

Review: *NEET young people and training for work: learning on the margins*. Simmons, Robin and Thompson, Ron (2011) Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

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What is it about books on issues facing the Lifelong Learning Sector? No sooner are they published, when new events potentially make some aspects anachronistic. There is no fear of that in the case of *NEET young people and training for work: learning on the margins* - this reviewer has a sneaky feeling that the two authors are having difficulty suppressing themselves from saying “We nearly told you so”.

Violence and looting erupted in London, Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham in August 2011 – probably as the book was being printed. Although there is no prophecy of the disturbances in the book, its cover has an image called *Broken Glass*. Whatever the preferred reading of the publishers then, the one now is of smashed shop windows.

This book is definitely not superseded by the disturbances but provides an incisive preface for Government reports (Home Office, 2011; Ministry of Justice, 2011). It prompts memories for this reviewer of a whole range of “bad good ideas” from successive governments – each of which would “make the difference”. Its main thrust is that the priorities of the policy makers resulted in strategies replacing previous attempts only to be replaced by others. The proliferation of abbreviations – YTS, YOPS, TVEI, E2E – are worryingly memorable due to the hard slog of trying to make them work followed by the deflation when they disappeared with the flourish of a new Minister’s pen.

The term NEET (Not in Education, Training or Employment) was first used in 1996 as it was considered preferable to the existing term ‘Status 0’, a classification used by Careers services. For a non-sociologist this book proves to be helpful in defining and illustrating specialist terms such as globalisation, neo-liberalism and knowledge-economy. Gaining some understanding of how the authors use the terms, is key to following the book through its subsequent arguments. There are many references to other work – quite a number by the authors themselves or colleagues at the University of Huddersfield. These help to support the authors’ arguments – which are generally critical of the policies relating to ‘hard to reach’ young people of the governments of Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown and the current (at least at the time of writing) Coalition Government.

The penultimate chapter is about the work of some E2E tutors (now subsumed into the more far-reaching Foundation Learning Tier). The chapter provides an ethnographic study of learners and tutors which illuminates the background of learners/NEETs. It also provides a reflection on the concepts of professionalism given that non-teaching staff have a positive impact on the lives of NEET young people.

A central argument of the book is summarised in the final chapter: ‘*the main beneficiaries of rising educational standards and increased levels of participation have been from the higher social classes*’ (p. 169). The authors forcefully defend their stance that research does not always have to be about *impact* or *best value*. They contend that this book offers space for broader discussion and conclude that there is a real need to secure ‘socially just outcomes’ for young people. They make their case well.

The book engages the reader with ‘policy scholarship’ rather than analysing effective approaches to teaching and learning. It is certainly a challenge to read but the book does explain how the authors are using language and provides extensive references.

NEET young people and training for work: learning on the margins would be particularly useful for anyone who works with socially deprived learners – especially the new generation of managers required to make strategies operational. They should not however expect to read about examples of ‘good practice’. It would certainly be useful for MPs, Ministers and Civil Servants before they come up with the next “best thing” (which cannot have any significant cost). It provides a background for some of the stark statistics published by the Home Office and Ministry of Justice following the disorder events of August 2011.

- ‘66 per cent of young people [involved in the disturbances] were classified as having some form of special educational need (SEN) (compared to 21 per cent of all pupils in maintained secondary schools).
- Over a third (36 per cent) of young people were identified as having at least one fixed period exclusion from school during 2009/10 (compared to 6 per cent of all Year 11 pupils).’

(Ministry of Justice, 2011)

NEET young people and training for work: learning on the margins is a highly current book. It provides a set of arguments that are supported by the data published in the wake of the disorders. The authors provide a sober and thought provoking appraisal of understanding of NEETS and challenge the stereotypical representations of a minority of young people who are 'on the margins' of social justice.

References:

BBC (2011) 'England Rioters "Poorer, Younger, Less Educated"' [online] Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15426720> [accessed 27 October 2011].

Home Office (2011) *An Overview of Recorded Crimes and Arrests Resulting from Disorder Events in August 2011*. Home Office

Ministry of Justice (2011) *Statistical Bulletin on the Public Disorder of 6th to 9th August 2011 – October Update*: Ministry of Justice.

Simmons, R., Thompson, R. (2011) *NEET Young People and Training for Work: Learning on the Margins*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.