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Article

"They Really Only Look for the Best": How Young People Frame Problems in School-to-Work Transition

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Abstract
This article presents how young people in educational measures experience and discuss tensions between structural and individualised challenges they face in the transition from school to work. The findings are based on an Austrian citizen social science research project that involved conducting participatory research in Vienna with 33 young people between the ages of 15 and 23 years who are in measures for early school leavers that are preparing for further education and training. These co-researchers struggle with constant comparisons to "norm" biographies and their accompanying social pressure as they try to meet the high expectations of school, work, and family. Additionally, mental health was a prominent issue, as the young co-researchers experience stigma and a lack of professional support, which can impede their access to the labour market. The results of our research indicate that young people in employment measures require a more inclusive school and work environment that supports them regardless of their origin, family background, appearance, or mental health status. They negotiate the tension between individual employability and structural disadvantage and demand a recognised place in society, a request that connects to current debates concerning the individualisation of transitions from school to work.

Keywords
citizen social science; early school leavers; education and training up to 18; NEET; participatory action research; school-to-work transition; youth

Issue
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1. Introduction

The fragmented employment biographies of young people have long featured in the discussion about transitions from school to work (Dörre, 2006; Krafeld, 2000; Pohl & Walther, 2007; Stauber, 2013). In Austria, young people who are not able to finish their education—be it school or an apprenticeship—face considerably more difficulties when entering the labour market (Neubacher & Wimmer, 2021, p. 291). Together with young people who do not continue their education after compulsory education, they more frequently experience discontinuous periods of employment later on in their lives compared to young people pursuing other educational pathways (Statistik Austria, 2021a, pp. 7–8). Work and school no longer form a direct continuum and the transition is increasingly characterised by uncertainties. This development has been framed as the destandardisation of life courses (Pohl & Walther, 2007; Spannring & Reinprecht, 2002). Managing the transition is becoming an increasingly individualised endeavour, meaning young people are less able to fall back on collective patterns and must instead resort to individual decisions. Moreover, the Austrian labour market is gradually relying

on a flexible workforce. Although this development is lower than in other European countries, an increase in solo self-employment and temporary contracts can also be observed in Austria (Fritsch et al., 2019, pp. 334–350). The high proportion of women in part-time employment (Fritsch et al., 2019, p. 344) and the increase in subcontracted employment (Riesenfelder et al., 2018) can also be attributed to the trend towards flexibilisation.

While the destandardisation of life courses creates opportunities for some young people, many face heightened risks of social exclusion (Kovacheva & Pohl, 2007; Stauber, 2013), which the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (n.d.) defines as:

> [The] processes that prevent individuals, groups or communities from accessing the rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of society….The list of young people at risk of social exclusion can be extended almost ad infinitum and it includes young people with disabilities, ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, homeless youth or young offenders etc.

During transitional periods, young people are especially vulnerable to social exclusion, as their lack of work or continuous education creates economically precarious situations and, therefore, issues like poor access to health services and safe housing (Alston & Kent, 2009, p. 93; Webster et al., 2004, p. 3).

The debate about transitions pays special attention to those who do not manage a seamless transition from school and vocational training to work. At both the European level, within in the context of the Youth Guarantee, and the Austrian national level through the 2016 *Ausbildungspflichtgesetz* (Compulsory Education or Training Act), NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training), and ESLs (early school leavers) have been a recent focus of sociopolitical efforts. Incomplete education can have detrimental consequences for individuals, including higher risks of job loss, longer periods of unemployment, and the greater associated potential for social exclusion (Bacher et al., 2014). Educational and employment measures are therefore continually being expanded to increase young people's chances and to minimise these risks. While such measures were initially seen as a temporary necessity, they have been continually developed (at least in Germany and Austria) since the 1980s (Oehme, 2020).

When discussing employment measures for young people, there is a prominent relationship between individualised and structural causes and responsibilities of early school leaving. The literature frequently asserts that failed transitions from school to work are ascribed to individuals without considering sociopolitical structures and the related unequal distribution of resources. Pohl and Walther (2007, p. 534) analyse activation policies in the EU and argue that because they "rely largely on over-simplistic assumptions about young people's motivations for taking an active role in their transitions, they contribute to the individualisation of structural problems." Individualising the causes of youth unemployment attributes the main source of failure to a lack of motivation, ethics, and values (Berthet & Simon, 2017; Otto et al., 2017, p. 4). This depicts young people as not being willing or suitable enough to take up employment, which results in measures aimed to enhance their employability (Pohl & Walther, 2007). Besides affecting the individual, this approach also affects their families. As Oehme (2020, p. 130) argues, measures that are intended to compensate for ascribed individual problems promote the exclusion and stigmatisation of young people's living environments, such as their families or peer groups, since these are classified as being responsible for a lack of orientation towards or competencies for the labour market.

This article investigates how young people experience this tension between the individualisation of problems and structural inequalities. In our research project, CoAct (Co-Designing Citizen Social Science for Collective Action), we work with the concept of citizen social science (CSS) that was inspired by participatory action research (PAR). This means that we collaborate with young people as co-researchers to learn how they analyse their position in employment measures. We jointly examined obstacles and challenges in the search for education and a career path. The young co-researchers have frequently addressed two particular factors in this line of research: (a) the demands and expectations placed on them by trainers, families, and the labour market while they are experiencing structural barriers that are framed as individual deficits; (b) psychological problems as exclusionary in the field of work and education. Although the research project took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, the article does not focus on the issues raised by young co-researchers regarding the restrictions and effects this had on their lifeworld.

In line with participatory research, we started with the idea that persons affected by a problematic situation have a specific, often-ignored perspective on this situation. Linking personal experiences with social science research methods potentially enables these usually excluded perspectives to be included in scientific knowledge as well as in sociopolitical action. In her research on precarity, Dörre (2006) emphasises the importance of tracing how certain conditions are subjectively processed, e.g., how people address uncertain job opportunities or discrimination in the job market. We furthermore follow Evans's (2007, p. 92) concept of "bounded agency" that grasps how the past and the imagined future of individuals, as well as their "subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate," influence their agency. From this perspective, individuals are neither overdetermined by sociopolitical structures, nor are their actions only a result of their individual behaviour. This understanding of agency is useful in participatory research that is equally concerned

with personal experiences and structural conditions of social exclusion.

2. Context

The general structure and organisation of training measures for young people—especially for those not in the regular educational system—constitute our research context. In 2016, Austria introduced a new law called the *Ausbildungspflichtgesetz* (Compulsory Education or Training Act), which made attending school, vocational training, or a preparatory measure mandatory up until the age of 18. Since 2017, the number and formats of existing training initiatives have expanded alongside the establishment of corresponding administrative bodies. The new structure is called *Ausbildung bis 18* (Education and Training up to 18, later shortened E&T up to 18). At the end of compulsory schooling (at the age of 15), students who are at risk of discontinuing their education are invited to "youth coaching" sessions where social workers help them define and plan their future education or training goals. Those who struggle to find an apprenticeship or do not want (or are unable or not allowed) to attend school participate in preparatory courses and training. These courses are designed to develop social and technical skills and prepare young people for working environments.

Despite its objectives to involve all young people in preparatory measures or formal education, some individuals fall outside the E&T up to 18 system. Reasons include structural and personal challenges like the lack of apprenticeship placements, a selective school system, family problems, little educational support from families and friends, other responsibilities, or health problems (Bacher et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2019). This is especially true for young people experiencing multifaceted problems, who often quit measures they perceive as too restrictive or demanding (Steiner et al., 2019).

Different categories define and describe young people who are not within the formal educational system: First, the Anglo-American term "early school leavers" (ESL) refers to those aged 18 to 24 whose highest level of education is ISCED 3c short. This corresponds to a short period of education after lower secondary school, e.g., at a one-year school (cf. Steiner, 2009). Conversely, Statistik Austria (2021b) uses *Frühe AusBildungsAbbrecherInnen* (early education dropouts, or FABA) to describe those aged 15 and older who have no education beyond compulsory schooling, are not currently enrolled in formal education or employed, and are not receiving a personal pension, i.e., people who are neither integrated into the formal education system nor the labour market. Likewise, NEET shares similarities with FABA, but concerns people aged 16 to 24 who are neither currently in education or training nor employment (Bacher et al., 2014). This definition, however, does not consider the highest level of educational attainment, making the group more heterogeneous than FABA or ESL. Tamesberger and Bacher (2014) stress that NEET subsumes disadvantaged adolescents who are involuntarily excluded from educational institutions and the labour market (e.g., due to illness, forced migration, or caregiving duties) with more privileged individuals who intentionally take time off. Hence, barely half of the adolescents in their sample of young people with NEET status are ESL.

Most of the young people we worked with belonged to the FABA category and failed to complete their schooling or find a vocational training placement. Although Austria has a lower share of early school leavers than the EU average (7.9% and 10.6%, respectively; see Strauss, 2018), an estimated 16,000 young people are candidates to participate in E&T up to 18 measures (Steiner, Pessl, & Karaszek, 2016, p. 79). By contrast, Statistik Austria (2021b) defined 46,902 persons between the ages of 15 and 19 as FABA as of 31 October 2017, not all of whom were in E&T up to 18 measures.

While several quantitative studies on Austria address NEET (e.g., Bacher et al., 2014; Tamesberger & Bacher, 2014) or ESL (e.g., Steiner, 2009, 2014), little academic literature investigates E&T up to 18. Two important exceptions are, first, an extensive report that estimates the benefits of E&T up to 18 on a macroeconomic and societal level and establishes recommendations for several E&T up to 18 subfields (Steiner et al., 2019). However, the report does not evaluate its implementation. The authors ultimately determine that E&T up to 18 will yield several benefits from a strong macroeconomic return on investment, as well as improved social justice and more options and support for individual young people. They approve of the methods of prevention, intervention, and compensation in E&T up to 18, but stress there are areas for improvement; for example, strengthening support systems at schools and other training sites (e.g., psychologists, supervision) and intensifying partnerships between different institutions. The second text is more critical, wherein Atzmüller and Knecht (2016) document the neoliberal transformation of labour market activities and policies for young people during their transition from compulsory school to work. The authors analyse ministerial papers and expert interviews with employees of political and administrative institutions, as well as those working directly with young people, and conclude that young people are expected to adapt to a competitive economic environment, while pathologising failure, deviation, or refusal ("adolescent madness"), or attributing it to dysfunctional, lower-class families (Atzmüller & Knecht, 2016, p. 130). The shift from *Ausbildungsgarantie* (guarantee of education) to *Ausbildungspflicht* (obligation of education) is an indicator of this neoliberal transformation.

However, no qualitative or participatory research currently addresses young people's perspectives on E&T up to 18. This is why our research project conducts collaborative research with young people who are the target group of this new educational structure.

3. Research Methodology: Citizen Social Science and Participatory Action Research

Our project is based on principles of CSS, a relatively new and emerging research approach (Albert et al., 2021; Mayer et al., 2018; Purdam, 2014) with no universal definition (Albert et al., 2021). Scheller et al. (2020, p. 10) define CSS as "participatory research co-designed and directly driven by citizen groups sharing a social concern." CSS has its roots in activist and participant-led research, citizen science, as well as PAR (Albert et al., 2021; Scheller et al., 2020). Our research project draws mainly on PAR, which originated in American and Latin American psychological, sociological, educational, and international development traditions (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Whyte, 1991). PAR perceives scientific knowledge as an instrument of power, which might exclude or even exploit people for the sake of science. It was influenced by Freire (1970/1992), who states that every person can use education and knowledge to develop a critical consciousness about the world around them and thereby develop a sense of agency in society's political and social fields. PAR strongly values individual lifeworld experiences as a valid basis for researching social issues. In this regard, PAR is deeply committed to using social science research as a means to question power relations and inequality (Kindon et al., 2007). It works in a participatory manner regarding the research and the practical implementation of research outcomes. This means that people who are not trained or professional researchers are engaged as co-researchers and are involved in defining the topic of the research object, the research conceptualisation, data collection, and analysis, as well as disseminating the results and their practical applications into practice (von Unger, 2014). However, participation is a fluid process with varying levels of engagement throughout a research project (Hart, 2007).

Multiple approaches have been developed within PAR, and collaborative research with children and young people is especially relevant to our work (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kellett, 2010). Kellett (2010) asserts that it is advantageous to include children in the research process in an active and co-determining manner because of their unique perspectives that cannot be captured by adults. Whether in peer-to-peer research or lifeworld experiences, children and youth bring a distinct stance to a research project. Cammarota and Fine (2008) furthermore stress the capacity of participatory research to engage young people in its reflection upon social structures and inequalities—especially when combined with postcolonial and feminist theories that likewise focus on challenging power relations. Although PAR is considered a mutual learning process between all participants, including the academic researchers, it focuses on its ability to develop critical and reflexive thinking and to empower young people to "inquire about complex power relations, histories of struggles, and the consequences of oppression directly related to their lives" (Desai, 2019, p. 125).

4. Research Activities and Data

The core of our research project was the collaboration with young people who attended E&T up to 18 measures. The research activities relevant to this article include one two-day online research session, and four "project weeks" in face-to-face settings with a total of 33 young co-researchers between the ages of 15 and 23. The research activities took place between November 2020 and October 2021 (see Figure 1). Information about further research activities done within the scope of the project can be found on our homepage (https://coactproject.eu and https://coactproject.univie.ac.at). Another important aspect of the project was building a "knowledge coalition"—a dynamic network of Austrian practitioners, public administration, policy institutions, service providers, youth organisations, and academic researchers. Building this network enabled the professional research team to work with different actors in the E&T up to 18 field and directly share the issues raised by young co-researchers during the project weeks with decision-makers, scientists, and practitioners, and vice versa.

The project weeks and the two-day online research session were organised with the help of the heads and trainers from the E&T up to 18 institutions attended by the young people. In some institutions, youth were compelled to be present, but the organisers of the research project gave all young people the opportunity to decide whether they wanted to actively participate in the research project or not. At other institutions, it was possible to advertise the research project, allowing young people to become familiar with the idea and the professional researchers beforehand. Mostly, the young people took interest in the project because it was a change from their everyday routines at the educational measure and because they could pursue their own interests. The research was structured in a way that the young co-researchers could choose their own research topic, collect information and data, analyse their data, and reframe their results in policy recommendations.

Since the project was working with a lifeworld-oriented approach, the research topic was not only youth employment but could encompass all social or societal issues the young co-researchers deemed relevant. Hence, the research topic and research question were developed by the young researchers themselves after a preparatory interactive exercise on their needs, topics, and challenges, as well as issues they wanted to transform. Figure 1 shows the topics the young co-researchers chose to research and which methods they used to collect and analyse data. They were able to choose from a range of research methods that were introduced to them in a playful way, such as conducting mutual interviews or doing photo research. The data collected in the joint research was analysed by adapting steps from qualitative content analysis, grounded theory, and situational analysis so the methods could

	Overview Research Activities				
	Project Week 1	Project Week 2	Project Week 3	Project Week 4	Online Research
General	• Pilot • November 2020 • 3 young people	• August 2021 • 6 young people	• September 2021 • 9 young people	• October 2021 • 8 young people	• May 2021 • 7 young people
Topics	• Corona and searching for jobs	• Mental illness and work requirements • Expectations put on young people	• Racism • Military • Climate (justice)	• Equality • Mobility: Transport, country and city	• Digitalisation • Racism
Methods of data collection	• Qualitative interviews	• Qualitative interviews (expert&street interviews) • Autoethnographics comic	• Interviews (expert&street interviews) • Group discussions • Photo research	• Online survey • Interviews (expert&street interviews) • Photo research • Group discussions	• Quality Interviews • Photo research
Methods of analysis	• Stop'n'Go • Coding with # • Discussions	• Stop'n'Go • Coding with # • Discussions	• Stop'n'Go • Coding with # • Discussions	• Stop'n'Go • Coding with # • Discussions	• Stop'n'Go • Coding with # • Discussions • Situational mapping
Outcome	• Video	• Video	• Video	• Video	• Posters created with an online design tool
	33 young people & 4 institutions				

Figure 1. Overview of participatory research activities.

be used by young co-researchers. In Figure 1, we call this "Stop'n'Go" and "Coding with #" (Wöhrer et al., 2018). All the steps were done collaboratively and were supported by one professional researcher. To enable the young co-researchers to publish their results, the professional research team chose graphic recordings or explanatory videos in advance as a target group-oriented dissemination tool for project weeks. The outcomes can be viewed on the CoAct Vienna YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw9KE2iUG74tcLab3p16ojQ/videos).

The young co-researchers' participation was very high with regards to setting the research topics as well as conducting and analysing data, but rather low concerning other project-related activities, e.g., organising funding or collaborating with stakeholders. Hence, their participation levels varied throughout the project. Although the initial plan was to enable as much participation as possible, especially in disseminating the overall project results, e.g., in the media or at conferences, this was hindered by Covid-19 restrictions and the resulting lack of opportunities for in-person follow-up meetings. In addition to the co-analysis depicted in this article, the research project entails activities beyond its collaborative research with young co-researchers, e.g., formulating final policy recommendations. Although these data analysis and dissemination steps will not be done collaboratively, the young co-researchers' previous co-analysis, demands, and suggestions will still be highly influential during this project phase.

5. Results: How Do Young People Negotiate Expectations in the Transition (From Measure) To Work?

As noted, many young people within E&T up to 18 measures face social exclusion, especially during transitional periods. This was also evident during project weeks when young co-researchers discussed the struggles and problems they faced in their lives—whether at school, in training, in their families, or among their friends. They seemed to be constantly on edge and under enormous pressure. They discussed being first burdened by social inequalities like racism, ableism, and mental health stigma—and thus structural disadvantages—and second by their more individualised effects in areas like care work, language skills, and lack of motivation. Considering the constant struggles young people experience, it seemed quite fitting when one young co-researcher described herself as someone who was mainly concerned with trying to survive. This strong language encapsulated the youth's lifeworld quite well by pointing to the multifaceted problems E&T up to 18 participants face, with looking for an apprenticeship or another form of education being only one of many obstacles to overcome.

To shed more light on the tension between structural and individualised challenges, we, the authors, focus on presenting the results from the co-analysis done together by the professional researchers and the young co-researchers during the project weeks and the two-day online research session. We will first discuss the demands

and expectations placed on young people by trainers, families, and the labour market. Finding apprenticeships in Vienna is highly competitive because of limited placements for too many young people, meaning companies often only hire those with "perfect" CVs. Additionally, we address mental health, as it clearly illustrated how inequalities affect youth education. The topics were main themes in three project weeks and were also repeatedly discussed by other groups of young co-researchers. For this article, we, the authors, summarised the outcomes of this joint research and framed the findings within a theoretical context to enable connecting the research to a larger discourse on youth in transition.

The following sections include quotes from young co-researchers who participated in the project weeks, which were all translated from German to English by the authors.

5.1. Requirements for Young People or How to Be a Wunderwuzzi

In our participatory research project, all research groups of youth and young adults discussed and analysed the expectations placed on young people by their social and professional environments. Based on their own experiences and interviews with E&T up to 18 professionals as well as other youth, the young co-researchers identified tensions between what they were expected to achieve and their assessments of their actual career potential. When analysing the current labour market situation, young people felt like they must be *Wunderwuzzis* ("whiz kids," which was used by one expert in an interview conducted by the young co-researchers)—a person who already knows and can do everything and who has to have above-average skills—to have any chance of being considered for the job. The young people questioned company demands for previous work experience even for those in their age group. They regarded it as a flawed system since companies selected people who needed the least amount of training, which was inconsistent with the very purpose of training young people and reduced opportunities for those with fewer skills. Furthermore, the young people described the contradiction where, on the one hand, there was an apparent lack of suitable personnel, while on the other hand, many young people did not gain an apprenticeship. As one young person summarised, this places pressure on everyone involved:

> It's like she [the interviewee] said, they really only look for the best. And if they don't find the best, then they don't take anyone. Of course, they have pressure and we have pressure because we don't have a job.

To the young co-researchers, the companies transferred their pressure onto the young people by demanding too many prerequisite skills and knowledge. They experienced requirements for a comprehensive CV, which is hard for young people who are attending educational measures to achieve. Accordingly, they feared that registering with Austria's employment service (AMS) would further minimise their chances of getting hired. As one young co-researcher explained, "going to the AMS at fifteen is suicide, so to speak." Their fear was also related to existing stereotypes about unemployment benefit recipients. This worried another young co-researcher when he stated: "And then the employer also thinks, 'what did he do there?' because some really take advantage of the AMS, some.''

These expressive quotes made it clear that young people constantly feared being considered stupid, lazy, or leeching off of social welfare benefits, which all diminished their chances of getting a good education or job. This fear of individualised failure was contrasted by the reference to structural conditions: The young co-researchers refused to exclusively see their difficulties in transitioning from school to work as an individual deficit. In their opinion, they were not prepared for the current requirements (e.g., the digitalisation of work changed tasks and duties they had not been trained for). They especially criticised schools for having hardly taught them any work life-related competencies and ambivalently discussed the necessity for a higher school leaving certificate. On the one hand, young people noticed that companies preferred graduates from, for example, technical upper-level secondary schools and recognised that jobs increasingly required a secondary school leaving certificate. On the other hand, they observed that a secondary school leaving certificate without work experience counted for little when looking for a job. Another structural factor regarding the difficulty of finding education was that, especially in Vienna, the discrepancy between applicants and positions for both internships and apprenticeships was so high that young people received countless rejections for applications—if they received them at all:

> For example, I know this from the internship. We had to do a hundred and thirty hours, and a lot of people really struggled because a lot of people apply in the summer. A lot of people do that. And there were many monotonous applications, yes, of course, they are then immediately thrown o—thrown away, and really only one, two are then invited to the appli—uh, to the interview. What are you supposed to do then?

Besides not being considered by companies due to the sheer amount of applications, the young co-researchers discussed how discrimination based on nationality or religion affected their application processes, e.g., not getting a job because of wearing a headscarf. They addressed those and other structural conditions such as job security and the lack of information about jobs when articulating demands for stakeholders, institutions, and politicians, as presented in Section 6.

Apart from the implicit or explicit expectations stated by companies and the welfare service, young people

were also confronted with their parents' expectations. For example, some young co-researchers argued with them about which jobs or careers were acceptable or worthwhile and which were not. They concluded that the older generation was not well-versed about new jobs in, e.g., the creative sector, and did not know about potential salaries. Some jobs deemed unsuitable by parents need to be considered as worthwhile—not because of the social status, but because of the associated salary. A commonly-invoked theme was the pressure parents place on young people concerning education and career choices. A young co-researcher described this as: "Because every day my dad is like: 'When are you going to get an apartment? When are you going to get a decent job?' Every day he asks that, although that question is getting annoying." Another young co-researcher spoke in more detail about the situation at home:

> My parents don't earn well, I have a sister who is in a wheelchair, my mother can't work because of that and now the whole burden is on me because my father wants me to get a good education, to earn money. And, it's not just because of the family that I give them money, but so that when I grow up I don't have to live like that. That's mainly what my father wants from me.

In both quotes, young people expressed that they fell short of their parents' expectations. The demand for (currently) unachieved independence and success built up pressure from the expectation to either no longer depend on their parents' income or to contribute to the household income. This was even harder for young people with migration histories who experienced both their parents' hardships (e.g., not having access to social welfare or having difficulties learning the official language) and the expectation to seize the opportunities their parents had provided for them. This experience was especially shared by girls, who mentioned that their parents were not necessarily strict—except for when it came to school.

The young people's statements demonstrate that E&T up to 18's status was not perceived as a normal or legitimate educational path, but as a failure. This means that participating in these measures was equivalent to having failed to obtain a regular educational or training placement. Young people in E&T up to 18 are stuck in a *sozialer Ortlosigkeit* (Abbenhardt, 2019), which is a situation where a positive social positioning is made impossible because it does not correspond to the norm biography and does not receive social recognition. Furthermore, as elaborated upon below, many E&T up to 18 participants bring a "package" of troublesome and energy-intensive issues but lack adequate support.

5.2. Let's Talk About (Mental) Health

Based on their study conducted between 2013 and 2015, Wagner et al. (2017) state that in Austria, 23.9% of young people surveyed between the ages of 10 and 18 experienced mental health problems. This increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dale et al., 2021) due to, e.g., lockdowns affecting schools and employment measures, a lack of social contacts, and stress. Mental health problems have previously been identified as a contributing factor to dropping out of school (Steiner, Pessl, & Bruneforth, 2016, pp. 170–172). It is, therefore, unsurprising that two of the research groups addressed mental health in the context of education and work, as well as concerning fairness within the health system. Based on their own experiences, the young co-researchers discussed what young people need to "survive" while navigating careers and continuing education. Because most of the young people we worked with had precarious economic backgrounds (Livanos & Papadopoulos, 2019) and psychotherapy is usually expensive in Austria, they had trouble obtaining professional support. During the research activities, the young co-researchers shared within the research group how the healthcare system generally favoured those who could afford services and put those who lacked financial resources at a disadvantage. Additionally, they did not feel supported in finding the right places and services that met their needs due to a combination of limited spaces and long waiting lists. However, parents and members of older generations seemed to be overwhelmed by support needs, which led to feelings of isolation and abandonment:

> At home, for example, my mother doesn't take it seriously at all, for example, [her mother describing her] "she's pretending to be depressed again," although it was diagnosed by a psychologist long ago…[she says] I'm faking it, I don't really have anything, I just want to take a vacation, so to speak, and that's why I'm going on sick leave.

These feelings of not being taken seriously and isolation were reinforced through mental health still being taboo in Austria and its association with shame and weakness. Furthermore, young people spoke about their lack of trust in authorities and institutions due to bad experiences at school, work, or with doctors, as they did not feel understood and supported. The lack of awareness and education about the topic was accompanied by many stereotypes that young people faced. Some experienced being labelled as crazy, lazy, weak, or unreliable when struggling with depression or mental illnesses. As described above, young people generally resisted these mental health ascriptions. This links back to our earlier comments about personal traits during job searches, highlighting how young people struggle against stereotypes and associated characteristics concerning mental health. The prevalence of mental health stereotypes promoted experiences of exclusion by colleagues or classmates through discrimination and mobbing. One young co-researcher argued: "If someone simply says you are sick [in the sense of crazy] or something,

something like that, that is just absolutely not true, it is not your fault." Hence, one young co-researcher summarised what needed to change as follows: "In my opinion, the most important thing is not to make people think that they are different."

Looking at these experiences from a professional researcher's perspective revealed that there is a lot more going on in the young people's lives than just finding a job or attending a school. It was not that they did not *want* to find a job or apprenticeship, but that this seemed very difficult, especially when their struggles had direct consequences on work and education or vice versa. As one young co-researcher stated: "It definitely helps if you feel better in your private life because if you feel like shit in your private life, you feel like shit at work…or vice versa."

The young people shared examples of how their mental illnesses had negative consequences on their work life. For example, some had to leave school or training, lost their jobs over extended hospital admissions, or were unable to work for longer periods and were accordingly trying to regain their footing:

> If you're absent, for whatever reason, if there's no damage, you will be gone after the second or third time. Some people, for example me, it is extremely difficult to get up, because of the effects [of depression]. Then I don't have the strength to call somewhere, whether it's [name of institution] or somewhere else. You're just in bed all the time and you practically can't move.

Therefore, they sometimes pretended to be physically ill to go on sick leave. One young co-researcher described having a "nervous breakdown" in the morning, but being afraid of not being taken seriously, so she called the doctor and said she was sick without mentioning the mental health issues. Besides missing work itself, other work-related disadvantages included young people being unable to openly address their mental health situation in job interviews or during training without the fear of job loss or discrimination.

Likewise, the young co-researchers did not feel sufficiently supported within their employment measures, since trainers were limited in their capacity to support mental health issues. One trainer described how she used her additional qualifications in psychology to work with young people. However, this was the exception and not the rule. Most young co-researchers had a good relationship with their trainers, as they felt supported with all work-related issues, but there was still a lack of general support:

> At school, there was a coach who was there for the kids who had problems with learning and with such psychological…here [in the training measure] you can always go to the coach, but it's not the same. They help us with the work; they don't listen to us in such a way that we really let everything, everything out.

The young co-researchers all participated in measures that did not specialise in mental health problems (which some measures do). As some administrators recognised, mental health was a general topic affecting all E&T up to 18 measures. To the young co-researchers, however, there was still a need for improvement regarding specific areas like psychological support or more open attitudes towards the issue. They desired more approaches to mental health that include awareness, understanding, and support from colleagues and employers as well as trainers and family. This was accompanied by desires for fair access to the health system, where they could receive support regardless of financial resources.

6. Conclusion

As the insights in the analysis and narrations of the young co-researchers demonstrate, young people in E&T up to 18 must constantly compare themselves with "norm" biographies, which are far from normal due to changing labour market conditions, reformulated work-life balances, the digitalisation of work, and other factors that contribute to general work life-related uncertainty (Kovacheva & Pohl, 2007; Stauber, 2013; Walther & Stauber, 2007). The collaborative analysis done by researchers and young co-researchers of their personal experiences and sociopolitical environments shows that the young co-researchers' lack of legitimate position for themselves (Abbenhardt, 2019) is most immanent. This creates constant feelings of social pressure to perform better and achieve more, which applies both to labour market expectations and mental health. The young co-researchers are constantly fighting existing or potential stigmatisation from peers, employers, or parents. At the same time, they struggle for the legitimisation of their position as FABA within the nexus of education, apprenticeship, and work. As shown above, knowledge of social inequality and structural disadvantage, e.g., due to discrimination or lack of training places, does not prevent young people from attributing their failure in the normative educational pathway to themselves. Rather, it leads to increasing uncertainty about how it is even possible to navigate one's work life under these adverse conditions.

Regarding this challenge, CSS aims to develop agency for individuals in unjust environments. This is achieved by collectively developing an understanding of the existence of and the relationships between sociopolitical structure and the individual, the social conditions, and injustice. Participatory and action-oriented CSS supports co-researchers to both analyse situations relevant to them and also formulate demands for relevant stakeholders. The idea of social change based on the experiences of those affected by a problem is inherent to CSS and is well-established in our study through the partnership with different E&T up to 18 stakeholders. When addressing those in charge, e.g., politicians or persons responsible within the social service landscape,

the young co-researchers formulated several demands regarding the labour market and mental health: They appealed for easier labour market and apprenticeship access for young people with little work experience. This not only includes more information about possible career choices, but also the need for more apprenticeship places. Young co-researchers urged companies to create apprenticeship places and take time and effort to train them. Furthermore, they advocated for fair pay and social recognition for all occupations. The young co-researchers demanded better job security, which was especially urgent in the face of economic uncertainty driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. Regarding mental health, young co-researchers desired for mental health taboos and stigmas to be eliminated and identified the need for a more general discussion about mental health in society, and especially in work settings. One of the most essential demands articulated by the young co-researchers was access to affordable therapy, as well as including people with mental health problems in the regular labour market. Their appeals reflect literature and current political debates, e.g., about the lack of (affordable) therapists or institutions that specialise in this target group (Medical University of Vienna, 2017; Steiner, Pessl, & Bruneforth, 2016, p. 174).

The young co-researchers, thus, advocated for a more inclusive and just school and work environment—not only for those with mental illnesses, but for all young people regardless of nationality, ethnicity, age, or educational attainment. The same applies to the debate over the role of E&T up to 18. As Steiner et al. (2019) argue, E&T up 18 must tackle the causes of ESL instead of its effects only. This also includes macroanalyses, e.g., about how the structures of mandatory school regulations promote ESL in Austria (Moser & Lindinger, 2016) as well as a relational comprehension of how different stakeholders and social structures promote dropping out of school (Stuart, 2020). Young people need support that productively addresses the "complexity of (post)modern life" (Kovacheva & Pohl, 2007), meaning it should reflect the uncertainty and individualisation of current labour market conditions. To counteract the stigmatisation of young people in employment measures, services must connect with the lifeworlds of young people and approach them by enabling self-determined development. However, if support measures for early school leavers only "build" competencies, they will ignore the socioeconomic factors that negatively affect opportunities for transition (Oehme, 2020). The young co-researchers resisted accepting social exclusion, as they refused to see their life courses as predetermined over not receiving enough support during their early school years or because they faced other challenges like discrimination, health problems, or economic disadvantages. They challenged being denied a recognised place in society (Abbenhardt, 2019; Castel, 2000; Flecker & Zartler, 2020). Returning to Atzmüller and Knecht (2016) demonstrates that young people do not simply adapt to a competitive economic environment, but demand changes in systems of school-to-work transitions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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