training. Danny left education at Year 9 and has since drifted in and out of various vocational courses. His tale of disengagement is marked by 'a labour market with few opportunities for young people, especially those with low qualifications, and training provision offering little in terms of advancement, either in terms of entry to employment or higher level study' (p.122). He appears trapped in a cycle of enrolling upon and repeating a series of low-level vocational programmes, namely in ICT and Business. However, these beginners' level courses do not enable Danny to progress on to more advanced levels or into employment. If we agree with Simmons, Thompson and Rimmer that '...individual choices are shaped, at least to some extent, by opportunity structures' (p.127), there can be little doubt that Danny's choices are limited by the lack of meaningful opportunities available to him. Indeed, this marginalisation is further compounded by his descent into youth offending and drug use, which eventually results in Danny leaving his family home and becoming increasingly socially excluded. As such, Danny's story serves to highlight the inappropriateness of some pre-vocational training, which results in the further marginalisation of the already marginalised .

*Education, Work and Social Change* is an enlightening read and would appeal to anyone interested in social policy, education and youth employment. Weaving the voices of six young NEETs into the narrative offers a useful and thought provoking illustration of some of the pressures and realities faced by these vulnerable young people in a society that does not facilitate meaningful opportunity structures for them. The book concludes by highlighting some of the implications that this research could have on both policy and practice. Perhaps the most intriguing and important section of the book, I did feel that this final chapter was too brief and I longed for the writers to engage more deeply in discussions regarding re-engagement.

The book's closing lines demand action, both from the current political regime whose policies have no doubt intensified the issues highlighted within this book, but also from us, the electorate, who will be able to vote upon such issues later this year: 'Marginalization can, we argue, only be exacerbated by cutting back advice and guidance services, reducing financial support available to young people pursuing education and training, and the introduction of ever more draconian welfare initiatives. There is an urgent need for political intervention to address the structural forces which lie at the root of marginalization' (p.230).

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