



Exploring the Experiences of NEET-Situated Young People Within the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic Using Resonance Theory

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, using resonance theory as an analytical lens. It contributes knowledge about the importance of school and work (or lack thereof) for these youths during a time of uncertainty and gives insight into their quality of life and well-being from a social and relational perspective. The findings shed light on how the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated an already strained situation for this group while highlighting the importance of relationships, not only with friends and family, but with society as a whole. Adopting a non-materialistic approach to NEET situated young people's quality of life and well-being allowed resonant experiences to become evident in various aspects of their lives, which may be overlooked if the norms of an educationally underpinned work-centrism are in focus. The study calls for a broadened view on what constitutes or characterizes a good life for young people at the margins of the labor market and education system, while emphasizing the need to move beyond narrow concerns about integration into education or employment, towards focusing on their well-being.

Keywords NEET-situated young people · COVID-19 · Well-being · Sweden

Introduction

Over the past few years, the global COVID-19 pandemic has had a worldwide impact. Previous research has shown that young people in general have suffered great challenges regarding education (Fisher et al. 2021) and labor market exclusion, mainly through overall heightened unemployment rates (Collins et al. 2022;

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MacDonald et al. 2023). It has also been reported that the pandemic has contributed to increased levels of anxiety in young people while negatively impacting their health behaviors (Czenczek-Lewandowska et al. 2021) and mental health (Rens et al. 2021). This study focuses on young people aged 15 to 29 who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The circumstances of NEET-situated young people have gained increased attention during the past decade throughout Europe (Murphy et al. 2022), with Sweden being no exception (Jonsson et al. 2022). This growing interest builds on the long-term negative health, social, and economic consequences of standing outside the labor market and educational system during parts of youth and young adulthood (Collins et al. 2022; Mellberg et al. 2023; Robertson 2019). Previous international and Swedish research has shown that many NEET-situated young people struggle with socioeconomic disadvantage, disabilities or learning difficulties, low self-esteem, and mental health problems while experiencing financial problems and a lack of control over their life which seems to undermine their well-being (Gariépy et al. 2022; Jongbloed & Giret 2022; Nordenmark et al. 2015; Lögdberg et al. 2018; Plenty et al. 2018).

The increased attention on young people in NEET situations has also brought to light some well-directed criticism to the NEET concept. This critique concerns the fact that the concept aims to capture a large and diverse group of young people, categorizing and labeling them by their exclusion (i.e., *not* in education, employment, or training) (Suttill 2021; Smyth et al. 2014; Wrigley 2024). Associated with the label are assumptions and stereotypes regarding young peoples' willingness to work and generational welfare dependency, which creates a discourse that reframes structural problems as individual deficiencies (McPherson 2021). Coupled with stigmatization and senses of isolation or alienation from communities and authorities who fail to account for, and attend to, their needs and aspirations (Hakkiola 2018; Russell et al. 2011), these negative stereotypes risk reinforcing the social exclusion of NEET-situated young people (Brunila et al. 2016). By referring to the *situation* of young people who are marginalized from the labor market and education system, we wish to shed light on the structural and social factors that shape their lives while moving away from the notion of individual responsibility, employability, and lack of abilities fueled by political and public debates (Suttill 2021; Wrigley 2024; McPherson 2021).

To better understand the situation of a youth group who are at the margins of two arenas that are highly valued by society and influential to our sense of self-worth—that is, education and employment—the well-being of NEET-situated young people has to be viewed considering the materialistic work-centrism of western democracies and the importance of education for taking steps into adulthood and establishing oneself in the labor market (SKL (2016)). It has been argued that we live in a society that is centered on work (Frayne 2015; Paulsen 2017) and that we are socialized towards it from a young age, with parents raising children to become working citizens, school preparing us for working life, and welfare policies being directed at making us able to work (Weeks 2011). Work earned its position by, on the one hand, providing necessities such as housing and food, and, on the other hand, offering social recognition, self-fulfillment, and status (Sage 2018; Weeks 2011). While unemployment has been shown to decrease well-being (Hammarström & Ahlgren

2019), Sage (2018) and Newman (1989) suggest that it is not the material absence of work that causes this decline but rather the fall in status and respect. When work becomes a strong societal norm and a moral way of life, those outside the labor market are generally viewed as work-shy, lazy, and welfare-dependent (Rossetti et al. 2022).

Finding oneself at the margins of a work-based standard can cause feelings of stigmatization, inadequacy, and shame (Korhonen & Komulainen 2019; Moldvik et al. 2021) which shape how individuals view themselves and their value in society (Ågren & Kallio 2023). The negative outlook on those not engaged in work is fueled by political and public discourses that emphasize individual responsibility regarding employability and self-sufficiency (Hobbins 2015). Material resources are often seen as equivalent to well-being. Whether one is scrolling through social media or flipping through the pages of a lifestyle magazine, the image depicted is one where a happy and successful life is equivalent to having wealth, health, material possession, and status. One may thus ask whether money and social status are the only way of achieving happiness and well-being. If so, what of those outside the labor market, such as NEET situated young people, are they certain to be less happy or have a lower quality of life?

Within public and policy discourses, it is generally assumed that simply getting a job or starting school will improve the life situation of individuals at the societal margins (Rossetti et al. 2022). In support of this, research shows that those who are unemployed or not in school are worse off compared to those who work or study when quality of life and well-being are considered from more tangibly behavioral and economic perspectives (Waddell & Burton 2006). However, when considering aspects in life other than lifestyle, status, money, material resources, and wealth (Lee et al. 2021), the quality of life and well-being of marginalized groups are less clear, with research largely overlooking the importance of social and relational aspects. To contribute knowledge about the importance of education and work (or lack thereof) for a youth group at the margins of the labor market and education system during a time of uncertainty, this study draws on the resonance theory developed by Hartmut Rosa (2019) to explore the experiences of NEET-situated young people within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden.

In his theory, Rosa (2019) turns away from the notion that a good life should be measured in terms of available material resources and options. Instead, he argues that it should be considered by the quality of our relationships with the world, that is, the degree to which people are connected with, and open to, the other people and things around them, making a good life one that is rich in resonant experiences (Rosa 2019). This notion is especially interesting in relation to NEET-situated young people, who are generally thought to be lacking in both resources and options (Ågren & Kallio 2023; Mellberg et al. 2023; Smyth et al. 2013), and for whom the pandemic may have been especially challenging in Sweden (MUCF 2020) and beyond (OECD 2020). Not only does previous research suggest that the prior health and financial strain of NEET-situated young people may have been amplified by the crisis (Palmer & Small 2021), but a growing body of literature highlights the need to adopt a wider gaze when approaching this group (Alonso et al. 2022; Brown et al. 2022; Meier Magistretti & Reichlin 2022) by moving beyond concerns

about integration into education or employment, and instead focusing on their well-being (Ågren & Kallio 2023; Dean 2003; Rikala 2020). Adding to this, research has emphasized the importance of social connections and relationships, not only when supporting young people outside education and employment (Brown et al. 2022) but with all groups at the margins of society (Cottam 2018). In a previous study of Finnish NEET-situated young people, well-being was conceptualized as a balancing of needs, with an emphasis on personal growth and self-realization (Helne & Hirvilammi 2022). Rosa's (2019) resonance theory provides the opportunity to dig deeper into the quality of life and well-being of NEET-situated young people from a more social and relational point of view. In this study, we accomplish this by exploring questions such as:

1. Does neither working nor studying mean that NEET young people have a low quality of life?
2. How can quality of life and well-being be understood from the perspective of NEET-situated young people?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic, with its added social and material challenges, affected the quality of life and well-being of NEET young people?

Theoretical Framework

Resonance theory, which was developed by Hartmut Rosa (2019), provides a framework for analyzing cultural and institutionalized relationships with the world. It stems from taking a critical view of our contemporary society while responding to the "social acceleration" or negative developments of Western societies during recent decades (Rosa 2013). The theory is concerned with how human relationships affect, and are affected by, the world. Resonance is experienced when things or people around strike a chord within or speak to us, which resonates with a response of feeling joyful and content. To experience resonance is to lead a good life with quality and well-being, where we can make life choices that support us to thrive. The antithesis to resonance is alienation, a mode of relating to a world that appears cold, distant, and mute, where one encounters people or things with either indifference or repulsion (Rosa 2019). Resonance and alienation do not represent a dichotomy but should be seen as interrelated; one seeks resonance as a contrast to alienating experiences. The resonance or alienation that emerges from our past experiences shapes our relationship to the world, and one can become dispositional towards either resonance or alienation. This disposition reflects one's attitude to the world, where those dispositioned towards alienation will approach unfamiliar things as unappealing, harmful, or threatening (Rosa 2019).

According to Rosa (2019), it is possible to establish stable resonance to the world through balance on three axes: the *horizontal*, the *diagonal*, and the *vertical* (Table 1). These divisions should be understood as heuristic, which allows us to explore the potential for resonance and alienation. It is important to note that these axes overlap and can affect one another. The horizontal axis deals with the social sphere and includes familial, friendship, romantic, and even political relations. For

Table 1 Description of the three axes of resonance

<i>Axis</i>	<i>Characteristics of the axis</i>
<i>Horizontal</i>	Deals with the social sphere and includes familial, friendship, romantic, and political relationships
<i>Diagonal</i>	Deals with materiality and relationships to things as well as meaningful activities such as education and employment
<i>Vertical</i>	Deals with aspects such nature, art, and religion and captures relationships with life, existence, and the world as a whole

many, the social sphere is of great importance for well-being, and relationships with loved ones are often highly valued compared to other aspects in life (Rosa 2019). The diagonal axis deals with materiality and relationships to things, but also meaningful activities such as education and employment. In line with previous research (Frayne 2015; Sage 2018; Weeks 2011), Rosa (2019) claims work to be an essential sphere of resonance due to its strong value in modern society. Apart from family, work is a major source of social interactions, which illustrates how the spheres of resonance overlap. In highlighting that relationships with, and attitudes towards, the world have been developed through familial socialization, Rosa (2019) also argues that school is a constitutive ground for developing resonance at the diagonal axis, by being an arena where we are first subjected to a world beyond our family. Through school, we learn how we relate and position ourselves in relation to our surroundings while finding that some things speak to us (resonance), and others do not (alienation). Finally, the vertical axis captures relationships with life, existence, and the world as a whole, dealing with aspects such as nature, art, and religion (Rosa 2019).

Methods

In this qualitative study, we focus on NEET-situated young people within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, concerned with both their health and life situations. The material was collected during November and December of 2021, during a time of increased infection rates resulting in temporary regulations concerning travel, public gatherings, and remote work (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2021) were put in place. Sweden had until then adopted a less restrictive approach to the pandemic than many other countries, focusing on voluntary measures through recommendations, emphasizing personal responsibility rather than mandatory ones involving stricter lockdowns (Ludvigsson 2023). Although schools remained open throughout the pandemic for most children under the age of 16, distance learning was implemented in upper- and post-secondary education until spring 2021. The labor market was severely affected by the pandemic, as in many countries, contributing to a rise in unemployment particularly among young people.

The initial analysis was an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), and then Rosa's (2019) theory was integrated to explore the participants' experiences using resonance as an analytical lens. This allowed us to bridge a gap in

knowledge by moving beyond material notions of quality of life and well-being for this marginalized youth group to more social and relational aspects.

Recruitment and Participants

Participants were recruited through targeted advertisements on social media (Facebook and Instagram). The advertisement was directed to reach 15- to 29-year-olds, appearing on their general feed and provided information about the study along with information on how to contact the second author. In addition to these advertisements, several networks and organizations that offer support and activities to NEET-situated young people were contacted and asked to share information about the research. After clicking on an advertisement, young people could show interest in participating by entering their contact information into a web-based form. In total, 33 individuals filled in the form, all of whom were contacted shortly thereafter. Of the 33 individuals, 20 expressed a positive initial response to participate while the remaining 13 did not reconnect. Another 7 dropped out during the process of setting up a time for an interview. The remaining 13, plus an additional 2 who were recruited through preexisting networks, chose to participate. Among the 15 participants, there was variation in terms of geographical location, age, educational level, and gender, with a slight overrepresentation of women (Table 2).

Data Collection

The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted via communication technology chosen by the participants: telephone ($n=5$), video conference ($n=1$), or online in an encrypted chat forum through instant messaging ($n=9$) (Jowett et al. 2011). Letting the participant choose the format of the interview was not only a result of COVID-19 restrictions, but a way to facilitate participation for a youth group that may be hard to reach with traditional data collection methods

Table 2 Demographic description of the participants ($n=15$)

	<i>Category</i>	<i>Number</i>
<i>Age</i>	16–20	6
	21–29	9
<i>Gender</i>	Female	9
	Male	5
	Non-binary	1
<i>Geographic residence</i>	Northern Sweden	6
	Central Sweden	5
	Southern Sweden	4
<i>Municipality type</i>	Large city	5
	City	5
	Rural town	5

(O'Connor & Madge 2017). With participant consent, the texts from the synchronous online interviews were saved in a separate document while the oral interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, open-ended questions were asked about the participants' health and life situation, both more generally and specifically in relation to of the COVID-19 pandemic. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided opportunities for the participants to highlight aspects that they felt were relevant while allowing for clarifying and probing questions specific to each conversation. The interviews lasted between 40 and 120 min, with the written interviews taking longer than the verbal ones.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two phases, the first of which was inductive, and data driven. The interview transcripts were read through several times to get an understanding of the whole and to identify interesting areas. This first phase also served to identify resonance theory as a relevant analytical framework. In the second phase, thematic analysis was used, following the steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) through a lens of resonance theory. Again, the first step was to read the transcripts thoroughly to deepen the understanding of the content and to search for patterns and meaning. Initial thoughts and ideas were written down, generating a list of interesting areas to explore. In the next step, meaningful groups of data were organized by labeling interesting features with codes. These codes were then sorted into potential themes. This process involved consideration of the codes as well as the young peoples' characteristics such as gender, sexuality, and country of origin as well as how they could be combined to form overarching themes. Despite the diversity of the group, similarities between the participants emerged and shaped the analytical themes. The texts used to extract the codes were read through to consider if they appeared to form a coherent pattern, and if not, the themes were revised. To ensure that the themes worked for the entire material, the data set was read again. This also allowed us to discover additional codes that may have initially been overlooked. The final step consisted of defining and naming the themes.

Result and Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of NEET-situated young people within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, using resonance theory (Rosa 2019) as an analytical lens. The following sections present the three themes that were developed during the analysis, with the first two detailing how the participants in various ways, and sometimes in parallel, *felt out of sync with* but also *connected to the world*. While the first theme depicts feelings of alienation that were amplified during the pandemic, the second one captures experiences of resonance that were present in the participants' lives despite the many challenges they faced both before and during the crisis. The third theme—*looking towards the future*—focuses on how the participants' previous experiences of the world shaped their

understanding of themselves and their surroundings, creating a disposition towards either resonance or alienation.

Feeling Out of Sync with the World

This theme captures aspects of the participants' lives in which they narrated senses of alienation—a feeling of being out of sync with the world. Emphasis was placed on experiences with and within the educational system, which falls under the diagonal axis of resonance theory. The theme also relates to the political sphere of the horizontal axis, as negative experiences had shaped the participants' outlook on social institutions such as health care and social services, which are publicly and politically governed.

Many of the narratives covered some form of underlying issue that contributed both to various challenges in school and to the consequent “NEET situation.” For some, the underlying issue was a *physical illness* causing periods of prolonged absence. One participant described a condition that caused him to miss around half of his school days during his childhood and struggle to get through upper secondary education, which eventually resulted in a breakdown of *depression* and early school leaving. This narrative was present in other participants' stories, although not all described having a *physical condition*. Some described struggling with *depression* and *anxiety*, while others described living with *attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder* (ADHD) and *autism*. What the narratives all had in common was a perceived lack of understanding, involvement, and action from the education system, with their illnesses or struggles being disbelieved by the teachers or dismissed as laziness and a lack of motivation. Several participants spoke about how they tried to find solutions to their problems, which when raised were generally rejected or denied. For example, John (19, male) said:

I've always wanted to finish school, even though... it was awful, and the teachers were stupid. I've really been like “I want to finish school so I can start working and everything.” But no. I haven't received any help at all, and a lot has just been, well, stupidity and rudeness.

The participants' stories were also colored by a *lack of support* from teachers, and the system more generally, for the health-related or social challenges they faced. This suggests that there was an initial expectation of receiving understanding and care—a resonant relationship—but instead, they were generally met with indifference and, in some cases, disbelief. Among the participants who had attended school during parts of the pandemic, some described how the change to online teaching aggravated their situation by decreasing their motivation, disturbing their concentration, and making the teachers increasingly unable to see them and their individual needs. The experiences of being met with indifference and disbelief were not isolated events, but rather something that had accumulated throughout their education. One participant described how she felt humiliated and unwanted when a teacher yelled at her for asking for clarification, which resulted in her quitting her course: “I shut myself in at home and didn't want to speak

with anyone.” (Ava, 26, female). This illustrates Rosa’s (2019) argument of how unmet expectations of resonance can result in alienation. The participants’ experiences appeared to have shaped how they viewed themselves, their abilities, and the world, but also what support they could be expected to receive.

The narratives also illustrated how experiencing a *lack of support* throughout school manifested in a mistrust towards institutions, which was generally compounded by parallel struggles with other parts of the welfare system such as health care, social services, the public employment service, and the social insurance agency (viewed here as part of the political sphere of the horizontal axis). Regarding interactions with welfare institutions, many described how for a long time they had not been taken seriously, that no one was interested in helping them, or that practitioners wanted to help but did not understand their situation or know what to do. Adding to this, the participants described being passed around between different services; this resulted in a sense of alienation and *feelings of hopelessness*, as illustrated by the quotation below.

It’s really... I really fell through the cracks, it feels like. I feel so damn forgotten /.../ And it’s so damn burdensome because I really don’t know how to work it out. Before this, there’ve been so many other factors but as of now it’s because it doesn’t feel like I have a future. (Sarah, 19, female).

Ultimately, struggling with or against the school system and other services to get (the right) support came across through feelings of not being seen or heard, being different, and not living up to *society’s* “standards.” As in the study of Lögdberg et al. (2018), the participants conveyed a *lack of trust* towards welfare institutions, which also had a negative impact on their *self-image* through being unable to prove their worth to the world, feeling unworthy of help, and feeling like a “lost cause” that should not waste societal resources as narrated by Ian (23, male):

But, like, I know that right now I’m currently outside of society. I mean, I don’t have a job, I don’t study, I don’t contribute anything at all. And then you indirectly become outside of society. I can’t claim that anyone else is implying that, but I mean, I know that this is what counts in society.

The consequences of how one views oneself and is valued by society when failing to live up to norms are not limited to NEET-situated young people, but have been shown to also affect people in unemployment and on sick-leave (Ågren & Kallio 2023; Korhonen & Komulainen 2019; Moldvik et al. 2021). The quotation above displays a strong social norm of earning an educational degree, getting a job, and contributing to society. Fraser (2000) suggests one’s chances of gaining recognition are dependent on their societal status, not being involved in paid work may lead to a loss of status and social recognition (Sage 2018; Newman 1989); this could be seen to illustrate the desire to gain recognition, improve one’s social status and become a “worthy” citizen. As implied in the narrative, the feeling of not fitting in seemed to stem more from their own perceived lack of meeting societal expectations, rather than from others expressing this, which could be viewed

as internalizing the social norm to work. In line with Fraser (2000), Rosa (2019) argues that within the social sphere (horizontal axis), resonance is closely linked to, although goes beyond, recognition; this serves as an example of how being *socially excluded* and *deprived of recognition for one's worth* contributes to feelings of alienation and a decline in well-being.

Participants with unstable home environments generally described feeling less connected with the world than those with strong support systems. Moreover, participants who did not experience or express resonance in any part of their lives conveyed signs of *severe depression*.

I don't feel emotions. I don't feel happiness, I don't feel sorrow, I don't feel... well, contempt. I don't feel anything most of the time. It only becomes more and more intense, rather... and I don't feel love, towards myself or to anyone else. Like, nothing. (David, 28, male).

The quotation from David illustrates how a lack of resonance, where nothing spoke to or connected with him, resulted in a complete indifference towards everything around, leaving him in a mute world (Rosa 2019). This lack of resonance was rare among the participants, since most had resonant experiences in either the horizontal, vertical, or diagonal axis. However, for those who experienced some resonance, the pandemic was perceived as more challenging. For example, in line with the findings of MacDonald et al. (2023), participants who described the struggles of not meeting people close to them in person generally expressed feelings of loneliness and sometimes aggravated depressive symptoms, which seemed to contribute to muting a resonant experience of close relationships. Among those who lacked resonant relationships with close ones, the pandemic was described as not having much impact on or making a difference to their lives. They already perceived their situation as meaningless, feeling isolated and alienated from the world; as one participant said, "what was already gray just got grayer" (Julie, 28, female).

Feeling Connected with the World

The previous theme showed how feeling out of sync with the world affected the participants' quality of life and well-being through alienation that emerged from a sense of being different, rejected, and disconnected from other people, welfare institutions, and society as whole. This theme conversely depicts resonant experiences where the participants felt *connected to the world*.

The participants' connection to the world could be seen in narratives highlighting the importance of forming and maintaining close personal relationships (horizontal axis), especially during the pandemic. This corresponds to Rosa's notion of familial relations being *a harbor of resonance*, in the sense that having a supportive family or friends can make a person feel less alienated. According to Rosa (2019), social relationships go beyond mere recognition, with the most important aspects being able to reach and connect with others. This was illustrated by

Hanna (16, female), who described her mother as being her advocate against the harsh and cold institutional environments in other spheres of life, which she had been battling against for years:

I can hardly do anything by myself, and if my mom hadn't taken care of me like a small child I would probably have starved to death or just died of another cause in my bed.

The quotation above depicts a person who struggles a great deal with everyday life. However, Hanna's mother helped her through these tough times, illustrating how resonance in one axis can balance feelings and effect of alienation emerging from other axes: not only by providing material necessities for survival, but through allowing connection with close ones. Although they did not describe the same severity of struggles, other participants emphasized the importance of social relationships and, in line with Rosa (2019), perceived them as some of the most valued aspects of life. As reported in previous studies (Lögberg et al. 2018; Zanfrini & Giuliani 2023), the importance of *social support* and feeling connected for health and well-being was explicitly narrated by the participants. Although social connections were generally highly valued, they became increasingly important during the pandemic. Like Rikala's (2020) findings among young people with mental health problems, many considered it crucial to stay in contact with friends and family to navigate the restrictions and isolations, since it meant that they did not have to feel so alone.

Even if it's not a "walk in the park" when you get home and are alone it's invaluable. The friend group I still have... is extremely valuable to me. (David, 28, male).

Beyond highlighting the importance of social connections, especially during the pandemic, the participants emphasized the value of forming relationships with nature and the things therein (vertical axis). As illustrated in the quotation below, resonance could come from spending time in a cabin that lacked modern amenities while still being able to enjoy life to "the fullest." This supports Rosa's (2019) notion that there is more to quality of life than material resources, status, and money.

Relationships, well, I'm very, like, social. Friends are very important, my girlfriend is very important, family is very important. That's what I think is one of the most important things in life, and being able to have people you can talk to, and they can talk to you. Things like that. But then, well, I love animals. I've always had an affinity for animals... and I love the forest, I have a cabin in the countryside. It doesn't have electricity or running water or anything so... I love being there and I enjoy it to the fullest. (John, 19, male).

The value of animals was described as important, both more generally and especially during the pandemic since they provided company during a lonely and isolated time. Within the context of COVID-19, the animals acted as a fixed point

in what was otherwise perceived as an insecure and unsafe period of their lives. These notions of connectedness with animals and nature serve as an example of resonant relationships to the world that are not dependent on human interaction. Several participants explained how their pets had supported or pushed them to continue even when they felt like they wanted to give up. The animals gave them a *sense of meaning* through the pandemic, and many expressed a great deal of love for them. As Maria (26, female) explained, being able to care for a pet required one to first take care of oneself:

Getting some form of routine was also very important, always get up at 08.00, take the dogs outside and feed them. Go for a long walk around lunchtime, have a nap, fix with the plants and then dinner. So yeah, a little hobby, routines, and a daily contact with someone you trust. I think that was my strategy through it all.

While the participants generally painted a dark picture of the pandemic, some glimmers of light also emerged, aligning with previous research finding that young people experienced joy and sadness simultaneously during the pandemic (Scott et al. 2023). Many described how the crisis provided them with time and energy to focus on their health and well-being. Some of them found that in the absence of pressure to socialize or be an active part of society, they had an opportunity to spend more time on their recovery. This could be understood as a way of escaping the acceleration of modern society (Rosa 2013) while seeking out resonant experiences that are *meaningful* and enhance well-being. As we previously saw, the limited social interactions during the pandemic affected some participants negatively, while for others, there was a positive effect on their social relationships; this has also been demonstrated in previous research (Brown et al. 2022; Sonesson et al. 2023). The participants were used to living isolated lives and not being able to participate in society on equal terms due to sickness or disability, and they found that the pandemic enabled the people around them to gain a better understanding of their situation. People's previous judgments and lack of understanding were replaced with insight into what a life lived on the societal margins might feel and look like, as narrated by Linda (28, female):

To some extent it's been positive for my mental health that a lot of people around me and in society have had to experience a little of what it's like to be on long-term sick-leave. /.../ Even if it's selfish on my part, I feel like a few people have gained a bit more understanding of what it's like to not be able to do what you want.

Looking Towards the Future

In the two previous themes, we have depicted past and present experiences of resonance and alienation among the participants. In the third and final theme, we focus on how the participants looked *towards the future* by delving into their hopes and dreams, as well as their perceived possibility and ability to realize them.

In accord with Meier Magistretti and Reichlin (2022), when the participants shared their hopes and dreams, the conventional nature of them was striking. Most simply aspired for a “normal life” of employment, a family, and a decent place to live, as narrated by Maria (26, female):

To have a business at home, so I can work and do something I love. Most likely I'll have to try to get a 50% disability pension and work 50% to be able to have children, have a family, and live a proper “average Joe” life in the countryside. My dream is still the same as when I was 12 – I want to work so I can survive without having to worry about food and housing for me and my family. Now, it's not clear how I'm going to succeed, but I think it'll work out eventually!

As illustrated in the quotation above and elaborated by other participants, financial worries were constantly present, in terms of not being able to *provide for themselves* and being a burden to others. Despite this constant worry, the participants' dreams did not seem contingent on wealth, material resources, or status. Monetary gain was generally not depicted as the driving force behind the participants' hopes of (re)engaging in education or employment. Rather, the narratives were focused on finding something meaningful to do.

The participants' aspirations for a *normal life* align with previous research focused on NEET-situated young people (Chen 2011; Meier Magistretti & Reichlin 2022), indicating a strong desire to fit in, be like “everyone else,” and live up to *social norms* and expectations. Ågren and Kallio (2023) reported that the young people in their study expressed criticism against the normative view of work and a belief that other aspects, such as engaging in arts or volunteer work, should be valued by society. Although none of the participants in this study voiced similar criticisms, emphasis was placed on meaningfulness in the sense of being able to do something they loved and were interested in. Some said that if they were not required to work (from a financial perspective), they would love to have the extra time for self-care and meaningful activities; as Kim (19, non-binary) explained, “if I didn't have to work, I'd rather be at home painting and cuddling with my cats all day.” Ultimately, this supports Rosa's (2019) notion that it is not (only) possessions and material resources that characterize a good life, but experiencing resonance and meaning in our relationship to the world.

Regardless of the conventional character of their hopes for the future, the participants' previous alienating and resonant experiences appeared to have an impact on how they viewed the possibility of realizing their dreams, or if they even dared to dream about the future. Whether or not one believes in the possibility of achieving one's dreams tends to be related to a disposition towards either resonance or alienation (Rosa 2019). Having experienced alienation in most aspects of life, possibly since early childhood, might lead to a person facing new situations with fear and lacking faith in their ability to affect the world. Conversely, someone who has experienced resonance and is more self-confident may feel excited about the future and believe that they have the means to realize their dreams. Some participants described oscillating between thinking that they would be able to achieve their dream and that it would never work, where the mitigating factor seemed to be whether they received help and support during their

struggles. As in Gaspani's (2018) study of Italian NEET-situated young people, others expressed that realizing their dreams was largely out of their hands, and that they had limited control over their situation due to dependence on unreachable societal structures.

But I don't really know what else I can do. And that's also the hardest part, to accept that I can do everything right at this point and it can still go to shit. It's not all up to me, I can't base... It's not performance based, I can't feel bad if it doesn't completely go my way with these things right now, because it's not up to me. (Sarah, 19, female) .

Adding to Sarah's narrative, many participants expressed a strong sense of being let down by the welfare system. They were so used to being *denied support* that they had simply given up and lost hope of ever changing their situation. Though some explained that neither society nor themselves were at fault, they still could not see a light at the end of the tunnel where they are able to realize their aspirations. However, regardless of whether they felt it was possible to change their situation, the participants expressed a strong desire to be seen by welfare actors who listened to them and did their best to help. If approached in this way, they felt supported and could maintain some sense of hope for the future.

Though the participants' *health issues* were not the focus of this study, their health clearly affected them and their sense of meaningfulness. The participants described how life was generally meaningful; however, those with chronic diseases expressed how it could lose meaning during depressive episodes, as narrated by Linda (28, female):

Purely disease-wise, life loses meaning in severe depressions, so when I'm in them it doesn't feel like it is [meaningful]. Otherwise, life feels meaningful, not in the same way it did before I got sick-listed. I feel that I can affect my life situation on the smaller scale /.../ But in the greater sense, to be in the situation that I'm in and the consequences of it that I'm handling, I can't change those. Even if I wish I could.

Nevertheless, for others, the situation felt far gloomier. The added challenges of the pandemic meant that they had either given up on their dreams or lost all hope of ever being able to realize them. This was exemplified in the interview with Hanna (16, female):

Participant: I think about the future sometimes, but I mainly think I'll be surprised if I'm still alive in a few years. Before [the pandemic], I had lots of goals and dreams, like being rich, leaving home, and having my own business (not sure what kind of business).

Interviewer: Don't you think these things are possible for you to achieve anymore?

Participant: Now it doesn't feel like I'll ever be able to live alone, get a driving license or a job, or even go to the store by myself. That seems to be about as likely as me becoming a singer and standing on a stage with Beyoncé.

Concluding Remarks

The findings from this study shed light on the experiences of NEET-situated young people and depict how the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated an already strained situation for this group. By focusing on the importance of relationships, resonance theory illustrates how social conditions such as institutions, structure, and practices influence the relationships of NEET-situated young people to things and people around them. This increases our understanding of their situation through considering their past and current experiences. In the following section, we highlight some key findings in relation to the three axes of resonance while reasoning on the importance of meaning for the young people's well-being and quality of life.

The findings highlight the importance of relationships, not only with friends and family, but with society as a whole. They also illustrate how the three axes of resonance overlap, especially regarding the horizontal axis. In line with previous research (Brown et al. 2022; Lögdberg et al. 2018), our findings show the participants' need to feel seen, heard, and understood as well as to be respected by receiving the help and support they need to lead a good life regardless of their situation. This was mostly achieved by a supporting home environment, where the support could assist in the struggles with teachers and the school system, as well as with other social institutions to obtain the needed aid and support to achieve the desired outcome. For participants who came from a more troubled background where familial support was lacking or non-existent, other social relationships could serve as substitutes such as friends, teachers, or actors operating in the welfare system advocating for the young person. The participants' narratives also revealed the negative consequences of not receiving the proper support and help during childhood and adolescence, mainly by feeling let down by the welfare system, resulting in a loss of hope for the future. This further strengthens the call for a change in how people with various problems and needs are met by society (Cottam 2018; Meier Magistretti & Reichlin 2022; Von Heimburg & Ness 2021).

Resonance theory (Rosa 2019) views school and work, both contained in the diagonal axis, as essential spheres of life, and it is hard to argue against the importance of education and employment in modern societies through monetary gain, status, and creation of identity. Our findings suggest that for most of the participants, the struggles started within the school system, where they felt misunderstood, mistrusted, and rejected. As our findings suggest, this can negatively affect one's self-image and create barriers to achieving what society deems as the norm, with the young people perceiving themselves as outcasts and failures. Further, it illustrates the importance the participants placed on employment while displaying a sense of not fitting in and living up to the norm when not engaged in paid work. The participants also expressed a desire to gain recognition, have a job, start a family, and somewhere to live—to live a "normal" life. Again, this shows the overlap of the resonance axes where negative experiences from school and the welfare system can be mitigated through social support, either from family or representatives within the systems. For those lacking social support, actors within the welfare system become increasingly important and need to meet these individuals with understanding and trust rather than suspicion and derogatory demeanor.

The findings also clearly illustrate vertical resonance in relation to animals and nature by highlighting the importance of these aspects for the participants' quality of life and well-being, which supports Rosa's (2013) notion that there is more to these areas than health, wealth, and material possession. The vertical axis provides a counter position to the work-centrism displayed in the findings, where participants depict desires to engage with arts, nature, and animals as a form of self-care if the monetary aspect of work did not have to be considered. Much like variations in access to support and social relationships, having access to a summer cottage, or the opportunity of having pets, is not available to all, but may be something unreachable, for example, to those from less privileged backgrounds.

Based on the findings, balance of the resonant axes entails experiencing resonance in at least one sphere and has the potential to mitigate feelings of alienation. However, the findings suggest the horizontal axis comprising a relational support system appears to be very important for NEET-situated young people by having the potential to reduce negative effects of various experiences. Since resonance is not achieved through the same means nor have the same ends for all, meaning becomes a crucial aspect. The findings suggest that the participants were searching for something meaningful; for some, this was human relationships, and for others, it was their pets that provided meaning to their lives. To be able to support individuals to lead meaningful lives while enhancing well-being and quality of life, diverse aspiration needs to be acknowledged and valued as important and not solely focus on skills, competence, and material aspects. Especially in relation to the pandemic where the findings illustrate how human connection, nature, and animals can serve as a buffer towards negative consequences, a too narrow focus on material and monetary aspects, such buffers are in danger of being forgotten or lost.

Based on the participants' stories, it is evident that despite struggling in various aspects, their lives did not lack quality and were not characterized solely by sadness or misery. The findings show how work-centrism impacted the participants' self-image and well-being. Though the desire to be "normal" and fit in was strongly present in the narratives, the participants wished to find and engage in something that was meaningful to them, that is, to experience resonance. As we have seen, this could be in relation to other people (horizontal axis), work and education (diagonal axis), or animals and nature (vertical axis). In line with Ågren and Kallio (2023), our findings suggest a need to move beyond concerns about integration into education or employment, to focus on the well-being of NEET-situated young people while recognizing that factors other than work have a moral value. This calls for a shift towards recognizing meaningfulness, relationships, and well-being as defining a good life, but also the consideration of employment or education as means to that end rather than ends in themselves (Ågren & Kallio 2023; Moldvik et al. 2021).

Author Contribution All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation and data collection were performed by Frida Jonsson. Isa Norvell Gustavsson conducted the analysis and interpreted the results, which was discussed and validated among all authors. The initial draft was written by Isa Norvell Gustavsson. Frida Jonsson reviewed and edited the draft. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Anonymized data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, (ING). The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (DNR 2021–04355). The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent has been obtained by all participants, either verbally or in writing. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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