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Not So NEET: A Critical Policy Analysis of Ontario's Youth Job Connection Program

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Not So NEET

A Critical Policy Analysis of Ontario's Youth Job Connection Program

By
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Major Research Paper

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Abstract

The Ontario government has identified youth unemployment as a central societal problem that it seeks to address through policy measures. It has recently switched its focus from assisting all youth towards assisting NEET youth (neither in employment, education or training), as is demonstrated in the current youth employment policy Youth Job Connection (YJC), which began in the fall of 2015. This MRP situates YJC as part of a broader trend away from designing youth policy as an explicit form of social control to a seemingly more *positive* approach of youth development. Using this example, it showcases the continuities between the social control and youth development models. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question: how does the framing and context surrounding YJC illustrate the limits of this approach in addressing NEET youth unemployment in Ontario? Keeping these questions in mind, I will demonstrate—through a critical policy analysis inspired by a critical political economy theoretical framework—the ways in which the positive youth development model taken up by YJC is failing to meet the needs of Ontario’s young people. Ultimately, the positive youth development model can be seen as a form of social control under the guise of youth development, as it seeks to funnel young people into neoliberal ideals of what a citizen should be: employed, flexible, consistently improving themselves, and perhaps most importantly not questioning the status quo.

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“We need to think far more creatively about the kinds of societies we want to live in — societies where young people, workers, and the environment are subject to a vulgar race to the bottom, or societies committed to flourishing forms of democratic social organization and nature-society relations” (Means 2017, 352).

Introduction

Youth unemployment in Ontario has been an issue since the 1970s, with unemployment rates for young Ontarians under 25, consistently double the unemployment rate of adults since 1976 (Statistics Canada 2016). And, marginalized youth—including youth with disabilities, LGBTQ+, Indigenous and racialized youth—are further discriminated against in the labour market and experience higher rates of unemployment (Canadian Labour Congress 2016, 5). As a result, considerable attention has been paid to this issue by Ontario premiers, policy-makers, organized labour and non-governmental organizations. The provincial government has been exploring and implementing programs, policies and legislation to assist youth in gaining employment and to reduce unemployment rates for young people since the late 1930s (see Priegert Coulter 1993b). The majority of the most recent programming focuses on the category of NEET youth, who are young individuals not in education, employment or training, with many also falling into the social markers of marginalization listed above (Yates, Harris, Sabates & Staff 2011; Maguire et al 2013). However, unemployment rates continue to remain high among youth in general, and among targeted groups of marginalized youth. This consistent policy failure leads one to ask the question, how does the framing and context surrounding YJC illustrate the limits of policy in addressing NEET youth unemployment in Ontario?

I became interested in the topic of youth employment policy through my work with NEET and/or marginalized youth at my place of employment last summer and through my community placement for the Social Justice and Community Engagement program. Last summer, I assisted an employment counsellor in Huron County with implementing a new

provincial youth employment program called Youth Job Connection (YJC). This program has been designed to help “youth aged 15 to 29 who experience multiple and/or complex barriers to employment by providing more intensive supports beyond traditional job search and placement opportunities” (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development 2017a). During my time supporting youth participants in YJC, I quickly began to realize that those who were the most marginalized or had many “complex barriers to employment” (the term, explained in-depth below, preferred by policy makers) often exited the program without having found a long-term job or a job placement at all. Furthermore, many of the youth I have interacted with at Why Not Youth Centres (my community placement) fit into the NEET category. Some have even participated in the YJC program in Brantford. Through both of these experiences, I’ve come to understand that only a small minority of the youth who participate in provincial employment programs—typically those who have fewer “complex barriers”—are able to escape the NEET category, and move into employment, education and/or training. This realization has encouraged me to research why these programs, which target both marginalized youth, continually fail to deliver on their promise. What other factors are influencing the provincial government’s decision to utilize this approach, because it is clearly not to assist NEET youth.

This major research paper will, through a critical policy analysis, examine the political economic conditions influencing the development of provincial employment policies and programs for young Ontarians within the NEET category. Using the current provincial NEET youth employment policy, Youth Job Connection, as a case study, it seeks to establish the origins and rationale of the policy, positioning these in the context of the broader economic and political dynamics of a capitalist society. In particular, I take into account the dynamics that push policy

forward including the interests of employers in an economic system that requires cheap and flexible labour, as well as the impact of social movements, civil unrest and youth crime. Additionally, I situate my findings within an analysis of the overall trends in provincial youth employment policies and programs, specifically the recent shift away from a “social control” model and towards a positive “youth development” model (terms that I explain below). In determining the historical trajectory of policy making in this area, I hope to pinpoint the key shifts within YJC, in the way the issue of youth unemployment is framed and how that framing relates to the solutions that are proposed. In particular, I explore the possibility that the goal of youth employment policy now, as before, is to prepare young people to be vulnerable, marginal workers. Rather than “youth development,” policy goals align more with the priorities of the owners of business and industry—that is, they align with their need to maintain a precarious labour market. As such, the recent policy—despite a focus on marginalized youth, who are supposedly most in need of development—continues, rather than shifts away from, earlier youth employment policy, which critics have argued was primarily aimed at establishing “social control.”

I argue that the positive youth development model YJC takes on is not a solution for youth unemployment. Rather the model seeks to, through a more subtle form of social control, create neoliberal citizens who are self-responsible and employed. Despite the fact that creating neoliberal citizens and maintaining a capitalist labour market can be deemed a success from the standpoint of employers, I demonstrate—from a critical political economy standpoint—the ways in which employment policy fails NEET youth. It is the failure of the positive youth development model, and by default of YJC, to recognize how NEET youth’s marginal status

impacts their ability to find and keep work which restricts the program's capacity to achieve the goals it sets out. But ultimately, it is policy's inability to compensate for the systemic failures of the capitalist labour market—which is maintained by a reserve army of labour, and thus by structural unemployment—that prohibits it from providing meaningful, secure, and well-paid employment for all.

My MRP begins with a discussion of the context in which youth unemployment occurs, and explains the trends in youth employment policy. I then outline my methodology – a critical policy analysis which is influenced by a critical political economy theoretical framework – before turning to the findings to my research questions. I begin this section by positioning Youth Job Connection (YJC) within the more general trends of youth policy, revealing the ways in which it can be understood as a form of the positive youth development model. Next, I analyze whether a positive youth development framework actually meets the policy's goal of benefitting NEET youth, and then illustrate the role of the social, political, economic, and historical context in framing YJC and legitimizing the province's focus on NEET youth unemployment. My analysis leads me to conclude that the positive youth development model presented in my case study of YJC fails to adequately address NEET youth unemployment. Moreover, my findings point to other ideas and policy alternatives that avoid the flaws of this model, and suggest a more viable avenue to addressing youth unemployment. It is my hope this MRP will contribute to existing knowledge on this topic, and be a potential resource to improve the ways in which youth employment policy is designed, delivered and implemented such that the needs of marginalized and/or NEET youth are met, and youth unemployment can be diminished.

Literature Review

This section explores literature relating to the ways in which young people are differently positioned within the capitalist labour market, and the political economy of youth perspective. It also explains the overall trends critical policy analysts have identified in the development of youth employment policy.

Capitalism, the Labour Market and Unemployment

Before we can begin to explore the effects of youth employment policy in Ontario, it is necessary to have an understanding of the context in which youth employment policy is produced: the capitalist labour market. Capitalism can be broadly defined as, “an economic and social system based upon the ownership or control of key productive resources (such as factories, patents, and tools) by a relatively small number of people who profit from the labour of the majority” (Sears and Cairns 2015, 204). As a result, capitalist economies have two things in common. The first is that a small minority of individuals, commonly referred to as capitalists, privately own the means of production—that is, the resources required to produce goods and services—and sell the finished products in the marketplace for a profit (Stanford 2008, 34). However, the owners of the means of production are missing one thing, workers. The second major feature of capitalism is the fact that those who do not own capital have little choice but to sell their labour power in the labour market to earn an income for themselves and their families (Stanford 2008, 119; McNally 2006, 89; Cairns 2017). That is, the vast majority of workers do not have access to the means of production, and most cannot live self-sufficiently outside of the capitalist labour market (Ferguson 2016, 50; Rinehart 2006, 12; Bhattacharya 2015; McNally

2006). It is precisely the workers' lack of alternative survival strategies that capitalists count on to keep their profits coming in. Inequality is thus embedded in the maintenance of a "healthy" capitalist economy.

Furthermore, there needs to be a group of individuals who are unemployed in order to maintain the system's reproduction. That is, unemployment is not something that simply appears out of nowhere. Rather, the capitalist economy produces unemployment as a mechanism to perpetuate employers' advantaged position vis a vis workers (Jamil Jonna & Bellamy Foster 2016). The existence of a "reserve army of labour"—a concept coined by Karl Marx (1990) to identify a population that is unemployed but ready to work whenever their labour is required—permits capitalists to keep wages low, and to spend as little as possible on creating or maintaining decent working conditions. The threat of being replaced by another worker, who is currently unemployed, keeps many employed workers from demanding an increase in wages or other costly workplace improvements (Jamil Jonna & Bellamy Foster 2016; Means 2017). In other words, the existence of a reserve army of labour forces job seekers to compete for employment, thus keeping wages low, rather than creating a situation in which employers must compete for labourers—a situation that would likely drive wages up to attract potential employees (Côté 2014, 535).

Under this type of system, unemployment programs tend to focus on upgrading job seekers' skills and training, as this helps them to remain competitive with employed workers and other unemployed individuals (McBride 2000). Although few people question this logic, there are other ways of imagining addressing unemployment in capitalism. An alternative might look towards gaps in social services, such as creating affordable day care policies (as has been

introduced in Québec), that would make it easier for women, for instance, to enter the workforce. Additionally, employment programs could, rather than concentrating on the individual's employability, focus on the broader concerns of unemployment. A solution from this point of view may place attention on creating more jobs through further development of public infrastructure, or expanding growing sectors, like green energy (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, 78). Such solutions, however, are not always favoured because capitalism's optimal reproduction depends upon there being a vast pool of workers driven to accept precarious work. The more secure the workforce, the less secure are capitalists' profits. As a result, unemployment programs created within the capitalist system, only help to make *some* unemployed workers a little more employable, but not necessarily find them meaningful work.

Moreover, ingrained class inequality is exacerbated by the highly racialized and gendered nature of the ways in which labour is socially reproduced in capitalist societies (Bhattacharya 2015, Ferguson 2016). This is as true for young workers as any other. Marginalized youth, including those in LGBTQ+, indigenous, racialized and gendered communities, and people with disabilities are overrepresented within precarious work and unemployed populations (CLC Young Workers Department 2016, 18-19). As a result, young people who experience multiple forms of marginalization, have increased difficulty finding employment within a labour market which is intertwined with inequality and oppression.

Ultimately, recognizing and understanding that inequalities and oppressions are ingrained in the capitalist system in which NEET youth must find employment is essential to determining why the policies designed to assist them are not effective.

Political Economy of Youth

One of the key approaches to understanding NEET youth's unique position within capitalism in the literature, is the political economy of youth. This literature brings together a critical political economy theoretical framework with critical youth studies to examine:

“the root causes and consequences of the positioning over time of the youth segment in relation to those (adults) in a given society with political and economic power, and thus how those in power see fit to develop policies that might recognize the political rights of the young, and therefore, support their economic interests” (Côté 2014, 528).

The political economy of youth approach has emerged out of a growing concern that the field of youth studies needs to take on a more historical-materialist approach, to demonstrate the ways in which the decisions made by adults drastically affect a young person's life (Côté 2014, 528).

In explaining how and why youth are generally disadvantaged when compared to adults, this literature considers the social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which the concepts of “NEET youth,” “youth,” and “unemployment” are constructed. It suggests policy-makers, and political and economic elites tend to utilize these terms without taking into account the material conditions in which these concepts are produced (Zoltok 2015, 24). Sukarieh and Tannock (2015, 6) note that “youth” is a social construction, meaning that the ways in which this category is determined differ according to the social and historical context in which any given youth population is produced. They ask how young people become “youth,” and point out that the individuals who have the most influence in shaping how youth are constructed are political and economic elites, who often do so for their own advantage (Sukarieh and Tannock 2016; 2015; Côté 2014). One example of this construction is the extension of ages which are included

in the “youth” category. Prior to the late 1990s, the Canadian government defined youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 (Côté & Allahar 2006, 39). However, “youth” now includes those up to the age of 29 (Côté & Allahar 2006, 39). This extension of age range has largely been created due to large numbers of young people staying in education after high school, as the result of the declining availability of good jobs which require only a high school diploma (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 117; Marquardt 1998).

The social construction of “youth” can benefit powerful elites in other ways as well. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015, 53) explain, “economic and political elites have long used youth as a social concept and technology to manage and maintain social order and control, and to promote their own agendas and interests.” Rather than focus on their own hiring policies or the lack of social supports, employers routinely place the blame for youth unemployment on the education system, and push to reform the curriculum to be more business-friendly (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, 67-68; see also Sears 2003). Moreover, the political focus on youth unemployment can distract attention away from the wider unemployment problem, and allows politicians to blame the seemingly natural barrier of inexperience and age, rather than other oppressions (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015; 2015; Côté 2014). Additionally, distinguishing young workers from other workers creates a divide amongst working-class people. One example of this has been a recent decision by workers at General Motors to accept a contract which could be harmful for newly hired workers, but beneficial to older workers (see Gollom 2016). By doing this, the structural forces which cause unemployment—the colonial, racist, patriarchal, capitalist system—are ignored and can continue as per usual.

Despite the strengths of the political economy of youth approach, it lacks some conceptual clarity. According to Côté, youth constitute an economic class, exploited by adults. But this framing of the adult/youth dichotomy is unhelpful. Côté (2016, 858) defines class as having the following three characteristics: “(1) material differences with another group, (2) ideological justifications for those differences, and (3) manufactured acceptance of those conditions.” And he claims that adults benefit from youth as *consumers* of goods produced by adult-owned businesses. This definition of class, however, emphasizes inequality but fails to identify any specifically exploitative relationship between adults and youth in the realm of *production*. It does not in other words, explain how it is that adults as a group actually benefit from their *class* relationship with youth.

Thus, the adult/youth dichotomy is defined by the fact that young people are differently situated within the capitalist labour and consumer markets, and have considerably less access to wealth than adults (Côté 2014, 531). This is true on a very general level. However, it is also certainly the case that many adults also experience a similar status. That is, like most youth, they do not own the means of production, and they are targeted as consumers. Moreover, it is important not to create a dichotomy between all youth and all adults, as it is a specific group of adults which benefit from the class exploitation of young people: those who employ and/or manage youth. It is also the case, that this same group maintains and benefits from the proletarianization of the adult segment, and in order to combat the issue of unemployment, everyone who sells their labour power must confront and challenge capitalist power (Sukarieh & Tannock 2016, 75; McNally 2006). Additionally, in describing the ways in which class—in terms of socio-economic status—can impact a youth’s experience of employment, Côté (214) fails to

fully recognize the ways in which being a young person and having membership within the working class both impact an individual but in distinctly different ways. Furthermore, by claiming youth constitute a class, the analysis glosses over the ways in which people's class positioning (as owners or not of the means of production), sets the material conditions of how we can live and what opportunities we have access to.

This limitation aside, the political economy of youth perspective offers great potential to my work. In particular, this literature has identified discursive and ideological trends within youth policy, many of which are evident at the international as well as more local level, which will be explored in the following section.

Trends in Youth Employment Policy

As mentioned previously, youth employment policy in Ontario is nothing new. In fact, it has been in place for over 30 years, and labour market reform targeting unemployed adults has existed for even longer. Beginning in the late 1980s, youth employment policy has gradually shifted from targeting all youth to focusing on marginalized youth in particular. Several analyses highlight the ways these shifts in policy have been discursively and ideologically framed (such as Dehli 1993; McBride 2000; Woodman and Wyn 2013; Côté 2014; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014; Sukarieh and Tannock 2016; Means 2017). To begin, they point out that the majority of policies throughout this period approach the issue from a neoclassical economic standpoint (Friedman 2002). According to neoclassical economic thought, the state should not generally interfere with the economy, as capitalism has the ability to produce full employment. Thus, unemployment is largely presumed to be the result of the individual's choice not to work (Stanford 2008, 56). At the same time, it is the government's responsibility to ensure the well-

being of its citizens, so some state intervention is permitted for this purpose (Stanford 2008, 57). Interventions in the labour market, however, must be minimal. The state must maintain a relatively free flow of labour, as the problem of unemployment does not lie with the overall system, but rather with a small sector of the system or, more commonly, with the individual themselves (Yates 2003, 134).

One of the most noticeable trends within labour policy, has been the move from designing youth policy as an explicit form of “social control” toward implementing a seemingly more positive or progressive “youth development” model. The social control approach views youth as a subordinate and unruly group which needs to be guided by the dominant group, in this case political elites (Côté and Allahar 2006, 90). This approach generally relies upon news media and other forms of social discourse to paint a negative picture of unemployed youth, depicting them as lazy, delinquent, and living off of the welfare system in order to justify the state’s response to control this population (Côté and Allahar 2006). Sukarieh and Tannock (2015, 58-59) explain unemployed youth have been recognized as a threat to social order since the 1930s, when large numbers of young men found themselves without work and began to protest, drawing attention to the systemic roots of inequality and unemployment. The elites therefore enact policies that police and restrict youth, justifying them as a means of protecting the well-being of citizens. Policies which take on a social control approach intend to keep people busy, and out of “trouble” by performing meaningless jobs, such as the unemployment relief camps in Canada during the Great Depression (Finkel 2006). These policies also serve the dominant political and economic interests by distracting people’s attention from the real roots of the problem, the capitalist system (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 67). This method of youth policy as a form of

social control was dominant from the post-war period into the 1980s, informing as well the renewal of youth employment policies in the 1970s (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 67).

Today, a more *positive* youth development model is prevalent. The positive youth development model combines three common ideologies for employment training programs—maintaining social control, developing human capital and promoting the neoliberal subject—under the guise of promoting young people’s success and value. This model, unlike explicit social control, presumes youth are not a threat to society, and instead focuses on “embracing and empowering the young,” regarding them as “resources” or “assets” to society and the economy (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 20). It is important to note however, that despite this seemingly *positive* shift within the discourse, this framework still functions to shape young people into self-sufficient, neoliberal citizens (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015; Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014; Zoltok 2015). The aim of this approach is to provide young people with tools to help them adapt to the capitalist labour market (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015; Côté and Allahar 2006). Thus, the goal is to assimilate young people into the existing conditions of the labour market rather than to work towards changing those conditions that place young people in vulnerable positions in the labour market. Therefore, the positive youth development framework is still a form of social control, but it operates under a veil of positive speech and still retains the neoclassical economic approach.

In addition to social control under the guise of youth development, the positive youth development model frequently provides solutions from a human capital framework. This approach sees the answer to youth unemployment as the development of programs which offer youth the opportunity to upgrade their skills and gain paid job experience (McBride 2000; Sears

2003). Ultimately, the human capital approach seeks to change education and training programs to fit “the needs of industry” rather than solving the problem of unemployment (Dehli 1993, 94). Thus, the solution lies in improving the individual, so they can better adapt to the labour market. There are multiple limitations of this approach. First, the human capital approach assumes that everyone is placed equally within the labour market in terms of class, race, gender, Indigenous identity, and/or citizenship status, and proposes that the only thing that is holding young people back is their lack of education and skills (McBride 2000, 173; Dehli 1993, 93). In reality, this is not the case, as racialized individuals, women, Indigenous peoples and people with disabilities experience much higher rates of unemployment than their less marginalized counterparts (McBride 2000, 173; Canadian Labour Congress 2016, 4-5). Second, this approach is largely based upon the assumption that there are enough job opportunities for skilled workers when, in fact, the industries with the largest increases of employment opportunities are those which require very little, if any, training such as the fast-food industry. And these jobs are increasingly precarious, offering part-time hours, short-term contracts and low wages (McBride 2000, 174; Canadian Labour Congress 2016, 6; Cairns 2017). Therefore, the neoclassical economic perspective on youth unemployment not only misses key defining causes of the problem of youth unemployment, but also proposes solutions which have little to no effect on diminishing the problem.

Moreover, the focus of improving the individual in neoclassical employment policies is particularly concerned with creating neoliberal citizens. Neoliberal ideology justifies and calls for capitalist-friendly measures such as the privatization of public resources (ex. the provincial government’s recent selling of Hydro One), and the elimination of trade barriers through the

development of a free market (Harvey 2005, 23). As a result of neoliberalism's focus on increasing the power and profits of the elites in society, the welfare of workers is often not considered, and responsibility for it is largely placed upon the individual themselves rather than on the state. In fact, one of the most prominent aspects of neoliberalism is that it argues for very limited, if any, state intervention, promoting "an environment that values individualism, self-responsibility, and freedom of choice in employment and identity formation" (Hillman 2016, 366). People are expected to internalize these neoliberal notions of the self, to work to be "continually changing the self, making informed choices, and engaging in competition" (Phoenix 2003, 229). And this model advocates for young people to "invest in themselves" in terms of post-secondary education (Woodman and Wyn 2013, 266). At the same time, privatization policies tend to inflate "the costs that individuals incur to become qualified"—such as rising tuition costs which cause young people to go into debt to be more competitive in the labour market (Woodman and Wyn 2013, 266). Thus, the neoliberal state, similar to neoclassical economics, does not take into account how systemic inequality can impact an individual's ability to transform the self through their choices, and ultimately places the responsibility for well-being on the individual rather than the state (Fraser 2003, 163).

The positive youth development programming and policies are modeled on this neoliberal citizen. As Hillman (2016) explains, youth mentorship programming in North America seeks to ensure that young people conform to neoliberal ideologies. Within mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, youth participants are often described as being troubled, or delinquent, similar to the ways in which marginalized youth are understood according to the social control approach. The policies aim to turn them into "productive" members of society,

describing marginalized youth as resources for their communities and as having the potential to do anything, if only they were provided some support (Hillman 2016; Sukarieh & Tannock 2015). To be considered a successful outcome of many youth-oriented state programs, the young person must become financially self-sufficient, take personal responsibility of their failures, as well as promote entrepreneurship (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, 21; Hillman 2016, 368). Instilling neoliberal values at an age where they are transitioning into employment, youth programs and policies can encourage young people to internalize these values and not question the system. Rather they are likely to see a logic in blaming their inability to find work on their own choices (Hillman 2016).

The above literature which discusses the shifts within youth employment policy and labour market policy more generally is crucial to my project as it identifies the ideological underpinnings of those trends. As such, it provides me with a historical and theoretical framework for critiquing Ontario's youth employment policies—for analyzing its neoclassical approach, and for pinpointing the discursive shifts (from an emphasis on social control to an emphasis on youth development), and for understanding the ways in which the Ontario policy is helping to shape neoliberal citizens for the future rather than assisting youth in achieving their own goals.

My MRP in Relation to the Existing Literature

The focus within the literature on youth policy at the provincial level is on defining the problem of youth unemployment and noting the ways in which young people experience unemployment. However, this literature does not go on to ask why provincial policy has failed to solve the problem of youth unemployment. The literature investigating youth unemployment at

the international level helps me address that question, but it does not specifically look at NEET youth in Ontario. My project draws from the analyses of these two sets of literature to take a critical political economy approach to understand the contours of recent youth employment policy in Ontario, to determine if YJC takes on a positive youth development model. It then asks: if it does, does this approach align with the policy's goal of benefiting NEET youth? And if the policy is failing, what is framing and justifying the provincial government's focus on NEET youth unemployment? Ultimately, I hope to prove—through a case study of policy which looks to assist NEET youth in gaining employment—that despite a shift from an explicit form of social control toward a more *positive* youth development model, that policy has presumed, and continues to presume, a neoclassical approach that benefits political and economic elites rather than the youth themselves.

Methodology and Theoretical Approach

Methodology

In order to discover if YJC's positive youth development approach delivers on the government's intended benefits to assist NEET youth in gaining employment, I have completed a critical policy analysis guided by a political economy theoretical framework. My analysis draws on empirical data (including government documents, news media reports, reports from non-governmental organizations and government statistics) on the one hand, and socio-historical accounts (scholarly accounts and analyses of what has happened) on the other.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Political Economy

The theoretical approach which guides my research is critical political economy, which examines the economic, political and historical factors of an issue to move from individualizing a problem into demonstrating its systemic nature. In its broadest sense, critical political economy “aims to trouble and challenge conventional ways of framing issues” (Clement & Vosko 2003, xiii). As a result, this framework examines the dominant systems, ideologies and structures in society, such as neoliberalism and capitalism, to explain how a particular societal problem, such as youth unemployment, is brought about and reinforced. A critical political economy analysis can take multiple forms, depending upon what it seeks to examine. For instance, feminist political economy looks to denaturalize the ways in which patriarchy leaks its way into the overarching structures and systems (Clement & Vosko 2003, xviii). However, generally, critical political economy specifically looks to problematize the structures of capitalism, which are seen to be at the root of injustice. This is largely due to the fact that capitalism is structured such that the vast majority of people, the working class, have little to no access to the means of production—the resources required to produce goods and services. Having no other option, workers must sell their labour power—that is, their ability to create goods and services—to the small minority of individuals who do have that access, for wages (Stanford 2008, 119; Rinehart 2006, 17; Bhattacharya 2015). It is precisely this unequal relationship between the owners of the means of production and the working class within capitalism that critical political economy seeks to explain.

This understanding of the capitalist economy derives from Karl Marx’s critique of classical economists such as Adam Smith. Marx problematized the view that the capitalist

economy was somehow a natural phenomenon which existed outside of the influence of society and politics, and in which all beings are created equal (Browning & Kilmister 2006, 40; Bhattacharya 2015; Côté 2014, 529). Instead, he saw the historical and social factors that go into creating and reproducing the capitalist economy as a place of immense inequality due to capitalists' drive for ever increasing profit (Browning & Kilmister 2006, 52-53; Bhattacharya 2015). Therefore, critical political economists look to the system of capitalism itself and the ways in which it is structured for an explanation of how inequality is produced and reinforced (Browning & Kilmister 2006, 45).

This focus on denaturalizing and problematizing capitalist logic and structure helps to demonstrate the ways in which labour and unemployment are created. Critical political economy illuminates how the structure of capitalism broadly, and its construction of a labour market in particular, privileges a select few while disadvantaging many. In the general sense, this framework interprets the issue of youth unemployment as the result of the “systemic failure of markets” (McBride 2000, 172). That is, it sees the inequalities within the distribution of labour and the trends of precarious—part-time and low-skilled—work as produced by capitalism (McBride 2000, 172). This view is contrary to the neoclassical view that sees inequality as the result of a “failure *in* the labour market” (McBride 2000, 172). The difference here is that the first views the system itself as the problem and thus in need of radical restructuring, whereas the latter views unemployment to be the result of a small glitch within the system, but the overall capitalist system is working. Thus, youth unemployment is viewed as something which is embedded in the ways in which the capitalist labour market is structured, rather than a simple mistake in the labour market, or as a problem that resides within the individual.

Furthermore, in addition to recognizing the broad systemic nature of youth unemployment, a critical political economic approach traces how policies, institutions, governments, and markets along with capitalism, contribute to the creation of youth unemployment. One example of this includes, how the decreased protection of the Canadian welfare state and introduction of neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 90s has left marginalized members of the working class, including youth, particularly vulnerable (Marquardt 1998, 47). Furthermore, due the focus on problematizing what is perceived as the status quo, this particular theory demonstrates how and why the dominant neo-liberal and human capital solutions to youth unemployment are not working (Côté 2014, 528). Beyond providing a framework for understanding the specific policy direction, critical political economy points to alternative solutions to the question of youth unemployment more generally.

Methods: Critical Policy Analysis

I undertake a critical policy analysis in order to examine the social, historical, political and economic contexts of policy making. One of the key considerations of the critical policy analysis is that it rejects the positivist orientation of policy. That is, it denies that the problems policy seeks to solve are based in/on self-evident reality. Rather this method views policy as in response to and created within a “bigger picture... including political struggles against structural oppression and wider issues of social justice” (Vidovich 2007, 290). Thus, critical policy analysis examines the empirical evidence through a critical political economic theoretical lens to answer the questions of why policy is framed in the ways that it is, and to determine whose concerns are brought forward within the policies and for what purpose. I thus investigate how the failure of policy to address NEET youth issues is directly linked to the social, political, and economic

climate of the time in which the policies were created. Moreover, a critical policy analysis also recognizes policies created in the present do not occur within a vacuum, but are fundamentally shaped by the past (Brewer 2014; Sears 2003).

In examining the context in which policy is developed, I first analyze the YJC documents themselves (program guidelines, memos and letters to service providers, and promotional materials from the Ministry) in light of the wider literature to understand what is happening within the policy. I note when youth employment policy begins to focus on NEET youth, and how the focus is discursively framed. Then I place the NEET policy within a historical, political, economic and social context by reviewing government statistics, policy briefs and legislative debates (in Hansard), as well as news media reports about youth unemployment. This, along with the social and historical accounts of youth unemployment, helps me to determine why the policy is being framed in the manner that it is.

In particular, I examine news media, non-governmental and government-sponsored reports and Legislative Assembly of Ontario debates prior to and during the implementation of YJC. I began by searching the Legislative debates, in Hansard, beginning at Session 40:2 in February of 2013, through to the most recent Session 41:2, which at the time of writing ends in May of 2017. I searched keywords “youth unemployment” and “youth job connection” to explore what has been said provincially in these areas, paying particular attention to mentions of “NEET,” “at-risk,” or “marginalized” youth. I then looked to government-sponsored and non-governmental reports on youth unemployment. I also searched provincial news outlets, via Google News search, from 2014 (one year before the announcement of YJC in the provincial budget) to the present day for what has been said about “unemployed,” “at-risk,” “NEET” and/or

“marginalized” young Ontarians. All in all, these sources assisted me in discovering the justification for YJC, the positive youth development approach, and allowed me to place policy within its social, political, and economic context.

It is also important to note this process did not occur in a linear manner. Instead, I proceeded with my investigation through what Sears and Cairns (2015) call the “cycle of inquiry.” Sears and Cairns (2015, 66) note that critical social science tends to move between inductive and deductive phases of inquiry, meaning that the process of data collection and data analysis tend to occur in a circular process. In other words, critical social science research both tests “theories through application and evaluation” as well as discovering “theoretical explanations to actual events” (Sears and Cairns 2015, 66). For this study, I undertook a cycle of inquiry by examining the government documents in relation to the critiques I have outlined above, and then revised those explanations to better fit with the evidence at hand. Additionally, I reviewed my conclusions in light of other socio-historical accounts to determine other possible interpretations. This research design thus moved between inductive and deductive phases, providing for a thorough and rigorous investigation of the logic behind youth employment policies in a way that shows how theory and concrete empirical evidence are interconnected and illuminate each other.

Ultimately, I have chosen to complete a critical policy analysis which is guided by a political economy theoretical framework because it best answers my research question of why the provincial government has chosen to focus on a positive youth development model within NEET youth employment policy, if the policies have done little to alleviate the problem of youth unemployment. Because I am not, nor have I ever been, a NEET youth, and because of my

positionality as a white, middle-class, university-educated, woman committed to anti-oppressive research, I do not focus the project on directly studying (that is, observing) NEET youth who participate in these programs. Nor do I hope to speak for or to individual NEET youth's experiences, as these are their own stories to share. Rather, I will look at the socio-political conditions framing that experience. Thus, I hope to analyze the social relations within Ontario which position the issue of youth unemployment in policy as a crisis of failing education systems resulting in unprepared youth for the labour market. Instead, by applying a political economic theoretical framework, I pinpoint key changes—that is when youth employment policy began to shift from an explicit form of social control, towards a positive youth development model—and look to the empirical evidence to see why these shifts have occurred and for what reasons. By investigating the contexts in which youth employment policy is created, I uncover why it is that youth employment policy is framed in such a manner and for what purpose, if not to benefit the NEET youth themselves.

Findings and Results

This section will discuss the results of examining the Ontario government's most recent youth employment policy for NEET youth, the Youth Job Connection (YJC) program. There are three goals to this section: 1) provide evidence that YJC's design embraces the positive youth development model; 2) determine how this approach aligns with the program's goal of benefitting NEET youth; and 3) investigate the ways in which the social, political, and economic

context impacts the framing of YJC and legitimizes the provincial government's focus on youth unemployment programming for NEET youth.

Youth Job Connection

Before analyzing YJC, it is necessary to understand the program's goals and processes. YJC was first announced in the 2015 Provincial Budget, and officially began intake on October 1, 2015. The program was conceived as a way of combatting high unemployment rates for NEET youth, specifically to "help young people between the ages of 15 to 29 who face multiple or serious barriers to employment" (MAESD 2016a). Its stated goal is "to achieve long-term employment, meaningful careers, and success in [youth's] future working lives" (MAESD 2016b, 8). It is also the first youth employment program in Ontario to specifically use the language of and target NEET youth. The program is delivered and monitored by the Ontario's Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), previously named the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

In order for a young person to participate in YJC, they must first be deemed eligible and suitable for the program. To be *eligible*, an individual must be between the ages of 15 and 29 (inclusive), and neither in education, employment or training, otherwise known as NEET youth. Additionally, the youth must, in order to be considered *suitable* for YJC, meet a given number of the listed barriers to employment (refer to Program Guidelines 2016, 31). These "barriers to employment" include: Indigenous identity, person with a disability, less than 20 years of age, recent immigrant, at or below a grade 12 education, limited English/French language proficiency, lack of essential skills, limited or no work experience, difficult family/household circumstances, socially marginalized (including racialized and LGBTQ+ youth), and/or source of income from

the government or non-existent (MAESD 2017a). Once the individual has been determined to be eligible and suitable for the program, the service provider and client work together to develop a client service plan, which describes the client's career goals, and includes a plan to reach these goals. At this point referrals can also be made to other social services such as mental health counselling and housing support. Following the creation of the service plan, the young person must complete at least 60 hours of pre-employment training. These workshops cover six topics: fundamental job readiness, career development/career exploration, personal management, job attainment, employment-related skills, job maintenance and career advancement skills (Program Guidelines 2015, 51-52). Individuals are paid for their participation in pre-employment training, at the adult minimum wage (which at the time of writing is \$11.40 per hour), for up to a maximum of 90 hours.

Upon completion of the training, participants and service providers work together to find a paid job placement with an employer, for up to 26 weeks and a minimum of six weeks. Employers are given an "employer placement incentive" for hiring the youth and depending on the YJC participant's number of barriers to employment, can receive anywhere from 75 to 100 percent of their wages covered by the Ministry. In addition to providing a paid job placement, the program can also pay for items to reduce barriers to gaining employment, such as paying the fee for further courses under the training and skills enhancement support (e.g., First Aid or Safe Food Handling), or for job placement supports such as uniforms, safety equipment or transportation up to a maximum of \$1000. In total, the program expends up to \$7,500 per youth participant which includes a pre-employment training stipend, placement incentive, job placement support, and training/skills enhancement support (Program Guidelines 24).

Throughout the job placement, participants are given access to job coaching (on-the-job support), mentorship from a community member, as well as referrals for additional support outside of employment.

After the job placement has been completed, the participant has completed all three aspects of the program (client service planning, pre-employment training, and job placement) and can exit the program. Participants are then monitored at three, six and twelve months upon completion to check on their status as in employment, training or education.

Youth Job Connection & The Positive Youth Development Model

What evidence is there that Youth Job Connection reflects a positive youth development model approach? To answer this question I have undertaken a critical policy analysis of the following documents: the YJC Program Guidelines (which outline how YJC is to implemented to service providers), the government of Ontario's 2015 Budget (in which YJC was officially announced), letters to Employment Ontario Service Providers from the MAESD (which inform them of the program), and a news release from the Ministry (announcing the program to the general public). My analysis confirms that YJC reflects the positive youth development model. In what follows, I provide evidence for this claim in relation to three key components of the positive youth development model: human capital, neoliberal citizen and social control under the guise of youth development.

Developing Human Capital: Skills, Education and Training

One of the most prevalent themes in the YJC program and promotional materials is a focus on the development of human capital in youth participants. A human capital approach

specifically encourages individuals to continually develop their skills through participation in education and training. Proponents of this approach insist that the more degrees, transferable skills, certificates and/or training an individual has, the more competitive that person becomes within the labour market (Means 2017; McBride 2000; Dehli 1993). This section considers how the program adopts a human capital approach, and how this maps onto to the positive youth development model.

The YJC guidelines and MAESD documents promoting the program primarily emphasize skills development, education and training. In fact, the YJC guidelines (MAESD 2016b, 8) state that the program goal is to provide “access to employability and employment skills development, along with education/training and work experiences.” Additionally, throughout the 55-page-long program guidelines, the term “skills” appears 48 times and “training” 86 times. Even the name of the Ministry that is responsible for the creation and monitoring of YJC (the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development) suggests human capital to be a primary component of the programming it provides. It is worth noting, that the Ministry just recently changed its name in the summer of 2016, from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to its current title. Along with a strong association with the neoliberal human capital approach, the new name more closely connects education and training with gaining employment. This is also evident in the Ministry’s mandate which states that it “can help you get the education and training you need to build a rewarding career after high school...we’ll also help you build your career, and keep learning, throughout your working life” (MAESD 2017a).

This extensive use of the terms “training,” and “skills” is significant enough to indicate a human capital approach, but the program also centres on “employability and employment skills”

which more explicitly align with the approach. The program guidelines state service providers must train YJC participants through pre-employment workshops or activities that are “designed to help participants get ready for work” and “focus on career decision-making, employability skills development or enhancement, and job search and job maintenance” (MAESD 2016b, 13). The pre-employment training requires programming in six areas which all encourage the development of a different set of so-called soft and transferrable skills—communication, decision-making, personal management, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving and time management—as they relate to gaining and keeping a job. In fact, in order to move forward in the program towards gaining a job placement, participants must complete this training. In flyers promoting YJC to employers, the program is described as preparing young people to “come to the job ready for the workplace with at least 60 hours spent at job preparation workshops” (Employment Ontario, n.d). Therefore, YJC assumes being able to find and retain work is intimately interconnected with the ability of the individual to acquire or advance a certain skill set, which are desired by employers.

The pre-employment workshops are also not typically meant to prepare young people for highly skilled labour or professional careers. Rather the training is designed for low-skilled work. Most pre-employment sessions train participants in soft or transferable skills, meaning that they gain basic skills that are necessary for any job, such as teamwork, communication and time-management skills. Moreover, the hiring incentives given to employers “are meant to encourage employers to hire and train participants for the negotiated placement duration” (MAESD 2016b, 25). As a result, the program is taking responsibility away from the employer to train their own employees on their own dime, as the program will pay anywhere from 75 to 100 percent of the

participant's wage. This means that the employer is essentially receiving free or highly discounted labour during the training period.

This is in stark contrast to previous generations who, as new hires, could expect extensive training completed (and paid for) by the employer. For example, in the mid-1800s, young men trained as apprentices, learning the trade for five years from highly skilled craftsmen or 'masters' before they could complete the practice on their own (Marquardt 1998, 17). These men would be provided with room and board for their time spent apprenticing with a master (Marquardt 1998, 17). And in the 1940s, then-Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King commented on the introduction of the Youth Training Program, disagreeing with the government providing employers with "trained men at no expense" (Prieger Coulter 1993a, 43). This demonstrates that employees were not always responsible for their own training, and that the government was not always so quick to take on the training of individuals so employers did not have to. Therefore, by providing pre-employment training in YJC as well as offering to pay for the duration of the training period of the placement, the program places the responsibility of training onto the individual, not the employer who is ultimately benefitting from the labour which is performed.

Not only does the YJC program encourage the development of skills, but it also promotes this as key to a young person's success in the labour market. The connection between skills and future success is emphasized in news releases and letters to service providers which state: "the province will invest more than \$160 million over two years to help over 27,000 young people get the skills and training they need to build a better future" (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development 2015) and "achieve their career goals" (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2016). Thus, the gaining of skills, education and training is explicitly linked to, and

presented as though it will likely lead to a young person reaching their “career goals” and a “better future.”

As Means (2017, 342) explains, youth unemployment is often expressed as a problem of human capital, meaning that young people lack the skills, training or education required by employers. From this point of view, the solution to youth unemployment is to develop programming which focuses on skills development, and encourage further engagement with training and education programs (Means 2017; McBride 2000; Dehli 1993). This is demonstrated in YJC, as the program’s solution to the problem rests on the idea that skills enhancement, further education or training, will ultimately result in obtaining employment.

Producing Neoliberal Citizens

This focus on the development of human capital for NEET youth is also connected to the production of neoliberal citizens as the goals, skills and training that are promoted within that approach ultimately align with neoliberal ideas of what an individual should be. The neoliberal citizen is expected to make good choices, be responsible for themselves, flexible, employed and therefore financially independent of state assistance (Kennelly 2011; Woodman and Wyn 2013). These characteristics are also adopted by the positive youth development model, because it envisions young people becoming neoliberal citizens by the time they reach adulthood (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, 19). As I explain below, YJC also operates on the assumption that “normal” youth development progresses along these same lines.

When examining YJC, we can see how the neoliberal citizen is promoted through the program’s focus on human capital and the types of training that are mandated to be taught. This

is demonstrated throughout the YJC guidelines as all the pre-employment training workshops or activities listed are closely aligned with what is expected of the neoliberal citizen. Workshop topics include “dealing with authority, conflict resolution,” “dress for success” and teaching the “culture of the organization/business, connecting socially at work, fitting in” (MAESD 2016b, 55). In particular, the “personal management (life) skills” section notably encourages the behaviours and lifestyles associated with neoliberal citizenship. The seven workshop or activity ideas listed under the section are:

- Positive attitude, self-awareness and workplace expectations
- Self-confidence, assertiveness training
- Responsible behaviours, actions and decisions
- Flexibility and adaptability on the job
- Healthy work-life balance (e.g., clean and sober lifestyle, healthy eating and nutrition, stress management and relief, etc.)
- Plan and set professional learning goals
- Social media profiles and online presence
- Budgeting (MAESD 2016b, 54).

Each of these bullets promotes a different characteristic of ideal neoliberal citizenship. For instance, being flexible is consistently noted within capitalist labour markets as a desirable trait in a potential employee (see Sears 2003, 73). This is largely due to the fact that many of the positions which are available are precarious, meaning that individuals must be willing to work part-time, irregular hours and/or for short-term contracts if they wish to be employed (McBride 2000, 174; Canadian Labour Congress 2016, 6; Cairns 2017). Thus, in order to be a desirable candidate for employers, individuals must be extremely flexible in terms of what hours they are available, the types of roles they are willing to perform, and being prepared to take on contract work which has no job security; they also must be ready to accept a lower wage/salary for their work with no opportunity for benefits (Canadian Labour Congress 2016).

Within neoliberal capitalism, individuals are also constantly told that they must self-regulate and take responsibility for their actions. This is also noted in the YJC guidelines as maintaining a “clean and sober lifestyle, healthy eating and nutrition,” “positive attitude, self awareness” and performing “responsible behaviours, actions and decisions” (MAESD 2016b, 54). Moreover, the responsibility is placed on the individual to change their behaviour, lifestyle and/or actions, with the presumption that doing so will bring them employment opportunities and future success (Shamir 2008, 8). The link between human capital and the neoliberal citizen is especially clear when youth are considered the target of programs. By influencing them to take responsibility, elites can “inculcate neoliberal subjectivities among the young through education, training and youth development programs to promote such concepts as youth entrepreneurship and financial literacy” (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015, 24). As a result of teaching youth to self-regulate and take responsibility for their lives in ways which align with the neoliberal citizen, responsibility is taken away from the state to provide more extensive (and expensive) social programming to individuals (Spade 2015).

Furthermore, the goal of job attainment and maintenance, is another example of how YJC promotes the neoliberal citizen. One of the most recognizable ways in which this occurs can be found in the program’s goals and definition of a successful outcome: “meaningful careers.” Note that this does not say meaningful lives; rather the goal of meaningful careers is singled out as the upmost importance. This distinction is significant as having a full-time job typically means being less dependent on government assistance and therefore becoming more financially independent. Therefore, the success of gaining a “meaningful career” also correlates with allowing the state to take less responsibility for providing for individuals.

Social Control Under the Guise of Encouraging Youth Development

In addition to examining the explicit focus in YJC documents on the development of human capital and producing neoliberal citizens, it is important to note what is *not* said within the policy. Earlier youth employment policies explicitly adopted a social control approach, in that their stated aim was to prevent young people from relying on the welfare state and loitering in public spaces (Côté and Allahar 2006; see Stephens 1983 for example). The youth development model is ostensibly focused on meeting the needs of the individual youth. However, when we examine the YJC documents for what is not said, for its gaps and absences, we can see how it also can be characterized in terms of social control.

Whereas the social control approach saw the problem to be fixed as “idleness” and dependency on the welfare system, the positive youth development approach, and YJC, defines the issue more sociologically. This is demonstrated in YJC’s explanation of youth unemployment, where the policy states “some sub-groups of young people, including Indigenous or racial minority youth...experience significant barriers to employment” (MAESD 2016b, 7). In this manner, it is recognized that there are some underlying *societal* factors (marginality) which contribute to an individual’s ability to find work. However, those markers of marginality are then treated as an *individual* issue, as obstacles for the youth herself to overcome: marginalized youth, if “given opportunities to develop their skills [can] reach their potential” (MAESD 2016b, 7). Thus, young people are taught they should not let their marginality determine their future success, rendering their position within society something they can choose to defeat. In a similar manner to the social control model, this approach prods “idle” individuals into action

(employment). That is, under the positive youth development approach, youth must overcome their marginality for a specific purpose: to gain work.

This ability to attain employment is viewed as a step in *normal* youth development, which despite not being expressed outright in any of the Ministry documents, can be interpreted as an aim of controlling young people to become neoliberal citizens. As Woodman and Wyn (2013, 266) express, normal youth development begins with high school, to further education and ultimately ends with attainment of full-time employment. Throughout the YJC guidelines and promotional material surrounding the program, it is assumed that living a successful life means obtaining full-time employment. The only other options that participants in the program are given as successful outcomes is engagement in education and/or training programs, which are thought, under the human capital approach, to lead to employment opportunities in the more distant future. This approach also assumes that there are enough jobs in skilled labour, to promote increasing credentials, which is simply not the case (McBride 2000, 174).

By using the language of youth development, the provincial government also creates an image for itself as caring for the well-being of its young citizens (Sukerieh and Tannock 2015; Côté and Bynner 2008). Creating a program like YJC, can deflect criticism, as governments' can claim that labour market outcomes are more justified since marginalized communities are getting special supports. Despite the fact that these types of programs—as will be discussed later—are not a solution to youth unemployment, they play a legitimizing role for the government, to make it appear as though they are assisting young people who are most at-risk of not becoming neoliberal citizens.

Ultimately, young people participating in YJC are taught to conform to certain ways of living, and are continuously taught that being “successful” means moving from education/training into employment, making rational decisions and being financially independent. In order to achieve the goal of employment, YJC continues to use a popular tool of social control, education and training (see Priegert Coulter 1993b). The 2015 provincial budget, which announced funding for YJC, stresses that the introduction of the program, as well as creating an “education system that is innovative and responsive to labour market demands,” will prepare young people “for today’s jobs and tomorrow’s opportunities.” By noting the importance of individuals being able to meet the needs of businesses and employers, the problem of youth unemployment is individualized (Means 2017, 345). That is, it is the responsibility of the youth themselves to meet the expectations of the labour market, rather than for businesses to adapt to the needs of young people, or even to train their employees from whose labour they profit.

Rather than truly supporting youth’s desires/needs—and realistically dealing with the systemic failures of the labour market to provide meaningful employment opportunities for all (Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014)—youth are instead told they must push past their marginality and conform to the needs of industry. As a result, YJC is still a form of social control as youth are funneled complete education and training programs if they wish to transition into adulthood. Therefore, the program is a form of social control for young people who are at-risk of not becoming the ideal neoliberal citizens, but under the appearance of encouraging young people to “achieve long-term employment, meaningful careers, and success in their future working lives” (MAESD 2016b, 8).

In its promotion of the neoliberal citizen, developing human capital, and social control under the guise of encouraging youth, YJC can be deemed as taking on a positive youth development approach to youth unemployment. The next section, looks to problematize this model as an approach which is said to improve the lives of NEET youth, by looking at how YJC actually impacts marginalized youth.

Problematizing the Positive Youth Development Model

How does the positive youth development model align with the policy's goal of benefiting NEET youth? I begin to answer that question by outlining the goals and the ways in which success is determined with the YJC program guidelines, both for youth participants and service providers. Next, I explain what elements these goals neglect, goals that point to an alternative approach to solving the youth unemployment crisis, mainly that we must begin to understand it as a structural problem rather than an individualized one. To conclude, I note the ways in which the positive youth development model fails to address the problem of youth unemployment.

Determining Success in YJC: For Participants and Service Providers

In order to evaluate how the program's framework impacts the lives of NEET youth, it is necessary to determine how the program is defining successful outcomes for participants in the program. First, participants must have exited the program, the point at which participants "have completed the mandatory pre-employment and job placement requirements" (MAESD 2016b, 28). To be considered a success, participants "must achieve a better status...to when they started

to program” (MAESD 2016b, 34). That is, YJC participants must have achieved “a desired employment, training, or educational outcome, measured at three months after exiting the program” (MAESD 2016b, 34). A desirable outcome means being employed (part-time, full-time, self-employed and/or participating in an apprenticeship), in an education/training program (post-secondary, Second Language training, Employment Ontario programming, academic upgrading such as GED, and/or in a federal training program), or a combination of employment and training/education (MAESD 2016b, 34). As I discuss in upcoming sections, this definition of success for participants is extremely narrow, embedded in neoliberal values, and does not necessarily match up with the participant’s own definition of success.

In addition to YJC participants, program service providers are also evaluated by the MAESD to determine if the program is meeting the Ministry’s standards, and this appraisal is a key factor in deciding funding allocations for upcoming intake sessions. The MAESD measures success of the YJC program delivery through a performance management system with three main components: effectiveness, customer service, and efficiency, which are measured at different percentages to equal the total of 100 percent, and a minimum provincial standard (a quantitative measurement to determine success in each category) described in the chart below.

As we can see, the service provider is evaluated primarily on service impacts (the number of youth three months after exit who are in employment, education and/or training), service coordination (the number of referrals made before, during and after the program to other social services) and participant suitability (ensuring those who are in most need of the program are accepted). Less attention is paid to efficiency (service provider’s ability to meet the Ministry’s

prescribed targets), and customer satisfaction (surveys completed by participants rating how likely they are to recommend YJC, on a 5-point scale).

Table 7: Provincial Service Quality Standard (SQS)

Dimension	Measure	Weight	Maximum value	Minimum Provincial Standard	SQS Value
		a	b	c	d
Customer Service 40%	1. Customer Satisfaction	15%	1.5	85%	1.275
	2. Service Coordination	25%	2.5	50%	1.25
Effectiveness 55%	3. Service Impacts	35%	3.5	75%	2.625
	4. Participant Suitability	20%	2.0	35%	0.70
Efficiency 5%	5. Funded Intake	5%	0.5	90%	0.45
		100%	10.0	6.30	
Overall Provincial Service Quality Standard					

Source: MAESD. (2017). Youth Job Connection: Program Guidelines. Retrieved from: http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eoopg/publications/yjc_program_guidelines.pdf

It is important to note that, despite YJC’s purpose to assist NEET youth, the performance measures barely consider the voices of the young people themselves. Youth assess their experience on a single question that is part of a multiple-choice customer satisfaction survey. As a result, participants of the program have very little say in how “successful” the program is, even though YJC is supposed to profoundly affect their lives.

In addition to performance measures, the program is also assessed to determine if they will receive funding for the upcoming fiscal year. A key component of determining funding is the ability of the service provider to reach their assigned targets. These targets are “based on closed service plans, but only those closed service plans with a closure reason of ‘Completed’” (Damaso 2016). This means that participants of the program who have been deemed “inactive” or have dropped out of the program without completing a service plan, pre-

employment training and a job placement, are not included in determining if the service provider will obtain funding. This is particularly concerning as service providers ultimately are rewarded for the participants who successfully complete the program, without necessarily acknowledging the number of young people whom they have failed to support through the program. Service providers themselves also have very little, if any, say in determining the Ministry-ascribed targets. And as the 2016 Auditor General report has noted, these targets are based on older labour market statistics which may not be representative of the current needs. In order to meet their allocated targets (and to compensate for those who enter but do not complete the program), service providers must enroll more youth than the number they have been assigned. For some service providers whose targets are set too high (in relation to the need of their service area), this means funneling resources to intake rather than ensuring young people are getting the one-on-one support they require. In addition, funding for some service providers may not allow for the hiring of multiple staff members to allow the youth the additional support they require.

What's Missing from these Definitions of Success?

Although statistics and the collection of numbers is important, and finding employment can be a significant goal for NEET youth to achieve, this is a very narrow definition of success and misses out on a wide variety of other potential outcomes. My own experience working as an intake worker with the YJC program, and from what I understand about youth more generally from my volunteer work with Why Not, leads me to question the assumptions on which these standards are based. I have found that it is very unlikely that participants will move through the program in the linear way which the program presumes. In fact, each youth moves through the

program in different ways, moving forwards, backwards and side to side. This is largely due to the fact the youth who participate in the program have multiple sites of oppression, and as a result experience many barriers to employment. Thus, the likelihood of a youth meeting the requirements for success in three months in such a linear pattern is extremely low. For example, participants may have a mental illness and forget to take their medication, or experience homelessness and as a result are more focused on figuring out where they will sleep that night than participating in the program, or they may not have access to a phone or internet and as a result will not communicate with their employment counsellor who also has no way of contacting them.

The prescribed model of success is only one possibility. Other variations of success generally do not operate in linear ways, but rather complex ways. Whitmore, Calhoun & Wilson (2011, 156) use complexity theory to better define what success can look like in social justice work. Success, they suggest, includes relationship building, accepting and expecting “uncertainty, unpredictability and ambiguity,” recognizing diversity, and understanding that success is contextual and will vary in each situation. Furthermore, given the complexity of social justice-oriented projects, it is important to take time to reflect upon the work completed, in order to recognize the success (or failure) in the complexity and messiness of the work (Whitmore, Calhoun & Wilson 2011, 160). A complexity theory definition of success is extremely important when working with youth in the YJC program. If employment counsellors working with marginalized youth expect a linear pattern of success for each participant, they are likely to be ill-prepared for many unexpected outcomes. But, as Whitmore, Calhoun & Wilson (2011, 158)

explain, when activists take into account potential glitches and plan for them, they are better equipped to recognize and support other markers of success.

Although securing employment can undoubtedly indicate success for a youth participating in YJC, so can other outcomes. For example, a few of the youth I supported were not able to gain a placement before I left the organization. While I felt I had failed these youth, one youth told me that they had also never had an interview or written a professional email to a potential employer before, and for this individual, those achievements were a successful outcome. Moreover, for some youth, being able to access mental health services, or to obtain safe and affordable housing may also be considered a successful outcome of the program not accounted for in the guidelines. It is particularly problematic that in the measurement of success the Ministry only provides one small opportunity for the youth to assess the program, and this is determined by one multiple-choice question. This underscores the point that success should be defined by the youth themselves as these are the individuals who know what gains have been made. Additionally, this limited opportunity for feedback also demonstrates how young people “are taught to define their life goals in terms of the requirements of employers, rather than in terms of their own needs” (Sears 2003, 73). Therefore, simply defining success in the linear and quantifiable manner, as the provincial government does, risks missing out on what the participants themselves define as success and fails to recognize the complex pathways to success.

MAESD designed YJC to assist young people who are having difficulty transitioning from school to work due to “challenging life circumstances” (MAESD 2016b, 8). However, the program goals and evaluation standards do not get to the root of the barriers which are causing the problem in the first place. The program does recognize the impacts that racism, poverty,

ablism etc. have on young people's chances of gaining and maintaining employment noting: "Indigenous or racial minority youth, youth with disabilities, teenagers, and those in low-income families, experience significant barriers to employment" (MAESD 2016b, 7). As a critical political economy analysis reveals, each of the "multiple or serious barriers to employment" (MAESD 2016b) listed in the YJC guidelines, are systemic failures of the market, not of the individual. Yet the guidelines never explain them in such a manner. Rather, these markers are treated as barriers that an individual can, and must, overcome to find and keep work. There is no discussion as to how many of these barriers to employment are beyond the individual's control. For instance, growing up on a reserve provides someone with considerably less access to high-quality education and training programs, a fact which impacts an individual's ability to find decent work. Access to good education on reserves is not the result of Indigenous youth's own choices, but rather is a product of the ongoing impacts of a colonial government that continually underfunds Indigenous communities (Berglund 2011).

Rather than acknowledging systemic barriers of racism, gender and so on, YJC adopts (in its prescriptions for youth success) a neoclassical economic approach of seeing these barriers as the fault of the individual. Although it recognizes that factors beyond the youth's control ("life circumstances") are responsible for their marginalization, it fails to follow through on the logic of that position. Rather, in its prescriptions for youth success, the social causes of those barriers are forgotten, and the focus is entirely on the individual's responsibility for overcoming them. In this way, YJC ultimately portrays—in a manner consistent with neoliberal presumptions—"unequal conditions that do exist as natural or neutral, and [suggests] that key access/resource issues are a matter of individual 'freedom' and 'choice'" (Spade 2015, 58). That is, problems that

individuals face are interpreted as the individual's own inability to work hard or gain a good education, rather than as the result of systemic racism, sexism, colonialism, or neoliberalism's attack on good jobs, and social and labour protections (Spade 2015, 50). As a result, in the pre-employment training, there is no anti-oppression training, to provide young people with the skills to combat oppressive language in the workplace, or to react effectively if a potential employer asks an inappropriate question (such as a person's religion or ethnicity) in an interview. Instead, participants are taught numerous skills in "personal management," and how to make better choices in the workplace environment. This individualistic approach is important for the neoliberal project as it allows those who have power and wealth to control those with less privilege, to render the deep inequality existing within the current systems invisible (Spade 2015, 59; Woodman and Wyn 2013).

A systemic analysis is particularly important within the framework of youth unemployment, as this issue is often presumed the fault of the individual seeking work and it is naturalized, seen as a condition of youth(fulness), rather than the result of the ways in which the neoliberal capitalist labour market is constructed. The capitalist system requires significant unemployment so that the threat of being replaced by another worker keeps the currently employed from demanding better wages and working conditions (Jamil Jonna & Bellamy Foster 2016). However, this understanding of the labour market is not widespread. Rather, individuals are considered to have a choice about being employed or unemployed (Spade 2015, 52). Moreover, this critique of the labour market is never taught as part of the pre-employment training programs. Such programs do not let young people know that their experiences of unemployment are largely the result of the construction of the capitalist labour market, in

combination with racism, sexism, ablism, classism, colonialism, etc. Instead, YJC treats those experiences as the fault of poor choices.

The Positive Youth Development Model and Solving Youth Unemployment

As the above sections suggest, the positive youth development model is not an effective solution to youth unemployment. Despite a lack of available statistics for YJC participants, numerous scholars have performed policy analyses on programs taking on this model. One such study was completed by Simmons, Russell and Thompson (2014), examining NEET youth in the UK who have participated in state-sponsored employment training programs. The youth they interview share their experiences of completing the programs and then not being able to find work “which was well-paid and secure enough to compensate for losing benefits” (Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014, 584). Marginalized young people, despite participating in training programs, are still impacted by their marginality within the labour market, including not having money to afford paying for a medial or criminal record check, or having access to affordable child care and/or transportation to allow them to attend work (Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014; Means 2017; Woodman and Wyn 2013).

As Means (2017, 352) states:

“While education can enhance capacities of labor and therefore improve employment opportunities for individuals...and state policies can stimulate economic activity and employment through various mechanisms, these strategies cannot resolve deeper structural trends that are hollowing out jobs, driving down wages, and creating vast surplus populations of low and highly skilled workers alike”

Moreover, the neoclassical/human capital approach to assisting Ontarians in finding and maintaining employment has been proven unsuccessful in other contexts. A recent Auditor General Report (2016) evaluated the cost effectiveness of MAESD's Employment Ontario programs from April 1, 2011 to the 2015/16 fiscal year ending March 31, 2016. The Report specifically assesses the Employment Service (ES) program, which provides a very similar service but to young people *and* adults. Similar to YJC, the ES program offers client service planning, job search assistance, job placements, training and job retention, and labour market information (Auditor General 2016, 255). It has been offered by Employment Ontario since 2010 and receives \$335.2 million in government funding, compared to YJC's \$42.6 million in the 2015/16 fiscal year (Auditor General 2016, 287). However, the report states that "only 38 percent of Employment Service (ES) program participants were employed full-time" (Auditor General 2016, 263). In other words, the majority of participants are not achieving full-time occupations after the program. To make matters worse, "only 14 percent had found employment in their field of training, found a more suitable job than before the program, or were employed in a professional occupation or trade at the time of program completion" (Auditor General 2016, 263). Additionally, just over half of ES participants are enrolled in education/training programs and/or employed at 3 to 12 months after exit (Auditor General 2016, 263). These statistics suggest that this neoclassical and human capital approach to assisting individuals in gaining and maintaining employment is not working and a more radical solution is necessary.

As a result, of the positive youth develop model not getting to the root causes of NEET youth's experiences of unemployment, programs which take up this approach (such as YJC) continually fail on their promise. In fact, as Simmons, Russell and Thompson (2014, 589) have

discovered, young people have meaningful ideas about how they define their own success, however after repetitively experiencing low-skilled training programs and precarious work these dreams are diminished. Therefore, the positive youth development model, which is more focused on producing neoliberal citizens, than it is assisting youth in achieving their dreams, does not provide a framework to solve youth unemployment.

As will be examined in the following section, YJC and the positive youth development model are the product of the context in which they have been created and implemented, despite attempting to decontextualize youth unemployment, and youth participants themselves.

Contextualizing YJC and the Justifications to Assist NEET Youth

If the positive youth development approach YJC is failing to assist NEET youth in finding and maintaining employment, why does the provincial government continue to fund the program? And what justifies the Ontario government's focus on creating a solution for NEET youth in particular? To answer these questions, it is necessary to place YJC within its historical, political, economic and social context, through an examination of government statistics, provincial legislative debates (in Hansard), news media articles, scholarly accounts, and the broader youth policy framework in Ontario. To begin, I note the abundance of political will behind reducing the youth unemployment, which is consistently explained as being too high. I then explore the context which has produced this youth unemployment crisis and the increasing interest of policy frameworks to abstract youth from these circumstances. Next, I note the connections made between youth crime and youth unemployment noted in the legislative debates as well as in Ontario's youth policy framework. This section concludes with a discussion of how

this context has impacted the positive youth development model informing YJC to determine that YJC is not solely about helping youth succeed, but is also about stabilizing the current neoliberal economic landscape.

Solving the Youth Unemployment Crisis while not Addressing Unemployment

The most frequent theme within the news media, youth policy framework and legislative debates is solving what has been deemed a “youth unemployment crisis.” In fact, the term “youth unemployment” appears in 119 debates in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario on Hansard from February of 2013 to the most recent session in May 2017. When we place this finding in comparison to the eight debates mentioning “drug addiction” or the 21 debates about “day care” during the same time period, we can see that MPPs are discussing youth unemployment much more frequently than certain other significant societal issues. In the news media, particular attention has been paid to NEET youth, noting youth unemployment as “one of the critical crises of our time [with] some 83,000 youth in Greater Toronto and Hamilton...not in school, not at work” (James 2015). The term “youth unemployment” is typically used when the unemployment rate for Ontario’s young people is placed in correlation with the national youth unemployment rate or in relation to adult unemployment.

Many MPPs in the legislative debates including Catherine Fife (MPP for Kitchener-Waterloo, New Democratic Party), and Patrick Brown (MPP for Simcoe North, Progressive Conservative) note that Ontario has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Canada. Interestingly, these conversations have been occurring since before YJC was announced, and continue to occur today. On July 15, 2014, Fife stated “We [Ontario] have one of the highest

youth unemployment rates in Canada,” and she also noted that part-time precarious contract work is a “new reality for the people of this province, especially for the youth in Ontario” (Hansard 16 July 2014). These statements were made when commenting on the 2014 provincial budget, before YJC was put in place, but just over a year after the Ontario Youth Jobs Strategy (which is a part of the 2014 Ontario Budget) had begun. In December of 2016, over one year after YJC was implemented, MPP Brown pointed to the then-recent Auditor General report on Employment Ontario programs to note that “we [Ontario] have a serious problem with youth unemployment...and training programs only get one third of the users to full-time employment” (Hansard 6 December 2016). Brown (Hansard 6 April 2017) also discussed Dr. Paul Kershaw’s findings in a report for Generation Squeeze—a Canadian campaign, based in British Columbia, which focuses on generational inequality—in April 2017, noting “Ontario has the second-worst economy for young people in the country...Whatever the government has been doing for 14 years, it’s not working for young people.” Thus, considerable attention has been, and continues to be, paid to solving youth unemployment in the Ontario legislator.

When we look to the statistics and reports on youth unemployment and NEET youth in Canada and Ontario, we can see why MPPs have made numerous references to the national and provincial youth unemployment rates. Ontario’s unemployment rate for young people under 25 is consistently higher than the national rate. In 2014, when Fife commented on Ontario’s youth unemployment rate, it was at 15.7 percent, 2.2 percent higher than the national rate (Statistics Canada 2016). In addition to the general youth unemployment statistics, NEET youth became a topic of discussion within the news media after Statistics Canada released a report on the topic in May of 2012. In her report for Statistics Canada, Marshall (2012, 3), explains that within the past

ten years between 12 to 14 percent of Canadian youth aged 15 to 29 fall within the NEET category. Provincial NEET youth statistics are calculated from ages 15 to 24, and in 2015 are reported to be 9.5 percent of young Ontarians, which is a slight increase from the previous year (Ministry of Children and Youth Services 2015, 3).

At the same time as increased attention is being placed on the unemployed and marginalized young person, adults continue to experience high rates of unemployment. In addition to young people, many adults occupy a similar position of having to navigate an increasingly unequal and difficult labour market. However, this status of adults is not acknowledged in Legislative Assembly discussions. Rather, it is only referenced when the youth unemployment rate is compared to that of the adult population. According to the literature, this is nothing new. By noting the high youth unemployment rate relative to the adult rate, political and economic elites can discuss unemployment as if it is the result of an age category, or the failure of education systems (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015; 2015; Côté 2014; Priegert Coulter 1993a). Thus, the point that the economic system actually causes unemployment to exist and persist—the colonial, racist, patriarchal, capitalist system—does not get made.

Abstracting Youth from their Social Context

It is also important to understand that this youth unemployment crisis did not appear out of nowhere. It is the product of the political, economic, cultural and social context. This climate is defined by the rise of precarious part-time contract work, reductions to the welfare state, growing inequality and, ultimately, governments siding with corporations and big business over the interests of working class people, including marginalized youth.

However, young workers' job prospects were not always so bleak. This is a phenomenon which is relatively recent and has been brought on by the introduction of neoliberal policies. As Marquardt (1998, 37) explains, Canadian society post World War II, saw immense changes to social and labour protections in order to ensure an episode like the Great Depression of the 1930s would not occur again. During this time, Canadians enjoyed more security and protection as a result of the government adopting a Keynesian approach to intervening in the market for the purpose of achieving "full employment, economic growth, and the welfare of its citizens" (Harvey 2005, 10). During this time, federal and provincial governments—pressured by strong union organizing and resisting—implemented social welfare policies such as comprehensive unemployment insurance, old age pensions, medicare, and family allowance (Marquardt 1998, 38; Cairns 2017). These programs created the most extensive "social safety net" Canadians had ever seen (Marquardt 1998, 38). As well, the government also made it easier to unionize, through the introduction of the Rand formula, a legal regulation that permitted unions to deduct dues from all employees' pay cheques within a unionized workplace (Wells 1995). As a result, many workers had access to decent wages and benefit packages, and their jobs and the conditions they worked under were protected by collective agreements (Marquardt 1998, 39). However, the jobs that the majority of young workers performed did not have the same protections since secure, unionized employment was increasingly available mostly for workers over 30 (Marquardt 1998, 40-41). Yet, although many young Canadians worked at what are considered "bad" jobs, they had the security of having a social welfare system that would support them, and their parents were more likely than today to be in secure and unionized work if there was a need.

The “golden age” of Keynesianism did not last forever, and the social and labour protections that Canadian workers had come to rely on and prosper under began to be pulled out from underneath them. In the 1970s concerns from the capitalist class, the owners of large corporations, mounted as their profits decreased (Harvey 2005, 12). With technological advances allowing for the deskilling of labour, wages began to fall and threatened employment in industries such as manufacturing which had been heavily unionized (Marquardt 1998, 44). Additionally, employers created low-wage jobs by reducing hours, deskilling labour, and creating temporary positions (Marquardt 1998, 45). In the 1980s, the Canadian government began privatizing state industries, and eliminating trade barriers—neoliberal measures that were used to increase the power and profits of the elites in society rather than the welfare of workers (Harvey 2005, 23).

Those most affected were marginalized members of the working class, including young workers. Youth unemployment became a pressing concern during the 1980s and has remained such into the present day (Marquardt 1998, 47; Lowe and Rastin 2000, 205). Côté (2014, 532) reports wages for young Canadian men declined by 36 percent between 1979 and 1994. Moreover, a similar trend has occurred among young American males who between 1973 and 2010, experienced a 30 percent decline in their median weekly wages (Côté 2014, 532). At the same time, there was a steep rise in the number of billionaires worldwide, from 52 in the 1980s to 1,426 in 2013 (Côté 2014, 533). The inequality continues today with the majority of new jobs created being precarious, and young workers having less access to social welfare programs, including Employment Insurance, and pension plans (CLC 2016; Côté 2014; Marquardt 1998;

Zolok 2015). This generation of young workers are seeking work in a context which leaves them particularly vulnerable.

This history of how young people have come to experience high rates of unemployment is left out of provincial policy frameworks and legislative debates. In a recent Master's thesis, Scott Earl Zoltok (2015) explores the theoretical framework of Ontario's youth public policy, and suggests that youth are continually "abstracted" from their social context. Zoltok (2015, 84) observes that instead of explaining the problems that youth face as the result of the social relations in which they reside, the provincial youth policy frames the discussion around the supposed school-to-work transitions youth are to complete. As Woodman and Wyn (2013) as well as Côté and Allahar (2006) explain, "youth" is viewed as a transitional period, from high school to post-secondary to full-time employment. However, it is a specific group of youth who have become a concern. Policy has been specifically focused on the transitions of "at-risk" young people, those who are "at-risk" of not making these seemingly "normative patterns" (Woodman and Wyn 2013, 266). But instead of recognizing the marginality that "at-risk" youth face as the result of the workings of a capitalist labour market it is described as inevitable, and thus youth must prepare themselves accordingly (Zoltok 2015, 86). YJC follows this trend of "abstracting" youth from their socio-economic location, and as a result struggles to move even a relatively small proportion of participants successfully through the program.

Youth Crime/Violence, Youth Unemployment and Meaningful Employment

Within news media, legislative debates and government-sponsored reports, the youth unemployment crisis is often associated with youth crime, drug use and abuse, and violence. As a

result, solving youth unemployment is also viewed as a step towards decreasing criminal behaviours among young people (Simmons, Russell and Thompson 2014). In a 2012 article in the *Toronto Star*, Flavelle (2012) states: “The phenomenon, dubbed “NEET”... is an area of growing concern to policy-makers around the globe. In some countries, high levels of youth unemployment have led to riots and demands for social and political change.” And in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, MPP for Kingston and the Islands, Sophie Kiwala (Hansard 2015), states “one of the main concerns for at-risk youth is that without proper support and guidance, they may become involved in criminal activity.” Additionally, provincial youth policy frameworks and government-funded reports have also made the link between youth crime and youth unemployment. Thus, the correlation between youth unemployment and youth crime are typical within the public and political discourse.

One of the most prominent provincial reports to demonstrate this connection is McMurtry and Curling’s 2008 *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* which was funded by the Government of Ontario. In June 2007, then-Premier of Ontario Dalton McGuinty stated the comprehensive review is to examine “where the violence is coming from, and to identify ways to address its roots, in order to advance the health, safety and long-term prosperity of Ontario” (McMurtry and Curling 2008, 1). The authors are quick to note that they are specifically focused on exploring violent youth crime, meaning “violence involving youth...that causes serious injuries or death or the fear of death” (McMurtry and Curling 2008, 18). Upon consulting with over 750 individuals, including young people, deputy ministers, Cabinet ministers, and representatives from community organizations, McMurtry and Curling (2008, 19) identify five risk factors leading to youth violence: alienation, lack of empathy, feelings of

oppression and disadvantage, lack of voice, and hopelessness. However, they do not stop here. The Review continues to demonstrate how these risk factors are interconnected to more structural problems, including lack of economic opportunities for young people, as well as living in poverty (McMurtry and Curling 2008, 71). The authors thus view youth violence sociologically, explaining it as the result of the social, historical, political, and economic contexts in which youth experience their lives.

Rather than demonstrating the ways in which youth crime and unemployment are connected systemically, however, the argument made in news media and legislative debates becomes one ostensibly about the lack of structure in a young person's life. This is demonstrated in Kiwala's statement connecting criminal behaviour among young people as the result of the lack of "support and guidance" (Hansard 2015). This connection is not one that only exists in the present. In fact, the same argument was made during the Great Depression when mass numbers of young, single men were without work. Then the argument was directly tied to idle youth (today described as NEET youth), who were seen "as a particular threat to public order" and as a result sent to Relief Camps to perform pointless work for very little pay under military supervision (Finkel 2006, 111). In both accounts, the root causes of crimes committed by young people that McMurtry and Curling (2008) outline are not acknowledged.

Within the political and public discourse, these roots of youth crime and violence, are ignored when discussed in relation to youth violence/crime. However, *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* does not make such a careless correlation, as the authors recognize the importance of providing young people with "meaningful" employment. This is made particularly evident in the *Grassroots Youth Collaborative Report* quoted in McMurtry and Curling's review:

“there is a general sense that, if provided with viable and accessible pathways to meaningful economic self-sufficiency, many young people would not be forced into situations that put them at a higher risk of violence. There is a myriad of issues that surround economics, including *meaningful* employment, self-determination, career options, glass ceilings, discrimination in the workforce, and overall success” (as quoted in McMurtry and Curling 2008, 71-72).

Specifically, meaningful employment or what Yates (2003) refers to as “good jobs” is defined by its relatively high income, highly skilled labour and the ability of the worker to define how they perform their work (Yates 2003, 99). Additionally, “good jobs” are full-time with an average of 40 hours per week, provide pensions and benefits (CLC Young Workers Department 2016, 7). Unfortunately, “good jobs” or meaningful employment opportunities make up only a small fraction of the jobs available. Most are precarious. In contrast to “good jobs,” precarious work is not only poorly paid but also “boring, repetitive, perhaps dangerous, unskilled, and leading nowhere” (Yates 2003, 102). Having a precarious job can also lead youth towards criminal or violent behaviour, as they may still not be able to afford the items they and their families need to survive and thrive, leading to the risk factors of feelings of oppression, alienation or hopelessness (McMurtry and Curling 2008, 72). As a result, simply creating programs to assist youth in gaining employment will not have any profound effects if the jobs they are obtaining are insecure, low-paid, and low-skilled, as they do not reach the root of the problem.

One of the focal points of YJC’s promises for NEET youth is that participating in the program will assist them in transitioning into “meaningful” careers. However, when we look to

the policy there is no description of what this means, nor is there a concrete plan for achieving this beyond attaining further education and skills. It is precisely this failure to address the systemic realities causing there to be a lack of meaningful jobs which limits the reach of assisting young people finding and maintaining employment.

YJC has been created and implemented within a particular context which is directly linked to its failure to address the issues affecting young people. As I have explained above, there are three main themes which arise in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, news media and provincial youth policy frameworks which contribute to the implementation of YJC. First, the problem youth unemployment is treated as separate from, general employment, by placing it as a more serious policy concern than unemployment more broadly. Moreover, youth unemployment is abstracted from its historical, social, political and economic context, so as to individualize the problem. Last, the correlation which is drawn out in public and political discourse between youth crime and violence on the one hand, and youth unemployment on the other does actually follow these societal problems to their root in a failing labour market. Therefore, if the solution is to assist youth into precarious work, it is not getting to the root of the problem and will not solve youth unemployment.

Conclusion

This concluding section of this MRP summarizes my findings that the positive youth development model and YJC fail to solve youth unemployment, and briefly discusses some

implications of those findings. I began this paper by seeking to investigate the systemic failures (from a critical political economy point of view) of current policy to address youth unemployment rates for youth neither in education, employment or training (NEET). My research question has been: how does the framing and context surrounding YJC illustrate the limits of this approach in addressing NEET youth unemployment in Ontario? I have been particularly interested in determining if YJC fits within the current global youth policy trend of positive youth development, and exploring if this approach aligns with the policy's goal of benefitting NEET youth. After performing a critical policy analysis, which reviewed government documents, legislative debate transcripts, reports, statistics, and relevant media reports, I found:

- 1) YJC consists of all three main elements of the positive youth development model—
developing human capital, producing neoliberal citizens and controlling young people;
- 2) The positive youth development model which YJC utilizes is not sufficient to provide a long-term solution for NEET youth unemployment and;
- 3) YJC has been created and implemented within a particular context which contributes to its limitations for assisting NEET youth in finding and maintaining employment.

As a result, this MRP has argued the positive youth development model, and by default YJC, is not an effective avenue to remedy NEET youth unemployment in Ontario. This is largely due to the fact that the positive youth development model fails to address the very real ways that marginality can affect an individual's chances of obtaining and maintaining employment. Rather than teaching young people the systemic barriers impacting their situation, the program draws upon neoliberal discourse and neoclassical economics to individualize the problem. It cannot

compensate for the systemic failures of the market, a labour market which increasingly provides young people with little choice but to accept precarious positions.

As a result, a more radical solution is necessary in order to get to the root of the crisis—the colonial, racist, patriarchal, capitalist system. Although I do not have a concrete answer as to how to solve youth unemployment, my research provides some clues to what a better program might look like. A better program might provide young people with the skills they need to fight oppression and discrimination in the workplace, and teach youth the systemic nature of their experiences of unemployment. Additionally, it would also be necessary to expand the definitions of success to allow young people themselves to determine their own goals and victories.

Moreover, expanding and making apprenticeship programs more accessible to marginalized youth, would provide young people with more meaningful employment opportunities.

Apprenticeships typically offer highly-skilled training and tend to have better employment options upon completion, including well-paid work (see Statistics Canada 2017).

But ultimately, despite a better program design, a policy simply cannot end unemployment. To repeat the quotation by Means (2017, 352) that begins this research paper:

“We need to think far more creatively about the kinds of societies we want to live in — societies where young people, workers, and the environment are subject to a vulgar race to the bottom, or societies committed to flourishing forms of democratic social organization and nature-society relations”

In order to provide a solution for youth unemployment, it is necessary to work in solidarity with all unemployed, underemployed, and precarious workers to address the root structures which are causing harm to all of these individuals. Youth unemployment, like unemployment more

generally cannot be solved easily, it requires more work than policy. It requires that we build an alternative to capitalism.

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