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A realist synthesis of interventions for youth not in education, employment or training (NEET): building programme theories for effective support

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ABSTRACT

The persistent trend of young people aged 15 to 29 years neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) in Europe remains high despite some regional improvements. This study employs a critical realist approach to synthesize 13 reviews, covering 811 studies, on interventions for youth in NEET situations worldwide. This review aims to inform future interventions. The realist synthesis identifies key contextual factors and mechanisms influencing the effectiveness of these interventions and reveals gaps in policy and practice. The findings highlight a lack of focus on non-cognitive skills and the agency of young people. Effective interventions should be tailored to individual needs, with some requiring intensive, long-term support, while multicomponent strategies prove most effective for addressing the complex needs of this population. The study emphasizes the importance of social innovation and psychosocial support to foster youth transitions into education and employment. Long-term, multi-stakeholder collaboration, including mental health support, is crucial to ensure sustainable outcomes for youth in NEET situations.

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Realist review; NEET youth; education; employment; psychosocial; social innovation


Introduction

The need for effective interventions targeting NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth is underscored by the ongoing disparity between persistently high NEET rates and the European Union's goal of reducing these rates to 9% by 2030 (European Commission, 2021). Despite the success of several EU countries in achieving this target, NEET rates remain high in several member states, especially in areas with structural barriers such as disparities in education systems, labour markets, and social support structures (Berigel et al., 2023). Addressing this challenge is critical, as being in a NEET situation has been linked to negative outcomes, including lower well-being, increased social exclusion, and reduced economic growth at both individual and societal levels (Rahmani & Groot, 2023).

Interventions targeting youth in NEET situations must account for the complex, multifaceted factors contributing to these situations. These include low educational attainment, economic disadvantage, family unemployment, single-parent households, and mental or physical health

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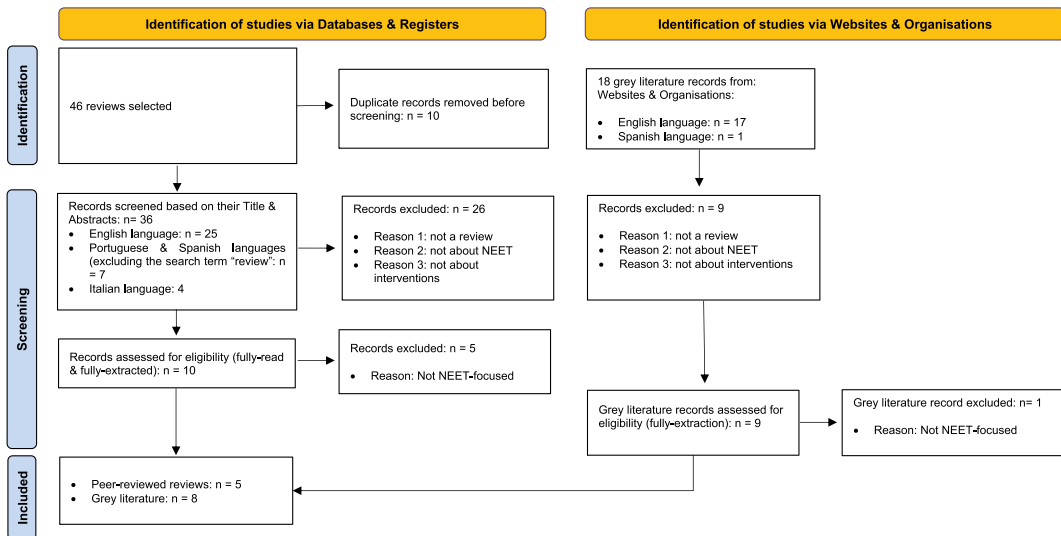


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the number of reviews identified, screened, and included/excluded at each stage.

challenges (Gariépy et al., 2022; Rahmani & Groot, 2023; Rahmani et al., 2024). Mental health needs are especially relevant, as they significantly increase the likelihood of becoming NEET and hinder engagement in education, training or employment (Lindblad et al., 2024; Lindhardt et al., 2022). However, mental health interventions often receive less priority in national policies, which tend to focus more on economic reintegration than on addressing well-being needs (Lindhardt et al., 2022). Stigma surrounding being in a NEET situation can further discourage involvement in interventions, as young people may feel ashamed or marginalized, which affects their willingness to participate and the types of support they seek (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Gender also plays a key role, as young women often face higher risks of becoming NEET, particularly in certain EU countries (Eurostat, 2023; Pesquera Alonso et al., 2022). Moreover, the timing and duration of a NEET situation influence the necessary intervention strategies, with long-term disengagement exacerbating social exclusion and poverty (Veldman et al., 2024).

Recognizing the heterogeneity of youth in NEET situations, Eurofound (2016) proposed classifying this group into subgroups such as Re-entrants, Short-term unemployed, Long-term unemployed, Illness/disability, Family responsibilities, Discouraged, and others, in order to better capture the diverse needs of these individuals.

A key challenge for current intervention strategies is the lack of comprehensive, multicomponent approaches, which often fail to personalize interventions and focus on short-term outcomes rather than sustained engagement (Stea et al., 2024). While there are several reviews of interventions, these reviews focus primarily on assessing the outcomes and much less on the underpinning mechanisms and contextual factors for generating these outcomes (Stea et al., 2024).

Theoretical frameworks for addressing youth in NEET situations must consider not only the characteristics of these groups but also the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the success or failure of interventions. This research adopts a critical realism perspective (Bhaskar, 2008), which allows us to recognize the complex, multi-layered nature of factors influencing intervention outcomes. It enables us to understand the interplay between structural, contextual, and individual factors that shape the effectiveness of interventions. To explore how interventions work, for whom, and in what contexts, we apply the Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) framework (Pawson &

Tilley, 1997). This framework enables us to examine not only the contextual factors that influence the implementation of interventions but also the mechanisms that trigger change and how these mechanisms lead to outcomes for different groups. Through a realist synthesis of reviews of interventions for youth in NEET situations, this study aims to examine the contextual factors, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with effective interventions. By integrating insights from diverse reviews, we aim to inform the development of tailored intervention strategies that are both contextually relevant and responsive to the varied needs of young people in a NEET situation across different settings.

Methods

We adopted a realist synthesis, a research methodology designed to synthesize evidence from diverse sources, particularly effective for analysing complex social interventions (Pawson et al., 2005; Richardson et al., 2020). Unlike traditional systematic reviews that primarily assess the effectiveness of interventions, realist synthesis seeks to uncover how and why interventions succeed or fail in specific contexts. It aims to explain how the context in which an intervention is implemented shapes the mechanisms, ultimately influencing the outcomes achieved.

Following specific RAMESES guidelines on realist synthesis (Wong et al., 2013), our research focused on answering the following questions: a) What contextual factors influence the delivery of interventions targeted at supporting young people in a NEET situation?; b) What are the key implementation mechanisms that influence the delivery of interventions?; c) What are the key reported outcomes associated with contextual factors, and mechanisms?

In line with these standards, we submitted a detailed protocol to the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO; CRD42022341511), that outlines the components and strategy for conducting the review.

Search strategy

The search for relevant reviews was conducted between June and July 2022 using several databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Cochrane, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest. Additionally, we explored grey literature sources such as the World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, European Social Fund, Social Care Online (SCIE), and Eurofound. The search utilized a combination of PICOS elements, specifically targeting NEET and/or disadvantaged youth (Population), interventions and/or initiatives (Intervention), well-being and/or employment (Outcome), and review and/or synthesis (Study). A comprehensive list of search terms is provided in the Online Appendix A.

Inclusion criteria included: (i) the output being a review; (ii) concerning an intervention in support of young people in a NEET situation, irrespective of the country of implementation; (iii) written in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Italian, reflecting the linguistic capabilities of the team; (iv) published within the last 20 years to capture a comprehensive range of interventions and trends in youth policies (Figure 1).

Screening

Both peer-reviewed and grey literature reviews were initially screened by assessing their titles and abstracts to determine if they met the inclusion criteria. A subset of these reviews was independently reviewed by all four team members (AP, MB, MJM, RA – initials of the co-authors), and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus meetings to ensure coherence in the screening process. The content of the shortlisted reviews was then extracted using a

standardized coding sheet created in Excel, which ensured consistency across reviewers by providing predefined categories and coding instructions. This process focused on identifying barriers and facilitators across the following themes:

- Contextual factors: high-level contextual factors that influence the implementation of all interventions (e.g., administrative and policy context).
- Programme Mechanisms: underlying processes that generate an outcome in a specific context. This explains how and why an intervention works or fails to work (e.g., the actions and decisions taken by stakeholders).
- Outcomes: the result of the interplay between context and mechanisms and include a broad range of outcomes related to health, education, and employment, etc.

The research team independently read a sub-sample of the same reviews, extracted relevant information, and reconciled different opinions.

Quality assessment

We assessed the rigour of extracted documents using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), a tool designed to assess the quality of reviews. The shortlisted reviews generally addressed a clearly focused question, nearly half included the right type of papers, about a quarter incorporated relevant studies and authors, and over one-third provided sufficient information to adequately assess the quality of the studies they included.

Results

A total of 13 reviews, comprising 811 studies, were included in the analysis: 8 peer-reviewed publications and 5 from grey literature. Studies adopted different methodologies (e.g., systematic reviews, literature reviews, evidence and gap map, synthesis). Three reviews examined the Youth Guarantee Scheme in Italy and Portugal, and the majority focused primarily on Europe, covering young people aged 15 to 35 years.

The reviews extracted for the final analysis were arranged around key realist themes: context, mechanisms, and outcomes (CMO) configurations. To develop configurations from the review analysis, an 'If and Then' model was used. The 'If' component included all contextual factors, whereas the 'Then' component captured the mechanisms and activities identified by the analysis of reviews. To accurately depict the range of qualitative data collected from the selected reviews, all aspects related to context, mechanisms, and outcomes were aggregated under their respective headings (Online Appendix B).

Contextual factors

We found that the context influencing NEET interventions is shaped by a combination of five multi-faceted factors: 1) Funding and resources; 2) Economic and political conditions; 3) Approach and design; 4) Pre-existing relationships; 5) Diverse characteristics of youth in NEET situations. [Table 1](#) provides further details of the contextual factors identified in the publications analysed in this review.

'**Funding and resources**' appeared in five extracted reviews as the 'fuel' that enables the implementation of interventions for young people in NEET situations (Kluve et al., 2019; Krauß et al., 2018; Maughan et al., 2011; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012; Tunnard et al., 2008; Vesan & Lizzi, 2017). Funding was observed at various geographical levels, ranging from macroeconomic sources (e.g.,

Table 1. Contextual factors.

Category	Subcategory	Subthemes	Mawn et al. (2017)	Hart et al. (2020)	Apunyo et al. (2022)	Celume and Korda (2022)	Vesan and Lizzi (2017)	Tunnard et al. (2008)	Kluve et al. (2019)	Reis and Nofre (2018)	Krauß et al. (2018)	Escudero and Mourelo (2017)	Kluve et al. (2017)	Nelson and O'Donnell (2012)	Maughan et al. (2011)		
<i>Funding and Resources</i>	Funding	Regional adjustment of central budget distribution				•											
		Short-term and temporary funding					•										
	Resources	Training and employment macroeconomic funding													•		
		Tapping into an existing support infrastructure: Social worker support, mentoring, social assistance										•					
		Investments target vulnerable groups and incentives for service providers															•
		Local authorities' financial resources and allocation discretion															•
		Economic and political landscape influenced level of funding and type of delivery partners in six countries (post-recession)															
		National economy improvements															
		Political landscape of location and time															
<i>Economic and Political Conditions</i>	Economic Conditions																
	Political Conditions																

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Category	Subcategory	Subthemes	Mawn et al. (2017)	Hart et al. (2020)	Apunyo et al. (2022)	Celume and Korda (2022)	Vesan and Lizzi (2017)	Tunnard et al. (2008)	Kluve et al. (2019)	Reis and Nofre (2018)	Krauß et al. (2018)	Escudero and Mourelo (2017)	Kluve et al. (2017)	Nelson and O'Donnell (2012)	Maughan et al. (2011)	
<i>Approach and Design</i>	Approach	Interventions targeting psychological barriers	•													
		Emphasis on holistic approaches encompassing health and social support		•												
		Integration of multiple interventions (e.g. counselling, training, income support)							•							
		Focus of engaging young people on intervention design								•						
		Well-coordinated, multi-agency response combined with preventative approach		•										•		
		Interventions designed to target the most disadvantaged											•			
		Partners' participation in design and implementation								•						
		Collaboration with local and multi-agency services and young people			•										•	
		Stakeholders' substantial cooperation in employment policy												•		
		Stakeholders' networking and engaging civic initiatives											•			
<i>Pre-existing Relationships</i>	Design	Regional networks independent from funding programme										•				
		Forging of cooperative agreements among stakeholders											•			

(Continued)

training & employment macroeconomic funding) to regional central budget adjustments and discretion given to local authorities to facilitate the allocation of financial resources. Flexibility in the use of funding was an important contextual aspect of the intervention. For example, the ability to adjust the distribution of budgets across different areas, as in the Youth Guarantee Scheme, or funding independent of any specific programme (e.g., youth education, social, and employment) or local authority's discretion in the allocation of resources (Vesan & Lizzi, 2017). In addition to financial resources, the ability to tap into existing infrastructure, such as social worker support, and the support of local entities for the empowerment of children, youth, and families, were also crucial (Krauß et al., 2018). Additionally, supplying service providers with result-based incentives was reported as an important factor (Kluve et al., 2017; Maughan et al., 2011).

'Economic and political conditions' were reported less often (2 reviews) but were found to influence the implementation of interventions both positively and negatively across various levels (international, national, and/or local). These conditions include elements such as improvements in the national economy, as observed in Portugal following years of austerity measures, which helped create a more favourable environment for implementation (Reis & Nofre, 2018). Additionally, Mawn et al. (2017) noted that the effectiveness of some interventions could be attributed to the specific political and economic context in which they were delivered. For example, political will and economic stability can provide the necessary resources and policy support for interventions, whereas periods of economic downturn or political instability can undermine the availability of funding and hinder the broader reach of such programmes. These insights emphasize the importance of aligning interventions with the prevailing political and economic climate to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness over time.

The third factor, **'Approach and design'**, appeared in seven reviews (Escudero & Mourelo, 2017; Hart et al., 2020; Kluve et al., 2017, 2019; Maughan et al., 2011; Mawn et al., 2017; Reis & Nofre, 2018). This underpins how interventions are conceptualized and initially planned. However, we found that 'approach and design' of interventions differ from each other because they emphasize different aspects of scope, implementation, and outcomes. This factor concentrates on the structural aspects and frameworks in which interventions for young people in a NEET situation operate rather than the more practical 'mechanisms' (see below) that are put in place to ensure that interventions are implemented as initially designed. We also found that programmes integrating multiple interventions – such as counselling, training, and income support – tend to be more effective (Kluve et al., 2019), as they address the diverse and complex range of needs that young people often present. The same study found that the effectiveness of interventions is more closely related to the number of components included rather than the specific nature of those components. This suggests that a broad range of support contributes to success. Key interventions include addressing psychosocial barriers to work engagement, such as emotional support (through counselling, mentoring, and peer support), access to mental health services (e.g., therapy, family counselling), and resilience-building programmes (Tayfur et al., 2021; Celume & Korda, 2022). Additionally, fostering collaboration with local and multi-agency services, including mental health professionals, and involving young people in NEET situations in the process are essential (Mawn et al., 2017).

Context-related **'Relationships'** appeared in five reviews (Escudero & Mourelo, 2017; Hart et al., 2020; Krauß et al., 2018; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012; Vesan & Lizzi, 2017). These relationships are the result of ongoing local and regional efforts to bring partners, stakeholders, and beneficiaries together around common goals and thus build social capital. We included 'Relationships' under the category of contextual factors as these types of relationships pre-existing in the implementation of any intervention and relate to the set of regional and local connections between organisations in the public, private, and third sector that underpin the implementation of any interventions and make up the cultural, economic, and social milieu of a location. This is illustrated, for instance, through the ability to forge cooperative agreements with employers' organisations, trade unions, schools and

training centres, and non-governmental organisations, and often independent from a funded programme and rely more on the willingness of partners to collaborate as part of achieving a shared goal.

Finally, the **'Diverse Characteristics of Youth in NEET Situations'** emerged as a consistent theme across 11 studies. These studies highlighted how factors such as age, gender, migrant background, mental health needs, and complex challenges (e.g., mental health issues, educational gaps, socio-economic hardships) shaped the effectiveness of interventions. These characteristics played a crucial role in influencing both the mechanisms of intervention and the outcomes they produced. Apunyo et al. (2022) and Kluve et al. (2017) emphasized the need for targeted interventions that address the heterogeneity within NEET populations, noting that groups like migrant youth face unique barriers requiring tailored support. Age was another key factor, with younger individuals potentially benefiting more from skills training and early interventions, as noted by Hart et al. (2020), while older individuals may require more comprehensive, long-term strategies. Mental health issues were often significant barriers to successful re-engagement, as discussed by Mawn et al. (2017), suggesting that interventions including mental health support may be more effective for certain NEET subgroups. Gender, highlighted in studies such as Kluve et al. (2019), also influenced how youth responded to employment interventions, with young women in NEET situations often facing additional societal and familial pressures. Hart et al. (2020) described 'complex needs' as a combination of challenges like mental health issues, educational gaps, and socio-economic difficulties and argued that interventions must be multifaceted, combining employment skills with social and psychological support for effective outcomes.

Mechanisms

Whilst contextual factors refer to the necessary structural conditions for the effective design and implementation of interventions for young people in a NEET situation, mechanisms refer to the characteristics of specific activities implemented on the ground to improve the opportunities and well-being of young people in NEET situations.

Such characteristics can be grouped into three categories: Financial initiatives; Employment and Entrepreneurship; and Education and Training (Table 2).

'Financial Initiatives' were documented in four of the analysed reviews (Hart et al., 2020; Kluve et al., 2019; Mawn et al., 2017; Reis & Nofre, 2018) and consisted of a range of incentives, subsidies, and funding mechanisms. These financial resources were allocated to different groups, including job and skill service providers (e.g., employment agencies), young people in a NEET situation and/or businesses, and for different purposes, including, primarily, employment and training initiatives. For example, subsidies to businesses included financial support to hire new employees or wage subsidies. Beneficiaries of the interventions also gained access to credit, grants, and micro-franchising opportunities aimed at promoting entrepreneurship. These efforts were often combined with financial assistance and wage subsidies as part of employment service programmes. Alternatively, identifying local practices and resources that support the development of basic skills among young people – by addressing barriers to their progress and leveraging this knowledge to create targeted training strategies and materials – has been shown to be effective in enhancing their employability skills

'Employment and Entrepreneurship' activities were mentioned in six of the reviews (Hart et al., 2020; Kluve et al., 2017, 2019; Krauß et al., 2018; Mawn et al., 2017; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012). These activities aim to take young people in a NEET situation on a journey towards re-activation by encouraging them to become visible in the labour market, helping them to secure employment and/or self-employment through organisations such as job centres, job providers, and businesses. Labour re-engagement efforts were pursued through multifaceted employment service



Table 2. Mechanisms and outcomes.

Category	Subcategory	Subthemes	Mawn et al. (2017)	Hart et al. (2020)	Apunyo et al. (2022)	Celume and Korda (2022)	Vesan and Lizzi (2017)	Tunnard et al. (2008)	Kluve et al. (2017)	Reis and Nofre (2018)	Krauß et al. (2018)	Escudero and Mourelo (2017)	Kluve et al. (2017)	Nelson and O'Donnell (2012)	Maughan et al. (2011)		
<i>Mechanisms</i>	<i>Financial incentives</i>	Employment financial incentives	•														
		Financial incentives for training	•														
		Subsidised employment interventions						•									
		Financial support to hire new employees							•								
		Entrepreneurship funding combined with job search financial assistance & subsidized employment											•				
		<i>Employment & entrepreneurship</i>	Employment	Job-based capacity building combined with financial support & work search	•						•				•		
				Work opportunities, support mentoring projects & labour market re-engagement		•											
				Work-based learning & employability soft skills										•			
				Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship promotion interventions								•				•
		Entrepreneurship education															
<i>Education & training</i>	Education	Education that combines capacity building with individual support	•														
		Parents & employers' education on complex needs		•													

(Continued)

programmes and subsidized employment initiatives, which were complemented by work opportunities and support for mentoring projects. Young people in a NEET situation benefit from a range of employment service programmes that provide job counselling, job-search assistance, and mentoring services to support their (re)activation. These programmes also offer job placements and technical or financial assistance to facilitate their integration into the workforce.

Education and Training activities were identified in 10 of the reviewed literature (Apunyo et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2020; Kluge et al., 2017, 2019; Maughan et al., 2011; Mawn et al., 2017; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012; Reis & Nofre, 2018; Tunnard et al., 2008; Vesan & Lizzi, 2017). These are composed of both formal and informal capacity-building opportunities which focus on equipping young people with skills that will make them more attractive in the labour market. Efforts to integrate education with professional training, employability programmes, and skills development initiatives have been pivotal in facilitating the transition of young people in a NEET situation into the workforce. These initiatives include job access training, non-formal learning certifications, and multi-skills training programmes, all of which have proven effective in opening opportunities for these individuals. Implementing these activities required the involvement of stakeholders at national, regional, and local levels. As a result, participants not only gained technical skills but also developed essential soft skills crucial for employability, including self-confidence, teamwork, responsibility, creativity, and time management.

Young people in NEET situations benefit from social inclusion programmes designed to address the multifaceted effects of their disengagement. These programmes often engage multiplier agents beyond traditional education and training frameworks to enhance clients' social capital. They also address learning difficulties and leverage community role models, including parents and other influential adults, to provide leadership and inspiration.

Outcomes

We found out that most outcomes fall under four main headings: 1) improved health & well-being; 2) increased rates of employment; 3) higher educational attainment, and 4) greater community engagement.

'Improved health and well-being' was supported through the implementation of various therapeutic approaches, which contributed to psychological enhancement, the development of coping strategies to manage challenges, and the boost of self-esteem. These interventions aimed to encourage social participation and empower young people in a NEET situation to pursue employment opportunities.

'Increased rates of employment' not only had the potential to reduce unemployment but also contributed to decreased welfare dependency among young people in a NEET situation, particularly noted in the UK. However, a potential downside of some interventions was their tendency to exacerbate existing inequalities among more disadvantaged subgroups, such as those with lower literacy levels, higher previous arrest rates, lower socioeconomic status, or minority ethnic backgrounds.

'Higher educational attainment' highlighted the role of non-formal learning awards in preparing young people for employment. Research supports the integration of these awards into mainstream pre-employment programmes, alongside more strategic investments in education. Combining non-formal awards with skills development and the acquisition of certificates and diplomas has been shown to enhance job prospects for young people in a NEET situation.

'Greater community engagement' indicated that some young people in a NEET situation developed improved social and relational skills, leading to greater visibility and effectiveness within community life. For instance, community programmes designed for disengaged youth facilitated increased participation from young people, their families, and friends. These programmes fostered

new topics and resources, encouraged involvement in additional community initiatives, and helped to reduce intergenerational tensions, though they did not always address ethnic divisions within communities.

Discussion

This realist synthesis identified the contextual factors, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with interventions supporting young people in NEET situations. We analysed 13 reviews, comprising 811 studies, which revealed five key contextual factors essential for effective intervention design: 'funding and resources', 'economic and political conditions', 'approach and design', 'relationships' and 'diverse characteristics of young in NEET situations'. Additionally, we identified three primary mechanisms: 'financial means and resources'; 'employment and entrepreneurship'; and 'education and training'. While causal links between context, mechanisms, and outcomes were not definitively established, four key outcomes were reported: 'improved health and well-being', 'increased employment rates', 'higher educational attainment', and 'greater community engagement'.

The reviews analysed underscore the role of contextual factors, particularly economic and political conditions, in shaping interventions. Flexible funding (Nelson et al., 2011) and existing structures, such as pre-established relationships, were also highlighted as essential for success (Krauß et al., 2018). However, many studies failed to provide concrete examples of how these factors influenced outcomes, and in some cases, broader structural constraints limited their effectiveness (Hart et al., 2020; Mawn et al., 2017). Multi-stakeholder engagement, including local businesses, was found to facilitate diverse support, yet the quality of stakeholder involvement proved more significant than the quantity (Kluve et al., 2017; Mawn et al., 2017; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012).

Diverse actors enabled multidisciplinary approaches to address the complex needs of young people across vocational, mental health, and well-being dimensions (Mawn et al., 2017). Financial support to both young people and businesses through incentives or subsidies was common (Hart et al., 2020; Kluve et al., 2017, 2019; Mawn et al., 2017; Reis & Nofre, 2018), yet outcomes were inconsistent, with some interventions yielding short-term gains without long-term employment. This suggests that financial incentives alone may not overcome deeper, structural barriers (Escudero & Mourelo, 2017; Tunnard et al., 2008).

The diversity of young people in NEET situations – including age, gender, and mental health needs – underscores the importance of tailored interventions. However, some studies lacked clarity on how these factors were incorporated into intervention designs, potentially limiting their impact (Hart et al., 2020; Mawn et al., 2017). For instance, younger NEET individuals may require more intensive career guidance, whereas older youth may benefit more from job placement and vocational training programmes. Young people with mental health challenges often require more personalised support, including psychological counselling and therapy, which is not always prioritized in traditional employability-focused interventions (Hart et al., 2020; Mawn et al., 2017). Migrant youth in NEET situations may need tailored interventions that address language barriers and cultural integration, alongside employment support, to ensure successful engagement in training programmes (Escudero & Mourelo, 2017; Kluve et al., 2017). Gender-sensitive approaches are also crucial, as young women face particular risks of long-term NEET status, especially in certain socio-cultural contexts, requiring interventions that not only offer economic opportunities but also address social support and family responsibilities (Apunyo et al., 2022; Vesan & Lizzi, 2017). Finally, youth with complex needs, including educational gaps, family conflicts, and socio-economic disadvantages, benefit from multi-component interventions that combine skills training with support in housing, healthcare, and social services to ensure more sustainable outcomes (Krauß et al., 2018).

Two main mechanisms emerged from the analysis: employment and entrepreneurship, and education and training. The success of these mechanisms often depends on labour market opportunities and networks that facilitate implementation (Hart et al., 2020; Kluve et al., 2017, 2019; Krauß et al., 2018; Mawn et al., 2017; Nelson & O'donnell, 2012). Education and training activities include both formal and informal programmes, primarily aimed at developing soft skills that are essential for employability, while also fostering well-being and enhancing interpersonal relationships (Apunyo et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2020; Kluve et al., 2017, 2019; Krauß et al., 2018; Mawn et al., 2017; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012; Nelson et al., 2011; Tunnard et al., 2008; Vesan & Lizzi, 2017).

Contextual factors like funding, economic conditions, and infrastructure are vital for activating mechanisms. While flexible funding and multi-agency collaboration enhance outcomes, some studies did not clearly link these factors to measurable results. Effective interventions appear to succeed when tailored to local needs and supported by long-term partnerships, but the pathways to success are complex and context dependent.

For particular groups experiencing more vulnerabilities, such as early school leavers or those with inadequate training, more intensive strategies are required. These strategies should emphasize relationship-building and provide socio-emotional support, which is crucial for successful reintegration into education or employment (Santos et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Psychological support, non-formal learning methods, and developing social skills were identified as effective in enhancing well-being and employability.

A key conclusion of this review is the importance of creating favourable conditions for the development of contextual factors and fostering sustainable relationships grounded in trust and empathy. These relationships are critical to young people's successful transition into employment or training and have the potential to significantly improve both social and professional integration, a perspective also supported by Ripamonti (2023).

This realist review focuses on young people in NEET situations and acknowledges the additional challenges of engaging with those who fall outside the standard sociodemographic profiles. In such cases, it is essential to consider other potential contextual factors when designing interventions. Furthermore, it is widely recognized that many interventions are implemented by providers working under precarious conditions, often constrained by short-term funding and unstable contracts. Therefore, sustained political commitment is crucial to ensuring the resources and stability needed for practitioners to continue supporting these young people over time in a flexible and responsive manner to individual needs and aspirations.

Despite the findings reported in this study, it is important to acknowledge that the distinction between young people in NEET situations and those who are not is often subtle. Young individuals may experience a NEET situation temporarily, finding employment or training opportunities that offer only a brief respite from the precarious circumstances that typically define this population. However, these opportunities do not necessarily lead to a stable transition out of their vulnerable condition. As a result, it is crucial to differentiate between the precarious conditions faced by young people and the NEET label, which may shift frequently. Arguably, an implication of this consideration is that support for young people in a NEET situation must be sustained long enough to address the underlying precarious conditions they face, rather than solely focusing on their NEET status. This approach requires flexible, potentially long-term support tailored to the unique needs and aspirations of each young person. Such support is most effective when facilitated through close collaboration between the young person and a qualified practitioner who can build a relationship of trust. Social prescribing initiatives for children and young people in the UK, as outlined by Bertotti et al. (2022), embrace a similar approach, where the role of the link worker is crucial in co-creating individualized strategies and providing close mentoring for young people.

Implications

This study has several implications for future theory, policy, and practice. First, it proposes an analytical framework that aids in the design of interventions for young people in NEET situations while also encouraging a more critical examination of how such interventions are conceptualized. This realist synthesis contributes to the development of a programme theory by elucidating how context and mechanisms interact to produce specific outcomes. By employing this approach, the synthesis not only considers the implementation process of interventions but also addresses the critical questions of ‘what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and why,’ moving beyond the traditional focus on simply determining whether an intervention is effective in achieving social and health outcomes.

Second, our study provides valuable insights for both policy and practice by not only assessing the effectiveness of intervention programmes but also elucidating how they work and identifying the conditions and mechanisms that enhance their success. It offers policymakers a comprehensive understanding of what contributes to achieving desired outcomes.

Additionally, this study presents a framework for researchers engaged in evaluating interventions. It underscores the importance of considering contextual factors and mechanisms that influence outcomes, serving as a critical initial step in developing a robust programme theory to guide the evaluation of complex interventions.

Strengths and limitations

This realist review, to our knowledge, is the first to examine interventions for young people in NEET situations, filling a gap in the literature. It employs a rigorous and inclusive methodology, drawing on various sources, including grey literature. The involvement of contributors from different countries, disciplines, and research units strengthened the synthesis. Additionally, we offer a detailed, multi-faceted quality appraisal of the included studies, allowing readers to assess the credibility of our findings.

There are also limitations to acknowledge. First, all interventions analysed were implemented in high-income countries, although this was not a defined inclusion criterion. Consequently, any recommendations for designing and developing interventions for young people in NEET situations should take limitations into account, recognizing that socio-economic and cultural factors in lower-income countries may affect the effectiveness of similar interventions. Second, most of the studies analysed did not provide evidence of sustainability, leaving uncertainties about whether the contextual factors and mechanisms identified reflect effective practices that lead to successful and sustainable interventions. This aspect highlights the importance of evaluating the impact of the interventions developed. Third, this study analysed 13 reviews, including 811 studies, which is generally considered an acceptable number size. However, the Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration is limited in some of the articles, particularly regarding the detailed examination of contextual factors influencing the interventions. While expanding the number of sources could address some of these uncertainties, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of cumulativeness (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). As a result, this synthesis is not exhaustive, and it cannot be guaranteed that the contexts and mechanisms of the programme will generate the same outcomes in different social contexts (Pawson, 2013). As emphasized by Jagosh (2019), interventions are seldom implemented uniformly or yield consistent outcomes, owing to a variety of uncontrollable contextual factors.

Conclusions and recommendations

This realist synthesis underscores the need for individualized interventions, recognizing that some youth in NEET situations may benefit from lighter approaches, while others require more intensive, long-term support. Multicomponent strategies, addressing both practical and psychosocial needs, were found to be most effective in meeting the complex needs of this population.

This review offers valuable insights into the complex interplay of contextual factors and mechanisms that influence the outcomes of interventions for young people in NEET situations. By promoting contextually tailored and inclusive interventions, it aims to guide future interventions, ensuring their success across diverse settings.

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