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Mattering on the margins: unpacking the influence of local support and the broader swedish welfare system for NEET-situated young people

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how senses of mattering among young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) is formed, disrupted, and partially repaired through encounters with the Swedish welfare system and local support initiatives. Drawing on interviews with 39 participants across eight initiatives, the study uses an abductive, reflexive thematic analysis informed by the Mattering, Wellness, Fairness model to explore how structural conditions, institutional practices, and relational encounters shape experiences of mattering. Findings show that cumulative delays, fragmented responsibilities, and activation-oriented logics taught young people that their needs did not matter, undermining well-being and agency. Local support initiatives partially repaired mattering through relational continuity, shared decision-making, and reliability, yet these gains remained fragile within a broader system marked by scarcity and rigid thresholds. The study demonstrates that mattering is a dynamic, context-dependent process and argues that sustainable youth well-being requires both relationally intentional practice and structurally embedded fairness.

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NEET; young people; youth; mattering; fairness; wellbeing; welfare systems

Introduction

Young people in 'NEET' situations, those not in education, employment, or training, frequently encounter overlapping structural and personal barriers that heighten their risk of social exclusion. Research has consistently shown that disabilities, mental health challenges, early school leaving and unmet support needs contribute to their marginalisation (Gariépy et al., 2022; Mellberg et al., 2023; Plenty and Andersson, 2018). However, rather than reflecting individual deficits, NEET situations are often contingent on intersecting institutional and socio-economic conditions such as poverty, unstable housing, limited labour market opportunities, and inequalities in access to supportive networks that constrain young people's ability to participate fully in society. Consequently, being in a NEET situation during youth and young adulthood is often an involuntary experience and a structurally produced disadvantage, which shapes not only how young people view themselves but also how they engage with welfare services tasked with supporting them.

While welfare systems are responsible for providing safety nets and pathways toward education and employment, obligations anchored in internationally recognised human rights, young people in NEET situations frequently report experiences of mistrust, stigma, and procedural complexity (Brunila et al., 2016; McPherson, 2021; Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025; Schön et al., 2024). Encounters with welfare services can be shaped by inflexible bureaucratic processes, inconsistent guidance, and interactions in which young people feel surveilled rather than supported (Haikkola, 2018). These experiences may reinforce a sense of not being heard or valued, contributing to withdrawal from available resources and a deepened sense of exclusion. For some, past experiences of being treated as problems to be solved, rather than individuals with legitimate needs and aspirations, can create enduring reluctance to engage with formal institutions (Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025; Rikala, 2020).

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If encounters with welfare systems risk reinforcing disengagement rather than facilitating inclusion among NEET-situated young people, attention must shift toward forms of support that are meaningful and conducive, both in terms of meeting needs and promoting re-engagement with school or work. In this regard, studies have highlighted that young people in NEET situations benefit most from approaches that are relational, personalised, and grounded in trust (Ayoub et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2022; Görlich & Katznelson, 2018). They often emphasise the importance of sustained encouragement, accessible mental health resources, and professionals who demonstrate genuine care, reliability, and respect. Support that validates their experiences, acknowledges their aspirations, and offers flexible pathways back into education or employment is more likely to foster positive outcomes (Brown et al., 2022; Frøyland, 2019; McPherson, 2020). These forms of support do more than address practical needs: they speak directly to young people's desire to be recognised, valued, and able to contribute, elements closely linked to psychological well-being (Brown et al., 2022; Välimäki et al., 2022).

Although existing research highlights the importance of supportive relationships and senses of belonging in young people's encounters with welfare services (Cottam, 2018; Välimäki & Husu, 2023; Välimäki et al., 2022), these dimensions are often noted rather than analytically unpacked. In particular, their role in shaping well-being, and the conditions under which such support is enabled or constrained, remains undertheorised. The current study addresses this gap by applying a *mattering* lens (Prilleltensky et al., 2023; Prilleltensky, 2020) to NEET-situated young people's engagements with local support initiatives. Mattering foregrounds experiences of feeling significant to others and to society, while also directing attention to the institutional and structural conditions that make such experiences possible. NEET-situated.

The matter of mattering

The concept of mattering, first introduced by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), refers to the feeling of being important and significant to others. A strong sense of mattering has been associated with higher levels of happiness and reduced emotional distress (Schmidt et al., 2020), while its absence has been linked to mental ill-health, suicidal behaviours, and difficulties during life transitions, particularly among marginalised groups (Prilleltensky et al., 2023).

Mattering becomes especially important during youth and young adulthood, when experiences of recognition and value are formative (Paradisi et al., 2024). Young people who encounter negative stereotypes, unfair treatment, or systemic barriers may be especially vulnerable to feeling undervalued (Flett et al., 2021). For those in NEET situations, mattering is particularly salient, as many experience social exclusion, low self-esteem, and mental health challenges (Jonsson & Norvell Gustavsson, 2024; Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025). Feeling that one matters can strengthen self-confidence, reduce isolation, and support healthier coping in the face of inactivity, unemployment, and marginalisation. Mattering also underpins self-efficacy and engagement, creating opportunities for young people to contribute to others and their communities (Prilleltensky et al., 2023). Yet these developmental potentials often collide with the realities that NEET-situated young people face in their everyday interactions, where recognition is frequently absent.

Conditions surrounding the NEET situation often communicate the opposite of mattering: shame, suspicion, and misrecognition. Young people in NEET situations are frequently subjected to negative assumptions, such as being unwilling to work or dependent on welfare, which individualise structural problems (McPherson, 2021). These narratives, coupled with stigmatising encounters and alienation from institutions that fail to meet their needs (Haikkola, 2018; Russell et al., 2011), can deepen social exclusion (Brunila et al., 2016). This not only undermines well-being but also exposes the limits of considering the NEET situation as a purely individual responsibility.

These dynamics of mattering raise broader questions about fairness and justice (Prilleltensky et al., 2023). Social justice is often discussed in terms of distributive justice—the fair allocation of goods, resources, rights, and responsibilities. However, justice also encompasses recognition (Fraser, 1995, 1999), which refers to cultural and symbolic dimensions of injustice, such as deficit framing, stigmatising narratives, or pathologising categorisations. These forms of misrecognition restrict participation in social life by positioning certain groups as less legitimate, capable or deserving. When NEET-situated young people are subject to such institutional and cultural marginalisation, equal opportunity becomes unattainable, regardless of how resources are formally distributed. Following Prilleltensky et al. (2023), we understand fairness as the

practices through which justice is enacted in everyday interactions and institutional processes, focusing on three interrelated forms that together shape how young people perceive their value and place in society.

(1) distributive fairness—equitable allocation of resources, rights, responsibilities, burdens, and rewards, particularly in access to health and social care.
(2) procedural fairness—processes that enable voice, influence, and impartial treatment, which resonates with Fraser's emphasis on recognition, highlighting how recognition is enacted (or denied) through routine institutional interactions.
(3) corrective fairness—efforts to repair harm and restore justice by addressing past mistreatment.

Welfare services are key sites where fairness is communicated through everyday practices and institutional processes. Young people in NEET situations frequently report feeling overlooked, treated as administrative cases rather than individuals, or encountering services that focus on deficits and risks (Chadderton & Colley, 2012; Haikkola, 2018). Such interactions convey non-mattering—the sense of being interchangeable, invisible or burdensome—and when repeated, can erode trust in welfare systems and intensify social exclusion (Gjersøe et al., 2024). Conversely, when welfare actors show consistent interest, empathy, and reliability, they communicate that the young person matters. According to research, these relational practices can counteract the stigma associated with NEET situation and encourage re-engagement with employment, education, or training (Välimäki et al., 2022). As such, such encounters are not only interpersonal moments but expressions of broader institutional logics that shape how young people are seen and treated within welfare systems.

This study bridges a gap by using mattering as the analytical lens that connects young people's relational experiences of welfare encounters with institutional practices and the structural conditions that shape them. We therefore situate mattering within a justice framework that includes recognition alongside distribution (Fraser, 1995, 1999). To analyse these dynamics, the study draws on the Mattering, Wellness, Fairness (MWF) model (Prilleltensky et al., 2023) which conceptualises well-being as emerging through the interaction of psychological experiences of mattering and the fairness of social and institutional conditions. The model integrates three analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions: mattering, wellness, and fairness.

Mattering refers to the experience of feeling significant, valued, and worthy of attention, both in interpersonal relationships and in relation to institutions and society at large. Wellness, in turn, is understood not merely as the absence of distress, but as a multidimensional state encompassing psychological, social, and functional well-being across life domains. Within the MWF model, wellness is shaped by whether individuals experience themselves as mattering and by the fairness of the conditions under which they live. Fairness concerns the distributive, procedural, and corrective arrangements through which resources, recognition, voice, and repair are made available or withheld.

A key insight of the MWF model is that mattering functions as a proximal pathway between fairness and wellness: when institutional conditions are experienced as fair, they are more likely to cultivate mattering, which in turn supports well-being. Conversely, when fairness is compromised, experiences of non-mattering can undermine well-being through disengagement, shame and reduced agency.

This framework is particularly well suited to studying NEET-situated young people's encounters with welfare systems, as it enables an integrated analysis of relational experiences, institutional practices, and structural conditions. By linking individual well-being to questions of justice and recognition, the MWF model supports an analysis that moves beyond individualised explanations of disengagement and instead examines how youth well-being is shaped through everyday welfare encounters embedded in broader policy regimes. In doing so, the study uses the MWF model to foreground how institutional arrangements are translated into lived experienced of inclusion and exclusion across youth transitions.

The Swedish welfare context

Sweden, like many Western countries, has undergone a gradual shift toward neoliberal policy orientations since the 1990s, characterised by an increased emphasis on individual responsibility while downplaying structural determinants of disadvantage (Hänninen, 2019). A key expression of this shift is the *work principle*,

traditionally a cornerstone of Swedish labour market policy (Bengtsson & Berglund, 2012; Bengtsson et al., 2022). While historically framed as a right, work has increasingly been interpreted as an obligation (Junestav, 2004), reflected in activation-first strategies targeting unemployed adults as well as NEET-situated young people. Policies such as the Job Guarantee for young people (SFS, 2007:813) prioritise rapid labour market entry, often through short-term activation or individual skill-building, with limited accommodation for complex or intersecting needs. Within this policy climate, unemployment and social difficulties tend to be framed as individual deficits, while the state's responsibility for enabling well-being is correspondingly downplayed (Dahlstedt, 2009; Nord, 2018).

At the same time, young people in Sweden navigate a transition regime marked by strong normative expectations of timely educational completion and smooth entry into full-time work. Upper secondary education is widely viewed as a prerequisite for labour market participation (Schoon & Evans, 2023), yet Sweden exhibits a substantial 'completion gap', disproportionately affecting young people with mental health difficulties, neurodevelopmental conditions, or unstable life circumstances. Falling outside these expectations can produce a sense of being 'behind' one's peers, contributing to psychological strain and reinforcing the individualising logics of activation policies. These dynamics shape how young people interpret their value and legitimacy as welfare recipients, forming an important backdrop for processes of mattering and non-mattering.

Although Sweden maintains a universal welfare model, three decades of neoliberal New Public Management (NPM) reforms have increased emphasis on documentation, performance indicators, and efficiency demands (Knutsson et al., 2016). These reforms operate within a unitary but decentralised governance structure, in which responsibilities are distributed across 21 regional authorities (responsible for health care) and 290 municipal authorities (responsible for education and social services) alongside multiple central agencies. Among these, the Social Insurance Agency (SIA) and the Public Employment Service (PES) play key roles for NEET-situated young people by administering income support and labour market measures (Andersson, 2022). Combined with NPM-inspired reforms, this administrative arrangement has been widely criticised for its fragmentation (Almqvist & Lassinantti, 2018; SOU, 2017). Differences in mandates, digital systems, legislation, and available resources often create gaps between actors, leading to repeated referrals, duplicated assessments, and unclear accountability. For young people with complex needs, these conditions can be particularly challenging. Structural features such as long waiting times for child and adolescent psychiatry (BUP), limited access to neuropsychiatric assessments, and variability in regional capacity further complicate efforts to secure timely support. These bottlenecks not only delay needed interventions but also shape how young people perceive their worth, priority, and place in the system.

Recent reforms of PES have intensified these dynamics. Digitalisation and marketisation have reduced the agency's local presence, increasing municipalities' responsibility for labour market support and social assistance (Swedish Association of Local Authorities & Regions, 2023). While conditionality has expanded, with benefits frequently tied to activation programmes (Bengtsson et al., 2022), municipalities may also draw on social work traditions emphasising empowerment and self-determination (Social Services Act, 2025:400). Many have therefore developed local, low-threshold support initiatives characterised by relation continuity, voluntary engagement, and holistic assessments, aimed at young people who have been underserved, or alienated, by mainstream services (Jonsson & Norvell Gustavsson, 2024). This study examines how young people's sense of mattering is formed, disrupted, and partially repaired through encounters with both the broader Swedish welfare system and such local initiatives.

Methods

This article draws on data collected from eight local support initiatives for young people in NEET situations. The initiatives were geographically distributed across Sweden and varied in size and degree of urbanisation, ensuring a range of contexts and participant experiences. All initiatives adopted a holistic, person-centred approach, combining activities, guidance, and tailored support to address participants' broader life circumstances through collaboration with other actors. Although their formal mandate was to promote reengagement with school or work, the initiatives prioritised capability-building beyond employability,

recognising that outcomes also encompassed belonging, financial security, education, and access to specialist care.

Engagement in the initiatives was voluntary and not time-limited, with participants acting as co-creators of their own programme trajectories. Compared to standardised programmes, these conditions afforded practitioners greater discretionary space, including smaller caseloads, fewer performance constraints, opportunities for shared decision-making and flexible, relationally oriented support. This institutional context contrasted with mainstream welfare services and enabled analysis of how recognition, voice, and procedural reliability were enacted in practice.

Guided by the framework outlined in the introduction, the study conceptualises mattering as an analytical bridge linking young people's relational experiences with institutional practices and structural conditions. Accordingly, the research focuses on how recognition, voice, participation and repair were enacted in everyday encounters, and how distributive, procedural, and corrective fairness were experienced within and beyond the support initiatives.

Recruitment and participants

Fieldwork was conducted between September 2022 and March 2023 across the eight initiatives. We interviewed 39 participants who were willing and able to engage during site visits. Recruitment was facilitated through collaboration with practitioners who informed potential participants about the study and invited those who expressed interest to take part. Participants ranged from their late teens to early thirties, consistent with the initiative's age limits, and followed highly varied educational, social, and welfare trajectories. Some had been in NEET situations for relatively short periods, while others described prolonged disengagement shaped by mental health difficulties, neurodivergence, disability, or repeated disruptions in education and employment. At the time of the interview, engagement with the initiatives ranged from a few weeks to several years, enabling insight into both early encounters and more sustained experience of support.

Information about participants' backgrounds emerged primarily through narrative accounts rather than systematic classification. These accounts indicated differing degrees of economic insecurity, housing stability, and prior contacts with welfare services. Rather than treating these characteristics as analytic variables, the study approaches them as contextual conditions shaping how welfare encounters were experienced and interpreted over time.

Prior to engagement in the local initiatives, most participants had extensive contact with mainstream welfare services, including upper secondary schools, PES, social services, and, for some, healthcare or mental health services. Participants described repeated interactions involving assessments, referrals, waiting periods, and eligibility decisions across multiple agencies and over extended periods. These encounters formed an important backdrop to later experiences, shaping expectations, institutional trust, and interpretations of subsequent support.

Data collection

The semi-structured interview guide covered relational aspects (interest, empathy, reliability, and experiences of stigma and recognition), influence and participation (voice, co-creation, responsiveness), developmental trajectories, and engagement with welfare services beyond the initiative. These domains were selected to capture experiences relevant to mattering, recognition, and the distributive, procedural, and corrective fairness through which justice is enacted in everyday practice. Although centred on participation in the initiatives, interviews also addressed broader life situations and well-being, enabling analysis of connections between micro-level encounters, meso-level institutional practices, and wider structural conditions.

Open-ended questions invited participants to describe encounters with welfare services and support initiatives in their own terms, including what they found helpful, difficult, and meaningful. Participants raised both positive and negative experiences unprompted, often within the same interview, reducing the risk that accounts of non-mattering reflected interviewer expectations rather than participants' own sense-making.

Interviews were mainly conducted face-to-face in private rooms at the initiative, either individually or in small groups; a small number took place by telephone. Individual interviews tended to facilitate more detailed personal accounts, particularly concerning sensitive issues such as mental health, shame, or prior negative welfare encounters. Small-group interviews, by contrast, often generated interaction through which shared experiences were affirmed, contested, or elaborated.

Data analysis

The analysis followed an interpretative, iterative approach using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, 2021), informed by an abductive analytic logic. Mattering was not part of the original research design, rather, an initial phase of inductive coding identified recurring patterns of (non-)recognition, deflection, waiting, and their emotional consequences. These patterns pointed toward mattering as a central interpretive concept, leading us to adopt the MWF model (Prilleltensky et al., 2023) as a sensitising framework for subsequent analysis.

Through this abductive lens, mattering was analysed in relation to fairness (distributive, procedural, corrective) and recognition. We began by immersing ourselves in the transcripts, attending to both manifest content and latent meanings, including institutional logics, normative assumptions, and internalised messages of worth or non-worth. Coding focused on indicators of (non-)mattering, such as being seen, heard, or treated as interchangeable or burdensome, as well as on fairness conditions, including access to resources, opportunities for voice and influence, impartial treatment, and experiences of repair or redress.

As analysis progressed, we moved iteratively between data and theory, using the theoretical lens to sensitise our reading while remaining open to novel or disconfirming patterns. Codes were compared and grouped into candidate themes that articulated connections across analytical levels, linking relational experiences to institutional practices and broader structural arrangements. Themes were refined against the full dataset to ensure analytic coherence, conceptual clarity, and fidelity to participants' meanings.

Memo-writing accompanied all stages of analysis, documenting theoretical decisions, moments of uncertainty, and emergent interpretations. Reflexivity was actively maintained through reflection on how our positions as researchers with prior involvement in youth welfare research and familiarity with policy contexts shaped analytic expectations. We revisited transcripts during theme development to assess whether interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed through pre-existing frameworks, particularly where early coding aligned closely with theoretical expectations. This reflexive practice supported analytic openness while situating themes within the study's theoretical contribution.

Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2021-01418). Before providing written informed consent, each participant received details about the purpose and implications of the study, emphasising that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without providing an explanation. Participants were not offered financial or any other incentives to participate. Personal information that could lead to identification was excluded from the transcripts to protect their identity. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

Findings

Through our analysis, three interrelated themes were developed: *Learning not to matter, Treated as someone who matters,* and *Fragile mattering*, illustrating how NEET-situated young people's sense of mattering is shaped through their encounters with the broader Swedish welfare system and local support initiatives. The findings show how mattering is produced, undermined, and partially repaired through patterned experiences across services intended to support them. In particular, the results demonstrate how mattering is shaped by a dynamic interplay between structural conditions, institutional practices, and lived experience. It suggests that while relational work can partly interrupt or compensate for entrenched experiences of

non-mattering, its impact remains fragile and contingent on the wider system architecture within which such practices are embedded and unfold.

Learning not to matter

The first theme depicts how young people learned not to matter over time, through slow, cumulative processes of prolonged exposure to a fragmented welfare system increasingly shaped by activation-centred logic, transactional encounters and the erosion of trusting relationships with practitioners. In describing experiences of learning not to matter, participants primarily referred to earlier encounters with mainstream institutions such as schools, employment services, social services, and healthcare providers, rather than the local support initiatives in which they were currently engaged. As illustrated in participants narratives, this contributed to repeated experiences of dismissal or delay that became internalised as feelings of shame, self-blame, and diminished expectations.

> *"It was hard to see the light when you were at the bottom, crawling around in the grease. Yeah, it went on like that for a while, and it got worse. I tried with the psychiatry and, like, I was passed around. 'Here, try this. It's fine, see you in two months. It will be fine.' Because then… I was passed around. It felt like I lost hope and faith in people. It looked like… yeah, sure, they did their job… But they don't care about you."* Daniel

Participants described how difficulties in securing timely and appropriate support were gradually reinterpreted as personal failures, narrowing their sense of agency and future aspirations. In this way, structural and institutional conditions of the Swedish welfare system were experienced as psychological burdens, cultivating a durable sense of non-mattering. They also frequently referenced perceived norms of a linear path into adulthood, moving smoothly from school to a standard eight-hour workday. Against such a normative backdrop, ending up on the margins of the labour market and education systems was experienced as a threat to their identity and worth. As Laura put it, "*It has always felt like I was on a different track than society expects*."

Like previous reports (Schön et al., 2024; Välimäki et al., 2022), when health-related or social challenges made the 'straight road' unattainable, many translated divergence into self-judgement, feeling 'behind', 'less then', or undeserving of help. At the same time, participants recounted repeated attempts of accessing support for such challenges, only to be met with waiting, referral, or no clear responsibility. What began as administrative delays gradually accumulated into a pattern that felt telling. Over time, systemic deflection was no longer seen as a capacity issue but came to be interpreted as a reflection of their own worth. Gradually, long waits and unclear responses came to be taken personally, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and the sense that their needs did not matter or merit attention. One participant described this process bluntly:

> *"I have always had the attitude where, yes, well you have to work and so on. But when you have fought yourself bloody several times, you have hit a wall, and you are not getting anywhere, it becomes a huge self-hatred in the end."* Daniel

Rather than interpreting gaps as organisational failures, participants increasingly concluded that *they* were the problem.

The psychological effects of non-mattering were pronounced. Participants narrated a thickening affective residue and what several called a sense of futility. In line with previous reports (Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025; Norvell Gustavsson & Jonsson, 2024; Shannon et al., 2020), even where support was eventually obtained, the emotional imprint of earlier negative experiences persisted as mistrust, self-doubt, and a conviction that help would not work 'for people like me'. They shared an anticipatory defeat that dampened engagement, with one participant, Christine, recalling a downward spiral vividly: "*All you saw was 'you can't do it… you are worthless'*."

Echoing previous research (Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025; Rikala, 2020), the analysis also illustrated how agency narrowed as non-mattering settled in. Plans for education or work receded into day-to-day coping and the future became difficult to imagine. Several participants spoke about withdrawing from help-seeking, not because their needs had been addressed but because expectations of being dismissed once again felt too costly. As Sandra explained:

"A lot of people have very little confidence in the insurance agency or the public employment agency because they have been treated poorly in the past. And those experiences make you reluctant to seek help."

Over time, the combination of normative societal pressures and dismissive welfare encounters coalesced into a durable narrative: I don't count, my needs don't matter. In this way, structural and institutional conditions were experienced psychologically. The cumulative effect was not merely unmet needs, but true senses of non-mattering, in which young people understood the system's failures as evidence that they were the problem.

Treated as someone who matters

The second theme shows how encounters within local support initiatives disrupted entrenched experiences of non-mattering by treating young people as people who matter. Unlike earlier services, which participants often experienced as fragmented, conditional, and focused on deficits or compliance, the local support initiatives were described as offering continuity, relational engagement, and flexibility, creating conditions in which participants felt recognised and taken seriously. Through practices such as attentive listening, reliable follow-up, and shared decision-making that communicated respect, voice, and commitment, participants described feeling seen, respected, and taken seriously in ways that contrasted sharply with earlier welfare encounters.

"*This place was where I've felt most heard. Like… I didn't get much understanding from my parents or the school, because I received my diagnosis very late. So, I ´ve had my own issues without anyone knowing exactly what the problem was. And no one took the initiative to find out either. So, I was very isolated. [*The support initiative*] has opened that world for me, to really be able to ask for help."* Maria

These institutional practices communicated that participants' needs, time, and perspectives genuinely mattered, operating as corrective experiences that rebuilt trust and enabled renewed engagement. Compared to previous welfare encounters, a recurrent turning point was the experience of being seen, not as a problem, a diagnosis or a case, but as a person with a history and a horizon. Participants shared how practitioners at the local support initiative remembered details, enquired about well-being beyond programme metrics, and followed up in predictable, caring ways.

Trust deepened further when practitioners checked in after missed appointments, treated setbacks as moments for support rather than sanctions, and kept their promises. These seemingly small gestures countered expectations of being 'dropped' and converted procedural routines into relational commitments. As Marcus put it, '*It's a more human way than what I'm used to from the public employment agency*.'

This recognition, echoing previous research (Almqvist & Lassinantti, 2022; Välimäki & Husu, 2023; Välimäki et al., 2022), shifted expectations about what support could feel like, from transactional and surveillant encounters, toward interactions that conveyed, implicitly and explicitly, 'you are worth my time and attention'. Participants described how influence and voice were central to this difference, by being invited to co-create goals, set the pace, and choose next steps. In line with earlier reports (Määttä et al., 2024), small gains were acknowledged and celebrated, rather than overlooked or dismissed as insufficient. Decisions were no longer 'about me without me', but with me, reinforcing that their perspectives mattered and reversing the depersonalisation many had previously experienced.

As recognition stabilised, participants narrated possibilities for new identities, moving beyond senses of failure and shame. Feeling valued made it imaginable to add value, to contribute to others, and in some cases, to pursue education, training, or support roles inspired by the quality of care they had received. This movement from being valued to adding value marked a restoration of mattering and a re-opening of future orientation. As Steve summarised, "*It's generally better here… Support and understanding, they listen and help… 'Hey, can we fix this?' 'Yes, no problem'*."

Fragile mattering

The third theme details conditions that constrained the durability of experiences in which mattering became possible, highlighting its fragility. Specifically, while local support initiatives could partly compensate for previous faults, participants situated these within a broader welfare context marked by lack of

opportunities, rigid eligibility thresholds, and age-bounded supports. Gains often felt conditional, tied to the time-limited programmes, scarce placements, marked thresholds, and a wider welfare landscape that frequently communicated low priority. Participants also articulated an awareness of the precariousness of recognition and belonging itself, expressing anxiety about what would happen when supportive conditions changed or ended, as Kim explained:

> "*They have this after-support so I will be able to reach out. But I feel that I'm not finished yet. I still need help with several things. So, I'm worried when I'm getting a new practitioner at a different organisation.*"

This highlights how the sustainability of mattering depends not only on relational practices, but on broader structural arrangements that determine whose needs are recognised and resourced over time.

Participants frequently described the support obtained at the local initiatives as exceptions, functioning as 'safe pockets' and refuges within a system that they otherwise experienced as fragmented and activation-oriented. The very contrast that made the support feel transformative also signalled exceptionalism: the fear that outside this place, I won't be treated this way. For some, the memory of being 'passed around' resurfaced as they contemplated transitions, underscoring the contingency of mattering on specific sites, teams, and relationships. Concerns about age-bounded support (e.g. a 30-year upper limit), strict eligibility criteria, and diagnostic gatekeeping animated participants' accounts of the future. Crossing a threshold, by age, label, or administrative category, could reconfigure access to support overnight. Participants worried that the recognition they experienced would not travel with them, producing anticipatory loss: 'What happens when this end? Where will I go next?'.

Even within the local support initiatives, participants were aware of scarcity within the welfare system, with limited placements, variable access to complementary services, long waiting lists elsewhere, and lack of opportunities in the labour market. They understood that the progress that they had made could be undone by delay: untreated conditions could resurface; trust could erode; motivation could fade. Past experiences of waiting or being stuck made the risk of reversal vivid, sometimes tempering hope with guardedness. While confidence could grow and self-esteem increase, few felt secure enough to take mattering for granted and the emotional tone emerging through the narratives was ambivalence. Participants expressed genuine relief and gratitude for being treated as someone who matters, alongside anxiety about its sustainability. Mattering felt real, but also fragile and dependent on conditions largely beyond their control. Specifically, the durability of mattering depended on more than relational excellence; it hinged on system arrangements, thresholds, availability, and continuity, over which participants had little influence. Mattering was therefore possible, but structurally unstable.

Discussion

This study explored how NEET-situated young people's sense of mattering was formed, disrupted, and partially repaired through encounters with the Swedish welfare system and local support initiatives. Rather than treating mattering as an individual disposition or static outcome, the findings conceptualise mattering as a process: young people learn non-mattering over time through patterned experiences of delay, dismissal, and narrow definitions of legitimate need; their sense of being someone who matters can be restored through recognitional and participatory practices; yet such gains remain contingent on broader system conditions. By foregrounding these temporal and infrastructural dynamics, the study extends the MWF model (Prilleltensky et al., 2023).

Interpreted through the MWF model, the findings show how fairness conditions within welfare systems shape young people's experiences of mattering, which in turn condition well-being across life domains. Across mainstream services, distributive and procedural shortfalls, such as long waits, unclear responsibilities, and limited opportunity for voice, communicated non-mattering and were internalised as shame, self-blame, and narrowed expectations of the future. In MWF terms, compromised fairness conveys that one's needs do not count, producing predictable psychological harms, including withdrawal from help-seeking and a contracted sense of possibility (Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025; Rikala, 2020; Välimäki et al., 2022).

Within local support initiatives by contrast, relational practices grounded in procedural and corrective fairness disrupted learned non-mattering. Attentive listening, reliable follow-up, co-creation, and

acknowledgement of small steps communicated recognition and inclusion, enabling participants to feel known rather than processed. These practices restored mattering and reopened engagement with education, work, and therapeutic support, while also fostering agency, hope, and social participation (Flett et al., 2021; Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025; Prilleltensky, 2020). The findings thus provide a concrete account of how everyday fairness practices translate into signals of mattering, functioning as a proximal pathway to improved well-being.

At the same time, participants consistently framed local support initiatives as fragile pockets of recognition within a broader welfare system experienced as fragmented, conditional, and activation-oriented. Experiences of mattering were situated within contexts marked by age-bounded support, rigid eligibility thresholds, scarce placements, and framented responsibilities across agencies. These structural constraints shaped how participants understood the durability and portability of the recognition they received.

Without structural fairness, adequate resourcing, and institutional recognition of diverse life trajectories (Fraser, 1995, 1999), locally cultivated experiences of mattering cannot be assumed to persist over time or travel across contexts. While procedural and corrective practices may repair trust within specific institutional pockets, the sustainability and generalisation of such repair depend on system-level fairness. In this way, the findings add an important process-oriented nuance to the MWF model, showing that repair is real yet reversible: mattering can be created and undone over time when the structural conditions that produced non-mattering remain unchanged.

The analysis clarifies how fairness, mattering, and well-being emerge through multilevel, interacting processes within the MWF model. Rather than unfolding as a fixed sequence, structural arrangements (e.g. distribution and recognition), institutional practices (e.g. procedural practices and corrective repair), and psychological experiences (e.g. felt worth, agency, and hope) shape and reshape one another over time. Fairness conditions often cultivate mattering, and mattering supports well-being, yet experiences of well-being can also recalibrate expectations of fairness and recognition, feeding back into how institutional practices are perceived and engaged. These pathways are dynamic and context-dependent, reinforcing or interrupting one another depending on how structural conditions, organisational logics, and relational encounters align.

In the context of NEET-situated young people, the findings show that mattering is not an ancillary outcome but central to (re)engagement and sustained participation (Nord-Baade and Ness, 2025). By foregrounding mattering, the study reframes youth transitions research beyond activation outcomes towards questions of recognition, dignity, and contribution (Brunila & Lundahl, 2020; Välimäki et al., 2022).

Beyond its empirical contribution to research on NEET-situated young people in Sweden, the study advances wider debates on youth transitions and social policy in three ways. First, it reframes youth transitions by conceptualising engagement, agency, and future orientations as processes shaped through experiences of recognition and non-recognition, rather than as movement into education or employment alone. Second, it contributes to social policy research by demonstrating how distributive and procedural arrangements are translated into lived experiences of worth and exclusion, showing that outcomes often attributed to individual vulnerability, such as withdrawal, hopelessness, or disengagement, are predictable effects of policy design and implementation. Finally, while grounded in the Swedish welfare context, the study identifies processes that resonate across activation-oriented and fragmented welfare regimes. The dynamics of learning non-mattering, experiencing partial repair through local support, and confronting the fragility of recognition offer conceptual tools for analysing how youth support systems create, sustain, or erode mattering across contexts.

Implications for policy and practice

Supporting young people to feel that they matter requires coordinated change across the welfare system. Mattering cannot be sustained through frontline efforts alone, it depends on structural conditions that make relational work possible and organisational routines that reliably communicate recognition and fairness. The implications below outline how policy, organisational design, and frontline practice can work together to create support systems in mattering is both possible and sustainable for young people. Derived directly from the analysis, the recommendations are organised across structural, organisational, and

frontline levels to address both relation experiences and the wider conditions that enable or constrain them.

Overarching implication

Cultivating mattering requires both structural reform and relational intentionality. Structural fairness provides the time, flexibility, and continuity needed for relational work, while relational practices operationalise fairness through recognition, voice and reliability. Youth services that integrate both can sustain mattering rather than offering it as an episodic or exceptional experience.

Structural level implications

- **Prioritise long-term fairness**: Relational work cannot flourish in systems marked by scarcity, fragmentation, and eligibility cut-offs.
- **Stabilise access and continuity**:
  - Reduce age limits and smooth eligibility 'cliff edges'.
  - Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination.
- **Resource relationally intensive work**: Ensure time and capacity for relationship-building and holistic support.
- **Reform system-level metrics**: Shift beyond activation-focused outcomes toward indicators capturing recognition, continuity, responsiveness, and relational quality.

Organisational level implications

- **Embed procedural and corrective fairness**:
  - Standardise practices that enable voice, shared decision-making, and flexible pacing.
  - Avoid relying on individual practitioners' discretion for relational practices.
- **Institutionalise recognition in everyday practice**:
  - Remember details, acknowledge small steps, and actively centre the young person's perspective.
  - Ensure routine procedures that signals that young people's time and needs matter.

Frontline practice implications

- **Acknowledge affective histories**: Approach new encounters with awareness of accumulated experiences of delay, marginalisation, and dismissal.
- **Normalise mistrust**: Treat mistrust as an rational response and allow young people to set the pace for renewed engagement.
- **Support transitions intentionally**:
  - Plan programme endings early and coordinate with other services.
  - Use warm handovers to ensure mattering becomes portable across contexts.

Limitations and future research

This qualitative study focused on a specific group of NEET-situated young people engaged with local support initiatives in one welfare context. While the findings may not be generalisable, they may be transferable to contexts facing similar structural and institutional challenges. The analysis is retrospective and cross-sectional, it captures process dynamics through narratives, not longitudinal tracking. Participants were those who engaged with support, while perspectives of those who did not engage, or disengaged, are under-represented. Future research could:

- Follow participants longitudinally across transitions (e.g. programme exit) to examine the durability of mattering and identify tipping points for maintenance or erosion.

- Compare policy contexts to identify structural arrangements (e.g. eligibility, funding stability, integration mechanisms) that best sustain mattering.
- Operationalise mattering alongside quantitative data, paring validated mattering measures (e.g. general and interpersonal mattering scales) with ethnographic or case-based designs to trace MWF pathways over time.
- Include multi-stakeholder perspectives (practitioners, managers, policymakers, employers) to understand how fairness and recognition are enacted, or constrained, at different system nodes.

Conclusion

By re-centring mattering as a process, this study demonstrates how NEET-situated young people's well-being is shaped through repeated encounters with welfare institutions that signal recognition, indifference, or exclusion. While local support initiatives can repair accumulated experiences of non-mattering, such restoration remains conditional in the absence of structural fairness. The implication is not that relational work is insufficient, but that its effects are unstable when welfare systems continue to prioritise activation over recognition. Designing support systems for young people that sustain mattering therefore requires attending not only to frontline practices, but to the institutional architectures and arrangements that determine whose needs are seen, valued, and supported over time. Designing for fairness that endures, not just fairness that happens in pockets, offers a pathway to make mattering, and thus well-being, sustainable.

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The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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