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Public Employment Services and Strategic Action towards Rural NEETs in Mediterranean Europe

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Abstract: The NEET phenomenon in southern Europe is particularly alarming. Most studies have focused on analysing the socio-demographic characteristics of NEET and policies directed towards them, but more research is needed regarding the psychological aspects that underlie this condition. This paper, grounded in the bioecological model, aims to analyse the psychological dimensions regarding the functioning of Public Employment Services (PESs) in three countries that rely on the South Mediterranean welfare model. Between November 2022 and September 2023, research was conducted across six rural PES locations in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, based on interviews and focus groups with PES operators and young NEET users. Thematic analysis identified two central axes: Enhancing Relationships and Building Strategic Action, which were crucial for improving NEET-PES interactions and fostering connections between PES and other community entities. The results highlighted the importance of psychological elements in the effective involvement of NEETs in policy initiatives.

Keywords: PES; rural NEETs; South Mediterranean countries; youth employment; employment policies



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1. Introduction

The NEET status classification, an acronym for “Not in Employment, Education, or Training”, has evolved as a considerable socio-economic and psychological challenge within the contemporary European context (Petrescu et al. 2022). NEETs represent a heterogeneous group of young people between the ages of 15 and 34 who are disengaged from the labour market and non-formal learning, often navigating through complexities exacerbated by numerous socio-psychological and structural barriers (Ellena et al. 2023). This condition has been a persistent problem across the European Union for several years, especially in the southern countries, where it presents an average rate of 11.7% (Eurostat 2023b). Nevertheless, for some, it can become a means of survival since they feel that the labour market cannot offer them adequate job insertion.

The Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese contexts—which present a Mediterranean Welfare State model—reveal a web of multifaceted challenges, such as disparities in educational and employment opportunities, socio-economic stratification, and regional inequalities (Alfieri and Ellena 2020; Prieto-Flores et al. 2020; Simões et al. 2020), contributing to the propulsion and maintenance of NEETs’ conditions (Erdogan et al. 2021). In addition, rural contexts are often conditioned by limited access to quality education, employment opportunities, and social mobility (Ellena et al. 2021). These elements not only perpetuate a cycle of poverty

and socio-economic stagnation but expose young NEETs to a vortex of discouragement, social exclusion, and psychological distress (Simões et al. 2022). The intertwining threads of social isolation, decreased self-efficacy, and burgeoning mental health concerns among the NEET population illustrate a compelling necessity for approaches that acknowledge its psychosocial substratum (Simões et al. 2017). Indeed, most studies have focused on analysing the socio-demographic characteristics of NEETs and policies directed towards them (Furlong 2006; Jamesberger and Bacher 2014; Contini et al. 2019).

The alarming prevalence and subsequent implications of the NEET situation, particularly within the contexts of southern Europe where higher education seems not to be sufficient to counteract the phenomenon (Scandurra et al. 2023), call for meticulous research capable of formulating effective interventions that can bridge the abyss between inactive youth and constructive societal participation (Petrescu et al. 2022). According to Ferreira et al. (2023), such a complex phenomenon necessitates an analysis that comprehends the multi-layered interactions between young individuals and their encompassing ecosystems, paving the way for a perspective shaped by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979). It proposes a look at an environment constituted by four systemic levels (the macrosystem, the exosystem, the mesosystem, and the microsystem), both impacting and being impacted by the development and behaviours of everyone (Anderson et al. 2014). According to Ferreira et al. (2023), this model facilitates a comprehensive analysis of how socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors collaboratively entrench and perpetuate the NEET phenomenon while also providing a framework for exploring potential interventions and strategies from a multi-dimensional perspective.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the functioning of PES in the South Mediterranean Welfare States using a bioecological model. Following the Simões et al. (2017) approach, we suggest that PES makes a substantial difference in facilitating young people's entry and sustenance in the labour market only if the immaterial aspects are regarded, i.e., the aspects related to the soft and psychological features of the NEET situation.

1.1. Macro and Exo-Systems: The Mediterranean Welfare Model and the National PES

Italy, Spain, and Portugal sharing the "Mediterranean welfare model" as conceptualised by Ferrera (1996) and framed within Bronfenbrenner's bioecological macro-system demonstrate a distinct approach to employment facilitation. Characterised by specific policies, cultural orientations, and economic practices, this model permeates through all layers of an individual's environment, with the family at its core. It is conceptualised as a pivotal economic and welfare agent, providing employment opportunities and mediating labour market entry and maintenance through informal networks (García-Mainar and Marcuello 2016; Naldini and Saraceno 2008). This reliance on informal channels, rooted not just in culture but also in systemic and policy-driven dynamics, reinforces family dependencies and often leads to disparities in employment opportunities, heavily influenced by the strength and reach of one's informal networks. In comparison, the global phenomenon of using informal channels for job information and applications shows regional variances in the nature and effectiveness of these networks. In Southern Europe, aligned with the Mediterranean model, the importance of 'strong' ties—close personal relationships—is significantly higher, deeply embedded in the social fabric of family and neighbourhood relationships. These strong ties play a crucial role in the job market of Southern Europe, as evidenced by Granovetter's 1973 study. In contrast, Northern Europe presents a different landscape where 'relatively weak ties'—casual or less intimate connections—are more advantageous for job seekers. These weak ties provide broader, more diverse networks, offering a different but effective approach to the job search process (Granovetter 1973). This contrast highlights the varied socio-economic structures and cultural norms that shape employment practices across different European regions.

Within the bioecological model, the exosystem is represented by PES, which modulates the dynamics between young people and the labour market. PES in Italy, Spain, and Portugal stand as intermediaries between labour supply and demand. In Italy, PES

provides a range of services for various population segments, particularly youth, women, and other potentially disadvantaged groups. They also play an essential role in gathering and analysing data related to the local labour market, thus contributing to the shaping of more targeted and efficient labour strategies and policies at the territorial level. The National Agency for Active Labour Policies (Agenzia Nazionale per le Politiche Attive del Lavoro, or ANPAL) coordinates and monitors active labour policies at the national level and intertwines policies and initiatives developed centrally with those implemented locally through the PES. Therefore, the synergy between ANPAL and PES is fundamental to orchestrating an effective employment services system. While ANPAL ensures a cohesive strategic policy framework, promoting innovations and best practices and ensuring adherence to European directives, PES, with its proximity to the territory, customises and implements these interventions, ensuring they are calibrated to respond to local needs. A bilateral system emerges: PES, with its direct connection to individuals and local businesses, provides crucial feedback to ANPAL, thus contributing to the continuous evolution and adaptation of active labour policies. In the Italian context, PES and ANPAL merge into an integrated system that aspires to bridge the gap between centrally formulated policies and their efficacy at a local level.

In Spain, PES operates within a decentralised framework that aims for both national and regional elements to coalesce. At the national level, the State Public Employment Service (Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal, or SEPE) operates as the primary entity, being responsible for developing and implementing policies related to employment and unemployment protection. Its role also extends to coordinating and supervising the activities of the autonomous regional employment services, ensuring alignment and coherence in implementing policies across the nation. At the regional level, employment services are administered by the respective autonomous communities, each with its own PES. The decentralised nature of PES in Spain allows these regional entities to manage and adapt various employment programs, training initiatives, and other active labour market policies, offering a variety of services to both employers and job seekers. Dealing with disparities in economic development, unemployment rates, and labour market characteristics between the different regions further complicates coordination. In summary, the PES in Spain, with its structured but decentralised model, strives to meet the specificities of various regional labour markets while maintaining a comprehensive national strategic framework through the SEPE. Achieving harmonious functionality between all these entities remains vital for the provision of efficient and relevant PES across the different Spanish territories.

In Portugal, PESs are structured and operated through the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional, IEFP), which is the national body responsible for implementing Portuguese employment policies, particularly those related to employment, unemployment, and professional training. The IEFP works at central and local levels to ensure that policies and programmes are effectively implemented across various regions of Portugal. Through the IEFP, PES provides a range of services to both jobseekers and employers, also collaborating with several stakeholders, including social partners, vocational training schools, and local entities, to enhance its service delivery. This cooperation aims to ensure that the various programmes and initiatives are aligned with the real-world needs of the labour market, thereby maximising their relevance and impact. Portuguese PES faces several challenges, such as effectively addressing regional disparities in employment opportunities and adapting to evolving labour market needs, particularly in the context of technological advancements and changing economic paradigms. In summary, through a structured approach that encompasses both centralised policy-making and decentralised implementation through the IEFP, PES in Portugal strives to meet the differentiated demands of the country's labour market.

1.2. Micro and Meso-Systems: The Importance of Immaterial Aspects

At the micro-level, young NEETs often face multifaceted challenges, encompassing personal, family, and social dynamics that influence their trajectories. Immaterial aspects,

such as self-perception, motivation, family support, and social relationships, have an influence on their career pathways and life choices and on their propensity and capacity to engage with formal structures, such as PES (Ellena et al. 2021).

Looking at the interactions between NEETs and PESs (the micro-system), PESs are pivotal settings capable of connecting NEETs with the labour market (Petrescu et al. 2022). To this end, we highlight the importance of the interactions that PES have with other immediate contexts (the meso-system), such as families, schools, and companies, as well as the relational capacity to engage with these young individuals. Petrescu et al. (2022) highlighted that the quality of interactions, communication, and support offered by PES operators can be crucial in shaping their efficacy in assisting NEET youth. More research is needed to expand on this important result, which draws attention to the need to focus on more psychological aspects in addressing the NEETs' situation. The present study goes in this direction, highlighting the importance of understanding how these services are perceived and experienced by NEETs and technicians alike. Integrating the voices of both technicians and NEETs can unearth crucial insights into the gaps, opportunities, and challenges within PES work. Hence, by synthesising these perspectives, this paper aims to describe the less visible dimensions of PES, looking at the micro and meso systems of young individuals connected with PES. The aim is to create a greater impact to address the NEET phenomenon within the context of the South Mediterranean Welfare model.

2. Materials and Methods

For the present study, we opted for a case study approach, directing our lens towards six PES settled in the rural contexts of three Southern Mediterranean countries. According to Eurostat's Urban–Rural Typology (Eurostat 2023a), "rural areas" are identified as regions outside "urban clusters", being considered contiguous grid cells of 1 km² with at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a collective population of 5000. Regions are then categorised by the percentage of their population residing in these rural areas: "Predominantly rural" if over 50%, "Intermediate" for 20–50%, and "Predominantly urban" for less than 20%. To ensure accuracy, regions smaller than 500 km² are combined with nearby areas. The final step considers the size of urban centers within a region, with regions upgraded based on the presence of significant urban populations, ensuring a nuanced representation of the landscape.

For each country, two case studies were selected, considering both the geographic variation (north/centers and south) and the unique programmes or services offered. Regarding the latter aspect, the PES involved in the research were indicated by national agencies (ANPAL, SEPE, IEFP) as best practices in addressing the challenges associated with rural NEETs. Partnership agreements were also signed. A total of six PES were selected (two from Italy, two from Portugal, and two from Spain). They were contacted by national agencies to assess their availability to participate in the research. Once their availability was ascertained, researchers from each country contacted the head of each PES to explain the aims of the research and clarify any possible doubts. In total, 69 interviews with directors, technicians, and young NEETs were conducted using online, telephone, and face-to-face approaches. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the sample.

To achieve the objectives of the study, a qualitative methodology was employed through conducting interviews with PES technicians and NEETs. Regarding the staff, the interviews were formulated to probe into the activities, service delivery modalities, operational facets, and areas of potential malfunction within the PES. Specific emphasis was placed on exploring the modalities of engagement, retention, and follow-up with NEETs, coupled with the technician's insights into the challenges and opportunities embedded within these processes. For the latter, the interview was structured around their journey within and through PES, including how they learned about and engaged with the services, the activities they participated in, and their perceptions and experiences of the functionality and possible dysfunctionality of PES. In both cases, the aim of the interviews was to reveal experiences, perceptions, and operational dynamics that define the interaction between NEETs and the PES services.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

Case Study	Region and Country	Number of Interviews	PES Technicians	Young NEETs (F = female; M = male)
1	Sicily—Italy (South)	10	Director local PES (M) Technician local PES (F) Technician local PES (M)	M, 27, Secondary Education F, 26, Secondary Education F, 28, Secondary Education F, 28, Secondary Education F, 28, Secondary Education F, 25, Secondary Education M, 29, Secondary Education
2	Lombardy—Italy (North)	8	Director local PES (M) Technician local PES (F) Technician local PES (F)	F, 24, Secondary Education F, 24, Secondary Education M, 25, Secondary Education M, 27, Tertiary Education M, 23, Secondary Education
3	Catalonia—Spain (North)	15	Director local PES (M) Technician local PES (M) Technician local PES (F)	F, 23, Tertiary Education F, 23, Tertiary Education F, 24, Tertiary Education M, 29, Tertiary Education M, 29, Tertiary Education M, 29, Tertiary Education M, 29, Secondary Education F, 29, Secondary Education F, 23, Tertiary Education M, 25, Secondary Education F, 24, Primary Education M, 25, Tertiary Education
4	Andalusia— Spain (South)	10	Technician local PES (F) Technician local PES (M) Technician local PES (F)	F, 32, Secondary Education F, 30, Tertiary Education M, 23, Primary Education M, 29, Primary Education F, 26, Primary Education F, 27, Tertiary Education M, 29, Tertiary Education M, 29, Tertiary Education
5	Centre—Portugal	15	Director local PES (M) Technician local PES (M) Technician local PES (M)	F, 19, Tertiary Education F, 28, Tertiary Education F, 28, Tertiary Education M, 29, Tertiary Education F, 25, Tertiary Education F, 26, Tertiary Education F, 26, Tertiary Education F, 30, Tertiary Education M, 30, Tertiary Education M, 28, Tertiary Education M, 28, Tertiary Education M, 28, Tertiary Education F, 31, Tertiary Education
6	South—Portugal	14	Technician local PES (M) Technician local PES (M)	M, 26, Tertiary Education F, 30, Tertiary Education F, 26, Tertiary Education M, 35, Tertiary Education F, 23, Tertiary Education M, 26, Tertiary Education F, 30, Tertiary Education

Source: Elaborated by the researchers, 2023.

Data were analysed following a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). The interviews were conducted in native languages and later translated and transcribed into English using a back-translation method to ensure semantic integrity. After that, they were scrutinised to identify common themes across the experiences of both technicians and NEETs, using a codebook established by the researchers. The research team consisted of three people with a psychological background who read and re-read the interviews of all countries, separating those with operators of PES from those with NEETs. The three researchers were experts on the NEET phenomenon, and one of them was also responsible for data collection in one of the three countries. Reading and re-reading allowed for familiarisation with the data, during which the research team searched extensively for less visible aspects of PES functioning and tried to understand how structural aspects of PES may have an influence on those aspects. In this phase, the research team was interested in identifying common issues between operators and young adults and focused exclusively on the commonalities between the three countries while leaving out the differences. After this phase, the team built a provisional codebook that was used to analyse the whole data corpus. Every time the codebook did not adapt to the interviews, the team discussed how to modify it, working collaboratively as previously described by Corvino et al. (2023). When a final version of the codebook was created, one researcher analysed the whole dataset again accordingly.

3. Results

Table 2 provides the results, highlighting two themes that indicate the intangible aspects that PESs need to focus on when addressing NEETs: (a) enhancing relationships and (b) building strategic action. Each of these themes includes subthemes indicating modalities used by technicians or modalities desired by NEETs to be reached by PESs. Each theme will be presented, including the perspective of both technicians and young NEETs, for each selected country, providing quotations that represent cases where the theme was “reached” and where it was not “reached”. Indeed, in both cases, the importance of the theme has been justified.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes Identified.

Themes	Subthemes
Enhancing Relationships	Providing/Receiving Personalised Attention and Humanity Providing/Receiving Support
Building Strategic Action	Building/Being Target of the Networking Building/Being Target of Effective Communication

3.1. Enhancing Relationships

This theme describes the importance of creating and nurturing attentive and supportive relationships between technicians and NEETs (see Table 3).

The first subtheme is related to providing/receiving personalised attention and humanity. Narratives revealed how personalised attention and humanity are crucial factors because when PES technicians have the time and capacity to listen to young adults and understand their journeys and desires, they can propose to them jobs or training that are in line with their personal situations, and young adults feel recognised and heard. Personalising the intervention means tailoring the PES programmes with a personalised approach and not in a generalised way. This makes programmes more engaging for young people, who may feel they are better suited to their needs. Some PES technicians tried to work with this perspective, suggesting personalised itineraries. This means focusing on understanding the person that was in front of them in all their complexity and demonstrating care for the young people’s interests. Providing personalised service from the perspective of PES technicians also means being able to listen to youth, but also to companies to provide them with the human resources they need. In this way, they responded to young people’s

desire to be seen in their humanity and psychological needs. To be truly heard, young people want to be recognised not only as a social issue to be addressed but as a resource to be valued. Providing individualised attention means respecting their inclinations and attitudes, which in turn enhances their engagement.

Table 3. Subtheme Personalised Attention and Humanity.

Subtheme	PES Technicians: Providing	Youth: Receiving
Personalised Attention and Humanity	According to their interests and hobbies, we also had some activities that focused on what they liked to do in general and we tried to channel it into a profession that later would be motivating for them to look for (Portugal).	My experience with the Employment Centre tells me that they should be more attentive to the individuality of each one, so it is not like sending them all to training just because, and we are all getting a pittance a day (...) they must look at each person as an individual being who has their own skills and aspirations and orient them in that direction (Portugal).
	If you opt to stay engaged with the PES, a profiling process is conducted to determine your aid class as a worker. Currently, there are four help classes. Class 1, to put it simply, is the most straightforward; it involves easier relocation and does not necessitate any training. On the other hand, Classes 2, 3, and 4 require the worker to undertake training. In these scenarios, since the training is provided by the PES, the decision is often referred to an accredited operator. This includes training and an agreement with the worker, aimed at bridging the gap between their existing knowledge and the desires and skills required by the company (Italy).	I received a job offer by email, never related to my field of work. I have also sometimes been sent information about a course that was also not related to my field (Spain).
	We do a lot of outreach, and then people come to us. They may be more or less lost; we try to make it a very on-demand, personalised proposal, and we adapt a lot. But in this case, the approach was different. We go for you, and we go wherever you are. This technician has been like her mother during these three months of training (Spain).	More guides are needed. They say that young people do not work, but they do not have any orientation. They do not have someone who approaches them; for example, the SAE or the SEPE should enter the institutes because you can obtain by with help, even in the short term, but in the medium and long term, what are you going to do? Give me an opportunity for a training course linked to a job. Let us train, let us guide. We do not want to make an appointment just to help us apply for temporary financial aid. They should do more than that (Spain).
	Our work is based on personalised itineraries of insertion, so it is perfectly defined [which ...] allows you to adapt to the person you are assisting at that moment. The basis is the individual interview you do with the person (Spain).	We would like them [PES operators] to be less robotic (Spain).

Another important subtheme was related to support (see Table 4 for quotations): mentoring and monitoring processes conducted by PES technicians, underpinned by genuine care and attention, foster a more conducive environment for the engagement of young people. Indeed, when this happens, NEETs perceive that PES technicians can provide for them, which is a sign of support. Therefore, support can be given by following up constantly, not only with young individuals but also with people working with them. Contrasting stories also highlighted the cumbersome nature of bureaucratic processes, which sometimes impede the facilitation and provision of services. Support involves not just starting a project but sustaining it as activities continue. In certain cases, monitoring and follow-up actions persist even after the formal end of the proposed programme. Such practices ensure sustained engagement and provide the assistance needed to mitigate long-term school dropout.

Table 4. Subtheme Support.

Subtheme	PES Technicians: Providing	Youth: Receiving
Support	<p>This technician was in charge of following up with the students. WhatsApp groups were created. There was no daily monitoring, but there was monitoring of all the students in all the courses. We had daily contact with the monitors of the course about the absences and how it had gone (Spain).</p> <p>We always try to have a kind of follow-up and be aware of the development, both in terms of training and employability and everything else, and we try to have that follow-up (Portugal).</p> <p>If this project had not been for the involvement, the care, the work, it would not have come out. This one is still good, but for the economic aid to entrepreneurs, they changed the criteria in the middle, so they left a lot of aid out because of a change in criteria they made (Spain).</p>	<p>I did not come here often. But when I did come, they were available and tried to help me in any way. I do not know the director, but I know the employees; more or less, the staff has always provided support (Italy).</p> <p>I feel very supported because they know that I am alone with two small children, and they accompany me. If there is a course they know I cannot do in person, they give me facilities to do it online, and this helps me a lot (Spain).</p> <p>The project helped a lot in terms of encouraging me that “you can do it” and “you can fight and do everything you can to follow your dream” (Portugal).</p> <p>However, for any course, for anything that was available, and they called me, I would come anyway, and while I was here, whatever I needed, they were immediately available (Italy).</p> <p>They have been there for me (Italy).</p>

3.2. Building Strategic Action

This theme refers to the way in which PESs relate to other social actors that interact with young people and the type of communication used to involve them.

The first subtheme was related to networking (see Table 5 for quotations), where both technicians and young people underscored the value of constructing relationships to address the employment of young people in a systemic and integrated manner. Establishing partnerships with companies and actively involving schools and training centres were often cited as strategies that enriched and extended the support offered to NEETs. Narratives also reflected cases where isolation—whether of NEETs or PES in their operational context—diminished the effectiveness and reach of interventions, thus limiting opportunities for collective involvement and support. The issue of networking also has repercussions in the Mediterranean Welfare State, which is mainly based on family and informal networks, as well as in the rural context, where elements do not provide all young people with the same opportunities. In the case of PES technicians, networking with schools and companies is difficult because the former does not have a preventive perspective, while the latter perceives PES only as a service provider and not as an intermediary to be used when looking for someone to hire. For young people, being introduced to active labour policies while they are still in school means positioning them for early career guidance, which could lead to a decline or prolongation of the NEET condition. Young individuals can benefit from the networks established by PES with the business world through a process of familiarisation or by taking advantage of projects built on shared strategies.

The other subtheme (see Table 6) is related to effective communication with stories that portray the positive impact of proximity practices. Engaging in community events and utilising informal communication tools, such as WhatsApp, facilitated communication among the youth and technicians. Indeed, PES technicians reported that word of mouth represents one of the most successful strategies to engage youth. Conversely, instances where communication leaned heavily on formal and generalised strategies (e.g., emails, mailing lists, etc.) were often depicted as potential barriers, fostering disconnection and inhibiting personalised interactions. Young people report a greater interest in communications that reach them directly and personally (in line with the preference for individualised attention described in the theme “enhancing relationships”), demonstrating that proximity practices are more effective for their engagement.

Table 5. Subtheme Networking.

Subtheme	PES Service: Building	Youth: Being the Target of
Networking	<p>While there is an appreciation for the existing initiative, it might be more effective if PES were to engage with students before they leave school instead of waiting until after they have graduated. This ‘leap into the void’, where students finish their education and then enter the world of work, could be bridged more smoothly. PESs play a role in this transition. However, in my opinion, it is essential to reach out to students earlier, not waiting until they have left school, to guide them towards the job centre and subsequently into employment. Incorporating this support into schools, specifically targeting students in their final year, could potentially be beneficial (Italy).</p> <p>Where we are going to put more emphasis is on intermediation. We hardly have clients in private companies. They are not obliged, and we cannot oblige them, but we have to make ourselves attractive. The perception is difficult to change; there has always been a perception of the Employment Service as a service provider, not as an intermediary (Spain).</p>	<p>We do not hear about job offers; there are none on the internet, very, very few. In the cities, it will be a different story, but here, it is all very familiar, and when someone is needed, they use an acquaintance (Spain).</p> <p>In my opinion, it is important to know about these opportunities beforehand. I was late in notifying the job centre about my unemployment because a friend told me about it. However, if I had been informed about these opportunities while still in school, it would have been better. I could have applied immediately and saved time. (Italy).</p>

Table 6. Subtheme Effective Communication.

Subtheme	PES Service: Building	Youth: Being the Target of
Effective Communication	<p>There is a municipality that we had not identified, and then when we worked with them, we realised that the sociocultural agent was almost like a father to the young people, and he brought us some students almost forced. He works at the Casa de Cultura and carries out activities with them in the afternoons, and of course, they were the same young people to whom the course was offered as an opportunity to stay in the municipality. He had a list of potentials. It was a very specific area with no nearby municipalities, small . . . but that recruitment work was already conducted because I had (through him) a list of ideal people to participate in it (Spain). When it was time to call them, the first contact was by phone; you had to call at 12 o’clock; sometimes they see a long number and do not answer, and you leave a message; if the cousin or friend has signed up, they gave you another phone number, and then through these informal networks is how you can reach them (Spain).</p> <p>We also have some career days. They are proposed to them; for example, one will be held soon in a very well-known area where there will be a meeting with companies looking for very specific personnel. So, during this period, we are very dedicated to that, meaning searching and contacting our unemployed individuals who could fit the profiles sought and informing them about it [. . .] To show them how to access our site, always leave them a reminder of how to do the search (Italy).</p> <p>When you interviewed the student and asked how they found out about it, it was through word of mouth. That is how it works in the municipalities (Spain).</p>	<p>We found out about the course because it was published on Facebook. It was published by the city council. And in fact, they made so much hype on Facebook that there were so many people (Spain).</p> <p>I think that in order to work better, they have to modernise the platform; they have to make it more dynamic but adaptable to the dynamics of the labour market itself (. . .) my boss did not like the experience of working with them (. . .) he complained. There are some obstacles and a lack of communication with the Employment Centre from the employer’s point of view (Portugal).</p> <p>o encourage them and to get us to really zoom in on this, we should have meetings. I am thinking of light, easy-going meetings where we can also just share stuff, you know? It should not always be just me talking and you listening. But thinking about public squares [. . .] If you bring music and food, people will show up—that is a sure thing. Maybe we could also organise an easy-going afternoon to invite the youth out to the square. Let us do workshops—not just one-way conversations but interactive sessions, especially focused on what we would be doing in the programmes. We should find a way to present it differently and make it interesting and engaging for them (Italy).</p>

4. Discussion

Grounded in the bioecological model, the present study aims to analyse the psychological dimensions regarding the functioning of Public Employment Services (PESs) in

three countries that rely on the South Mediterranean welfare model. Our results reached this aim by adding evidence to Petrescu and colleagues' study (2022), suggesting that the quality of interactions between PES technicians and young adults is crucial for shaping the efficacy of interventions. They also go towards building a psychological approach to address the NEET phenomenon, as suggested by Simões et al. (2017). While the results bring to light a number of good practices within PES where young people felt supported and accompanied, the overall view of the results indicates that these cases are not representative of the experience of the young people as a whole since these practices are somewhat isolated and exceptional. Further, amongst these same cases, there are still fundamental issues that permeate, related to communication and management, which is indicative of more universal areas for improvement within PES in the Mediterranean context. We, therefore, conclude that within the realm of the microsystem (defined as the immediate environment in which a person interacts, such as home, school, or workplace, influencing their development through direct interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and others), the attentive and affectionate relationship should be improved in the functioning of PES. It is, therefore, crucial for PES technicians to build strong relationships with the young people they serve, listening to their unique stories and, as much as possible, offering individualised and personalised proposals. At the same time, providing support throughout all phases of action implementation, not just at the beginning, proves to be a winning strategy for keeping young people involved in these processes. Furthermore, it is essential to approach them with outreach strategies and events that, once again, are designed specifically for them and the local context in which they reside. These findings complement and extend the research trajectories highlighted in the study by Rosina et al. (2021), where the significant role of operators in building relationships with youth is identified as crucial. Within the scope of the mesosystem, strategic action that emphasises networking and effective communication is a critical aspect. PES, through the creation of networks with schools, companies, and third-sector organisations, can transcend their traditional role as a mediator, evolving into a catalyst for change and development within the local employment ecosystem. By facilitating and participating in collaborative initiatives and partnerships, PES potentially amplifies its impact, not only responding to immediate employment needs but also contributing to building a supportive, integrated, and sustainable employment landscape for rural NEETs. The development of systemic partnerships to facilitate a smooth transition into the workforce is crucial in various contexts. This is exemplified in the work of Broadbent and Cacciattolo (2013), who explore the role of school–community partnerships in creating successful transition pathways for young people. Additionally, the importance of these partnerships is further reinforced in the study by Salon et al. (2019), which delves into innovative strategies for customised employment and underscores the value of enhanced partnerships across different systems.

A symbiotic interplay is witnessed as micro and meso systems intertwine. Relationships cultivated at the micro-level potentially feed and are fed by the collaborative and networked initiatives that develop at the meso-level. Thus, the personalised and relationship-oriented support approach, when integrated into a well-connected and collaborative local ecosystem, can potentially increase the effectiveness and impact of PES, navigating through the challenges and opportunities that define rural NEETs within the South Mediterranean context.

Future Directions

Contemplating future paths and extending this research to cover more countries within the South Mediterranean region and beyond presents a valuable trajectory. Adopting a comparative approach would not only allow for the exploration of commonalities and divergences across varied contexts but would also facilitate the distillation of insights and strategies that are universally resonant while also being finely attuned to the localised nuances and specificities of different regions and countries. Ultimately, this research provides a preliminary yet deeply insightful portrait of the multifaceted world that defines the

interaction between rural NEETs and PESs. The experiences, challenges, and triumphs that have emerged, woven through the layers of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model, spark a dialogue that transcends mere employment strategies, referring to a holistic, integrative, and empathetic lens through which we perceive, understand, and navigate the nuanced landscapes of youth employment, social support, and development trajectories.

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