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Hutchinson, Sarah

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A Qualitative Exploration of Post-16 Education and Student Experience: *The inextricable link between learning, life and identity.*

Government Policies

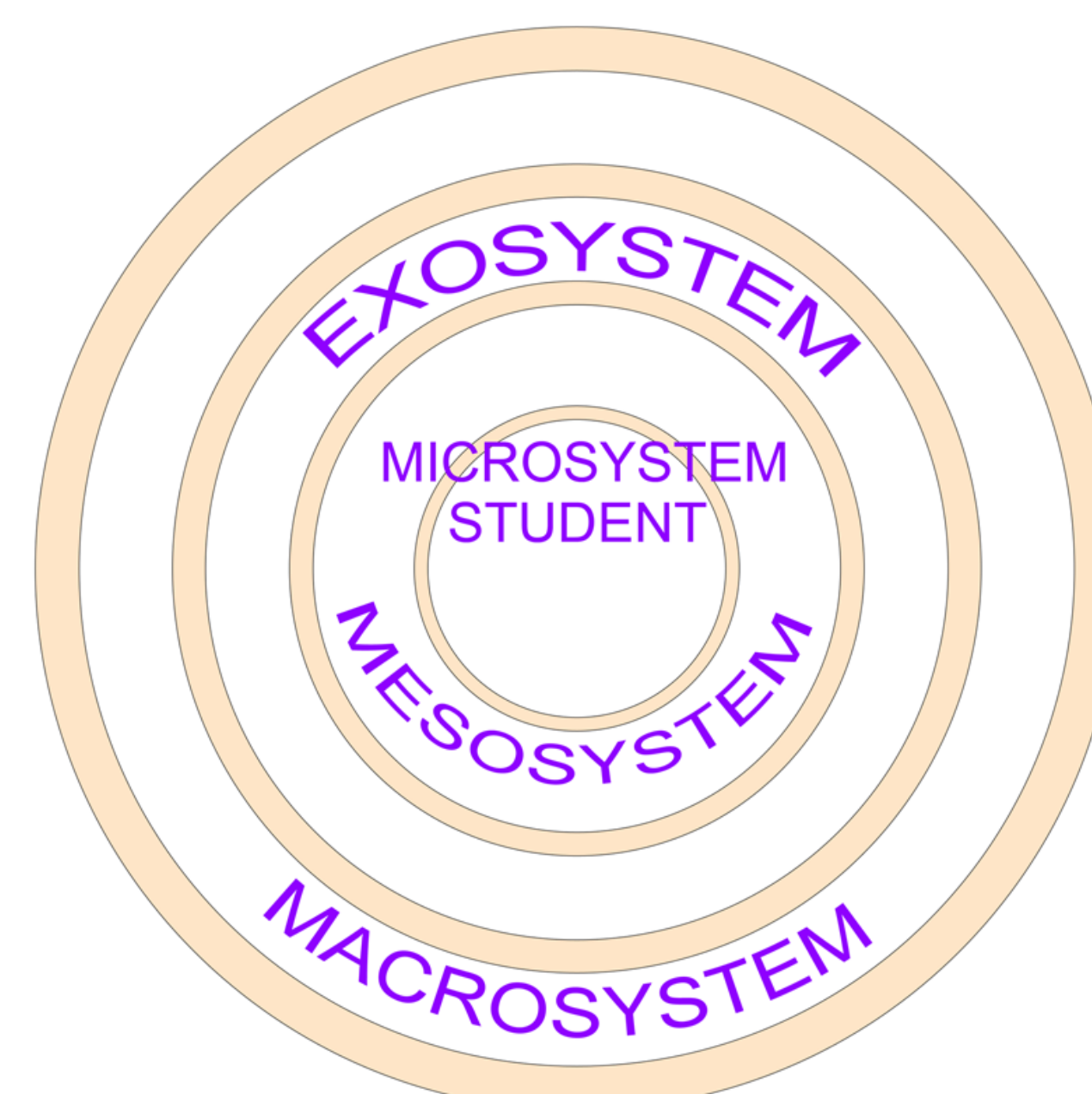
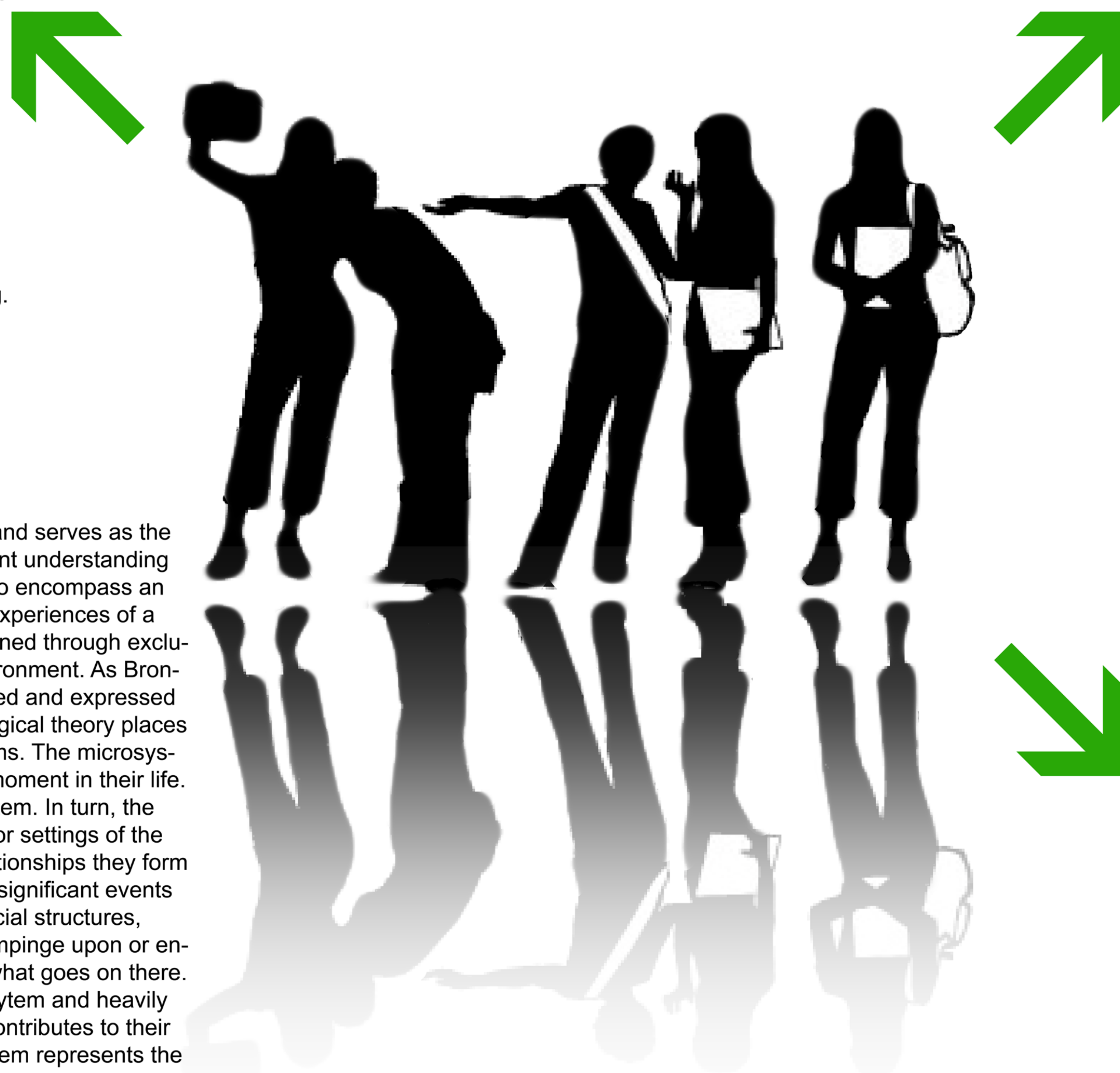
The educational landscape of further education (FE) will undergo radical change over the next 5 years. This stems from the Foster Report (2005) whereby the role of FE colleges came under scrutiny and it was concluded that they were not realising their full potential. It was found that 200,000 16-18 year olds were not in employment, education or training, 14% of adults of working age have no qualifications and over 5 million adults have literacy and numeracy skills below level 1. Concerns for the British education system arose from the report as it was found that Britain suffered in the international educational league tables. The UK had fallen in a set of rankings which compared reading, mathematics and science standards in 57 nations- accounting for 90% of the world's economy. In reading 15 year olds had dropped from 7th place in 2000 to 17th, and in maths fell from 8th place to 24th, placing them below the international average. The UK has now been overtaken by countries such as Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands, with Hong Kong in the top rankings. Along with a growing unease that Britain as an economic market is suffering internationally, the statistics prompted the Foster Report to publish a comprehensive set of reforms across the whole of the FE system in the hope to fuel economic achievement through colleges which can provide a greater choice of courses and learning modes, streamlining qualifications and learning pathways and better specialisation in Centres of Vocational and Excellence Skills. Emerging from the Foster Report (2005) the government proposed the Education and Skills Bill (2007) this green paper is aimed at 14-19 year olds but specifically targets the post 16 age group. It introduces a requirement to remain in education or training beyond the current statutory leaving age of 15/16 years of age. By 2015 the statutory leaving age will be 18, with students participating in some form of education or training. It is hoped that the drive for increased participation and achievement in economically valuable skills will help to deliver a nation of world-class skills by 2020, with the UK as a whole benefiting 'through increased productivity and economic performance, and increased social cohesion and mobility.'

Theoretical Concepts

The diagram represents Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of development and serves as the underpinning framework and theoretical lens for my research. This provides a coherent understanding of the complex environment in which every individual is situated. Although designed to encompass an individual's entire lifespan, I use the framework to specifically explore the world and experiences of a college student. A key assumption of this theory is that development cannot be explained through exclusive consideration of the individual, but must also explore the complexity of their environment. As Bronfenbrenner noted, 'Development never takes place in a vacuum, it is always embedded and expressed through behaviour in a particular environment' (p.27, 1979). Accordingly, the bioecological theory places the individual at the centre of their world, envisioned as a series of interrelated systems. The microsystem is the settings which contains an individual, or in this case a student, at a given moment in their life. Home life and family, college, friends and teachers comprise a student's microsystem. In turn, the mesosystem is the set of microsystems made up of the interactions between the major settings of the student and particular points in their life. A student's mesosystem will contain the relationships they form at college with friends and staff and at home with family members, it will also include significant events or situations they are a part of. In addition, the exosystem is composed of specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate setting of the individual and thereby influence or determine what goes on there. The structure and practices of the college predominately constitute a student's exosystem and heavily influence their behaviour and attitudes. In addition to this a student's home life also contributes to their behaviour and development for example parent's employment. Finally, the macrosystem represents the societal blueprint and includes core cultural, legal, political, religious, economic and educational values of a given society. This influences the nature of interactions within all other levels of the ecology of human development. In the case of a college student their macrosystem is comprised of the government's educational policies and legislation, in particular the legislation to increase the school leaving age to 18. In recognising the mediating role of the environment, Bronfenbrenner's theory utilises the assumption that development and learning experiences can only be understood through consideration of the social networks in which they are embedded. I believe that is essential to consider these interrelated levels and networks and their contribution to understanding the realities of further education and the experiences of the students in order to promote better pedagogical and inclusive practices. Incorporated with Bronfenbrenner's work, is Wenger's literature on communities of practice. I intend to employ Wenger's theory as it attempts to encapsulate how students construct their identity at college and enables an insight into how students learn and participate in the community which constitutes their further education.

In utilising the core concepts of Bronfenbrenner's and Wenger's theories I hope to produce a piece of research with true insight and realistic recommendations for colleges and policy makers.

Sarah Hutchinson



The College and its Practices

My focal college has over 2000 students between the ages of 16 and 18 and provides courses from foundation (and GCSE) to advanced level covering a variety of subjects, including vocational courses at all levels. The college recruits a diverse range of students, 21% are from minority ethnic backgrounds, 28% come from economically and socially deprived areas and 15% have learning and/or disabilities. The practices of the college are structured around the principal's vision and commitment to provide a supportive and inclusive environment to enable individual learners to achieve their potential. The way in which the college runs is very much dependent upon the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and other funding bodies, government educational policy, the syllabuses and specifications of the different subject areas and Ofsted (government inspectors and regulators). Interwoven with this are the college's own rules and expectations for students and staff all of which influence how teachers deliver their lessons and the relationships they form with the students. Pressures of time, energy, and resources heavily influence delivery of teaching along with the experiences and personalities of the teachers. Students are expected to adhere to the student code of conduct which covers academic expectations: attending lessons and bringing equipment, handing in homework, and behavioural expectations: treating staff and fellow students with respect, displaying non-discriminatory behaviour and respecting the college environment. The college's practices greatly influence students' experience of education, their construction of identity and participation and the social relationships they form.

Student Life-Stories

This narrative approach aims to delve into the personal histories and biographies of focal students in order to explore their educational life-stories. This will provide a rich, detailed and multi-layered account of each student's experience of education and gain insight into their life at college, enabling the student to voice their feelings, views and experiences to gain a better understanding of their educational journeys and stories. The construction of these educational stories will illustrate how students feel about their identification and participation within college in the hope to promote and encourage inclusive college practices for all students. Through implementation of a narrative approach I will be able to know an experience in the same way a student knows it, allowing the students to arrange critical events or incidents in their lives and highlight significant points. This may include aspects of life outside of college in the student's home or social life but which also contributes to their educational experience. Taken together, biographical, life histories and educational journeys highlight the perspective of the student in a story form.

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