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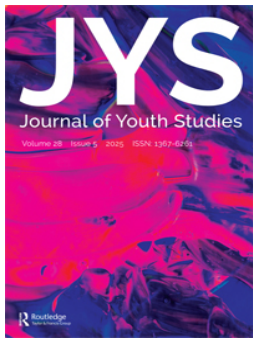
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Playing the game? Young people ‘at risk’ of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) and their investment in education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how young people identified as ‘at risk’ of not being integrated into education, employment or training orientate themselves towards the education system in England during their final years of school. These years can have long-term consequences for future engagement with the labour market, but not every young person is equally positioned to invest in them. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of 81 young people aged 14–16 in England who were vulnerable to becoming NEET, the paper argues that Bourdieu’s oft-overlooked concept of ‘illusio’ offers a novel way to understand the complex relationships participants have with their schooling. Comparing the field of education to a ‘game’ helps to think through the ease and difficulty with which young people ‘at risk’ of becoming NEET invest in its ‘stakes’ and unpack their beliefs about whether it is worth ‘playing’ even when they feel out of kilter with its rules. Overall, the paper elucidates the tensions between the young people’s motivations to engage in their schooling and their struggles to enact this engagement in the ways that the education system expects of them.

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Introduction

Systems to support the early identification of young people who may be at risk of not being integrated into education, employment or training (NEET) are increasing globally (Maguire 2021). Based on the routine collection of school-based data, they flag risk factors to enable the implementation of timely, targeted interventions before young people fall out of the system. In England, these preventative efforts have accompanied legislation introduced in 2013 to raise the age of participation in learning to 18. Although there is currently no legal enforcement of this legislation nor any national, government-led programme to support its implementation, local authorities have a statutory duty to promote and encourage participation amongst 16–18-year-olds when they leave

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compulsory schooling at age 16 (DfE 2024a). Young people's post-16 participation can include remaining in full-time education, starting an apprenticeship, or combining work or volunteering with part-time education or training.

To enable local authorities to carry out their duties regarding participation, formal tools known as risk of NEET indicators (RONI), as well as targeted criteria focused on known high-risk groups, referrals received directly from schools and the reporting of young people without an intended post-16 destination are widely used to identify young people aged 14–16 who are at risk of becoming NEET in the future. These systems of early identification of potential future NEET status recognise that the final two years of a young person's compulsory schooling between the ages of 14–16¹ can have significant consequences for their post-16 participation. Notably, academic attainment in the national General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations young people prepare for throughout this period and sit at age 16 is a significant predictor of future NEET status. Young people not achieving a 'standard pass' in any GCSEs² at this stage of their education are most overrepresented in the NEET group (DfE 2018). The curriculum they study also impacts post-16 transitions, with those taking applied vocational subjects disadvantaged in their progression to full-time education post-16 compared to peers pursuing academic subjects (Moulton et al. 2018). Furthermore, pupils' persistent absence, over 10%, in the final two years of their schooling, is a significant risk factor (Powell 2021).

Becoming NEET is not a defined event that occurs once young people leave school at age 16, but rather a gradual process that begins earlier in their education. For this reason, research suggests enhancing school motivation and engagement may play a protective role in future education and work transitions and provide feasible leverage for lowering the probability of NEET (Rahmani and Groot 2023). Engagement enables pupils to develop skills to cope with the 'stressors, setbacks and difficulties' they face in school and beyond (Wang and Fredricks 2014, 732). It also correlates with overall levels of self-esteem, which is particularly important for adolescents coming to the end of their school years when they undergo significant self-identify development (D'Angelo and Kaye 2018). The positive impact of school engagement for young people vulnerable to becoming NEET should, however, be contextualised in relation to the high stakes involved in their final school years.

The English education system is not unusual in assessing learners at the end of their compulsory education. However, compared to most other countries, it requires pupils to spend considerably more hours sitting examinations, with performance predominantly determined by these rather than assessed across their course (DfE 2025). Additionally, the system places unusually high weight on GCSE examinations, due in part to England's strong accountability measures for schools, but also the significant educational and labour market advantage associated with holding these qualifications (Machin, McNally, and Ruiz-Valenzuela 2020). Even marginally failing to get a standard GCSE pass grade in English and maths at age 16 significantly narrows young people's post-16 opportunities (Jerrim 2023; Machin, McNally, and Ruiz-Valenzuela 2020). GCSEs not only serve as a crucial gateway into post-16 colleges, universities and employment, but also govern which type of providers they have access to within established educational and occupational hierarchies. This advances a performance imperative that urges young people to strive for individual success in these examinations as a path to personal fulfilment. With their final school years framed as an important determinant in securing positive

and worthwhile futures, achievement demands have arguably ‘colonised all areas of youth life’ (Krogh and Madsen 2024, 708), leaving little room for questions about structures of inequality. Rather, individual ‘stress’ and ‘pressure’ associated with the ‘all or nothing’ nature of end of school examinations remain dominant in young people’s lives (Banks and Smyth 2015, 612).

Within this achievement-orientated context, school is an unenjoyable and alienating experience for substantial numbers of 14 and 15-year-olds (McPherson et al. 2023). Yet there is a stark difference between discontent in their final school years and the effort they put into them. School is something they try to ‘endure’ and ‘work as hard as they can in’ because of its bearing on their futures (McPherson et al. 2023, 11). As Mendick, Allen, and Harvey (2015) argue, young people no longer attribute educational and labour market success to ‘effortless achievement’ and instead affirm the value of ‘hard work’. Reflecting this, among young people who become NEET, there is little evidence they experience the ‘poverty of aspiration’ that is often attributed to them (Thompson 2017). However, there is a dearth in research that considers specifically how such young people engage with their final school years and invest in the imperative to ‘perform’ embedded within the education system.

This paper offers a contribution to fill this gap by reporting on ethnographic data gathered with 81 young people identified as ‘at risk’ of becoming NEET. Drawing on findings from this group of 14–16-year-olds, it explores how these young people orientate themselves towards the education system, using Bourdieu’s comparison of the field of education to a ‘game’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Specifically, Bourdieu’s often-overlooked concept ‘illusio’ is used to analyse participants’ beliefs about whether the game is worth ‘playing’ and the ease or difficulty with which they act upon these beliefs to invest in its ‘stakes’. To achieve this, we begin by explaining how school engagement is understood elsewhere, before introducing Bourdieu’s conceptual framework as a novel way to conceptualise this. Next, the research is explained, before findings emerging from the data are discussed. Finally, the conclusion considers an emerging paradox between participants’ beliefs about the game and their struggles to meaningfully partake in it.

School (dis)engagement

School engagement refers to pupils’ levels of participation in school and their connectedness with education. As Ryan et al. (2019, 1272) describe, the concept relates to ‘the extent to which young people are involved, committed and motivated to learn and work towards their academic and professional careers’. Positive school engagement is associated with overall better well-being for young people and higher academic achievement (Wong et al. 2024). In contrast, school disengagement is associated with poorer socio-economic and health outcomes that can have negative effects throughout an individual’s life (Feng et al. 2015). On a societal level, the potential for school disengagement to subsequently lead to periods of being NEET can have negative implications for welfare systems, public health, and labour market efficiency. School engagement is not, therefore, only about the ‘here and now’ in particular classrooms, but extends outside these boundaries to affect longer-term outcomes for the individual and the communities they live in (Lawson and Lawson 2013).

Interventions to address disengagement at a school or policy level typically focus on concerns relating to young people's behaviours, such as classroom disruption, low attendance, or non-compliance. However, pupils who are not outwardly displaying these behaviours may also have little motivation for school (Ryan et al. 2019). These moderately engaged pupils may be attending school and behaving but do so with little enjoyment or value attributed to learning. To capture the inconspicuous aspects of school disengagement, in addition to more overt indicators, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's (2004) conceptualisation of school engagement as a multi-faceted concept uniting how pupils 'behave, feel and think' is useful. Behavioural engagement concerns 'positive conduct', such as regular school attendance and adhering to school rules, as well as active involvement in learning or extra-curricular activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). Pupils' emotional engagement, or how they feel, relates to their attachment to school and the extent to which they value and feel valued within this environment. Cognitive engagement is how pupils think, emphasising effort in learning and strategies to sustain this beyond simply 'doing the work' (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). Each of the three components of school engagement has the potential to vary in intensity and duration, meaning engagement may develop or change over time. However, rather than focusing on a single factor, exploring the interrelation of pupils' behaviours, attitudes and feelings towards school can offer a richer understanding of pupils' school engagement. Together they establish school engagement as a 'multidimensional, developing, and malleable' concept (Upadyaya and Salmela-Aro 2013, 138).

The three dimensions of school engagement do not, however, operate in a vacuum. They are influenced by wider structural contexts. These include the norms of the education system itself, such as the high stakes involved in end of year examinations or the timing of educational transitions. The rules, teaching styles and support systems operating within specific institutional or classroom contexts are also relevant (Fredricks et al. 2019; Santos et al. 2020). Furthermore, it is important to consider how young people interact with these structural contexts based on their social and economic backgrounds. This does not mean school (dis)engagement should be considered an individual attribute of the young person themselves or part of a 'natural process' in some families (De Witte et al. 2013). Rather, as Reay (2017, 96) asserts, 'some things are just not possible if you have virtually none of the necessary resources'. The young people in Reay's research have a strong sense of individual responsibility for their learning, but experience 'constraints and difficulties' associated with their working-class backgrounds that alienate them from school (96). Considering the relationships between young people's orientations towards their education, their individual and family resources, and the opportunities and contexts they interact with, is therefore important to understanding school engagement. To unpack these relationships and conceptualise how young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET engage in their schooling, the following section introduces Bourdieu's concept of 'illusio' and situates this alongside his more commonly used tools of field, capital, and habitus.

Playing the game: Bourdieu's conceptual framework

Bourdieu employs the metaphor of a game to describe the relatively autonomous 'fields' that make up society. Each field is imbued with a 'doxa', the presupposed norms, values

and practices or 'rules' that are accepted as 'common-sense' (Bourdieu 1998). Yet, just like a game, a field is also a 'space of conflict and competition', constructed through its players and strategies they employ to exert power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 17). Within the game, it is the accumulation and exchange of 'capital', be that economic, social or cultural, that make playing more than just a matter of chance (Bourdieu 1986). Comparing capital to cards that can be brought into play during the game, Bourdieu explains there are some cards that are more valuable than others in most games, while there are others whose relative value may change depending on the particular game in hand (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This means the ability to wield influence in one field is not necessarily transferable to another. It is therefore 'one and the same thing' to determine what the field is and the species of capital active within it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98).

Capital alone does not, however, explain why some players are more easily able to interpret the rules of the game than others. Players bring to the field an embodied history, or 'habitus' formed through the position they occupy in the game and the trajectory that has led to it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As the 'system of dispositions' through which social positions become internalised, habitus is marked by the social and economic conditions of its acquisition and, in its manifestation of cultural capital, is 'at home' in the fields that have produced it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For some individuals, habitus thus provides them with a 'feel for the game' and enables them to deploy strategies to influence their likelihood of success in the game (Bourdieu 1998, 77). Others, however, do not experience the obviousness of the rules of the game. This uneven ability to navigate the game means habitus plays an important role in structuring participation and engagement. At the interface of field and habitus, key to understanding what leads individuals to engage with the game, remain in it and adhere to its norms is Bourdieu's oft-overlooked concept of 'illusio'.

While habitus shapes how individuals approach the field, illusio is what gives the game an affective pull and imbues actions in the field with a sense of purpose. Players who are motivated by the stakes and rewards of the game and consider pursuit of them to be a valuable endeavour feel compelled to take part. Illusio captures this interest in the game and denotes the belief that 'playing is worth the effort' (Bourdieu 1998, 77). Illusio thus corresponds with a specific orientation towards the future where players see something worth aspiring towards in a specific field (Threadgold 2018). When they are 'taken in and by the game', what happens in the game matters to them and illusio manifests in their investment of time, energy and emotion (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 116). Indeed, even when there are broader social, economic and cultural circumstances impacting on them, illusio means they take the game seriously. Their day-to-day struggles are a means of making their lives worthwhile.

The expectation that investment in the game holds future promise is, therefore, fundamental to the perpetuation of a field. However, players do not always have to agree with the rules of the game to partake in it. While they may feel that the game is significant enough to engage in, a player can be interested whilst simultaneously being disinterested. Importantly, to be disinterested is not the same as being 'indifferent'. In contrast to illusio, indifference means individuals see little value in the game and are 'neither moved nor affected' by it (Bourdieu 1998, 77). They invest nothing in the game or its stakes. Rather, those who are disinterested in the game have the disposition to recognise it is worth the effort to struggle for the things that are in play. Even though they may want

to 'overturn the relations of force within the field', they grant recognition to its stakes and continue to follow its norms and logic (Bourdieu 1998, 78). Illusio is useful, therefore, for analysing the intensity with which an individual's motivations and orientations towards the game are experienced.

As Bourdieu (2000) outlines, to have any chance of benefiting from the game, players need to take part in it. Illusio thus creates a worldview in which playing the game seems to be commonsense, resonating in this paper with the way in which young people's school engagement during their final years is positioned as an important determinant in securing positive and worthwhile futures. To consider how young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET are captivated by this official rhetoric, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's (2004) conceptualisation of school engagement, introduced in the previous section, acts as a useful descriptive tool for their interrelated behavioural, cognitive and emotional investments. Illusio, however, speaks more to the underlying logic of young people's engagement, conveying the interest (or indifference) that explains *why* they (dis)engage with their schooling. In the sections that follow, analysing school engagement in terms of illusio helps to illuminate the beliefs of young people vulnerable to becoming NEET about the value of their final school years. While they are pushed and pulled by different forces and often feel as if they are 'out on a limb' during their education (Bourdieu 2000, 127), it is illusio that shapes their efforts to invest often under difficult conditions.

Research methods

Data are drawn from the second phase of a longitudinal ethnographic research study that explores the unfolding educational and employment trajectories of young people vulnerable to becoming NEET in England.³ A 'recurrent time mode' ethnography, whereby temporal phases formalise the research methodology, was used to monitor the experiences, feelings and identity shifts young people exhibited as they moved through the rhythms of their final two school years (Jeffrey and Troman 2004). Life events such as school exclusion or transitioning into and out of educational sites were also important points of contact. 81 young people (aged 14–16) took part in the research, across five local authorities and based in mainstream schools, pupil referral units (PRUs), special schools and alternative provision.⁴ The findings for this paper largely derive from interviews with the young people, which sought to understand their lived experiences of being 'at risk' alongside pre-existing and ongoing experiences of home, school and family. The full corpus of data includes interviews with 41 professionals who worked with the young people, 68 participant observations and the researchers' fieldnotes from over 400 hours spent in the field. The researchers' recurrent presence in the field and the large data set assisted in developing a nuanced understanding of the contexts shaping the young people's lives.

Schools in England have a duty to inform their local authority about pupils in their care who have characteristics relevant to future NEET status (DFE 2023). This information was used by staff within each setting to identify young people to take part in the research. Importantly, not every young person identified as vulnerable to becoming NEET was willing or able to be involved. The researchers invested substantial time in the field to build rapport and trust with the young people and gain their informed consent face-to-face as well as through written forms. Among the young people, risk factors for NEET status were varied and often co-existed. These commonly included: persistent

low attendance or internal truancy, temporary or permanent exclusion, low predicted GCSE grades, having special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and 'problematic' behaviour. Less common, but significant, factors included criminal exploitation and substance misuse. Of the 81 participants, 43 identified as male, 35 female and 3 non-binary or preferred not to say.

Each young person took part in at least one in-depth interview. Prior to the interview, 67 created a 'lifecycle map' detailing events that were personally significant to their educational history. The lifecycle maps helped to place aspects of their educational experiences that were subsequently raised in the interviews against the backdrop of the young person's wider life and educational trajectory. Together, the lifecycle maps and interviews brought to the forefront differences in the young people's situations and their own perspectives on reasons for their 'at risk' status. Rather than reducing them to a homogenous group through externally imposed fixed labels such as 'at risk' and 'NEET', this approach sought to prioritise the young people's experiences.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and then coded inductively using NVivo. Inductive analysis followed a thematic approach and involved regular, structured discussion between the research team. Young people's school (dis)engagement emerged as an overarching theme. However, to interrogate tensions in the relationship between participants and their schooling, the researchers were drawn to Bourdieu's concept of *illusio*. Returning to the data through the lens of *illusio* showed strong overall patterns in participants' 'interest' in their schooling. Three subthemes were of significance as they related to key factors shaping how participants articulated this interest: high-stakes exams, school exclusion, and social and emotional complexities. The following sections illustrate how Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* helped drive a deeper level of understanding of participants' school (dis)engagement in relation to these subthemes. They are not exhaustive of situations that may affect school engagement for young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET but capture significant considerations for those in this study.

Future-orientated *Illusio*: high-stakes exams

With GCSEs a 'central pillar' in the English education landscape (Jerrim 2023, 6), the young people in this research recognised the stakes at play in their education as they approached these exams during their final school years. They contrasted their current experience to earlier years and highlighted the expectations now placed on them to take their learning seriously. As Jake, who was based in a mainstream secondary school, explained:

It feels, because like Years 7, 8 and 9 is more like, to me that was like a mess about and relax year kind of thing. [...] you meet people, like make friends and stuff [...] And like Year 10's where you've got to like sit down and actually learn.

Like many of the young people, Jake's description of Year 10 is congruent with the expectations the education system places on young people to 'perform'. GCSEs bring with them a regime of hard work and pressures the young people have often not experienced before. Like the rules of a game, these are learned over time through the young people's participation in their school contexts, namely the localised fields in which

broader educational structures and expectations are enacted. For some young people, like Adnan below, congruence with these expectations necessitates a shift away from earlier behaviours:

It wasn't intrinsically like naughty in terms of school. It was like more laziness to be honest. Like I wasn't the best with my homework. I am now. I go to homework club and everything and just try to stay on top. But back then when there was like a homework piece sometimes I just couldn't be bothered and just left it out of the way.

Through his renewed engagement with schoolwork, Adnan sought to reconcile his performance with the stakes at play. His actions demonstrate a shift in his behavioural engagement and an acceptance that this is 'crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes' (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004, 60). Indeed, as Adnan further explains, 'if I keep at the path that I believe I'm currently on I think I will be able to [...] get the top grades, the top marks'. Aspiring to achieve 'a minimum of 7s' in his exams, Adnan re-orientated himself towards the field with *illusio* manifesting in the expectation that his efforts will bring future reward.

There were, however, many other young people whose behavioural engagement undermined their ability to invest in the stakes at play. Low attendance, internal truancy and problematic behaviour were key factors in why participants had been identified as 'at risk' of becoming NEET and brought them into conflict with school. This did not, however, mean they were oblivious to the performance pressures encapsulating their final school years. Milan, for example, is aware of the actions she is expected to take to commit to the field, yet conflict at home between family members does not create conducive conditions for her to engage in school routines. Milan's 70% rate of attendance at her mainstream school reflects her struggle to meet its expectations:

My attendance isn't that good. I don't really come in that much. [...] I don't mind like Year 10, but I feel like I should've just focused and came in more and like put my head down a lot more this year, and obviously next year.

Although Milan's actions are at odds with the school's demands, her comments show that she still gives space to its dominant discourse around the importance of attendance and hard work at this stage of her education. Had she attended every day, Milan notes 'I would've done better [...] like it would've benefited me'. She recognises that attending school should be worth her investment but without a stable homelife she has not yet been able to adjust her behaviour to participate every day. It is not, therefore, that Milan is indifferent to the game. She recognises its rules and the stakes at play, but her expression of *illusio* is weak. It is enough to sustain her connection to school, but not to fully engage.

Most of the participants were intending to progress into vocational education post-16 rather than pursue conventionally academic pathways. This did not, however, lessen the logic of importance attributed to their final school years. They share in the 'tacit accord' that qualifications and grades are objects of value for life beyond Year 11 and were able to ground themselves congruently with this *illusio* (Bourdieu 1998). Max, for example, was hoping to become a mechanic. Although still unsure about how to get there, Max recognises that the qualifications he is working towards serve as currency, or in Bourdieu's terms a key form of cultural capital, in the education system: 'I need GCSEs for everything,

even if it's not needed'. Attaining 'five GCSEs' for entry to college or to apply for future jobs was the threshold identified for progression beyond school in several participants' accounts. This motivated the young people to strive to achieve these qualifications, even though they did not always enjoy the process of doing so. As Emma explains: '[...] sometimes it's not fun but you've got to do it'. In this way, many adopted an instrumentalist orientation to their schooling. They engaged behaviourally in doing the work, rather than necessarily seeing learning itself as an inherently good thing (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004).

Even as a means to an end, investing in their GCSEs mattered to the young people and held promise for their futures. For Evan, who had been excluded from a mainstream school and was studying at a PRU, this involved focussing his efforts 'not where the profit is, but where it will be' (Bourdieu 1998, 79):

I really like want to get something good in business GCSE especially because I'll probably move over to an apprenticeship when I'm done here, in architecture, and then obviously have, once I've learned all of that I can start a couple of businesses on my own, and then eventually that'll become passive income.

Evan's confidence that 'good' GCSEs will help him fulfil his aspirations reflects how he is 'taken in and by the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 116). Captivated by the education system's meritocratic discourse that effort leads to success (Reay 2017), Evan explains how his ambitions have motivated him to improve his attendance 'a lot'. He no longer wants to miss out on learning concepts like 'Pythagoras theorem' that he says will facilitate a career in architecture. For Evan, investing in education is a way to make his future desirable and, as a result, his engagement with school has increased. As Bourdieu notes, Evan's 'relationship to the future' is starting to govern his 'present practice' (1990, 64). Yet despite how strongly *illusio* manifests through Evan's beliefs, GCSEs will not guarantee training or employment in his desired profession. His hopeful attachment sustains his investment but may have 'emotional consequences' if it does not lead to success (Threadgold 2018).

In contrast to Evan's investment in his GCSEs, it is also their 'relationship to the future' that causes some young people to disengage with parts of their education (Bourdieu 1990, 64). The young people highlight the need for what they are learning to have relevance to their lives for it to be 'worth the effort' (Bourdieu 1998, 77). This means, as Cody describes, that they do not necessarily take all aspects of the game seriously:

I was in school, but I used to have some lessons what I didn't like and, like I used to have RE but I never used to go because you don't really need RE for anything really. (Cody)

For Cody, trying to cognitively engage with a subject he perceives as disconnected from the realities of daily life is of little advantage. He struggles to match it with knowledge that is valued by friends and family outside school and his long-term aspirations. Consequently, he sees little future promise in RE and, without an *illusio* that gives meaning to why he is taking it, breaks with any interest in this part of the game. Cody's indifference towards the subject leads to his internal truancy and brings him into conflict with his mainstream secondary school. He describes how teachers 'gave me many chances', but once a trajectory forms, it gains momentum and it becomes 'difficult to get off that path just by making different "choices"' (Threadgold 2018, 36). Perceptions of

'uselessness' in one aspect of his schooling thus act as an obstacle to his overall engagement (Santos et al. 2020) and inhibit his inclination to 'perform' in the ways expected of him.

Illusio on the margins: school exclusion

Despite the significant individual responsibility placed on young people in their final school years to invest in 'personal optimisation' (Gillies 2016, 40), their inclination and ability to comply with the rules of the game is grounded in past experiences and the social contexts in which these experiences arise. In some cases, experiences that led to their current positioning in the game began very early in the young person's education and had built up over time. Sienna, for example, missed much of her first year of primary school when her family had to move house to protect them from a stalker. Reflecting on the long-term impact, Sienna explains:

I've realised like I did have a long bit of time out of reception it makes sense to why I was so, always the, not the slow one but the one always behind. I've always been the one behind other students in like obviously English and maths and all the subjects.

Over time, Sienna's academic struggles eroded her confidence and contributed to a sense of abjection that affected her behaviour. She grew frustrated at being in the lowest ability classes and relying on teachers for help with schoolwork and gradually began to disengage from school. Subsequently, what Sienna describes as an accumulation of 'dumb little' stuff in secondary school, such as non-completion of homework and being late, led to her permanent exclusion. Currently based in a PRU, she explains her education is 'very messed up right now, like very, very messed up'. Although the rewards of the game feel inaccessible, Sienna is aware of what she is missing out on and the damaging effects earlier life events are having on her education. Her past experiences offer weak foundations for Sienna to invest in the game she is expected to play in at this crucial stage in her schooling and contribute to her marginalisation.

The experience of permanent exclusion was not uncommon among this group of young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET. Exclusion itself was an important event in their past trajectories and leading them to their current positions in the game. Typically, the young person had little agency in deciding the setting they were sent to following their exclusion. Moving between several mainstream schools or into and out of PRUs, as well as gaps between each move were common. This 'churning' left young people struggling to keep up with the knowledge and skills that were presupposed at each stage of their schooling (Thompson 2017), often acting to further spiral their disengagement from the game of education. As Rhiannon, who had been to five different secondary schools, explains:

[...] once you get kicked out you're now officially behind, because you're not getting the support you would get in school. And then, now when it comes to me doing my GCSEs I don't get the grades that I want.

Achieving the grade 6s and 7s that she had once aspired to now feels 'delusional' for Rhiannon. Illusio means she recognises the value they would hold for her trajectory beyond school. However, her marginalisation from the game engenders a relatively 'lucid view' of her own conflicted positioning within it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992,

173). Despite the education system compelling her to strive for individual success, Rhannon recognises it has poorly prepared her for doing so. What happens in the game still matters to Rhannon, yet she is ill-equipped to play. Despite her interest in the game, its rewards feel increasingly unattainable.

Among the young people with experience of permanent exclusion, frustration at their past school experiences and low expectations of their final school years were perhaps unsurprising. As Kira, who had already attended nine different settings during her secondary education, describes:

I just don't like school at all. I've actually, my school, my whole high school experience has just been like a blur [...] I literally, yeah so many things have happened. It's just like, I just give up with school. It's one of them.

Attending the PRU where she is currently enrolled 'maybe once every two weeks', conflicts with what the education system expects of Kira. Yet positioned on the margins of the field, she is not inclined to follow its rules. This does not mean she has rejected its values of achievement altogether. By studying from home and in libraries on the days she does not attend, she still buys into the necessity of gaining qualifications to facilitate a future job in real estate or as an air hostess. Illusio manifests in her cognitive engagement and the effort she directs towards learning. While her absence from school might seem unreasonable to those more passionately invested in the game, Kira has little faith left in formal educational settings and finds her own way to improve her objective chances of success.

Affective illusio: social and emotional complexity

While on the one hand, the final years of school are presented as vital for securing positive and worthwhile futures, they are also characterised by significant social and emotional complexity. Using an analogy from Colley (2012, 332), the field becomes like a 'warmed glacier, riven with crevasses' that may 'halt [young people] in their tracks and threaten descent into a void'. For Charlie, this 'void' is one of emotional turmoil as they struggle to cope with their mainstream school's strong performance imperative:

It's really stressful. There's a lot of pressure. Everyone's always on about how this is like the beginning of our lives really, and like everything I'm doing now is going to impact everything that's happening from the end of Year 11 onwards. But I just sort of want to escape it.

Despite being urged to care about their outcomes, the anxiety Charlie attributes to the 'all or nothing' nature of end of school exams feels overwhelming. Yet exams are not the only factor at play in Charlie's life. Charlie has recently become care experienced. Currently living in a foster home, they describe how this is 'interfering with everything'. The situation leaves Charlie displaced from the life they have previously known at a 'critical juncture' in their education (Banks and Smyth 2015). While they recognise GCSEs carry particular importance for their future, Charlie's capacity to act on this belief and embody illusio in the way the field demands is constrained by the emotional upheaval and instability they are experiencing. Their schooling is secondary to their move into care, amplifying Charlie's impulse to dislocate from the game.

It is difficult for the young people to prioritise school's expectations when there are other concerns affecting their lives. For Diana, it is social complexities in school that

cause her investment in the game to falter. Diana was finding it difficult to cope in her mainstream school due to an issue with other pupils in her year group:

[...] if I was in school I'd just sit in the toilets all day. I wouldn't come out until it was time to leave with everyone else [...]. Because the group of people, I was just like so afraid to just even see them, because they had hurt me so much I just didn't want to even like be near them.

School had become a source of anxiety and tension that hindered Diana's ability to productively participate with her lessons. Even though her truancy brought her into conflict with school, finding a way to cope with the impact of bullying took priority. Needing to play her own game to survive, Diana did not yet have the capacity to consistently engage in someone else's.

The need to prioritise concerns other than their schooling left many participants feeling ill at ease, with their investment in education and capacity to meet its demands disrupted (Bourdieu 2000). Diana was not alone in struggling to cope with the impact of bullying, similarly, many of the young people were trying to deal with individual needs that caused them significant suffering in school. Ellis, for example, describes the deterioration of their mental health after returning to school following the COVID-19 pandemic and whilst on a two-year waiting list for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism assessments:

[...] it got to that point my demeanour had completely changed. I had just stopped caring about what teachers were saying, and even though I respected them I just stopped caring. Because at that point I'd lost so much education that in my mind there was no point forward. And so I would walk out of lessons a lot, yell at teachers a lot, and just go to sleep in lesson.

With limited capacity to engage in their education, Ellis's belief that school is worthwhile diminishes. Yet their actions reflect more than mere indifference. Ellis still expresses a respect for teachers and acknowledges the education they have lost; they are not in this sense unmoved by the game (Bourdieu 1998). Rather, a combination of time out of school, mental ill-health and undiagnosed SEND shape Ellis's positioning in the game and the intensity of their investment. Teachers, operating from secure and dominant positions in the field, interpreted Ellis's behaviour as problematic, arguably misrecognising Ellis's unmet needs as open defiance. Consequently, Ellis was moved temporarily into alternative provision within their mainstream school. Here, Ellis was required to engage in self-directed learning and unable to socialise with peers. Although intended by the school to facilitate Ellis's reintegration into the main school environment, for Ellis the move contributed to further distancing them from the game. The change in setting made little sense to Ellis who describes their experience as 'punishment'. Rather than restoring *illusio* the situation had 'emotional consequences' and intensified distress (Threadgold 2018), increasing Ellis's anxiety about reintegrating into the main school environment and re-adjusting to its expectations.

Echoing these feelings, the possibility of change looms large and is unsettling for Maisie who is awaiting an assessment for autism. She describes adopting a 'persona of being naughty' to cope with the large environment of mainstream school. Now in a PRU, Maisie feels settled and is fearful of being sent back to a mainstream school, something she has little control over:

Because if I go to another school it'll just set me off again, and I just want to be comfortable. I don't really, I know this sounds bad, but I don't really care about GCSEs. Like all I care about is being settled in a place.

While Maisie recognises the 'official' stakes she is expected to care about in her education, what makes engaging with school seem worthwhile is a feeling of belonging. The risk of this feeling shattering by moving to another setting is frightening. Playing the game for Maisie is about sustaining her emotional engagement in school, with *illusio* manifest in her efforts to feel valued and fit in, not primarily in achieving qualifications. Crucially, she has found space in the PRU to enact these interests and sidelines those the education system would seek to impose on her.

Moving into educational settings they perceived as supportive rather than adversarial engendered feelings of inclusion and safety for the young people. They felt better equipped to deal with school. Although, for Maisie, cognitive engagement with school was a low priority, for a small number of others moving to a new educational setting offered an opportunity to re-orientate themselves towards the future. This was the case for Sky, who describes how, by the time they reached Year 8 in their mainstream secondary school, they were 'just never going to lessons'. With undiagnosed ADHD and autism, the school placed Sky in its SEND department. Here Sky describes how teachers 'kind of tried to help, but they didn't know exactly what to do'. Consequently, Sky was eventually moved into a PRU.

I got into [the PRU] when they did push me to do the work it was a shock but I kind of got on my feet and did it. So now I actually am keeping up with all my schoolwork and I'm actually doing things at a GCSE level, which I would've never been doing if I had stayed in mainstream.

For Sky this new setting allows them to successfully reengage in learning at a level where their efforts now feel worthwhile. Although Sky is taking only half the number of GCSEs compared to their peers still in mainstream school, for Sky this feels manageable. Crucially, 'taken in and by the game' once again, Sky does not question whether this smaller suite of qualifications may narrow their post-16 options (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Rather, Sky's sense that these qualifications offer them at least some chance of success, renews Sky's interest in school and their efforts as they act on this *illusio* feel like a valuable endeavour.

Conclusion

There are high stakes at play for all young people during their final school years. The 'all or nothing' nature of GCSE exams and their bearing on the future urge young people to strive for individual success and personal optimisation. However, for young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET these pressures are arguably heightened. By reconceptualising the field of education through Bourdieu's metaphor of a 'game', this paper challenges assumptions that those on the margins of the education system are indifferent, 'neither moved nor affected' by their schooling (Bourdieu 1998, 77). With the insecurity of post-16 transitions looming, the research shows they recognise the potential rewards of engaging with school as desirable. Few genuinely do not care about doing well in their GCSEs, rather how these exams could influence the 'forth-coming' matters to them (Bourdieu

2000, 168). In other words, when they see something worth aspiring for, this gives meaning and value to the 'game' of education.

A key contribution of this paper lies in its development of Bourdieu's concept of 'illusio', which has not previously been addressed in relation to school engagement among young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET in England. Illusio is pivotal to understanding how those in the research are 'taken in and by the game' during their final school years (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 116). There is a clear shift in the value they see in school during this period compared to their earlier education. Yet while this shift should correspond with increased investments of time, effort and emotion, many struggle to partake in their schooling in the ways expected of them. Disruptions to past educational trajectories, for example, narrow the knowledge the young people were able to acquire earlier in their schooling and leave them feeling ill-equipped to invest. Similarly, social and emotional complexities make it difficult to sustain their investments as their priorities are re-orientated elsewhere. Their belief in the game thus collides with other factors at play in their lives.

Analysing the young people's school engagement through Bourdieu's concept of illusio reveals an important paradox between the interest young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET have in their schooling and the precarity of their investments. Many struggle to convert illusio into tangible opportunities to succeed. In this sense, they are taking part the game and value its rewards, but struggle play competitively. Ultimately, this disjuncture illustrates that the education system needs to take heed of the past and present complexities young people are negotiating. Indeed, if it is to support young people like the participants in this research to achieve positive and worthwhile post-16 transitions, the education system must ensure young people's logical responses to the challenges they experience during their final school years are not misrecognised as indifference towards their schooling. School engagement is more than just a matter of individual choice and cannot be improved simply through increasing young people's motivation. Rather, it necessitates creating meaningful opportunities for young people to actively pursue the objects of value to them.

It is thus 'worth the effort' for research to employ illusio as an analytical lens to understand how young people 'at risk' of becoming NEET engage in the 'game' of education (Bourdieu 1998, 77). Thinking with illusio has afforded the opportunity to re-evaluate what engagement looks like for this marginalised group and the challenges they experience complying with the norms and expectations of the education system. However, it is necessary to momentarily look beyond the 'grand' illusio of educational institutions in England (Colley 2012), where GCSEs are positioned as the only legitimate means for young people to secure positive and worthwhile futures and reimagine an alternative. Young people's transitions into the labour market depend heavily on these high-stakes qualifications and there are few alternatives for those who struggle to achieve them. This narrow pathway disregards the nuanced circumstances of individuals vulnerable to becoming NEET and, as this research shows, fails to provide them with equitable opportunities to invest in their futures. Rather than only advocating for additional interventions to support them within the current 'all or nothing' system, the field itself might be transformed to offer alternative pathways into post-16 education, employment and training that do not depend so heavily on young people's final school years. In contrast to the current system, it is imperative that those vulnerable to becoming NEET not only see

something worth aspiring for in and beyond their schooling, but are also able to participate meaningfully in a game that facilitates their future transitions.

Notes

1. In the English education system, 'Year 10' and 'Year 11' mark the final two years of a young person's compulsory secondary education and precede the transition to further education, training or employment.
2. Although all grades on the former 8-point letter scale (A*-G) and the current numerical scale (9-1) technically count as a 'pass', a 'standard' pass is a grade C/4 or above. A 'standard' pass is considered the minimum level young people are expected to achieve.
3. Ethical approval was granted by the universities where the research was conducted. Informed consent was obtained from participants.
4. Since participants' trajectories through the education system were often not straightforward 'schooling' and 'school' are used broadly in the following sections to refer to time in any formal education setting, not only mainstream schools.

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