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Managing a fragile motivation within an unfit organisation: young adults' experiences of support to achieve employment

Att hantera en skör motivation i en illa lämpad organisation: Unga vuxnas erfarenheter av stöd för att uppnå sysselsättning

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ABSTRACT

This article explores subjective realities of being not in employment, education or training (NEET), with a specific focus on support needs and how labour market support fits these needs. A total of 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants aged 18–29 who had just been recruited to a work support program aimed at increasing the availability, coordination, and individualisation of support in order to enhance the possibility of finding work. The results illustrate a clear yet fragile motivation to work among the respondents. The participants expressed optimism that they would find a job, but were also clear about the need for adaptations in the workplace to succeed. Through the lens of crip time, the participants expressed a need for flexibility and extra time to perform tasks such as finding a job and feeling comfortable in the workplace, compared to the needs of abled people. Rules and time limits at the Public Employment Service and the Social Insurance Agency reinforced the image of this normative time, making the participants express their needs as a deviation from what is considered normal.

ABSTRAKT

Den här artikeln utforskar erfarenheter och upplevelser av att stå långt ifrån arbete, sysselsättning eller studier, med ett specifikt fokus på subjektiva stödbehov och hur arbetsmarknadsstöd matchar dessa behov. Totalt genomfördes 23 semistrukturerade intervjuer med deltagare i åldrarna 18–29 år, som just rekryterats till en arbetsstödande insats som erbjuds genom samordningsförbund. Insatsen syftar till att öka tillgängligheten till stöd, samordna och individualisera stödet för att öka möjligheterna att nå arbete eller studier. Resultaten illustrerar en tydlig men samtidigt skör motivation att arbeta, bland respondenterna. Deltagarna uttrycker en optimism om att de ska hitta ett jobb, men också en tydlighet kring behovet av anpassningar på arbetsplatsen för att lyckas. Genom perspektiv såsom att cripa tid illustreras deltagarna behov av flexibel och extra tid för att utföra uppgifter som att hitta ett jobb och känna sig bekväma på

KEYWORDS

NEET; labour market initiatives; misfit; crippling time

NYCKELORD

NEET; arbetsmarknadsstöd; misfit; cripad tid

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arbetsplatsen, jämfört med vad arbetsföra människor kan behöva. Regler och tidsgränser från Arbetsförmedlingen och Försäkringskassan förstärker bilden av hur denna normativa tid skapar en känsla av avvikelse bland deltagarna.

Introduction

This article explores subjective perceptions and experiences of support and labour market initiatives among young adults with intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses and experience of being ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET). Most European countries have seen an alarming increase in the extent of young adults (aged between 18 and 29 years) who are detached from both the labour market and the education and training system (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022). In 2021, approximately 13% of the 18–29-year-olds in the EU were neither in employment nor in education and training (Eurostat). The NEET group is characterised by great heterogeneity, and there is a lack of clarity in the definition of the group (Maguire, 2015). The NEET category may be understood in the broader context of social changes that have extensively restructured the relationship between young adults, work, and education (Simmons et al., 2014). Young adults in a NEET situation have often had difficulty coping with school and the adaptation to normative time and schedules that school is based on (Simmons et al., 2014). Moreover, today’s career pathways are more individualised and less predictable, potentially placing more responsibility on young adults to find their own way. The ableist expectations are a healthy body and a normal mind, that actively look for work, are flexible about work content, are outgoing and service-oriented. The construction of the able-bodied employee thus excludes many individuals (Lundberg, 2022). When it comes to people with autism spectrum conditions, it is estimated that 80% are unemployed worldwide (Bury et al., 2020).

Unlike other countries’ coordination of efforts for people in a NEET situation, Sweden still has a fragmented support system that makes it hard for young adults with complex needs to achieve work. Within these organisations, there are also regulations where objectives based on time and activity reporting are central to being granted support (Olofsson & Panican, 2019). Some young adults with intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses that are in a NEET situation, are offered daily activities with the aim of strengthening their ability to work, but few people progress from daily activities to work or studies (Socialstyrelsen, 2019); in 2016, only 0.2% of all people in daily activities ended up in a permanent transition to work. This is explained by limited routines for testing work ability, as well as limitations in cooperation between municipalities, the Public Employment Service, and the Social Insurance Agency (Socialstyrelsen, 2019). The OECD has also directed criticism towards Sweden for a lack of follow-up on which efforts or investments contribute to young adults entering the workforce (OECD, 2015; 2016).

Today, there is available knowledge about factors promoting a gradual transition to work or studies, and previous research is relatively consistent regarding risk factors and success factors. Several studies emphasise the importance of profiling, in which interventions are targeted at specific groups, and individual follow-up is associated with better results (Carcillo & Königs, 2015). There are also promising effects of certain types of interventions such as educational interventions, wage subsidies, vocational training, and multi-competent support/multiple efforts (Hardoy et al., 2016). There is also promising evidence for supported employment according to the Individual Placement and Support approach, and some evidence for the use of cognitive behavioural therapy in this group as an effective complement to more labour market-oriented efforts (Forslund & Liljeberg, 2021). A common denominator in these interventions is that they are flexible and person-centred to fit people’s needs. Research highlights the importance of

individualised support, characterised by a personal and continuous contact with the participants to build trust and cooperation between external actors as well as within organisations. This can be realised through case management, flexible encounters, and individual adaptation according to the participants' different conditions and needs, as well as continuous follow-up of the mapping and plans made for participants (Forte, 2021; Lundberg, 2022; Moen et al., 2020).

Two projects to encourage achievement of work or education

The context for this study was two similar projects aimed at developing and implementing collaboration between authorities facilitating support for young adults with disabilities who need extensive support to approach working life. The projects were initiated and are managed by two coordination associations, within which the Public Employment Service, the Social Insurance Agency, municipalities, and the region work together locally. The projects target young adults aged 18–30 who are detached from both the labour market and the education and training system. The target group for the projects are thus young adults in a NEET situation. A large percentage of the participants had an autism spectrum diagnosis and/or mental health problems. The aim of the projects is to increase the availability of support and to coordinate and individualise the support in order to enhance the possibility of achieving work. Within the projects, support such as case management, supported employment, and occupational therapy to handle everyday life is offered. Combining supported employment, case management and support to handle everyday challenges within the same service is unusual and an unexplored way of supporting young adults. An articulated goal of the projects is that the participants should be encouraged to be involved in the planning and implementation of their own support efforts. Together, the projects cover a major proportion of the municipalities around Stockholm, Sweden. Both projects are similar in terms of purpose, target groups, and design. In practice, the projects involve a consolidation and coordination of already existing support and efforts. The reinforcement is mainly in terms of increased staff resources and structural collaboration between personnel. This study focused on the participants in the projects, who had been recruited to the projects mainly via the municipality's services.

A framework to explore young adults's (non)participation

To understand the participants' statements about challenges and support needs to achieve work or studies, a critical disability perspective was adopted (Mik-Meyer, 2016). Previous studies on ableism and workplace inclusion find that disabled people are constructed as less capable, less willing, and less productive workers and thus as less employable (Mik-Meyer, 2016). According to McRuer (2006) Crip Theory can locate the problem of the construction of an able-bodied identity. Therefore, the concepts of *crip* and *misfit* became tools for understanding the idea of (work) ability as a realm of compulsory able-bodiedness. According to Garland Thomson (2011), 'body' does not only refer to physical or visible disabilities, but also includes invisible disabilities such as intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses. 'Crip' and 'crip time' are analytical concepts that create an understanding of time that unravels the social construction of ability. In relation to performing in the workforce and individual needs of flexibility in relation to time and temporality, crip time differs from 'ableist time'. A normative life course suggests a transition from child to adult, studies, work, and eventually transition from adulthood to old age and retirement. However, this has drawn criticism from researchers who say that it is embedded in ableist norms and fails to recognise temporality (Kafer, 2013; Wood, 2017). Disability may disrupt the stages of the life course, both in terms of when life stages are achieved and regarding the time it takes to complete activities. Crip time recognises diversity by redefining time, facilitating a social approach to disability in which it is the environment that needs to be adjusted, not the individual (Kafer, 2013). Being in a NEET situation may be understood as a disruption of a normative life course, and using the concept of crip time implies a focus on support and flexibility, societal expectations of the participants, and normative assumptions.

When analysing the interviews, the concept of ‘misfit’ was added to further understand the respondents’ stories about how their needs did not fit the structures of the organisations. Garland Thomson (2011) used the theoretical concept of misfit to broaden the perspective around functional variations and stories of lived experiences, claiming that society is both socially and materially maladapted for numerous individuals’ functional abilities. A misfit occurs when the environment fails to sustain the shape and body that enters it (Garland Thomson, 2011). Not being able to share the public space (for example, support systems and working life) in the same way as able-bodied that society is adapted for, may imply a structural risk factor as well as the participants’ adaptations.

Using a critical disability lens may evolve how culturally shared expectations about the order and timing of life events in a prototypical life course and employment situation are constructed. It contributes to understanding the norms, rules and traditions prevailing in today’s workplaces and society.

Study aim

Through this theoretical lens, the present study addresses how young adults with intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses experienced the services offered to achieve employment or education. The study adds to a growing literature that addresses how people with mental illness perceive and experience support from public employment services. More specifically, it explores the participants’ subjective support needs and how these needs were matched by the labour market support offered within the framework of the coordination associations. Knowledge about young adults with intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses in a NEET situation is currently limited, and there is an absence of the young adults’s own voices (Mawn et al., 2017). The knowledge base today mainly consists of interview studies with professionals and quantitative studies on efforts and outcomes (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022; Stea et al., 2019) or studies focusing on participants in Individual Placement and Support programs (Moen et al., 2020).

Methods

Individual interviews were conducted with participants in the two projects. The interviews were semi-structured and aimed at capturing experience-based knowledge in a range of areas. Interviewees were selectively recruited through staff in the services within the projects, with the aim of achieving a diversity of participants regarding gender, age, disability, and ethnic origin. Nevertheless, a basic principle in the recruitment was that all participants in the two projects who wanted to participate in the present study were given the opportunity to do so. The respondents were asked about their willingness to participate in an interview by the personnel in the services, and given an information letter about the study. In addition, a short film with the same information was published on a common digital platform. The participants who wanted to take part in the study either contacted one of the researchers directly, or allowed staff to give their telephone number or e-mail address to the researcher to make contact.

The respondents constitute a vulnerable group and a great deal of flexibility was applied in how the interviews could be conducted, and the time and place were guided by the respondents’ preferences (Oliffe et al., 2021). The interviews mainly took place digitally via Zoom, though a few were telephone interviews, two were physical in one of the services, and one was conducted via chat. A total of 23 interviews were conducted with participants aged 18–29 (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents from the two projects (*n* = 23).

	Project 1	Project 2	Total
Men	6	8	14
Women	3	6	9
Total	9	14	23

The respondents were of course very heterogeneous, and needs varied between different individuals. A common denominator for being able to take part in the projects' efforts was that the participants had expressed a desire to participate and thus expressed some form of motivation to begin work or studies. The fact that the participants were taking part in a project that offered interventions aimed at achieving work or studies may bring into question whether they fulfilled the criteria for a NEET status. However, they all had a history of being NEET, and were not in occupational activities, work, or studies at the time of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide with great openness to the participants' own stories (Roulston & Choi, 2018). The interview guide touched on four areas: (1) experiences of the project, (2) thoughts and experiences about studies and work, (3) family, friends, and leisure time, and (4) thoughts about the future. In order to ensure comparable data, the interview guide contained follow-up questions that were asked if not covered by the interviewees (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

At the time of the interview, all interviewees were once again informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent to participate. The interviewed participants were also offered the option of having their transcribed and anonymised interview sent to them, to enable possible clarifications or additions. Each interview lasted between 40 and 75 min, and all were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Committee (2020-03632).

Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006). After reading all the transcripts, the data were coded by the first author. Hence, all statements on obstacles and support needs were coded, and the codes were gathered into potential themes into which the data were sorted. The themes were named and given basic descriptions. To validate the themes, the coded extracts within each theme were reread and revisions were made. In the final step of the analysis, the theoretical framework was used to deepen the knowledge of the participants' stories.

Findings

The analysis identified four themes: (1) prerequisites for working, (2) unmet mental health needs, (3) citizenship and participation, and (4) (in)flexible support. The themes have different content, but are to some extent intertwined. Together, they create a complex portrait of a clear yet fragile motivation to work among the interviewees, which was affected by a structural misfit of interventions combined with individual challenges. The four themes are presented below.

Prerequisites for working

The interviews with the participants revealed an expressed desire to study or work, which indeed was also a prerequisite for taking part in the projects. When asked what they thought life would look like in a year's time, the vast majority predicted that they would have a job or would have started studying. They expressed optimism that participation in the project, with staff support, would result in their identifying and achieving a suitable job, or alternatively would help them resume interrupted studies. The participants expressed a clear desire to work or study, and many also described the type of work that they thought was suitable for them. Based on workplace expectations, they placed themselves as different, describing how they needed 'adjustments' to obtain and keep a job; for example, clarity around the content of work tasks and what was expected. The meaning of clarity varied among the interviewees; for some, it was about predictability and having control over what would happen in the workplace regarding work tasks as well as what social contacts they were expected to have. Others said that they wanted 'simple work tasks' that they knew in advance they would be able to handle and thus had control over. Most of them considered it impossible for them to live up to the norm of working full-time and showing great

flexibility regarding work content. Here, they emphasised both temporal adaptations to a more general restriction on working full-time, and a need for flexibility around working hours based on a shifting energy.

In relation to the projects, the respondents described that they appreciated that the efforts allowed them to start at the right pace and that staff ‘pushed just enough’ in a way that helped them get started but did not create stress:

I need to take it in very slow steps because otherwise I won’t get through it. / ... / I think they [the staff] have respected that, but at the same time pushed me to move forward ... so they’ve been great in that respect, the people who work there really try to learn how the individuals they work with function.

Availability and flexibility of the staff, personalised meetings, a varied range of support, openness about the pace of the work, and a willingness to serve were mentioned as characteristics of good support, helping the participants deal with obstacles and contributing to a future hope of work.

At the workplace itself, in addition to clarity and a temporal adaptation, the participants emphasised the need for employers and employees to understand their fluctuating capacity. Being regarded as ‘part of the team’ despite differences in ability was something brought forward, as was permission and acceptance from the employer for them to remain at the workplace during periods of depression or high levels of anxiety:

A good workplace for me is a place where I know what to do, what I can do, and where I never feel uncomfortable asking for support. A workplace that respects my limitations. What I feel I need is an understanding that sometimes I feel ill. But just knowing that those around me know that I’m not really okay helps me to be more okay.

To get this understanding, several participants described the importance of being open about their vulnerabilities when talking to employers. Some participants with earlier work experience highlighted the lack of adaptation and understanding as the main reason why they were not able to keep their job. This necessity to be open about one’s needs for adaptation and flexibility in the workplace had been made visible in the collaboration with staff in the projects. Likewise, several participants described how staff had encouraged them to be honest with themselves about their needs and preferences, in order to achieve and keep a job:

[The service] has helped me realise that I must find a job that is right for me. I have to be a little selective. Because in the past, I’ve taken any job, but it’s always failed. But they made me realise I have to describe my situation and if the job still wants me, it’s right.

The respondents described a clear motivation to work or study, but at the same time a low energy that challenged their ability to take the initiative.

Unmet mental health needs

The second theme covered the participants’ challenges with mental illness, but also a misfit of care and support. Their unmet mental health needs created several challenges in everyday life. They talked about anxiety and depression, and how these meant they had low energy levels that reduced their ability to ‘grasp things’ or to cope with everyday activities such as getting out of bed, cooking, getting out of the house, or spending time with family or friends. They felt ‘exhausted’, and described previous experiences of periods of exhaustion that meant prolonged isolation making it impossible to participate in studies or work. Some had an ongoing contact with psychiatric outpatient care, but did not feel they had received any treatment that improved their well-being or increased their energy:

I think they [mental health staff] don’t care ... there are so many of them who would rather talk than listen, I think. And they don’t take the problems you have seriously. I talked to one and really poured out how hard it is for me to do anything when I’m so depressed, and that I need help with that, because I can barely get out of bed some days. And his response to that was just ‘No, it doesn’t sound like such a serious problem.’

The participants' perceived need for care did not fit the criteria that psychiatric care had created in order to offer support. Psychiatric care was perceived to be better suited to providing care to people who already had a job, rather than offering treatment to people who wanted to get one. Among the participants there was both a hope that their mental illness would be considered by psychiatry, and a cautious hope that there would be treatment available that could increase their energy levels and reduce their anxiety. The participants described how they would 'stress for several weeks' over a scheduled meeting, and needed to 'make an effort' in meetings with the project staff to be accommodating and show willingness and commitment. At the same time as they experienced stress or were 'in high gear', they expressed how they often forgot appointments or agreements and found it difficult to deal with everyday things and activities that had been agreed, due to their fatigue.

Despite the need for support in managing everyday life described by the respondents, none of them had housing support from the social services. Some mentioned that it was something they had started to discuss in connection with participating in the projects:

Housing support might be something that would be good for me, who needs a bit of everything. From scheduling to maybe going for a walk sometimes ... So, you get out and socialise a bit ... Or they're just there as a bit of help. Maybe you do some tidying up together, and you just receive some advice like that, and they show you how to do it.

The participants' stories thus showed that organisational limitations such as long waiting times for psychiatric care, lack of treatment options, and lack of support at home might contribute to discontinuing the process of moving towards work or studies.

Citizenship and participation

The interviews made it clear that the participants had not followed the normative life course either socially or materially. They described a palpable loneliness and isolation, as they lacked friends from their childhood and previous schooling and had not established new contacts as young adults. In addition to a lack of social networks, they lacked activities and involvement in society at large. They were not anchored in society through clubs or associations in the community or through social media. In addition, several of the interviewees were excluded from the traditional welfare efforts offered in Sweden.

Most of the participants lived with their parents or in close proximity to one of their parents' residences. Among these, some had daily contact with their family or parent, but some lived alone in shared accommodation, with only sporadic contact with their family. Given that the interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, where isolation was recommended, it might seem unsurprising that the participants described their everyday life as relatively isolated at home. However, this situation was not described as being caused by pandemic restrictions, but as being intrinsic to their life situation. Some of the participants described wanting closer contact with a friend, but others also felt satisfied by having a limited social life without social relationships. When asked to describe their social network and friendships, almost all the respondents chose someone in their own family.

Even though the participants were adults aged 18–29, a majority stated that they lacked a regular income. Some received an activity allowance, but a large proportion were supported by their parents in terms of food and accommodation. At the time of the interview, a couple of the participants were in the process of applying for income support from social services, with support from staff in the projects. Not having a stable income was associated with a lot of stress:

No, I mean, I get an activity allowance of five hundred Kronor a month [45 Euros]. So it's not as necessary for me as for many others. I'm lucky right now to be supported by my parents, and that's something I know a lot of people don't have. I also know that if I were in such a situation, that stress would certainly have killed me. Literally, I would have died, because the stress would have made me unable to see any other option.

The stress was associated with the continuing dependence on one's parents as an adult, and not really seeing how that dependence could be lifted. For those who received an activity allowance, stress also came from uncertainty and worry over whether or when this allowance would be withdrawn.

However, several of the participants said that participation in the projects had meant that their life situation had improved in terms of contacts with authorities and care providers. They had gained access to aids and support to make their everyday life work; but perhaps above all, their total isolation had been broken. Financial security, established care contacts, and other 'life fixes' were described by the participants as core tasks in the project;

Above all, I think the staff have been a great help when I was applying for activity compensation. And it's quite a long and difficult process. It's hard to go through ... feels like you have to argue that your life looks the way you know it looks. Then, like being told that you can do things that you know you can't. / ... / Partly to have someone who's involved in the process, but also who has experience with other participants who've applied for this and knows what they're looking for in the medical report.

Although the inclusion criterion for participating in the projects was an expressed desire to work or study, the participants prioritised a schedule where the 'life fix' came first.

(In)flexible support

The fourth theme was concerned with the participants' experiences of a lack of coordination and flexibility within and between support units. This inflexibility was created by rules and regulatory routines in the organisations, but also by limited knowledge among staff about their own organisation, about what other organisations offered, and about how this was regulated. Several participants described their own uncertainty of the organisations' offerings and expectations. The respondents expressed stress and anxiety about not living up to the authorities' able-bodied norm of expectations and requirements. This stress was based in a perceived lack of knowledge about what the support system looked like and the requirements for being granted support.

It was also evident that the support activity from the projects that was most appreciated by the participants was support from staff in orienting them in the support system and getting in touch with relevant authorities. This involved staff helping to 'translate' the requirements and opportunities from various authorities, but also staff participating in meetings and increasing the participants' legitimacy when, for example, they described their ability to work. Independently reporting activity such as taking part in job training or job search activities in the 'right way' was described as stressful, while contacting authorities and getting help with this was described as impossible. Many of the participants also spoke about previous experiences of being 'misunderstood' or 'not believed' by representatives from the Social Insurance Agency, the Public Employment Service, or psychiatric outpatient care services. The respondents regularly needed support from various agencies, and appreciated how staff in the projects assumed a coordinating function. Staff were described by the participants as 'fast and helpful' or like 'spiders in a web':

As far as I can say, right now they have a hand in almost all the things that I'm having trouble getting in touch with ... what can I say ... official figures who can help me with financial support and talk to the municipality or doctors and seek mental health care ... everything like that.

The participants experienced that the work within the project was centred on their specific needs, which in this case meant that staff adapted to the participants' wishes, pace, and abilities. Staff were thus described in a positive way, based on the fact that the support they provided was flexible and adjusted to individual needs, and that the participants had great opportunities to influence the kind of support given:

The meetings were adapted to whatever time suited me and then it was more like, job search and what do YOU need help with and things like that. Then there were the drop-in times, which were completely free. You could come in when you wanted and you could leave when you wanted, and you could sit and just be there. / ... / I feel that the efforts are all about what I want and which jobs can suit me.

The participants thus emphasised how the efforts in the project were appreciated and successful because they were adapted to their individual needs. Many had previous experiences of a lack of individual focus in the support from staff, and a general lack of sufficient knowledge of the participants' conditions. A lack of understanding of the participants' individual support needs was described as contributing to the setting of requirements that the participants found it difficult to live up to:

The worst thing is when people look at you and think you're lazy or generally don't understand what's wrong. It takes time and energy to have to explain how to handle my problems and needs to each new person. When it comes to the Public Employment Service, for example, even the units that take care of people with special needs still don't seem to understand how we function. They are so fixated on short-term finances and don't understand what would be better and probably cost them less money in the long run.

The staff's knowledge of the target group was described as significant for adequate support, and this knowledge also affected the stability of the support that the participants received in collaboration between the units. Another decisive factor was the staff's knowledge of, for example, the range of activities, interventions, and aids. When the participants were receiving support from a person who had good knowledge of the support system and established cooperation routes within the it, they were able to request an adapted coordination of efforts.

The participants also highlighted the importance of staff commitment to working with the target group and to clarifying and strengthening their potential and willingness to work in accordance with the participants' wishes:

I'm the kind of person who always wears red lenses, always, always. And the staff are good at just seeing positive things and explaining them in a way that I can understand and agree with. They don't just say nice things in a fake way and pep you up, like fake-pep. No, they clearly explain like ... this is possible, this can be done.

Another aspect emphasised by the interviewees was the need for early interventions, as many had been without work and studies for several years before they were invited to join the project. Several of the participants described a gap between high school and the time when they were offered a work-oriented activity. They would have liked greater preparation and information about available opportunities after high school, other than regular work on the open labour market or studies at a university or college.

Discussion

This article explores subjective realities of being NEET, with a specific focus on the participants' subjective support needs and how labour market support fitted these needs. The results illustrate a clear yet fragile motivation to work among the interviewees. The participants expressed optimism that they would find a job, but also a clarity about their need for adaptations in the workplace to succeed. They requested clarity, predictability, and control over their tasks, but also a need for temporal flexibility in their employment due to temporal variation in their ability. These experiences resemble previous research on work place ability (Bury et al., 2020).

The respondents related to an expected normality; that is, what ought to be important and desirable as a young (abled) adult with a normative life course in terms of living independently, having a social network of other peers, being self-supportive, and having a job or engaging in university studies. Through the lens of *crip time* (Kafer, 2013; Wood, 2017), the participants expressed a need for extra time to perform tasks like finding a job and feeling comfortable in the workplace, compared to what others need. Rules and time limits at the Public Employment Service and the Social Insurance Agency reinforced the image of this normative time, and the participants expressed this extra time as a deviation from what is considered normal. However, the need for extra time came not only from the participants' slower pace, but also from ableist barriers that made things take longer, such as long waiting times for psychiatric care, inaccessibility at the Social Insurance Agency, or participants suddenly being 'forgotten' in connection with a change of staff. Previous

research suggests that accessible and adequate psychiatric care is likely to facilitate this target group in their endeavour to be able to cope with studies and work (Hardoy et al., 2016; Forslund & Liljeberg, 2021). Another perceived barrier was the participants' lack of housing support in their everyday life, which is something that other studies have also emphasised (Carcillo & Königs, 2015; Stea et al., 2019). The participants expressed support needs in relation to getting up in the morning, taking care of their home, ensuring adequate nutrition, doing their laundry, performing hygiene tasks, and also coping with the time and structure that work or studies require.

Through the concept of *crip time* and the questioning of normative time, it becomes clear how exclusion is created in relation to access to the labour market or further education. The script of time (Ljuslinder et al., 2020) creates ideals of capacity and functional perfection which are inaccessible for many individuals who are part of the NEET group. This exclusion stems both from time limitations in relation to the needs of the participants, and from the difficulty of navigating the terrain to gain access to work support efforts. According to Baril (2016), society's dominant understanding of this extra time is 'wasted time', in the sense of being unproductive and not living up to the norm. The participants' stories included experiences of how previous achievements in work training activities were still ended or dismissed when the designated time limits were not met. The results demonstrate how the projects have compensated for these barriers. Project staff took a coordinating role around the participants, and were described as 'spiders spinning the web'. This was also described as an important function that was missing in ordinary practice.

Garland Thomson (2011) states that misfits are created not only in terms of social attitudes, as unfit for the workplace, but also in material ways. The participants in this study were excluded from the environment due to the inaccessibility of support, and the project staff assisted them in making the support accessible by 'translating' the requirements and opportunities of the various authorities. Furthermore, the staff increased the participants' legitimacy when, for example, they described their ability to work to authorities. In this regard, the staff started from the experience that public welfare is built up by 'conduits' between and within authorities. The parts of this system are divided by different organisational boundaries, but at the same time the different parts are dependent on each other in order for there to be a functioning support for the individual. The participants' inability to manoeuvre in this system created a misfit. These activities are in line with previous research emphasising the need for flexible encounters and individual adaptation according to the participants' different conditions and needs, as well as continuous follow-up of the mapping and plans made for participants (Forte, 2021; Lundberg, 2022; Moen et al., 2020).

However, this coordinating role may also compromise the use of promising evidence-based methods (Hardoy et al., 2016), due to complex needs and complex organisations. When the participants spoke about how the support was designed, this was through staff who were described as supportive and who worked in accordance with what the participants themselves considered to be the most urgent tasks in their life situation. This is interesting in relation to the fact that the primary purpose of the projects is to contribute to a sustainable establishment in work or studies. One of the clearest reinforcements offered in the projects, in addition to promoting coordination, is the evidence-based methods of supported employment and case management as support for work or studies; research has shown that these are among the most promising methods for achieving the relevant goals (Forte, 2021). The question that needs to be asked is how interventions like supported employment and case management can be further strengthened in projects like these, without compromising the participation of the participants and staff. Such a question is relevant both for the continued need for research and for practice.

The present study has several implications for the practices that support young adults in a NEET situation to approach work. A consistent theme highlighted as important by the respondents was the need for support interventions to be flexible in terms of time and fit to individual needs. In accordance with the statements of Kafer (2013), there is a need not only for more time, but also for a greater flexibility and a reinterpretation of what should happen during a certain time. Through the lens of a *crip perspective*, this places the deviation on organisational normativity

instead of on the participants (Palmqvist, 2022). Ordinary efforts are described as ‘standardised’ and have a focus on quick results. Striving for compliance to these normative expectations, risks enhancing experiences of failure and reduced motivation among the participants.

A possible limitation in this study is the representation of young adults in a NEET situation. In contrast to the NEET population in general, the present respondents were all participating in a work support project, which imply that they correspond to a group with strong resources within the NEET group. Additionally, the respondents were recruited via staff which means that they were likely to have been those who had the ability to talk to others. However, in line with how the NEET group is described (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022), the study respondents included an overrepresentation of young adults with disabilities and with experience of an unfinished upper secondary education. Moreover, it can be considered a strength that the study included as many as 23 participants in a NEET situation, which is sometimes considered a hard to reach group. Their experiential knowledge can provide valuable insights into how work support initiatives can be made to better fit the needs of other young adults in the same situation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, the participants in this study did not agree that their data could be shared publicly, and so supporting data are not available.

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