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# Further Education and Social Inclusion under New Labour

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Ph.D. on the Basis of Published Work

University of Huddersfield  
June 2011

# Further Education and Social Inclusion under New Labour

Studies in the (re)production of class-based inequalities through post-compulsory  
education and training in England

Ronald Thompson

Publications and commentary submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on the Basis of Published Work

University of Huddersfield

June 2011

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# Further Education and Social Inclusion under New Labour

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## Abstract

This investigation analyses the production and reproduction of class-based social inequality within the Further Education and Skills system in England, with a particular focus on the years of Labour government following the 1997 General Election. New Labour policy on further education (FE) continually emphasised the importance of reforming the sector for a dual role: contributing to UK economic competitiveness by expanding the skills base; and promoting social inclusion by integrating vulnerable people into job markets and society more broadly. The published work submitted here investigates how this 'reform agenda' unfolded in three key aspects of FE provision, and examines the ways in which inequality continued to be produced and reproduced, in spite of the proposed key role for FE in social inclusion. The aspects considered are the training and workplace development of FE teachers, the rehabilitation of creativity within discourses of knowledge economy and social cohesion, and programmes for young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). In addition to the published work, a commentary outlines the context and main arguments of each paper, explains my contribution to the three co-authored publications and discusses the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the investigation. The commentary concludes by discussing the overall contribution to knowledge of the work and its theoretical significance.

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# Further Education and Social Inclusion under New Labour

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Commentary in Support of the Published Work

## **Introduction**

The work submitted for the award of *PhD on the Basis of Published Work* consists of eight papers which appeared in international peer-reviewed journals during the period 2007-11. The publications submitted are grouped as follows (brief titles for each paper are given in brackets):

### ***The classed nature of FE for young people:***

- Thompson, R. (2009a) Social class and participation in further education: evidence from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(1), 29-42. [*Social Class*]

### ***Discourses of social inclusion in provision for NEET young people:***

- Thompson, R. (2011a) Individualisation and social exclusion: the case of young people not in education, employment or training, *Oxford Review of Education*, 37(6), forthcoming. [*Individualisation and Social Exclusion*]
- Thompson, R. (2011b) Reclaiming the disengaged? A Bourdieuan analysis of work-based learning for young people in England, *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(1), 15-28. [*Reclaiming the Disengaged*]

### ***The training and workplace development of FE teachers:***

- Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2007) Aiming higher: how will universities respond to changes in initial teacher training for the post-compulsory sector in England? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31(2), 171-182. [*Aiming Higher*]
- Thompson, R. and Robinson, D. (2008) Changing step or marking time? Teacher education reforms for the Learning and Skills sector in England, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(2), 161-173. [*Changing Step*]
- Thompson, R. (2010) Teaching on the margins: tutors, discourse and pedagogy in work-based learning for young people, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 62(2), 123-137. [*Teaching on the Margins*]

### ***Creativity and discourses of knowledge economy and social inclusion:***

- Simmons, R. and Thompson, R. (2008) Creativity and performativity: the case of further education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(5), 601-618. [*Creativity and Performativity*]
- Thompson, R. (2009b) Creativity, knowledge and curriculum in further education: a Bernsteinian perspective, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 57(1), 37-54. [*Creativity, Knowledge and Curriculum*]

Each publication examines a particular aspect of the further education (FE) system in England and relates it to neo-liberal discourses on social inclusion and UK economic competitiveness, in the specific form given them by successive Labour governments.

New Labour policy on FE continually emphasised the importance of reforming the sector for a dual role: expanding the skills base, thereby contributing to UK economic competitiveness; and promoting social inclusion by equipping vulnerable people with the knowledge and skills required for integration into job markets and wider society. The papers critically analyse how the FE system continued, under Labour governments whose declared aims were to promote inclusion and social mobility, to reproduce inequalities structured along the lines of social class. Taken together, the publications seek to answer a number of questions of key concern to understanding how class is made – and in some ways, re-made – through the practices and discourses of contemporary FE. These questions are:

1. How did New Labour conceptions of the role of education and training influence principles for selecting and distributing the knowledge and skills transmitted by the FE system, and how do these principles work through specific areas of the FE curriculum?
2. In the context of young people, what is the structure of FE as a classed location, and what are the implications of this structure for understanding the relationship of FE to other areas of the education system?
3. In what ways did the characteristic discourses on social exclusion associated with New Labour interact with other neo-liberal discourses to affect the experiences of marginalised young people?
4. To what extent can ‘grand theories’ of social reproduction provide valid and contextually sensitive accounts of micro-processes operating in contemporary FE?
5. How does FE contribute to the making of class under contemporary conditions of individualisation and globalisation?

The publications have been grouped as follows. The first paper deals with an underpinning issue, namely the classed nature of FE colleges and the continuing relevance of class as an analytical category through which the participation of young people can be approached. The remaining papers address the questions raised above within the context of three related issues: programmes for young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training); the training and

workplace development of FE teachers; and the rehabilitation of creativity within discourses of knowledge economy and social cohesion. These issues are all significantly affected by neo-liberal discourse on the role of post-compulsory education in a globalised economy, and provide an opportunity for exploring how knowledge, curriculum and inclusion are constructed through specific contexts. Furthermore, they are inter-related, in that discourses of curriculum and inclusion profoundly influence how teaching and teachers are conceptualised. The three issues are also related to class structures and social divisions, both in education and society more broadly, raising questions about the persistence and conceptualisation of structural inequalities in a period when processes of individualisation are said to have diminished the relevance of collective analytical categories such as class, gender and race.

The commentary begins by briefly summarising each paper, the context surrounding them and the links between different papers. My contribution to the three co-authored papers is also described. This part of the commentary identifies concepts which underpin the papers and provide some of the coherence of the work as a whole: these include social inclusion and exclusion, globalisation, and processes of individualisation in a 'risk society'. The commentary continues with a more extended discussion of theorisations of class and social reproduction. It relates these key concepts to the theoretical perspectives within the publications and provides further discussion of some important considerations treated only briefly in the papers. It also considers further developments of the framework used in the papers, including how intersections of class, gender and race are being developed in my current research.

The publications employ a range of methodological approaches, including policy scholarship, secondary analysis of quantitative data, and ethnography; these methodologies and their epistemological framework are discussed in the subsequent section of the commentary and my role in the research process is explained. The final section of the commentary discusses the significance of the work as a contribution to knowledge, both in the field of FE research and its theoretical significance more broadly. Some ways in which the work can be further developed are explored, with particular emphasis on the intersectionality of social class with gender and race in my current research interests, which build on the papers in this submission and move forward its theoretical and methodological frameworks.

## Summaries of the publications

Although further education is often regarded as culturally and historically working-class, its positioning within the class system needs to be interpreted and used with some care. Participation in the sector and its antecedents by those from higher social classes has always been significant, and it has been argued that organisations such as Mechanics' Institutes were substantially colonised by the middle classes (Royle, 1971). More recently, FE has traditionally provided a refuge or second chance for middle-class young people disinclined or unable to continue their education in school (Avis, 1994). Furthermore, proponents of individualisation argue that class is less relevant to the discussion of social issues than in earlier periods, proposing instead that modern social risks arising from trends such as globalisation affect all classes (Beck, 1992). Nevertheless, class-based patterns of participation in FE continue to be significant.

*Social Class and Participation in Further Education* (Thompson, 2009a) conducts a secondary analysis of quantitative data from the Youth Cohort Study to analyse the social class composition of FE colleges, for young people aged 16-17 years. This paper can be related to a tradition of 'political arithmetic' in the sociology of education (Heath, 2000; Lauder et al. 2004), a style of quantitative research which focuses on class inequalities in education. Heath notes the paucity of official data on social class and educational achievement over time, which resulted in political arithmetic relying heavily on sample survey research. This was also the case in *Social Class*. Although some broad data on educational participation and social class was available, it was insufficiently detailed; the rich data of the Youth Cohort Study was essential to conduct the work. The paper finds that participation by middle-class young people in FE colleges is relatively high, but suggests that this derives from two factors: the high participation rate in all sectors of education by middle-class young people, and a tendency for low-achieving middle-class students to remain in education, using further education as a second chance. For high achievers, preference for schools and sixth-form colleges is considerably greater amongst the middle class than for working-class young people.

Although the political arithmetic tradition has been relatively atheoretical, preferring to concentrate on the delineation of social conditions (Heath, 2000), *Social Class* provides a discussion and interpretation of its data based on the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein. The statistical trends uncovered are discussed in the light of habitus and field, and also by drawing on research into the school experiences of middle-

class young people (Power et al. 2003), which suggests that middle-class transitions from school to work or higher education are not necessarily smooth or unbroken. The paper argues that, whilst it is important to recognise middle-class presence in the sector, FE is differently positioned for middle-class and working-class students.

### ***Discourses of social inclusion in provision for NEET young people***

The next two papers consider class-based inequalities in the context of young people at risk of social exclusion – specifically, of being not in education, employment or training (NEET). *Individualisation and Social Exclusion* (Thompson, 2011a) reviews research on NEET young people, exploring the extent to which class remains a central explanatory concept whilst acknowledging that the ways in which class contributes to the experiences of young people are increasingly diversified. Although risks associated with early departure from education affect all social classes, those with least material and cultural resources are likely to be affected most severely. Using a typology of discourses on social exclusion (Levitas, 2005), the paper argues that one of the main disadvantages of the NEET category is its basis in horizontal conceptions of inclusion, in which the aim is minimal: to bring people across the boundary between participation and non-participation. Within such conceptions, vertical inequalities in education and employment disappear, as do the wealth and power of those in privileged positions. Submitted shortly after the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in May 2010, the paper briefly looks ahead to coalition policies on education and suggests that, although similar discourses of inclusion through education are evident, greater marketisation and public expenditure reductions are likely to exacerbate inequalities in education and work. Indeed, the Education White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) contains ‘more of the same’ (see Avis, under review) in terms of discourse on education and inclusion.

*Reclaiming the Disengaged?* (Thompson, 2011b) draws on a Bourdieuan framework to analyse and synthesise findings from a one-year ethnographic study of Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes in the north of England (see the discussion of this project later in this commentary). This paper was intended partly as a response to my call for more research which foregrounds class in FE (*Social Class*), and draws together data on learners, parents and practitioners to construct an integrated field analysis along the lines mapped out in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

The paper argues that the positioning of E2E constitutes a construction of learners – largely working-class young people – as *other*, particularly in relation to their dispositions to academic and practical learning, which reinforces individual tendencies and chance circumstances to socialise many of these young people for a life of low-paid, insecure work. Although in principle concepts such as disengagement can be approached in a critical way, as relationships between young people and schooling (James and Simmons, 2007) rather than attitudes inherent to the individual, the paper analyses how discourses of disengagement and non-academic disposition contribute to the exclusion of young people from more mainstream education, and legitimise such exclusion as meeting individual needs and preferences.

### ***FE Teacher Training***

New Labour discourse on social inclusion and economic competitiveness was particularly evident in their emphasis on FE teacher training and workforce development. The ‘competitiveness settlement’ (Avis 2007a) led to an intensive focus on the FE system in which increased attention to the sector and greater funding for skills were predicated on the assumption that government was entitled to mould the sector in accordance with policy priorities. Professionalising the FE workforce was explicitly related to engaging and upskilling increasing proportions of working-class people, particularly those at risk of social exclusion. These discourses led to several attempts to reform FE teacher training in support of the supply-side initiatives favoured by New Labour, and are typified by government reports such as *Success for All* (DfES, 2002), which positioned existing arrangements as outdated and not fit for purpose.

The training and development of FE teachers is examined in three papers. *Aiming Higher* (Simmons and Thompson, 2007) was written against the backdrop of two waves of major reform. The first wave introduced compulsory teaching qualifications and national teaching standards from 2001, whilst the second, implemented in 2007, introduced further changes to the system established in 2001. Concurrently, FE teacher training was increasingly drawn into individualised approaches to student finance in higher education, and state funding for FE teacher trainees was reduced. *Aiming Higher* analyses these reforms to training curricula and funding systems, placing them in economic, social and cultural contexts which date back to the origins of further education, as well as locating them in contemporary discourse.

Both this paper and its successor, *Changing Step* (Thompson and Robinson, 2008) argue that the reforms were compromised by a reluctance to acknowledge and act upon the significant and largely class-based differences in status, resourcing and culture between further education and school teaching. As well as providing a critique of the detailed structure of the 2007 reforms, *Changing Step* provides preliminary evidence that these differences would be detrimental to workforce development. Together, these two papers suggest that, whilst highly effective in extending central control over teacher training in the sector, the reforms do not significantly challenge existing practices in recruiting, training and developing further education teachers, nor do they develop existing notions of professionalism.

Although in both papers there was continual critique and challenge of each other's work, the main responsibilities and division of labour were clear. My contribution to *Aiming Higher* (50%) began with drafting an introduction which set the overall agenda of the paper, with its central question of how universities engaged in FE teacher training were likely to respond to government reforms, particularly the intention to transfer part of the responsibility for funding to the individual trainee. Within this overall framework, I was concerned largely with analysing New Labour discourse on reforming teacher education in the sector and discussing its contradictions, as well as relating new funding arrangements to more general discourses of individualisation. In *Changing Step*, my contribution (60%) again included establishing the overall framework of the paper, followed by a focus on the nature of the 2007 reforms to the FE teacher training curriculum, their origins in New Labour discourse on further education and social inclusion. I also developed the arguments on the differential positioning of training between schools and colleges – relating them to the cultural and historical roots of further education.

The third paper in this group, *Teaching on the Margins* (Thompson, 2010) reports findings from the ethnographic study of E2E programmes discussed earlier. The paper explores the biographies of E2E tutors, their training and support, and their constructions of learners and pedagogy. It also provides a concrete illustration of some of the implications of modernising approaches to public-sector provision, in which providers from the private and voluntary sectors are given access to public funding for delivering services, including education and training (Horton and Farnham, 1999; Kettl, 2005). Although such approaches are claimed to improve quality and efficiency through competition, the paper provides evidence that training,

pay and conditions in E2E providers are under severe pressure, with negative consequences for young people. The paper contributes new data and analysis to debates over FE professionalism and the ways in which processes of upskilling, deskilling and proletarianisation (Braverman, 1974; Avis, 2007b) are worked out in contemporary FE settings.

Drawing on Fuller and Unwin's (2003) expansive-restrictive continuum of workforce development and the Bourdieuan analysis used in the *Transforming Learning Cultures* project (James and Biesta, 2007), the paper argues that the reforms discussed in *Changing Step* have been slow to permeate E2E learning cultures and that much work remains to be done to equip E2E tutors to meet the challenges posed by learners. More fundamentally, the paper traces the links between dominant discourses of learners in the field constituted by E2E and the positioning of tutors within this field, a theme also present in *Reclaiming the Disengaged*. It argues that these discourses essentialise the disengagement of some learners, regarding it as due to individual and community failings rather than being influenced by broader structures and inequalities within society. The paper provides further discussion of the 'non-academic' discourse, arguing that it polarises the distinction between practical and academic learning and creates conditions under which staff are more likely to be employed under unfavourable terms and to receive inadequate training.

### ***Creativity in a Knowledge Economy***

The decline of UK manufacturing industry since the 1970s has led to an increasing focus on the importance of the service sector, in particular those high-skills areas which form a 'knowledge economy'. Such approaches tend to conflate the knowledge economy with lower-skilled service employment, constructing a *mythological discourse* (Bernstein, 2000) of horizontal solidarities comprising workers at all levels in a post-industrial economy. In addition to technical knowledge, this discourse also encompasses the creative and cultural industries – surfacing as the 'Cool Britannia' of the early Blair years and leading to what Buckingham and Jones (2001) call the cultural turn of the first New Labour government. Creativity was heralded both as part of the knowledge economy and as contributing to social cohesion. However, although acceptable as part of the pursuit of wealth, creativity was not allowed unfettered play in the hands of teachers, and remained enmeshed in the performative culture permeating all levels of education.

*Creativity and Performativity* (Simmons and Thompson, 2008) discusses the educational discourse of creativity in the light of the culture of targets, monitoring and prescription. It argues that the socio-economic context of the further education system entails a working-out of creativity discourses which is significantly different to rhetoric on the knowledge economy – doing little more than provide a pedagogical veneer to a largely instrumental and target-driven curriculum. Within this co-authored paper, my contribution (50%) is largely centred on the educational discourse of creativity and its links with New Labour policy and the performative culture pervading education in England. Following the jointly-written introduction, I wrote the two sections on creativity in education and its embedding in a culture of performativity, as well as significant parts of later sections – relating mainly to New Labour’s approach to FE policy and processes of social reproduction in the sector.

*Creativity, Knowledge and Curriculum* (Thompson, 2009b) focuses more closely on the relationship between creativity and knowledge in FE, providing a class-based analysis which highlights the limitations of the knowledge acquired by many learners in the sector. Drawing on a Bernsteinian framework, the paper argues that principled, conceptual knowledge is marginalised in FE curriculum design, particularly where competence-based models of training predominate. This paper complements other work, notably by Avis (2004) and Wheelahan (2007; 2009), which emphasises the impact of differential access to knowledge and the potential of the FE system to act as a site of social reproduction when discourses of instrumental learning and essentialised disengagement channel working-class students away from high-status or ‘powerful’ knowledge.

Such work raises a crucial question for research into the FE curriculum. Within the so-called ‘new sociology of education’ (Young, 1971), which investigates how dominant culture shapes the experience and life chances of learners through educational systems, the dominant culture can be in many respects arbitrary. These accounts were based on an epistemic relativism, in which educational knowledge is the product of power relationships and the interests of a dominant class. More recently, authors such as Moore (2000) and Young (2008) have proposed that, whilst knowledge is socially constructed, it is not purely a social construction and certain forms of knowledge have an intrinsic value which confers epistemic as well as social benefits (Wheelahan, 2007). However, attempting to provide access to powerful knowledge by reverting to neo-conservative curriculum models is likely to reinforce educational inequality, and *Creativity, Knowledge and Curriculum* proposes an

epistemological discourse of creativity in which knowledge production and vocational skills are placed within a social context, recognising both the ability of knowledge to transcend the conditions of its creation and the power relations which select and mould the knowledge entering into a specific culture. The role of creative teaching within this perspective is to enable students to access disciplinary knowledge in a critical way *and* use it in a critique of existing social relations; by contesting instrumental and exclusive conceptions of knowledge and skill it relates to notions of 'really useful knowledge' dating back to radical education movements in the nineteenth century (Johnson, 1981).

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Social Reproduction**

Why is class important, and why should sociologists be interested in class-based analyses of social phenomena? Savage (2000) considers a number of possible conditions under which the concept of class may retain its importance in post-industrial society, despite social transformations that have undermined collective working-class identities and obscured the relationship between class and capitalist relations of production. Firstly, class may retain a theoretical significance in systems of thought, particularly Marxism; secondly, it may frame inductive generalisations from empirical data, helping us to understand social patterns; and thirdly, it may relate to social concerns and practices, including self-identity and the organisation of political activity.

Each of these reasons has, to some extent, been called into question by social change. In classical Marxism, the distinction between productive and non-productive labour is central to theorising class; however, as post-industrialism and globalisation have eroded this distinction, the exploitation of labour has come to be seen as a systemic process within capitalism (Postone, 1993). In this view, the great majority of people, including 'knowledge workers' and others who would be thought of as middle class, are subject to exploitation, and the working class loses its distinctive position within Marxist thought. By contrast, Weberian analyses of society claim no *a priori* significance for their theoretical constructs: the existence of social regularities involving class is an empirical question. However, as Savage (2000: 16) points out, this places an arbitrariness at the heart of class analysis: if we do not recognise the importance of class at the outset, why should we bother to investigate it? Other possible dimensions, such as race or gender, have as great a claim on our attention,

and perhaps more immediacy than the relatively abstract signifiers of social class. Furthermore, given the diminished consciousness of class identity compared with other influences on subjectivity, alternative sources of justification for structural analysis, such as invoking public awareness of class as a social and political issue, are problematic.

These considerations indicate that theorisations of class must keep pace with social change; however, they do not negate its importance. Although the working class may have lost its archetypal status, the conditions of the post-industrial labour market continue to differentiate middle-class trajectories from those of the working class, particularly its most disadvantaged section. In education and other areas, class-based inequalities continue to be an empirical fact of life, suggesting that capitalist production relations, cultural patterns and struggles for domination are still interrelated.

As capitalism finds new forms of labour and consumption to exploit, old categories shift but remain relevant in new ways. Within classes as well as between them, vertical gradients and horizontal cleavages can be related to changing modes of production, and neo-liberal policies aimed at increasing labour-market flexibility have constructed an economic underclass which, in political discourse and popular conception, is conflated with supposed moral deficits. Skeggs (2009) relates how certain forms of popular culture position the working class as deficient and in need of re-formation, a discourse also found in education and social policy where 'problem' groups largely drawn from the working class – such as NEET young people or benefit claimants – are constructed as part of an incipient underclass, lacking in skills and aspiration. The middle class increasingly takes a normative position, as the new particular-universal class against which others are judged (Savage, 2003); its practices are defined as 'normal', even when deeply exclusionary and likely to disadvantage other groups (Ball, 2003). At the same time, this universalist discourse absorbs the wealthiest and most privileged within the middle class, obscuring its objective position within society.

These new forms of class relations require 'a more subtle kind of class analysis ... which involves tracing the print of class in areas where it is faintly written' (Savage, 2003: 536). Rather than seeing class as expressed in collective forms of consciousness, a relational understanding is required in which class membership is defined through positions in different fields, including fields of employment, education

and cultural performance. This relational conception implies that, substantively, class is constituted by distributions in the volume, proportions and evolution of various capitals: economic, cultural, social and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1987: 4). Social reproduction, therefore, becomes a question of how such distributions persist from one generation to the next, and the extent to which they become altered, diminished or intensified. The contribution of educational systems to this process, or – as Willis (1977) bluntly puts it – ‘how working class kids get working class jobs’, remains a central question in the sociology of education (Lauder et al. 2009).

### ***Social Reproduction and Cultural Reproduction***

The central questions and issues concerning theories of reproduction through educational systems are long-established. Gewirtz and Cribb (2003) identify four fundamental problematics associated with such theories. Firstly, changes in the nature and intensity of class distinctions, as well as the processes by which they are maintained, must be taken into account. Secondly, how are universal theories combined with contextually specific explanations to produce nuanced accounts of social relations? Thirdly, what conceptions of structure and agency are used – how permeable are structures, and what are the limits of agency? Finally, what are the normative bases of reproduction theories, and how do they affect the reading of class situations and conceptions of social justice?

These questions have been evident since the 1970s, when two groups of theories emerged which claimed to account for the reproduction of the working class through processes of schooling. The first group, in which capitalist relations of production are claimed to have a direct effect on the structures of education, is best known through the correspondence principle of Bowles and Gintis (1976), who argue that class relations are reflected in the social dynamics of schools and classrooms through a ‘hidden curriculum’ which distributes skills, knowledge and values to different social groups as part of their socialisation into future class roles. Althusser (1971) relates this process to ideology: both as a set of material practices embedded in the daily lives of teachers and students, and as inscribed in the ‘unconsciousness’ of individuals (Giroux, 1983: 264). The difficulty with such universal accounts is that they are overly deterministic, providing insufficient explanation for deviations from overall trends through human agency – for example the high percentage of working-class students with low educational attainment who do not become NEET (Thompson 2011a), or the middle-class failures or rebels discussed in Power et al.

(2003) or – much earlier – in Aggleton and Whitty (1985). Although they improve on simplistic genetic explanations based on inherited ability, such directly materialistic theories of reproduction are said to represent the dominated as passive and give little hope of progress (see, however, McGrew, 2011). Nevertheless, as Carspecken (1996: 181) points out, despite its theoretical weaknesses the correspondence principle is empirically well-attested, and in the publications submitted here some use is made of work in this tradition – for example, the research by Anyon (1980) cited in *Creativity and Performativity* is used to suggest that educational spaces may be constructed in different ways by teachers, depending on the sector of education and the class origins of students.

Considerably more use is made of a second group of theories, the cultural-reproductive model closely associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who confronts the problem of structure and agency by constructing a dialectical model in which the notions of habitus and field are central. In this model, habitus is both structure and agency – embodying the history of class, family and individual relations with the field, and also underpinning individual actions. Corresponding to Althusser's model of unconscious ideological domination – in which teachers and students stand in 'an imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971: 162) – is Bourdieu's *symbolic violence*, the process by which dominant social classes induce us to recognise their claim to material and cultural power as legitimate, a necessary outcome of natural ability and superiority rather than historically contingent. For Bourdieu, the educational system performs a dual function: preparing people for dominant or subordinate roles in society and economy, and at the same time convincing them that their ultimate position is fair and natural – a process that Bourdieu refers to as *misrecognition*. Education is therefore 'one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one' (Bourdieu, 1974: 32). The idea that social inequality is systematically misrecognised as the product of innate dispositions or abilities is drawn on in *Social Class*, and in discussions of the discourses surrounding NEET young people.

As noted earlier, Bourdieu's framework is used most systematically in *Social Class* and *Reclaiming the Disengaged*, and indirectly in *Teaching on the Margins* through the concept of learning cultures, part of the explicitly Bourdieuan analysis underpinning the *Transforming Learning Cultures* (TLC) project (Hodkinson et al.

2007). The idea that fields may be hierarchically nested, combining local and immediate forces with influences from embedding fields, including the field of power, is used to retain contextual sensitivity whilst recognising the importance of more global forces, constraints and explanations. The concepts of cultural, symbolic and social capital are also widely used in the papers, and underpin my conceptualisation of the cultural dimensions of social class.

### ***Resistance and Reproduction***

Bourdieu does not neglect the possibility of resistance, which is central to his account of field as a space of struggles for domination. However, he explains that apparently resistive or submissive behaviours cannot necessarily be taken at face value: resistance and submission may take different forms, and are sometimes misrecognised as their opposite. For example, rejecting dominant cultural values may appear as an act of resistance, but by depriving an individual of access to dominant cultural capital this resistance contributes to maintaining their subordinate position. Although adopting a strategy which works so thoroughly against oneself may seem irrational, Bourdieu emphasises that the strategies adopted by individuals are not usually a result of conscious choice; rather, they arise from 'the unconscious fit between their habitus and the field they reside in' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 24).

Bourdieu's emphasis on cultural domination potentially underplays the importance of material circumstances and the constraints they place on working-class students. Furthermore, the explanation of resistance in terms of habitus and field has been seen as overly structural, sidelining individual agency and ignoring the characteristics of non-dominant cultures, except to position them as deficient (Giroux, 1983; see also Savage, 2003: 541). Stemming from such criticisms, accounts of resistance that start from the cultural agency of individuals – for example, the classic work of Willis (1977) – have enjoyed considerable popularity, particularly in ethnographic accounts that reveal the richness and variety of resistance and submission. In terms of the problematics identified by Gewirtz and Cribb (2003), resistance theories give considerable weight to agency and, as with Willis's 'lads', can combine the contextual specifics of local interactions with the external constraints and social relations that influence the consequences of resistance.

Although accusations of determinism in Bourdieu's framework may in some ways be justified (for a careful examination of criticisms of Bourdieu and the possibilities and limitations of habitus, see Reay, 2004), they can be at least partly addressed by paying careful attention to the concept of field, as a structure of forces and relations encompassing both cultural and material processes. As discussed in *Reclaiming the Disengaged*, Bourdieu does not regard habitus as a monolith *determined* by the field; it is not a collection of impersonal and substitutable practices. Rather, it arises from the reflexive interaction between the lived experience of individuals, the choices they make, and the structures of the field. Variant responses and experiences are neither wholly determined by field structure, nor a product purely of culture. Furthermore, the legitimacy of dominant culture is not mediated by culture alone – it is also produced by material conditions and differential access to resources. The inter-convertibility of cultural and material capital, with exchange value constantly revised as conditions change within the field, implies that every cultural process is also a material process, and differential access to resources can produce a range of cultural outcomes. As Reay (2004: 435) points out, the interaction of habitus and field can produce a continuum of outcomes which are nevertheless recognisably linked to conditions of living.

### ***Bernstein and Pedagogic Discourse***

Both Bourdieu and Bernstein are interested in the structural analysis of the social practices involved in schooling and their relationship to power and control within society more broadly; in different but related ways they produced dense theoretical languages intended to describe and analyse social phenomena. Both provide accounts of how the micro-relations and interactions of schooling mediate larger-scale power structures (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2009: 43). As we have seen, reproduction theories of the correspondence kind tend to present education as a simple relay for external structures and power relations. They neglect the relative autonomy of educational institutions, and ignore the ways in which what actually goes on in schools or colleges – content as well as pedagogy – contributes to reproduction. In different ways, the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein provide 'languages of description' (Bernstein, 2000) to analyse the processes operating at a micro-level that produce difference and inequality: 'How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control' (Bernstein, 1971: 47). In their analyses, both draw on Marxist categories, extending the social significance of

capitalist relations of production from material to symbolic systems – as in Bourdieu’s cultural capital – and asserting the primacy of the class structure in shaping content, access and change in education (Bernstein, 1977: 475). Although both are interested in the analysis of educational processes as a way of illuminating more general sociological principles, Bernstein’s language is more specifically designed to address what goes on in schools and colleges. For Bernstein, the structure of pedagogic discourse itself is an important part of the processes of reproduction, by distributing knowledge, projecting specific forms of educational identity, and regulating the practices taking place in institutions.

At different times in this investigation, I have found that either Bernstein or Bourdieu has provided a significant advantage in conceptualisation, depending on the context under discussion. Bernstein has been of greatest value where issues of curriculum are concerned – most notably in *Creativity, Knowledge and Curriculum*, where the analysis based on vertical and horizontal discourse was particularly helpful to understanding approaches to creativity. The notion of generic modes and trainability, and the idea of a mythological discourse which attempts to divert attention from vertical inequalities by emphasising horizontal commonalities, are also helpful in several places. Elsewhere, when discussing more general social practices that are less specifically related to the structure of what is learned, I have found a Bourdieuan framework more effective. In addition to the broad conceptualisations such as field and misrecognition, I have also made use of specific insights – for example, the use of Bourdieu’s analysis of ‘unequal selectedness’ in *Social Class*.

I have argued above that criticisms of Bourdieu’s determinism are exaggerated. However, the criticism is more justified in Bernstein’s case. Although some aspects of Bernstein’s model show how the social practices and interactions of the classroom construct pedagogic structures, there is a strong asymmetry between professionals and students, with the latter being very much on the receiving end of pedagogic discourse. The responses of students appear to operate largely through a collision of two structures – the codes acquired in the home and those demanded in the classroom. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyse classroom interactions using a Bernsteinian framework (one example is Arnot and Reay, 2004). In a further paper on E2E, currently in draft, I explore the pedagogy of these programmes using Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing, an approach which enables both class and gender to be integrated with an analysis of the practices involved in teaching and learning.

As noted at the beginning of this commentary, the selection of publications aims to foreground social class. This should not be taken as an implicit rejection of the importance of other dimensions for understanding social reproduction, in particular gender and ethnicity, or of questions of identity more generally. Indeed, some researchers propose that the focus for educational ethnographies should be on the simultaneous cultural reproduction of raced, gendered and classed identities and subjectivities (Yon, 2003). Recently, Gillborn (2010) has argued that race and class inequalities cannot be fully understood in isolation, and that in policy terms 'slippages' between different working-class fractions are used to justify diverting resources and attention away from issues of race, gender and disability by creating new problems such as the underachievement of white working-class boys. A number of studies have examined the intersections of two or more dimensions of inequality and domination. For example, Nayak (2003; 2006) and McDowell (2000) discuss the complex interactions of class, region and gender in the formation of masculinities amongst working-class young men in the post-industrial north; Lucey et al. (2003) consider the impact of educational success on identity amongst working-class young women, and Archer (2008) examines the social construction of educational success or failure for ethnic minority students.

These papers, and many others, are deeply important contributions to understanding how subjectivities are formed and contribute to social reproduction. However, there is still much to be gained by concentrating on class-based inequalities, and a consideration of the relative effects of class, gender and race suggest the reason for this. Heath (2000) shows that class inequalities are substantially larger than those based on gender or ethnicity, and Moore (2004) argues that the latter are in consequence 'second-order' effects. This does not mean that inequalities in gender or ethnicity are not important (and certainly does not imply that racism and sexism have little impact). Indeed, the different orders of magnitude between class and other inequalities is part of Gillborn's argument – that class-based differences, for instance in achievement, are systematically misrepresented by politicians and the media as race differences, resulting in ethnic minorities being portrayed as 'grabbing' resources from poor white students. Understanding the ways in which class operates across dimensions of gender and race can therefore be seen as an important prelude to studies drawing on intersectionality, as highlighting outcomes of capitalist production relations that may otherwise be misrecognised as due to raced or gendered cultural differences.

## **Methodology of the Investigation**

The papers in this submission employ a range of methodological approaches, including policy scholarship (Avis, 2006); secondary quantitative analysis of large-scale data sets; and ethnographic investigation. Although statistical methods are used at some points, the research does not aim to predict or control phenomena; rather, it is broadly qualitative in character, taking an interpretive and, where possible, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. The range of methodologies used reflects the complexities of the further education system, and corresponds to the model of researcher-as-*bricoleur* discussed by Denzin and Lincoln (1998). In this model, research practices are not set in advance, but adapted to the questions being asked, which in turn are dependent upon context. The result is a set of methods and perspectives, pragmatically assembled but unified by problem and context, and sensitive to the political implications of the research (p.3-4). Consistent with the use of policy scholarship and ethnography, the theoretical standpoint is critical, in the sense of foregrounding the role in further education of power, ideology and structured socio-economic relations.

## ***Policy Scholarship***

Humes and Bryce (2003) identify a tendency in neo-liberal policy development towards modernist approaches, with an emphasis on clear-cut answers to educational questions and continual progress based on unambiguously determined best practice: the growing fashion for evidence-informed policy and practice is an example of this. However, for researchers, things are rarely clear-cut – first principles and data analysis can be questioned, new evidence found, and new interpretations applied (p.182). This provides academic researchers with a number of alternatives, offering different conceptions of the relationship between research, policy and practice.

Both Avis (2006) and Ball (1995) review these options, amongst which two are of particular interest here. *Policy science* ‘articulates with an interest in “what works” and the strategies that should be marshalled to improve educational practice’ (Avis, 2006: 108), and is thus allied to the modernist approaches identified by Humes and Bryce. This directs researchers towards a concern with technically optimal solutions to pre-determined problems (Fay, 1975: 14), although Lauder et al. (2004) use the term policy science in a more challenging way, arguing that researchers need to engage with modernist discourse to disseminate critical research and hold politicians

to account. *Policy scholarship*, on the other hand, does not seek to offer clear prescriptions and is more concerned to place educational policies and interventions within their political, historical and socio-economic context (Avis, 2006). This perspective examines 'the politics and ideologies and interest-groups of policy-making process; the making visible of internal contradictions within policy formulations, and the wider structuring and constraining effects of the social and economic relations within which policy making is taking place' (Grace, 1991: 26).

Although the difference between these approaches is not an abrupt dichotomy, this submission is strongly orientated towards policy scholarship. The papers deal explicitly with the wider context of FE reform, and are particularly concerned with the contradictions between espoused policy aims and their implementation – which themselves are strongly influenced by contextual factors. Ideological issues, such as neo-liberal approaches to state intervention in education and the economy, constructions of inclusion and exclusion, and the appeal to globalisation to justify solutions to unemployment and poverty which prioritise 'lifelong learning' over job creation and redistribution, are considered in all of the papers. However, the term *discourse* is generally preferred to ideology. Although, as Byrne (2005) points out, reference to ideology reminds us that there are solid material interests at play, underpinned by economic and political actions that range beyond the merely linguistic, discourse has a number of specific advantages. Firstly, what is said and how it is said is of great significance for our perception of issues; discourses 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1989: 54) and structure our choice of strategies. Secondly, discourse implies a continuing process in which discursively regulated conversations replenish and extend the existing structure, never reaching a completed state. Thirdly, whilst ideology tends to imply the systematic misrepresentation of states of affairs to serve dominant interests, discourse can be used more flexibly, representing a web of language, ideas and comprehensions in which both dominant and subordinate agents are enmeshed. Indeed, discourse can be thought of as integral to a Bourdieuan field, both as part of the knowledge relations by which subjects perceive the field and as part of the conditioning relations through which the field structures the habitus. The concept of discourse is used frequently in this submission, both to analyse the assumptions and preferred solutions of policy and practice, and to highlight the possibility of other conceptions.

### ***Quantitative Study***

Lauder et al. (2004) propose that the political arithmetic tradition in educational research has a significant place in policy science and scholarship, enabling researchers to hold governments to account for the effectiveness and outcomes of their policies. More broadly, it maps the broad features of inequality in education and elsewhere. In *Social Class*, I use elementary statistical analysis of a large data set from the Youth Cohort Study to focus on the particular issue of the class composition of FE colleges. The investigation in this paper does not aim to predict social stratification of colleges in the future – rather, it aims to present a snapshot of FE at a specific time and use the data to reflect on the issues they raise. For this reason, it has some similarity with the use of quantitative data in qualitative research rather than being a quantitative study of a more positivist nature.

The techniques used are described in the paper, and will not be pursued here. However, it is worth commenting on one particular epistemological issue, the neo-realism about regularities of social class which permeates the discussion. Although class is socially constructed, the product of material and symbolic relations of capitalist production but also cultural practices more broadly, the paper assumes that class-based regularities in educational choices have an objective existence. It also assumes that the regularities observed in relation to a particular dimension of class – the employment conditions and relations characterising the labour process of individuals – are not simply the product of this dimension, but also apply to more cultural dimensions of class. To some extent this position is a necessary one, based on the primary data collection methods of the Youth Cohort Study, but is also justified by other research using its socio-economic classification system, in which similar structures are found (Savage, 2003). Nevertheless, it does point to a limitation in the paper and reinforces the suggestion it makes that further research is needed, including qualitative work, to explore the issues raised.

### ***Ethnography and the E2E project***

Two of the publications in this submission derive from ethnographic research on Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes in the north of England, in which I collaborated with two other researchers. This section has two purposes: firstly, to review the nature of ethnography and discuss some of the epistemological issues it raises; and secondly, to describe the E2E project and my contribution to it.

Ethnography is distinguished by a naturalistic approach, in which the actions and expressions of participants are studied in everyday settings. Although ethnographic research takes various forms, a number of characteristic features are often evident. These include: a range of data collection methods; a flexible research design, which is refined iteratively as data emerges; and an interpretive approach to data analysis, seeking to understand the meanings and functions of people's activities in relation to immediate and wider contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The E2E project shared these characteristics. Moreover, our research was a 'critical' ethnography (Carspecken, 1996), in that we sought to investigate ways in which power relations within and outside E2E affected the practices and expressions of participants.

The rationale for ethnography is embedded in a critique of quantitative research, particularly approaches such as large-scale surveys or controlled experiments, which claim to parallel the methods of natural science. Ethnography challenges this paradigm on a number of grounds, arguing that the validity of quantitative research – and also some forms of qualitative research – is compromised by limitations such as lack of transferability from controlled to natural settings, a reliance on what people say rather than what they are observed to do, and a neglect of individual agency in preference to overall behavioural trends. By contrast, ethnography claims to capture social processes and the meanings underlying them, producing theoretically informed descriptions which 'remain close to the concrete reality of particular events, but at the same time reveal general features of human social life' (Hammersley, 1992: 12).

Such claims about ethnography raise their own questions about the nature of the knowledge it produces. First of all, how can descriptions of a particular reality contribute to the development of general accounts of social processes – that is, to the development of theory, in some sense of the word? Although ethnographers are usually cautious about moving from knowledge of particular contexts to broader claims, they often wish to draw general conclusions of some form, and the relationship between ethnography and theory has been extensively debated (Hammersley, 1992; Brewer, 2000). Whilst some authors aim to develop abstract propositions which explain general aspects of the social world, others have more modest ambitions, seeking to investigate the particular features of a specific context. The idea that ethnography produces 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1975) has been used to bridge the gap between particularity and generality, referring to an approach in which theoretical analysis is closely interwoven with rich description of the case. This approach is taken in the two E2E papers included here, in which the aim is not

to generate theory but to use existing theory – such as the Bourdieuan perspectives in *Reclaiming the Disengaged* – to understand more fully the social meanings of a particular situation for its participants and relate them to external forces and power structures.

A second question raised by ethnography is whether the idea of a concrete reality, to be captured by ethnographic methods, is sustainable. The origins of ethnographic research in nineteenth-century anthropology produced an ideological framework in which the researcher was seen as external (and, by implication, superior) to the culture being studied – a detached observer producing objective and unambiguous descriptions. However, the increasing recognition that the values and interests of the researcher cannot be separated from the research process calls into question the assumption that ethnographers, as socially embedded individuals, can arrive at complete and unambiguous reproductions of social reality. The alternative to this naïve realism is not a retreat into relativism. Hammersley (1992) and Denzin and Lincoln (1998) propose neo-realist epistemologies for ethnography. They assume that, although knowledge is socially produced, the phenomena described by ethnographies exist independently of these descriptions and can be represented more or less accurately by them. According to this view, reasonably objective criteria exist for evaluating competing claims, such as credibility, compatibility with other well-established claims, and the likelihood of error in particular situations. Although social inquiry cannot reproduce reality, it can represent it more or less credibly and persuasively. However, the normative standpoint of the researcher will make certain features relevant and others irrelevant, and there can be several internally valid descriptions and explanations of the same situation (Hammersley, 1992: 51).

The E2E project took place in 2008-09 and was funded by the University of Huddersfield. I led the project, writing the initial research proposal and, with my colleague Robin Simmons, appointed a Senior Research Fellow, Lisa Russell. The three of us worked closely together on the project, meeting frequently to discuss the detailed research design, plan research materials and interpret emerging findings. However, for the two E2E papers included in this submission, I worked independently of my two colleagues, using the primary data to construct analyses leading to the single-authored papers *Teaching on the Margins* and *Reclaiming the Disengaged*.

An ethnographic approach to researching E2E had several advantages, including the production of a rich corpus of data which allowed interviews with participants to be

cross-checked against their practice and set alongside field notes, documentary records and photographs. The relatively long timescale of the project enabled repeated visits to be made to providers, so that data collection could be refined and checked with participants. It also allowed us to monitor activity in E2E providers across the local area, confirming that our case-study sites were not markedly untypical of the provision as a whole. However, the project also raised a number of problems typical of an ethnographic investigation – in particular, what cases to select, the specific data to be collected, and how to identify the main themes to be reported.

The research began with an exploratory phase encompassing most of the E2E providers in the local area (provision operated as a partnership led by an FE college). In all, Lisa visited 15 of the 20 providers in the partnership, in the company of Connexions personal advisers who were familiar with the provision. Her field notes and initial interview data, together with documentary records, were subject to collective analysis using both ‘foreshadowed problems’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), based on existing E2E and FE literature, and identification of emergent themes to anticipate issues of relevance to the research questions. These initial themes included possible differences between public, voluntary and private-sector providers, and the gendering of provision through the vocational specialism of providers; the case-study sites selected were chosen partly to allow further investigation of these themes. The second phase of the investigation comprised a detailed ethnographic investigation of the case-study sites (see also Russell et al. 2011 for further details of the methodology, as well as findings on E2E learners and learning additional to those discussed here).

The emerging data was analysed using methods similar to those described in Carspecken (1996). For *Teaching on the Margins*, low-level coding was done by hand, and independently of my colleagues for data concerning learner resistance, practitioners in E2E providers and their relations to parents. This linked iteratively to a reconstructive analysis in which the low-level codes were grouped and used to generate themes for further analysis and to identify areas where further data was needed. Cross-checking between observation data, interview transcripts and other documents was an integral part of this process.

Data analysis for *Reclaiming the Disengaged* was conducted differently, as the aim was to produce a synthesis of the research using a Bourdieuan framework, which would provide a better understanding of how processes of reproduction operated in

E2E. Using the discussion of field analysis in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), a template approach to the low-level coding was taken to reconstruct themes such as the positions taken by learners and tutors, resistance and tutor mediation, and ways in which tutors attempted to establish a legitimate authority by defining specific forms of relationship to school or college teachers and to parents.

### **Significance of the Investigation**

The publications contained in this submission have both a contextual and a theoretical significance. Individually, they deal with substantive issues in further education research and, as well as being located in a growing body of literature on the sector, they extend the existing research base in a number of ways. Returning to the questions raised at the beginning of this commentary, we have seen – in the papers on creativity and on E2E – how principles for selecting and distributing knowledge and skills in FE arise from neo-liberal individualising discourses on economic competitiveness and social inclusion. These discourses project specific forms of pedagogic identity, based on notions of lifelong learning and trainability, which focus on instrumental learning and in some cases act to reinforce the marginalisation of young people by denying access to powerful or ‘really useful’ knowledge. In the papers on teacher training, we see other aspects of these principles for regulating access to knowledge, through notions of performativity and state control of training curricula, and the direct links between these principles as applied to students and in relation to teachers.

These papers contribute to understanding how the state constructs models of professionalism in FE, and the ways in which the reworking of earlier professionalisms has continued – and extended, with particular nuances, beyond FE colleges into the wider learning and skills sector. Together with the papers on E2E, and *Social Class*, they also discuss how differences in the positioning of FE and schools within the educational system lead to distributions of material resources and cultural capital directly affecting the teaching workforce and thereby help to reproduce inequalities in education and the economy. The importance of context should be stressed here. Just as FE colleges are positioned differently to schools, so institutions in the wider FE sector, including work-based learning providers, have their own specific relationships to other areas of education. As Robertson (2000: 286) emphasises, the social relations of teachers’ work and the conditions under which

their institutions operate will be shaped by specific struggles and histories, and a full understanding of the ways in which teaching is organised requires an examination of a range of contexts, inside and outside FE colleges.

The papers also highlight interactions between discourses of social exclusion/inclusion and the broader hegemony of neo-liberalism. In the papers dealing with E2E and NEET young people, we have seen how limited conceptions of inclusion act to obscure vertical inequalities and legitimise the marginal position of certain young people. These papers contest the homogenising discourses of non-academic youth mired in cultures of low aspiration, highlighting the inappropriateness of stereotypes whilst acknowledging the complex challenges facing these young people. Other papers also suggest that inclusion is largely a veneer for instrumentalism and continuing vertical cleavages in the education system. Educational discourses of creativity, in both schools and FE, have attracted a great deal of interest from researchers over the last fifteen years, and a detailed analysis in the context of FE was long overdue. Together, the two papers on creativity constitute a sustained critique of such discourses, whilst also drawing on wider theoretical perspectives and empirical research to highlight contradictions between claims about creativity and inclusion in education and the lived experience of teachers and students.

This submission also has a wider theoretical significance, which relates to the last two questions raised in the commentary and the four problematics of social reproduction identified by Gewirtz and Cribb (2004). Firstly, there is the question of social change and the continued relevance of class as a category of analysis in the FE system. Although this submission explores some issues that are paralleled in research from the 1970s and 1980s, the discursive and socio-economic context has moved on considerably, intensifying individualisation and diminishing collective identities. This is why the relational approach to class and reproduction, based on different trajectories in the distribution of Bourdieu's forms of capital, retains its importance. It is the relation of the working class, and particularly its most disadvantaged sections, to the middle class that continues to differentiate classed experiences within post-industrial modes of production and maintains the production and reproduction of class-based inequalities in certain areas of FE. Production, because the discursive and material relations under which these areas operate contain elements which further reinforce inequalities in access to knowledge and resources, cutting across some of the more progressive features of FE provision.

Reproduction, because the structuring of participation by social class directs working-class young people more effectively than their middle-class peers towards areas of education where inequalities are most likely to be produced and reinforced.

In their second problematic, Gewirtz and Cribb ask how studies of reproduction engage with macro-level theories whilst remaining contextually sensitive. In this submission, the papers take a sustained critical approach in which specific features of curriculum and practice are placed in the context of wider discourses and power relations. Two of the papers provide analyses conducted within thoroughly Bourdieuan or Bernsteinian frameworks, and demonstrate how these conceptual tools can help us to understand complex situations in the FE system. The complementary nature of these frameworks has been discussed earlier, and together they provide a set of principles that can be interpreted in sensitive and highly local ways.

Throughout much of this submission, the relationship between structure and agency, and the possibilities for interrupting processes of reproduction, is a constant presence and challenge. The earlier discussions of this relationship will not be repeated here. However, my work on NEET young people continues to raise interesting questions about structure and agency, as well as requiring an intersectional approach in which race and gender are key dimensions. The new research involves a three-year longitudinal ethnographic study of NEET young people (with the same research team as for the E2E project). This work has already begun, and the role of agency in the face of severe constraints – material as much as cultural – is one of our central concerns. Early data reinforces many of the themes identified in the E2E project, but the longer-term and more detailed engagement with young people has already highlighted complex relationships and distinctions in forms of resistance, compliance and aspiration which promises to further inform work on conceptualisations of social reproduction. Individual-level engagement with these young people is already highlighting ways in which the broadly class-based analysis in this submission needs to develop, and we are currently exploring ways of understanding the classed, gendered and raced experiences of our participants. Bourdieuan and Bernsteinian conceptualisations will remain important, and both of these frameworks have been used successfully in intersectional studies (Reay, 2000; Arnot and Reay, 2004).

The fourth problematic identified by Gewirtz and Cribb (2004) is the normative content of reproduction accounts. In particular, they ask whether research is framed in simple dualities (compliance bad, resistance good) or is prepared to take a more complex approach that recognises normative hierarchies – and if so, what principles can underlie them. In this submission, a fundamental distinction is made between horizontal and vertical models of social exclusion, and this distinction can help to frame normative principles. Firstly, it clarifies terms such as equal opportunity, social mobility and social justice. Under New Labour, and perhaps more so under the Coalition, neo-liberalism surrounds encroachments of marketised and privatised delivery of public services with discourses of opportunity, fairness and social mobility. However, as this submission makes clear, these ideas should not be conflated. Equal opportunity and fairness are slippery notions, and take no account of distributions of capital. Educational achievement is valuable in itself, but as discussed in *Individualisation and Social Exclusion*, is no guarantee of social mobility. At the same time, the idea of social mobility slides all too easily into misrecognition of wealth and poverty as the just deserts of success and failure; social justice must inevitably concern itself with equality of outcome and discourses of redistribution.

A normative hierarchy that concerns itself only with systemic issues is incomplete, however. As Gewirtz (2004) argues, an ethically reflexive social science should consider the normative implications of both a systemic approach to asking research questions and a focus on individual responsibility. Nevertheless, to do this without deflecting attention away from deep-seated social divisions and structures requires a clear understanding of the factors bounding agency in particular contexts, something I have tried to achieve in these publications. A question that continues to exercise us in our NEET research is whether, in spite of clear weaknesses in the nature of provision aimed at re-engagement, the benefits of participation are still significant, and young people should be encouraged to remain in learning of some kind until they are ready to access more rewarding forms of participation. Although education may not have guaranteed economic outcomes, it may have individual and social benefits that certain understandings of resistance and compliance do not recognise. This is a normative question that can, at least in principle, be answered empirically; however, there is conflicting evidence on whether non-participation in itself has negative impacts, rather than indirectly through such factors as low skills and qualifications. Similar questions confront teachers: although FE workforce reforms are flawed and creative teaching compromised, they must choose what kind of practice they engage in. Again, simple dualities are insufficient to conceptualise the kinds of

professionalism teachers enact (Gleeson and James, 2007). A broader understanding is required if research is to have anything to say to policy.

### **Conclusion**

The PhD by publication requires, in addition to the oral examination, the submission of works constituting a coherent programme of research and making a significant contribution to knowledge of a standard equivalent to that of peer reviewed publication. The published work should represent an original contribution to knowledge in a single well-defined, coherent subject area. The candidate is required to show that they have made a significant contribution towards the publications and have been engaged in all the processes of research.

The publications presented here have all been published (in one case, accepted for publication) in peer-reviewed journals in the field of education. In this commentary, I have discussed the coherence of the publications using themes of social inclusion and social reproduction, and have explained my part in the research process and contribution to the co-authored papers. Taken together, the publications and commentary constitute a sustained, critical and original contribution to knowledge in the field.

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## Additional details of contributions to the publications

The purpose of this section is to provide greater detail on the relative contributions of myself and my colleagues in the published papers. This includes my work with co-authors and also with colleagues in the E2E project.

### *Aiming Higher*

Although there was collaboration in all sections of this paper and a continuous critique and challenge of each other's work, the main responsibilities and division of labour were clear. My contribution (50%) began with drafting an introduction which set the overall agenda of the paper, with its central question of how universities engaged in FE teacher training were likely to respond to government reforms, particularly the intention to transfer part of the responsibility for funding training to the individual trainee. Within this overall framework, Simmons concentrated on the political and historical context of FE and the effects of increasing central control both before and after incorporation, whilst I was concerned largely with an analysis of the New Labour discourse on reforming teacher education in the sector and a discussion of the contradictions it contains.

### *Changing Step*

Within this second co-authored paper, my contribution (60%) centres on the nature of the most recent reforms to the FE teacher training curriculum, their cultural and historical roots in further education and the New Labour discourse on further education and social inclusion. Robinson provided discussions of the evolution of the reform proposals, including the role of agencies such as LLUK and FENTO; she also contributed an analysis of empirical data she had collected as part of her research into workforce development policies in FE colleges.

### *Creativity and Performativity*

Within this co-authored paper, my contribution (50%) is largely centred on the educational discourse of creativity and its links with New Labour policy and the performative culture pervading education in England. As with the earlier paper *Aiming Higher*, mutual challenge and critique formed an important part of the writing process, as contributions were first written individually and then jointly discussed and re-written. However, the main responsibilities and individual contributions remained

clear. Following the jointly-written introduction, I wrote the two sections on creativity in education and its embedding in a culture of performativity, as well as significant parts of later sections – relating mainly to New Labour’s distinctive approach to FE policy and processes of social reproduction in FE. As in the earlier paper, Simmons contributed sections on the political and historical background of FE, together with analyses of the FE curriculum and how creativity is likely to be operationalised in the sector.

### *The E2E Project*

The E2E project took place in 2008-09 and was funded by the University of Huddersfield. I led the project, writing the initial research proposal and, with my colleague Robin Simmons, appointed a Senior Research Fellow, Lisa Russell. The three of us then worked closely together on the project, meeting frequently to discuss the detailed research design, plan research materials and interpret emerging findings. Lisa conducted the fieldwork, and her field notes, together with interview transcripts, constituted the primary data from the research. Responsibility for the production and publication of findings was then divided as follows: Robin to write up a paper on the policy context and curriculum structure of E2E (Simmons, 2009); Lisa to be lead author for a paper on Connexions workers and E2E (Russell et al. 2010); myself to be lead author for a paper on E2E learners, drawing on data analysis by Lisa and myself (Russell et al. 2011). The two E2E papers included in this submission were in addition to this, and involved a return to the primary data to construct analyses relating to E2E tutors, parents, and forms of resistance by learners. These analyses were conducted independently of my two colleagues, and led to the single-authored E2E papers *Teaching on the Margins* and *Reclaiming the Disengaged*.

In the data analysis, low-level coding was done by hand: by Lisa for data concerning learners in general and Connexions personal advisers, and by myself for data concerning practitioners in E2E providers and their relations to parents. As a group of three researchers, we conducted an ongoing reconstructive analysis in which the low-level codes were grouped and used to generate themes for further analysis and to identify areas where further data was needed. Cross-checking between observation data, interviews and documents was an integral part of this process. My independent analysis of tutors and their discourses on parents was conducted in a similar way, and helped to inform further data collection by Lisa on teaching qualifications and training.

Once the final set of data was available, the construction of analytical themes and production of findings related to particularly significant themes proceeded with the same division of labour. The selection of themes for discussion was guided by, firstly, the robustness of the data supporting them (Russell et al. 2011), and secondly by their wider significance for the understanding of policy-related issues in the context of NEET young people and the practitioners who work with them. The selected themes are presented in three papers: the first on Connexions personal advisers (Russell et al. 2010); the second on E2E practitioners (Thompson, 2010; presented here as *Teaching on the Margins*); and the third on the experiences of E2E learners (Russell et al. 2011).

Data analysis for a fourth paper (Thompson, 2011a; presented here as *Reclaiming the Disengaged*) was conducted differently, as the aim was to produce a synthesis of the other papers using a Bourdieuan framework, which would provide a better understanding of how processes of reproduction operated in E2E. Using the discussion of field analysis in Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992), a template approach to the low-level coding was taken to reconstruct themes such as the positions taken by learners and tutors, resistance and tutor mediation, and ways in which tutors attempted to establish a legitimate authority by defining specific forms of relationship to school or college teachers and to parents.

# Publications

**Note:** For ease of reference, pages are numbered consecutively throughout all the papers, as part of the pagination of the complete document. These numbers will be found at the bottom right corner of each page. Other page numbers are those as originally printed in the published versions of the papers.

## **Social class and participation in further education: evidence from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales**

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This paper examines the class distribution of young people, aged 16–17 years, in colleges of further education (FE) using data from the Youth Cohort Study. It finds that, contrary to popular perceptions of FE colleges as being for ‘other people’s children’, middle-class students as well as working-class students are well represented. However, this does not imply that FE colleges are institutions of choice; middle-class representation is often related to lower achievement and, for low-achieving working-class students, leaving education entirely is more likely than entry to FE. These findings are explored using notions of habitus and field. Their relationship with studies of the education of middle-class children is also discussed, and the paper suggests that research on class in FE colleges must come to terms with middle-class presence.

**Keywords:** further education; social class

### **1. Introduction**

Recent discourse on the education of young people and adults, in particular from the UK Government, has tended to downplay the role of class. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, ‘questions concerning inequality are no longer perceived and politically handled as class questions’ and the individualization of social inequality ‘compete[s] with ... collective aspects of a labour market destiny’ (2006, 143). Avis (2006, 344–345) recounts how educational research from the 1980s, on the way in which students’ experiences in education served to reproduce class-based orientations towards waged labour, came to be superseded by a position that, whilst providing more complex accounts of learning experiences, favoured processes related to individualization rather than the structural basis of class inequality. Avis calls for structural accounts of social inequality – including race and gender as well as class – to be placed once more in the foreground, whilst retaining an awareness of the complexity of educational and social relations. Similarly, Reay (2006) notes that, despite claims that class is no longer relevant to the analysis of schooling, social inequality in the United Kingdom is growing, and argues for a reinvigoration of class-based analysis. Furthermore, a growing interest in the education of the UK middle class (Power et al. 2003) and of the ways in which its educational advantage is perpetuated (Ball 2003; although see also Beck 2007) suggests a class-based analysis should focus on middle-class as well as working-class experience.

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There is surely no doubt that, in twenty-first-century England and Wales, social disadvantage is a major factor in the achievement and consequent life chances of young people. In England in 2006/07, only 21.1% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieved five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A\*–C (including English and mathematics), compared with 49% of those not eligible (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007). In post-compulsory education, progression to Level 3 qualifications (the requirement for entry to higher education) is drastically affected by social disadvantage. Students who were eligible for free school meals when in school are much less likely to be entered for such qualifications. Although the extent to which social disadvantage is related to social class is arguable, to ignore structural effects would be to sacrifice a significant dimension of understanding.

The present paper attempts to foreground class in relation to educational progression by focusing on the participation of 16–17 year olds in further education (FE) colleges in England and Wales. These colleges are often conceptualized as largely working-class institutions, both historically and culturally, and as suffering from a marginalization that belies the recent significant increases in government spending on FE. Richardson (2007, 411) depicts prevailing attitudes to the sector as follows:

So far as those in Whitehall and the media are concerned, the fundamental but unspoken point about colleges of general FE in class-conscious England remains that they are boring, hard to understand and something best suited to ‘other people’s children’.

Hyland (2002) and Raggatt and Williams (1999) make similar points, noting a systemic neglect of FE that is class-based and related to images of FE as a second-choice institution concerned with low-status vocational or remedial courses. Colley et al. (2003), in their study of the development of vocational habitus in FE courses such as childcare and engineering, note that these courses are ‘populated mainly by students from working-class backgrounds’ and raise the possibility that they may play a significant role in the reproduction of social inequalities of class and gender. On this basis, Colley et al. argue for a classed (and gendered) analysis of vocational learning in FE.

In the twenty-first century, the FE sector in England and Wales occupies an uneasy nexus of policies relating to social inclusion and global competitiveness. FE is seen by the UK Government as having a central role in the creation of a future high-skills, knowledge-based economy and as contributing to social cohesion, indirectly through wealth-creation stimulated by high skills and directly by means of educational provision aimed at disadvantaged individuals. Although the basis of this position has been questioned by many (in particular, see Avis 2006; Brown, Green, and Lauder 2001; Wolf 2002), the ‘competitiveness settlement’ has acquired a hegemonic status within education and is responsible for much of the rhetoric pervading government policy. In practice, however, FE is positioned within lifelong learning as a provider of academic and vocational courses whose common feature is their lower status compared with those offered by more prestigious institutions, such as universities, sixth-form colleges and school sixth forms.

For many young people, enrolling on a course in FE is a tacit acknowledgement of their lower status as students (Bathmaker 2005) and of the fact that certain opportunities are closed to them (Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 1999). They ‘follow a particular route, not so much because they know what they want to do, but because they know

what they cannot do' (Bathmaker 2005, 86). These students are unlikely to reflect the government's positioning of FE within its rhetoric of 'learning society'. Indeed, their attitudes to learning may be seen as 'reflecting not so much inherent capacities of individual learners, as a response to their positioning in an education and training hierarchy' (Bathmaker 2005, 98).

Therefore, whilst it may be true that learning has a major role to play in tackling social exclusion, the issue is not simply one of inclusion or exclusion; inequalities in how young people are included need to be addressed. As Bourdieu and Passeron emphasize in their discussion of higher education opportunities in France:

To grasp the social significance of the different social categories' share in the different faculties or disciplines, one has to take into account the *position* this or that faculty or discipline occupies at a given time within the system of faculties or disciplines. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 222; original emphasis)

This paper seeks to contribute to understanding the position of FE within the education system by means of an analysis of data on social class and educational participation from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales (YCS). As noted earlier, the analysis is concerned with the structuring by social class of choices made at age 16 years in terms of whether to continue in full-time education – and if so, at what type of institution. Whilst the issue of social class in relation to higher education is the subject of vigorous debate, the social composition of FE colleges has received very little attention. This lack of attention to class in FE may arise from a perception that its working-class nature is both obvious and unproblematic; if FE colleges are full of working-class students then they are doing their job in providing for social inclusion and global competitiveness. However, it is difficult to carry through any form of class-based analysis – such as Avis, Reay and Colley et al. call for – without an understanding of how the classed nature of FE manifests itself in general terms. The rich data of the YCS, including as it does both social and educational information, provides an opportunity to develop this understanding.

The class distribution of young people, aged 16–17 years, across the varied locations of post-16 education is examined. The great majority are following full-time courses. For the higher social classes, this is mainly in schools and sixth-form colleges; for the lower social classes, attendance at an FE college is not much less likely than attendance at a school or sixth-form college combined. However, this does not mean that full-time courses at FE colleges are dominated by working-class students. Because of the very high participation rate in full-time education of 16–17 year olds from higher social classes, they are numerically well represented in FE.

When previous educational attainment is taken into account, the distribution of young people in full-time education reveals that the class composition of FE is constructed as much from middle-class failure as from working-class disadvantage. Working-class 16–17 year olds in full-time education with five or more GCSE passes at grades A\*–C are twice as likely to attend an FE college as those from the highest social class with the same range of qualifications. At the same time, 16–17 year olds from higher social classes with fewer than five A\*–C grades are more likely to be in FE colleges than similar working-class students.

The following sections begin with an overview of post-16 education in England and Wales and go on to outline the methodology and results of the analysis; these results are then discussed, initially in the light of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and

field. However, the significance of social class representation in FE can better be understood by combining Bourdieu's conceptual tools with a consideration of the significance of middle-class participation in FE; this draws on a number of recent studies of the middle class in relation to education (Power et al. 2003; Power and Whitty 2006; Whitty 2001).

## **2. Post-16 Education in England and Wales**

In England and Wales, education is compulsory to age 16 years. Provision immediately following the end of compulsory education is varied and complex, with a number of different types of post-16 institution. The term 'further education' is often used to refer to the full range of post-16 provision other than higher education, but is applied in this paper specifically to the education taking place in FE colleges and tertiary colleges. Although schools and sixth-form colleges cater almost exclusively for young people aged 16–19 years, FE and tertiary colleges are institutions of 'lifelong learning' and have large numbers of adult students. Schools and sixth-form colleges offer a mainly academic curriculum aimed particularly at entry to higher education, although a significant number of their students follow vocationally-orientated courses such as Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education. On the other hand, FE and tertiary colleges offer a range of academic, vocationally orientated and specifically vocational courses, as well as basic skills and pre-vocational courses intended to provide lower achievers with the skills necessary to access higher-status courses. A variety of government-supported training is also available to young people and adults, including initiatives such as Entry to Employment and New Deal. These initiatives are often delivered through private training providers.

Maintained schools and further education colleges have been the most common providers of full-time education for 16–17 year olds in England and Wales. Largely because of a collapse in youth employment, the period 1985–1993 saw a rise in participation in full-time education for 16–17 year olds. Since then, participation has remained fairly stable, with each type of institution being attended by between 26% and 30% of 16–17 year olds in England between 1993 and 2005. There has also been an increase in the proportion of 16–17 year olds in full-time education at sixth-form colleges, from 5% in 1985 to 11% in 2005. In Wales, between 1995 and 2005, 35–38% of 16–17 year olds were in full-time education in maintained schools and 31–34% were in full-time education in further education colleges (Office of National Statistics 2007).

Young people under the age of 19 years form a relatively small proportion of all participants in lifelong learning. In 2005/06 there were 2.9 million adults (aged 19 years and over) in Learning and Skills Council-funded education in England; however, adult participation is predominantly part-time, whereas young people are more likely to be enrolled on full-time courses. In terms of teaching hours, approximately one-half of provision in FE and tertiary colleges is for younger learners aged 16–18 years (Foster 2005, 82).

## **3. The Youth Cohort Study**

The YCS is a major series of longitudinal programmes designed to monitor the behaviour and decisions of representative samples of young people aged 16 years upwards as they move from compulsory education to the labour market or to further or higher

education (Jarvis et al. 2006). The YCS contains detailed information on the factors influencing post-16 transitions, including educational attainment, training opportunities and experiences at school. So far, the YCS holds complete data on 11 cohorts, with over 20 surveys carried out from 1985 onwards, the most recent being in 2005. A 12th cohort is currently being studied.

Cohort 11 consists of 16,707 young people (15,890 from England and 817 from Wales) who reached the minimum leaving age for compulsory education in the school year 2000/01. The first survey (Sweep 1) was carried out between March and June 2002, with three further sweeps in February–June 2003, February–June 2004 and February–May 2004. This paper examines data from Sweep 1, which includes personal and background information on participants, in particular on social class, as well as information on educational achievement, current education and employment status. At the time, participants in Sweep 1 were nearing the end of their first year after leaving school and were therefore aged 16 or 17 years.

The analysis of social class in Cohort 11 of the YCS is based on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), now commonly used in the United Kingdom (Rose, Pevalin, and O'Reilly 2005), and is available for both father and mother separately. A family (or, more correctly, household) grouped NS-SEC is also available. As Rose, Pevalin, and O'Reilly point out, the traditional unit of class analysis in sociology is the family or household and, because of the interdependence and shared conditions of its members, the use of household social class has analytical advantages. They argue that lines of class division run between families or households, not within them and that household members, through sharing the outcomes of consumption and labour market participation, share the same class fate (Rose, Pevalin, and O'Reilly 2005, 40). Similarly, in an analysis of social class, ethnicity and educational achievement using YCS data, Rothon (2006) argues that the use of household social class is theoretically and practically superior to other possibilities, such as father's social class alone or separate analysis based on the father and mother, in that the household rather than an individual parent is the key unit of reference for young people. This paper follows Rothon and uses the household grouped NS-SEC to represent social class. The corresponding YCS variable, *famsec*, is derived from the occupations of parents or step-parents with which the respondent was living at the time of Sweep 1 or, if the respondent was no longer living with them, on the occupations of parents or step-parents when the respondent was aged 15 years – see Rose, Pevalin, and O'Reilly (2005, 41) for a discussion of the principles underlying the derivation. This method removes gender as the criterion for determining the head of the household and, in the case of lone parents, derives the household social class from that parent.

The tables presented here contain population estimates calculated using weightings provided with the raw YCS data (the YCS variable name for the weightings used is *s1weight*). These weightings are designed to compensate for differences in selection of participants and for differential questionnaire return rates by gender, ethnicity, region, social class and educational achievement. For example, it is found that return rates are lower from potential participants with lower educational achievement; using raw data from the returned questionnaires would underestimate the number of young people in the population with lower educational achievement. When sampling weights are used, it is possible to make unbiased estimates of population values. Thus, the values given in the tables may be assumed to be representative of the population of young people in England and Wales at the time of the survey. Standard errors have been suppressed, but in all cases are negligible.

#### 4. Analysis of data from the Youth Cohort Study

Tables 1–5 present the results of an analysis of YCS data using the complex samples procedure within the Statistics Package for Social Scientists. The YCS variable names are presented in each table. Where locations of post-16 education are given, ‘FE’ refers to FE and tertiary colleges.

Participation of 16–17 year olds in education and training declines markedly with social class position, with a commensurate increase in those in government-supported training, those in employment without training, or those not in employment, education or training. Young people in the lowest social classes are considerably less likely to be in full-time education than those in the two highest classes. Employment with training, which would often lead to part-time attendance in FE, is rare for all social classes. This pattern can be seen in Table 1.

Table 2 presents the distribution by social class of 16–17 year olds in full-time education across different locations in post-16 education. Those from the highest social classes are considerably more likely to remain at school for post-16 education than those from other classes; this may be due in part to a greater likelihood for schools serving the higher classes to have sixth forms. The increased likelihood of attendance at an FE college with decreasing social class is also apparent from the table, although the increase is not as marked as may be expected and there is a significant representation in FE for all classes.

One obvious explanation for the increased likelihood of being in FE for lower social classes is that these young people may not have the educational qualifications necessary to pursue higher status courses in other institutions, and therefore seek vocational or other courses in FE – an example of the ‘closed doors’ of Ball, Macrae, and Maguire (1999). It is therefore important to analyse further the data of Table 2 by taking into account differences in educational achievement on leaving school. This is done in Table 3 by breaking down each cell of the previous table into two groups: those with five or more GCSE passes at grade A\*–C and those with fewer than five passes at grade A\*–C, respectively. In England, this is a common criterion for selecting those suited for academic or higher vocational study post-16.

Table 1. Participation of young people aged 16–17 years in education and training (*sled\_tr1*) by household socio-economic class (*famsec*).

	Education and training (%)						Total count
	Full-time education	Employed with training	Employed without training	Government -supported training	Other education or training	Not in employment, education or training	
Large employers and higher professionals	87.2	2.0	3.3	4.5	1.2	1.8	2608
Lower professional and higher technical	78.1	2.6	5.9	7.0	1.6	4.9	4423
Intermediate	68.6	2.6	10.1	9.7	2.0	7.1	3609
Lower supervisory occupations	58.0	5.3	14.4	12.2	2.2	7.9	1875
Semi-routine and routine occupations	58.7	2.6	13.4	12.4	1.5	11.3	2400
Other	61.8	1.3	8.8	10.7	2.1	15.2	1793

Table 2. Locations of young people aged 16–17 years in full-time education and training (*Inst type for slact1FTED*) by household socio-economic class (*famsec*).

	Education and training (%)					
	State school	Independent school	Sixth-form college	FE college	Other/not stated	Not in full-time education
Large employers and higher professionals	40.1	15.0	13.8	14.5	3.8	12.8
Lower professional and higher technical	35.2	5.1	14.1	20.1	3.5	21.9
Intermediate	27.8	4.5	10.5	21.7	4.2	31.4
Lower supervisory occupations	21.0	0.9	9.1	22.6	4.4	42.0
Semi-routine and routine occupations	19.2	0.5	9.8	24.6	4.6	41.3
Other	19.1	1.7	11.3	24.7	5.0	38.2

A number of trends are apparent from Table 3. For the higher achievers, attendance in FE remains much more likely for those from lower social classes – twice as likely when comparing the lowest three classes with the highest. On the other hand, attendance in a sixth-form college is almost equally likely across all social classes, reflecting the greater propensity for high-achieving students from the highest classes to remain in school. It would appear that high achievers from higher social classes actively reject the FE system. Table 3 also shows that high achievers from lower social classes are more likely to be not in full-time education than other high achievers.

Turning now to lower achievers, Table 3 indicates that the likelihood of low-achieving students from higher social classes attending FE is considerably greater than for these classes as a whole. As with other low achievers, they meet the ‘closed doors’ of a selective school and sixth-form college system; for many, this appears to lead to a complete exit from full-time education. However, departure from education is less likely for these students than for low achievers from lower classes.

Table 4 presents the levels of courses attended, again by social class. Note that, in England and Wales, ‘Level 3’ refers to academic awards such as General Certificate in Education Advanced Level (A-level), and also to vocationally related courses such as Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education or Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications; these awards may be used to gain entry to higher education. Awards at ‘Level 2’ are broadly equivalent to GCSE grades A\*–C and ‘Level 1’ corresponds to GCSE grades D–G.

The data from Tables 1 and 2 make it possible to determine the composition, by social class, of 16–17 year olds in full-time education within FE. This is shown, also broken down by gender, in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that the social composition of FE is not dissimilar to the distribution of social backgrounds of 16–17 year olds as a whole, although those from the highest social class are significantly under-represented. Overall, young women in this table substantially outnumber young men – indicative of the feminization of FE over the past 20 years – although this is not the case in the highest social classes.

Table 3. Locations of young people aged 16–17 years in full-time education and training by household socio-economic class (*famsec*) and attainment (*s1peta2*).

	Education and training (%)						Total count
	State school	Independent school	Sixth-form college	FE college	Other/not stated	Not in full-time education	
<b>Large employers and higher professionals</b>							
<5 A*–C grades	15.1	4.0	3.6	29.1	9.3	38.9	594
5+ A*–C grades	47.4	18.2	16.8	10.2	2.2	5.1	2014
<b>Lower professional and higher technical</b>							
<5 A*–C grades	15.2	1.5	6.3	28.2	3.9	44.8	1596
5+ A*–C grades	46.5	7.1	18.6	15.5	3.3	9.0	2827
<b>Intermediate</b>							
<5 A*–C grades	12.7	0.8	6.0	26.1	4.5	49.9	1756
5+ A*–C grades	42.1	8.0	14.7	17.4	3.8	14.0	2853
<b>Lower supervisory occupations</b>							
<5 A*–C grades	12.0	0.3	5.9	23.0	5.2	53.6	1232
5+ A*–C grades	38.1	2.1	15.2	21.8	2.9	19.8	643
<b>Semi-routine and routine occupations</b>							
<5 A*–C grades	12.1	0.1	5.5	26.2	5.1	51.0	1660
5+ A*–C grades	35.1	1.5	19.5	21.1	3.4	19.5	740
<b>Other</b>							
<5 A*–C grades	12.9	0.1	8.0	26.5	5.5	47.0	1331
5+ A*–C grades	37.0	6.5	20.7	19.6	3.5	12.7	462

Table 4. Main study aim (*s1saim2*) of young people aged 16–17 years in full-time education in FE colleges, by household socio-economic class.

	Main study aim by level (count, row% in brackets)			
	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1	Other course/ not applicable
Large employers and higher professionals	237 (62.5)	76 (20.1)	23 (6.1)	43 (11.3)
Lower professional and higher technical	460 (51.7)	233 (26.2)	81 (9.1)	115 (12.9)
Intermediate	334 (42.7)	222 (28.4)	97 (12.4)	130 (16.6)
Lower supervisory occupations	154 (36.3)	133 (31.4)	68 (16.0)	69 (16.3)
Semi-routine and routine occupations	167 (28.2)	182 (30.7)	93 (15.7)	150 (25.3)
Other	107 (24.2)	140 (31.7)	76 (17.2)	119 (26.9)
Total	1459	986	438	626

Table 5. Young people aged 16–17 years in full-time education in an FE college by household socio-economic class and gender (data derived from *Inst type for slact1FTED* by *famsec* and *slsex*).

	16–17 year olds in full-time education in FE (%)			Proportion of total population of 16–17 year olds (%)
	Male	Female	Total	
Large employers and higher professionals	5.5	5.3	10.8	15.6
Lower professional and higher technical	12.0	13.3	25.3	26.5
Intermediate	8.8	13.6	22.3	21.6
Lower supervisory occupations	5.4	6.7	12.1	11.2
Semi-routine and routine occupations	7.6	9.2	16.8	14.4
Other	6.2	6.5	12.6	10.7
Total	45.5	54.5	100.0	100.0

## 5. Discussion

This section attempts to give a reading of the data presented earlier that is consistent with the emphasis given to class by Avis and by Reay, yet acknowledges the complexity of the individual life choices made by young people. This reading will draw on the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990, 2006; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Reay 2004), as well as recent work on the sociology of middle-class education by Power et al. (2003), Power and Whitty (2006) and Whitty (2001).

Initially, the data in the previous section need to be seen in the context of the conceptual basis of the classification system used, which in the case of the NS-SEC is that ‘employment relations and conditions are central to delineating the structure of socio-economic positions in modern societies’ (Rose, Pevalin, and O’Reilly 2005, 14). Specifically, this is developed in terms of a distinction between employments based on a ‘service relationship’ characterized by autonomy, security and authority and those based on a ‘labour contract’ characterized by close supervision, control and conflict relations. Intermediate employment relationships are those containing elements of both these types to a greater or lesser degree.

Using Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, it may be suggested that a family habitus will emerge that is influenced strongly, not only by material and social conditions but also specifically by the employment relationships characteristic of family members. As a ‘practice-generating grammar’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 35), this habitus structures the repertoire of behaviours of family members. The idea of a ‘grammar’ illustrates one way in which agency and reproduction are reconciled; many possible sentences may be consistent with the grammar, but not all sentences are possible. As Reay (2004, 435) notes, ‘Choice is at the heart of habitus ..., but at the same time the choices inscribed in the habitus are limiting’. Elements of this primary habitus may go with or against the grain of the secondary habitus of schooling. This would further suggest that a family habitus influenced by service relationship employment, or by a position as a large employer, and therefore characterized by the exercise and valuing of high levels of linguistic capital and theoretical knowledge, will privilege the educational position of

young people from higher class backgrounds compared with those from class backgrounds characterized by labour contract employment relations. It is reasonable to expect post-16 aspirations to be part of the matrix of dispositions contained in the habitus; for example, as seen in the study by Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) of a northern sixth-form college and in the work of Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth (2007) on the aspirations of working-class girls.

The broad shape of the analysis of the previous section, with increasing levels of participation with increasing class position, and a greater concentration in less prestigious institutions or outside education with decreasing class position, is therefore consistent with a conceptualization based on Bourdieu. However, a more detailed understanding may be achieved by recognizing, with Whitty (2001) and Power et al. (2003), that the place of middle-class young people is crucial to an analysis of the education of young people as a whole.

Whitty (2001) takes up the arguments of Giddens (1998) concerning patterns of social exclusion from public services in general, and applies them to education. He emphasizes that exclusion takes place 'at the top' as well as 'at the bottom', in that middle-class parents tend to self-exclude their children from general types or particular locations of state provision that they deem to be 'unsafe' in academic or social terms. The effects of middle-class self-exclusion on less desired types of schooling are profound, undermining the status of certain schools and preventing institutions from achieving the 'critical mass' required for the development of an academic ethos. Middle-class absence also manifests itself by depriving unfavoured institutions of cultural, social and material capital. There is, however, a delicate balance between self-exclusion, which may leave working-class children in one institution without the benefits conferred by the presence of middle-class peers, and middle-class colonization, which may largely preclude working-class access to some institutions.

The extent of middle-class self-exclusion from FE colleges can be seen by comparing Tables 2, 3 and 5. Although from Table 5 FE appears to be a space for the interaction of young people from all social classes, middle-class young people are much less likely to attend FE than their working-class peers (14.5% of young people from large employer/higher professional backgrounds compared with 24.6% from backgrounds with parents in semi-routine or routine occupations). The reason why so many middle-class young people (in numerical terms) may be found in further education colleges is, firstly, that their general participation rate in post-compulsory education is high and, secondly, that the middle class itself is now much larger than in the mid-twentieth century. The apparent egalitarianism of FE seen in Table 5 is therefore something of an illusion.

The further analysis provided by Table 3 sharpens this point. When previous academic achievement is taken into account, middle-class self-exclusion of high-achieving young people operates even more strongly. Only 10.2% of higher achievers from large employer/higher professional backgrounds attend FE; working-class young people with similar achievement are twice as likely to be in FE. Middle-class self-exclusion from further education colleges is therefore exclusion (in proportional terms) of high achievers; Table 3 shows that low achievers from middle-class backgrounds are actually *more* likely to attend FE than low achievers from the working class. For low-achieving, working-class young people, academic failure is likely to propel them out of education altogether, whereas this effect is less pronounced for middle-class low achievers. In Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 72), 'unequal selectedness' is operating: middle-class young people are only weakly

selected for post-16 participation, and therefore effectively a much greater part of the distribution of linguistic and other capital is represented than for the working class. It may be argued, then, that to a significant extent FE college provision for young people is constructed from middle-class failure; their role as second chance institutions is often for middle-class young people, for whom they present an opportunity to climb back on the ladder of progression to further or higher education.

These observations provide support for the conclusions of Power et al. (2003) and Power and Whitty (2006) – that the supposed ‘inevitability of middle-class success’ is highly questionable, and that even successful middle-class educational outcomes often follow some form of ‘troubled’ or ‘broken’ progression. However, because of the construction of the sample of young people studied by Power et al. (their work was originally based on research into the assisted places scheme), the number of low-achieving (fewer than five GCSE grades A\*–C) students available to them was limited to 12. The larger sample of low achievers considered here both emphasizes that middle-class success is certainly not inevitable and also highlights the role of FE as a recourse of low-achieving middle-class students. Bathmaker’s (2005) ‘hangers-in’ (students with a tenuous but continuing foothold on the academic ladder in FE) are by no means exclusively working class. There is also evidence here for the inhomogeneity of the middle class as argued by Power and Whitty (2006), with the ‘middle-class gradient’ of participation and study aim evident in the tables indicating vertical differentiation, although horizontal differentiation is not discernible given the class categories used in the YCS data.

Is there evidence that the presence of significant numbers of middle-class school leavers represents a form of ‘colonization’ of FE, possibly beginning to exclude working-class young people within the sector? Table 4 indicates that this may be the case in terms of Level 3 courses, where even in FE the higher social classes (professional and intermediate) are numerically dominant. Colley et al. (2003) provide a vivid example of how this might operate in specific cases, describing exclusionary processes operating *within* a broadly working-class group of female students, which nevertheless was stratified in terms of parental occupation. ‘Nice’ students:

lived in leafier suburbs ... usually with both parents, [who were in] more white-collar occupations. ‘Rough’ students lived in the more deprived areas ... in poorer and less stable family situations, and were criticised for using obscene language, bullying others and dressing in exotic fashions ... a number of these students became isolated and then excluded from the learning site in various ways. (Colley et al. 2003, 482)

As noted above, the creation of parts of the FE system as a ‘safe space’ for lower-achieving middle-class young people may confer benefits in terms of a contribution of cultural and social capital; however, processes such as that Colley et al. describe could result in the marginalization of some working-class students within the broader FE system.

Turning now to higher achievers, why should working-class students with ‘good’ GCSEs be twice as likely to find themselves in an FE college as middle-class students of similar achievement? One obvious explanation is that state schools in working-class areas are less likely than those in middle-class areas to have sixth forms, so that for many working-class young people a change of learning site is inevitable. Nevertheless, sixth-form colleges provide an alternative that, in many cases, is not taken up. Again, notions of habitus could have explanatory force here, particularly its tendency to ‘favour experiences likely to reinforce it’ and to ‘protect itself from crises and critical

challenges' (Bourdieu 1990, 60). The 'institutional blindness' discussed by Baker and Brown (2007) in relation to higher education choice, through which the separation for working-class applicants is between participation or not rather than between institutions of different status, may also be operating. Furthermore, the work of Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth (2007) on the educational engagement of working-class girls suggests that post-16 aspirations will require a gendered as well as class-based analysis, with even apparently trivial concerns such as dress code having a potential influence.

A further insight into the social stratification of inclusion may be provided by the concept of *field*. Field, as a social environment containing the struggle between competing social groups, constitutes each group in terms of its location within the field and of its relationships with other groups. The way in which the field is structured depends on the exercise of power by dominant groups; for example, in the field of age 14–19 education in England and Wales, 'success' is defined as the achievement of GCSE grades sufficient in number and quality to allow progression to the dominant academic curricula leading to higher education entry. According to Bernstein (2000, xxii), the essence of Bourdieu's 'symbolic violence' in structuring the field of education lies in how the school 'disguises and masks the way power relations, external to the school, produce the hierarchies of knowledge, possibility and value within the school', thereby legitimizing educational inequalities between different social groups as arising from individualized, meritocratic principles. This is an example of what Bernstein (2000, xxiii) calls a 'mythological discourse' whose function is to maintain horizontal solidarities between different groups and thus to contain vertical cleavages, such as differential achievement according to social class. Arguably, the system of post-compulsory education in England and Wales is beset by an exclusionary discourse that functions so as to retain the grip of higher social classes on the 'glittering prizes' of elite higher education entry and employment in an environment of widening participation and increasing access to credentials. In order to retain class advantage, it has become necessary to supplement credentials with the location of their achievement. Thus we find in league tables for schools, colleges and universities information on which are the 'top' institutions for higher education entry, for higher education success and for elite employment. In terms of qualifications themselves, the 'gold standard' of A-level is fiercely defended along with the academic/vocational status divide, and means are sought to identify 'the best' candidates through grading systems of increasing complexity. At the same time, the effects of this exclusionary discourse are contained by a corresponding mythological discourse that ascribes the resulting vertical differentiation to the intrinsic merit of qualifications, institutions and the individuals who attend them. In this context, the perception of FE by the middle class as a last resort for its own children can only undermine efforts to use the sector as a vehicle for social inclusion.

Two possible limitations on the conclusions to be drawn from this analysis should be noted. Firstly, the analysis does not take into account the effect of variations in the class composition of different regions in England and Wales, so that in certain areas there may be marked differences between the overall distributions presented here and the local distribution. Regionalizing the analysis would have been possible, but would have led to fragmentation of the data-set that could in itself be problematic. It may be that aggregating several YCS cohorts will allow a regional analysis to be carried out in the future. Secondly, the analysis treats FE colleges and tertiary colleges as being essentially the same type of institution; this is not necessarily the case. However, the

relatively small number of tertiary colleges means that the overall nature of the findings should not be affected.

## 6. Conclusion

The social composition of 16–17 year olds in FE colleges in England and Wales derives from the interaction of two main effects: the increasing likelihood of attending such institutions with descending class position; and an increasing participation rate in post-compulsory education with ascending class position. These effects are strongly modified by previous educational achievement, so that high-achieving working-class young people are less likely to attend FE than their class position might indicate, and low achievers from the middle class are more likely to find themselves in a further education college than might be expected. However, a significant class effect remains: in the higher category of attainment, working-class 16–17 year olds are more likely to attend FE than peers from the middle class, whilst in the lower category the reverse is true. Gender differences are also mediated by class to some extent.

The apparently equal social distribution within FE, with a near-perfect representation of social classes in proportion to their representation in the population, in fact conceals a propensity for exclusion both at the top and at the bottom, with the middle class largely avoiding FE unless forced there by school failure and the working class often regarding school failure as the end of their educational experience altogether. As well as depriving FE of social and cultural capital, middle-class self-exclusion may also contribute to the perception of FE colleges as of low status and for ‘other people’s children’. However, the complexity of social distributions discussed in this paper is great enough to indicate that such perceptions do not tell the whole story. This paper has been able to indicate structures but can only hypothesize the ways in which agency operates to govern choice; nevertheless, a Bourdieuan framework would appear natural for further work. Furthermore, research that makes visible middle-class young people in the FE system alongside their working-class peers could help to answer the questions raised.

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# **Individualisation and social exclusion: the case of young people not in education, employment or training**

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# **Individualisation and social exclusion: the case of young people not in education, employment or training**

## **Abstract**

The characteristics, experiences and long-term prospects of young people outside the labour market and education have attracted widespread international attention in recent decades, and the specific category of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) has been a policy concern for the UK Government since 1997. This paper examines the analytical and empirical basis of our knowledge of NEET young people, in the light of more general conceptualisations of social exclusion and the individualisation of social risk. It relates the NEET category to a conception of social exclusion in which the central policy focus is on moving young people across a boundary between participation and non-participation, and inequalities within education and employment receive less attention. This focus, allied with discourses of individualisation, obscures the structural basis of inequality in education and training. However, the paper argues that the research evidence shows that individualised approaches based on personal and cultural characteristics of NEET young people are inadequate to understand this group and frame policy. The paper proposes that stronger versions of social exclusion need to be used in constructing solutions which acknowledge the basis of NEET issues in wider social inequalities.

## Introduction

Education and social exclusion were closely related themes in UK social policy throughout the period of New Labour government. One of the first actions of the Labour administration was to establish the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), and Tony Blair, in its report *Bridging the Gap*, claimed that 'The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience' (SEU, 1999, p.6). However, as Levitas (2005) points out, although the political language of social cohesion, inclusion and exclusion was central to the New Labour project, the meaning of these terms was less than clear. Levitas traces three overlapping discourses of social exclusion in New Labour thinking. The first discourse, of redistribution, explains social exclusion in terms of relative material poverty, and finds its expression through the tax and benefits system and in improved levels of public services. The second, a 'moral underclass discourse', attributes social exclusion to cultural characteristics of the excluded, and leads to a focus on behaviour rather than material poverty. The third discourse, of social integration through (paid) work, views social exclusion as arising mainly from unemployment, which it attributes to deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of individuals. In all three discourses, education has an important role in combating social exclusion: as a recipient of increased public funding, as a means to cultural change, and as a preparation for employment.

The concept of social exclusion is useful in maintaining a focus on material and cultural deprivation in a period when, although discourses of opportunity, equality and inclusion are politically dominant, inequalities between the richest and poorest segments of society have been significantly higher than in the late 1970s (Byrne, 2005, p.96). However, social exclusion is not ideologically neutral, and draws on what Steinert (2003, p.45) calls a 'horizontal' model of social inequality, in which the powerful and privileged disappear within an included majority, whilst the poverty and disadvantage of the excluded are positioned outside society:

The solution implied by a discourse of social exclusion is a minimalist one: a transition across the boundary to become an insider rather than an outsider in a society whose structural inequalities remain largely uninterrogated.

(Levitas, 2005, p.7)

These considerations are particularly apparent in the case of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Rising participation rates, together with the centrality of learning in discourses of social exclusion, have resulted in young people who reject its benefits to seek employment becoming, as Roberts (2009, p.358) puts it, 'a stigmatised rump' – albeit not insignificant, with 17 per cent of young people spending time NEET within two years of reaching the minimum school-leaving age (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p.33). Under existing proposals in England, the age of compulsory participation in education or training will rise to 18 by 2015 (Simmons, 2008), further stigmatising non-participation through civil, and possibly criminal, penalties. However, the focus on NEET young people assumes a horizontal conception of social exclusion, concentrating on the participation boundary and neglecting inequalities within education, employment and training. As this paper will show, there is substantial evidence that reducing NEET rates amongst 16-18 year olds will not only be extremely difficult to achieve but will have little impact on social inequalities.

From 1997 onwards, numerous policy initiatives were deployed in the quest to raise participation in full-time education or in employment with training. Connexions, the advice and guidance service for young people aged 13-19, was given a particular remit to reduce the size of the NEET group; the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was introduced to provide financial support for young people aged 16-19 engaged in education and training<sup>1</sup>; and curriculum change attempted to make what young people learn more 'relevant', both to themselves and to employers. More recently, pilots of Activity Agreements provided conditional benefits to NEET young people in the form of financial support alongside individualised learning programmes (Maguire et al. 2009). However, over the last decade NEET rates have remained high, at around ten per cent amongst 16-18 year olds, and since 2005 rising participation rates at age 16 and 17 have been offset by greater unemployment amongst 18-year-olds entering the labour market in increasingly hostile economic conditions (DCSF, 2009a, p.11).

The purpose of this paper is to review our knowledge of NEET young people, and to argue that a minimalist approach to social exclusion based on crossing the participation boundary needs to be replaced by a broader programme aimed at addressing class-based inequalities within education and employment. Over the last fifteen years, a growing body of research has become available, including quantitative analysis of large data sets, smaller-scale qualitative studies and

conceptual analyses. Much of this work points to the persistence of structured inequalities, particularly in relation to class, and the relationship between being NEET and social class is a particular focus of the paper. However, as proponents of 'individualisation' maintain, our subjective awareness of social structures has become increasingly obscured as collective approaches are displaced by individualist values, and young people are encouraged to conceptualise their biographies as the outcome of individual choice, aspiration or failure.

The paper begins by considering the conceptual framework of individualisation (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). It then considers the development of NEET as an analytical category, and the advantages and disadvantages of classifying young people in this way. Some of the major contributions to empirical research on NEET young people are examined, including work on the composition, characteristics and lived experience of the NEET population. Although many of the research findings have international relevance, the characteristics and experiences of NEET young people show some sensitivity to national contexts (Furlong and Cartmel, 2003); accordingly, the main focus here is on research in the UK. Re-engaging NEET young people often involves provision aimed at helping them to achieve vocational qualifications and enhance their basic skills, and the paper continues by reviewing evidence on the labour market returns of such qualifications. The paper concludes by discussing how different conceptions of social exclusion can frame policy approaches to reducing NEET rates and, of equal importance, achieving greater equality for those who participate.

### **Individualisation and the epistemological fallacy**

Although there is some debate over the extent of continuities with past decades, it is generally agreed that school to work transitions have become both more extended and more complex since the decline of youth employment in the 1970s (Furlong, 2009; Roberts, 2009). As Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) point out, transitions were never as collective or smooth as the image of a 'golden age' in the 1960s suggests; nevertheless, qualitative changes have occurred in post-school experiences. Participation in full-time education has increased markedly as traditional youth employment opportunities have dwindled and the road to a 'steady job' has lengthened (European Commission, 2009, p.115), whilst post-16 routes have become more individualised in response to market approaches to education and

training and the increasing location of available work within smaller units, particularly in the service sector. As a result, young people face more complex structures of opportunity, and are expected to engage in the reflexive navigation of these opportunities in order to construct a marketable self. However, their experiences remain highly structured in terms of gender, ethnicity and particularly social class (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Roberts, 2009). Although class-based segregation in secondary and tertiary education has reduced, the objective and subjective dimensions of how young people deal with diversity and choice still lead to social stratification in post-compulsory routes, and the end of compulsory schooling continues to be a point of social dispersal and differentiation (Ball, Macrae and Maguire, 1999; Furlong, 2009).

Ulrich Beck argues that we are currently experiencing a process in which social inequality becomes more individualised as traditional patterns and arrangements in work and society are weakened and replaced, on the one hand by expectations of self-actualisation, and on the other hand by increased reliance on individual resources. The contradictions inherent in this process mean that, whilst the structure of social inequality in developed countries is remarkably stable, 'questions concerning inequality are no longer perceived and politically handled as class questions', and individual-level solutions compete with collective responses to the social risks of wage labour, such as unemployment and deskilling (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2006, p.143). As a result, inequalities are redefined in terms of individualised risks, with social problems being perceived in the light of psychological dispositions and personal attributes. Although this process is partly ideological, Beck and writers such as Giddens (1991), Lash (1992) and Bauman (2001) see it as characteristic of the period of 'late modernity', in which the intensification of trends such as globalisation, the disembedding of social relations from local structures, and increasing reflexivity in knowledge and behaviour all require individuals to assume responsibility for navigating increasingly complex options.

It is useful to draw a distinction at this point, between individualisation as a structural product of capitalism in late modernity, and therefore as a process to be critiqued, and discourses which take individualisation at face value, using it to justify individual-level solutions to social inequalities. This latter tendency is reflected in UK Government discourse on NEET young people throughout the New Labour period, and is unlikely to change under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition which came to power in May 2010. Within this discourse, participation is conceived as

increasing individual employability by developing work-related skills, attributes and dispositions. Conversely, factors which increase the risk of disengagement from learning and employment, such as low attainment, restricted aspirations, and negative attitudes and behaviours are essentialised, regarded as properties of young people, families and communities, rather than as consequences of structural inequality.

In young people's own accounts, being NEET is often attributed to an inability to compete in education and labour markets due to low academic ability, lack of experience, and low confidence (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p.34). However, although adverse labour market conditions impact on all social groups, structural factors continue to be important, particularly those relating to social class. Recent data from the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) show a strong association between socio-economic status (SES)<sup>2</sup> and being NEET (DCSF/ONS, 2009). Young people from low-SES backgrounds are significantly more likely to be NEET than those from professional backgrounds (Table 1). Furthermore, they are also more likely to lack academic qualifications, and to be in Government-supported training schemes, both of which are associated with increased risk of being NEET in the future (Coles et al. 2002, p.26).

To some extent, lower NEET rates amongst high-SES young people are a consequence of greater participation in full-time education, and even for those who are relatively privileged, early entry to the labour market increases the risk of becoming NEET. As Table 1 shows, when NEET rates are calculated as a proportion of those not in full-time education, social class differences are less sharply defined and, as the individualisation thesis would suggest, declining youth labour markets affect all social classes. Similarly, in Table 2 only NEET young people from higher professional backgrounds have a substantially shorter average time in NEET status than those in other SES categories, again suggesting that the risks of seeking employment at an early age are not confined to low-SES groups. Nevertheless, these risks are not equally shared, and Table 1 indicates that even amongst those who enter the labour market early, NEET rates are considerably higher for young people from low-SES backgrounds than for their more privileged peers. Furthermore, although SES differences in the average length of time NEET are generally not large, Table 2 shows that the likelihood of spending more than 12 months NEET is much greater for low-SES young people than for those from professional backgrounds. Compounding such trends with differential access to family resources suggests that

the experience and outcomes of being NEET may vary greatly between young people from low and high-SES backgrounds.

In deprived neighbourhoods, awareness of broader social divisions can be constrained by location and class; MacDonald et al. (2005, p.880) describe their participants as experiencing a lack of contrast which underpinned their 'bemusement' at the idea that they might be socially excluded. Although many young people show some awareness of structured inequalities, their responses to the situations they face are individual rather than collective (Furlong, 2009, p.349). As Furlong points out, job titles and cultural preferences are no longer immediate indicators of class position, and young people of all classes may be found in higher education or working alongside each other in service environments. However, this does not mean that class-based patterns in youth transitions have disappeared or become irrelevant. Young people continue to face situations which are structured along the lines of class, but – through education and employment choices and consumption decisions – deal with these situations at an individual level. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) draw attention to this growing disjuncture between objective and subjective experiences, referring to it as the *epistemological fallacy* of late modernity, in which 'People's life chances remain highly structured at the same time as they increasingly seek solutions on an individual, rather than a collective basis' (p.5). Reflexive modernisation (Lash 1992) has not freed young people from predictable social paths; rather, by weakening collectivist traditions and intensifying individualism, it has obscured the role of social structures in shaping life chances.

### **Social exclusion and the problem category of NEET**

Policy on NEET young people in the UK is largely based on a dichotomy between privileged forms of social participation such as paid work, formal education and accredited training, and other activities – including both pathological behaviour and socially sanctioned occupations which are nevertheless positioned as being of lesser value, such as unpaid domestic labour or gap years (Fergusson 2004; Levitas 2005). Inequalities within education and work are overlooked, in favour of a horizontal concept of social exclusion in which the central distinction is between those who are reducing their risks by gaining knowledge, skills and experience in approved ways, and those who, for whatever reason, are not. Inevitably, therefore, NEET young people form a heterogeneous group, both in terms of the reasons for their NEET status and the length of time they spend in this category. It is unfortunate that the

heterogeneity of the NEET group is sometimes presented as an empirical 'discovery' rather than the logical consequence of a definition, as this provides a realist veneer to what is essentially a policy construct. Nevertheless, research on the factors associated with non-participation is valuable in terms of indicating the precise nature of the different sub-groups constituting NEET, their relative size and the types of intervention that may be necessary to support them (Coles et al. 2002; Spielhofer et al. 2009). Table 3 indicates some of the main reasons for non-participation, and the age-dependent size of each sub-group (see also Furlong, 2006, p.561 for data from Scotland).

The emergence of NEET as an analytical category can be traced back to changes in the UK benefit system in 1988, which removed the entitlement to unemployment benefits for young people under the age of 18. This meant that many young people effectively disappeared from the radar of state surveillance, and led both researchers and government officials to find new ways of monitoring vulnerable young people (Furlong, 2006). Ironically in view of later developments, NEET was originally adopted as a neutral alternative to the term Status Zero, derived from careers service records and used in the pioneering study of NEET young people in South Glamorgan (Rees, Williamson and Istance, 1996). However, replacing unemployment, a precisely defined term with international currency, by a category which combines groups with very different characteristics has both advantages and disadvantages (Furlong 2006, p.554).

On the positive side, the NEET category maintains vulnerable young people in the policy foreground; in particular, NEET status draws attention to groups such as teenage parents and other young carers, or people with disabilities. As Yates and Payne (2006, p.336) point out, such young people often lead very isolated lives and although, particularly for young parents, NEET is not necessarily a negative status, they can be at risk of becoming disengaged or excluded. To some extent, NEET provides a focal point for the issue of youth unemployment and, more generally, highlights some of the contrasts between advantaged and disadvantaged (Furlong, 2006). Furthermore, efforts to reduce NEET rates throughout the last decade have maintained elements of a redistributive approach to social exclusion through measures such as the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the Activity Agreement pilots.

Constructing NEET as a problem category may therefore benefit some young people. However, it also has several disadvantages. Capturing the size of the NEET population can be problematic, with both cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches creating definitional problems. The overwhelmingly negative connotations of NEET status in policy documents and in the media have come to stigmatise and marginalise young people, who are perceived – alongside their peers in jobs without training – as feckless and lacking both aspiration and employment-related skills (Lawy, Quinn and Diment 2009). Furlong (2006) argues that effective policy making requires the disaggregation of a status which conflates short-term and long-term unemployed, those briefly ill and the long-term disabled, young offenders and those simply taking a break from work or education. Focusing on NEET can lead to those who are easiest to move into education or employment receiving the most attention and using up scarce resources, at the expense of those who are more vulnerable – particularly when agencies such as Connexions are set targets for reducing NEET rates. Maguire et al. (2009) report that conflicts between the rules for Activity Agreement pilots and those for the receipt of other benefits meant that some of the ‘hardest to reach’ groups did not engage with these initiatives. For the most vulnerable, such as the homeless or those caught up in drug misuse, being NEET may not be their most relevant characteristic, and attention to this status may divert attention from more immediate and threatening risks requiring urgent or sustained intervention (Yates and Payne 2006, p.338).

Perhaps most significantly, NEET distracts attention from substantial and firmly entrenched inequalities within both education and employment. Ball (2003) shows how education markets lead to social stratification in post-16 choices, with those most constrained in cultural and social capital ‘choosing’ low-status courses, whilst Roberts (2009, p.361) warns that, for many young people, post-16 education or training is a continuation of efforts to achieve ‘worthless’ qualifications. Although many young people are caught in a ‘churn’ between different sites of education or employment, punctuated by periods NEET, Fergusson (2004) argues that stable post-16 participation can also be a part of social exclusion, with the least advantaged locked in to courses with few prospects. Fergusson identifies a ‘new inequalities’ group of young people, in which continued participation results from having no alternatives and is merely a prelude to later experiences of social exclusion. These students are not visible in current ways of accounting for socially-excluded young people.

The importance attached by New Labour to reducing NEET rates can be related to what Levitas (2005) calls the social integrationist discourse of social exclusion, in which a cohesive society is to be achieved through inclusion in paid work. This type of discourse emphasises the moral and social benefits of work and portrays an organic society in which solidarity and interdependence override conflict and struggle. However, as Levitas points out, the social integrationist discourse obscures inequalities between paid workers, including gender inequalities in pay and conditions, and disregards the inequality and exploitation inherent in capitalist modes of production. The dynamic nature of social exclusion, as a process which maintains or deepens inequality, is thereby concealed. In his analysis of New Labour discourse, Fairclough (2000) notes the dominance of the adjectival form of social exclusion – to describe a condition that people are in – over the verb form, in which it describes a process by which something is done to them. Byrne (2005) distinguishes between weak and strong versions of social exclusion, citing Veit-Wilson:

In the 'weak' version of this discourse, the solutions lie in altering these excluded people's handicapping characteristics and enhancing their integration into dominant society. 'Stronger' forms of this discourse also emphasise the role of those who are doing the excluding and therefore aim for solutions which reduce the powers of exclusion.

(Veit-Wilson 1998: 45; cited in Byrne 2005, p.5)

Byrne (2005) regards the weak version of social exclusion as a means of shutting down political debate on redistributive and other measures aimed at redressing the polarisation between rich and poor. Weak social exclusion fails to contest processes of individualisation, weaving them instead into a discourse of inclusion through education and paid work and, in relation to the NEET category, places the balance of responsibility on a group of vulnerable young people rather than the state, employers and schooling.

### **Becoming NEET – risk factors and consequences**

The factors involved in young people becoming NEET, and their underlying relationship to broader social structures, are now relatively well understood, although

the ways in which different factors interact is less clear. The heterogeneity of the NEET group arising from its broad definition means that these factors are varied, and in some cases – for example young people taking gap years before entering higher education or those suffering from short-term illness – NEET status arises from a specific reason and is unlikely to have significant longer-term consequences. However, for many NEET young people, and particularly those who are ‘sustained NEET’ (Spielhofer et al. 2009), their status is both an outcome and a continuing part of social and educational disadvantage.

The strong association between being NEET and coming from a low-SES background has been indicated in Tables 1 and 2. More specifically, Coles et al. (2002) note that the young people least likely to be NEET are those living with two parents in owner-occupied housing with a father working full time; conversely, children receiving free school meals in their final year of compulsory schooling are considerably more likely to become NEET than those who are not (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p.30). Furthermore, one of the most significant specific factors in being NEET at age 16-18 is educational attainment, itself related to social class. Using data from the British Cohort Study of individuals born in 1970, Bynner and Parsons (2002) found that young people with no qualifications were six times more likely to be NEET as those with ‘O’ level qualifications or above. Recent data from YCS and LSYPE indicates that school leavers with no qualifications are four times more likely to become NEET than those who achieve the relatively modest level of 1-4 grades A\*-C at GCSE (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p.30). In Australia, Hillman (2005) also reports an association with low educational attainment. However, the relationship between NEET and social or educational disadvantage is gendered; for example, Bynner and Parsons (2002) found that girls with no qualifications were less likely to become NEET than boys, and that residence in inner city or social housing had a large effect for boys, whilst for girls family poverty was more important. Overall, NEET rates are gendered and increase with age. Young women aged 16 are less likely to be NEET than young men, with rates of 3.9 per cent and 6.3 per cent respectively in 2008; however, by age 18 the gender gap has decreased as a proportion of overall rates, the corresponding figures being 15.3 per cent and 17.7 per cent (DCSF, 2009b).

Unstable family circumstances are also significant. Rees et al. (1996) note that ‘by far the majority of young people interviewed had experienced what might be called “fractured” childhoods’ (p.224), and more recent studies have confirmed that NEET young people aged 16-17 are considerably more likely to live with lone parents and

to live in a household where no-one is working (Barham et al. 2009, p.28). Young people who live independently are also at higher risk of being NEET, particularly when living as part of a couple with children or as a lone parent. Unsurprisingly, being pregnant or a parent is the most important single factor in young women being NEET, outweighing even lack of qualifications (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p.34). Rees et al. (1996) found that contingent factors, including major personal and family traumas, were often responsible for higher-achieving young people becoming NEET, and similar findings are reported by other authors (Ball et al. 1999; Russell et al. 2010). In some circumstances, events such as parental break-up or unemployment, relocation and bullying appear to overwhelm the material and symbolic resources of families.

Whilst educational disadvantage refers to social factors and family circumstances, together with personal attributes such as disability or special educational need, *disaffection* concerns young people's attitudes to their education. Research over the last fifteen years has shown consistent links between disaffection and being NEET. Rees et al. (1996) found that, in general, education was not esteemed and youth training courses were seen as having little value. Truancy and school exclusion remain significant risk factors, with 34 per cent of those permanently excluded from school and 28 per cent of persistent truants later becoming NEET (DCSF/ONS, 2009, p.30). However, it would be a mistake to equate these forms of disaffection with wilful rejection of education. Coles et al. (2002) draw attention to the structural basis of both truancy and school exclusion, with strong associations between schools serving deprived communities and high rates of exclusion and truancy; furthermore, they report the dramatic impact of ethnic monitoring in reducing exclusion rates amongst Black Caribbean boys (p.32). Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) report how young people from a deprived area of Teesside described poor quality provision for lower achieving pupils and their neglect by schools focused on those close to A-C grades at GCSE (p.593).

The introduction of subjective dimensions to the risks of becoming NEET evokes the moral underclass discourse of social exclusion (Levitas, 2005), in which disconnection from education, work and society is assumed to derive from a cultural malaise within families and communities. Since the political emergence of this discourse in the 1980s (Byrne, 2005, p.24), the idea of an underclass has been the focus of extensive academic debate, both analytical – stressing that 'underclass' behaviours are explainable in terms of structural factors – and empirical. Rees et al.

(1996) concluded that, although a proportion of NEET young people were likely to be relatively impervious to interventions, there was no evidence that they formed part of an 'underclass', and that increased state investment in education and training would pay dividends for the majority. More recent studies find the British underclass to be equally elusive. In a deprived area of Glasgow, McKendrick, Scott and Sinclair (2007) found no evidence for widespread disaffection or disengagement, or for a distinct sub-group of the most problematic individuals. For Macdonald and Marsh (2001), the economic and social marginality of disadvantaged young people in Teesside resulted from the restructuring of employment in post-industrial, flexible labour markets, in which job insecurity, unemployment and poor work are now part of normal working-class experience. Significantly, they found that social exclusion itself was associated with a general stigma affecting job prospects.

Geographies of opportunity appear to have particular significance, often at a highly local level. MacDonald et al. (2005) emphasise the importance of place in mediating young people's experiences, whilst Green and White (2008) found that individual choices about whether and where to work were based on subjective values and aspirations, which in turn were limited by the objective opportunities available at local level, particularly for those facing the greatest labour-market constraints. Indeed, contrary to the underclass discourse, Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) point to a hyper-conventional work ethic amongst socially excluded young people, in which *any* work takes precedence over deferred – and dubious – labour market returns from education and training.

Much of the policy focus on NEET young people arises from concerns about the long-term consequences of non-participation at age 16-18. Young people who are NEET at age 16 are considerably more likely to be NEET at age 21, even when qualifications and early life experiences are taken into account. They are also less likely to be in full-time or part-time employment at age 21. For young women, the consequences of being NEET at age 16 extend beyond education and employment, including early motherhood, feelings of lack of control, dissatisfaction and problems with life (Bynner and Parsons, 2002, p.300). There is also some evidence that young people NEET at ages 16-18 are more likely to suffer poor health and depression (Coles et al. 2002, p.64).

Labour-market policy and the nature of support for the unemployed appear to influence significantly the long-term consequences of earlier inactivity (Furlong and Cartmel, 2003), and it is not wholly clear-cut that being NEET in itself, as opposed to the reproduction of class and gender relations, has serious long-term effects. However, in Sweden, despite relatively generous unemployment benefit and extensive intervention in the labour market during the 1990s, long periods of inactivity in young adulthood were associated with higher risks seven years later (Franzen and Kassman, 2005). By contrast, some US research suggests that later labour-market outcomes are largely unrelated to early experiences (Coles et al. 2002, p.60). There is some evidence of other long-term consequences of being NEET, such as reduced lifetime earnings, drug abuse and criminal activity; however, this evidence is based on indirect associations through factors such as school exclusions or lack of qualifications, and should be treated with caution.

### **Educational qualifications and labour market returns**

Roberts (2009) argues that social class differences in aspiration are explicable largely in terms of positional strategies based on the costs, risks and potential benefits of aiming higher, relative to the starting points and resources of families. As Ball (2003) reports, educational marketplaces have made it increasingly difficult for working-class students to navigate effectively the stratified 'choices' on offer, and positional strategies tend to reproduce existing social divisions. Furthermore, the participation choices for many young people at risk of becoming NEET tend to be limited to lower-level vocational courses, basic skills provision or government-supported training schemes, all of which have somewhat doubtful benefits in terms of labour market returns.

Using data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), Jenkins, Greenwood and Vignoles (2007) analyse the economic value in England of vocational qualifications. They distinguish between the average wage return to a qualification, and the marginal return – the value to individuals for whom it is their highest qualification. For National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at level 2, average returns were negative, whilst for NVQ at level 3 average returns were zero for men and approximately one per cent for women. The marginal returns of NVQ qualifications were zero or negative at level 2, but positive at level 3. There is also evidence that wage returns to vocational qualifications depend on how they are acquired, with greatest benefit where they are

achieved through an individual's employment (Dearden, McGranahan and Sianesi, 2004). Jenkins et al. found that men acquiring an NVQ2 in employment earning a marginal return of around eight per cent, whilst qualifications achieved through government training schemes yield lower or even negative returns.

There was little evidence associating NVQ2 with increased probability of employment, although these qualifications appeared to encourage inactive individuals to enter the labour market. With NVQ3 qualifications, men were 2.3 per cent more likely to be employed, whilst for women the figure was 1.8 per cent (Jenkins et al. 2007, p.116). Academic qualifications performed better; for example, holding five or more grades A\*-C at GCSE was associated with an increase of three per cent in the probability of employment.

De Coulon, Marcenaro-Gutierrez and Vignoles (2007) analyse the labour market value of basic skills in Britain for a cohort born in 1970. Controlling for individual and family background characteristics, literacy and numeracy skills have a significant positive impact on earnings. An additional standard deviation in attainment results in 14 per cent higher earnings for literacy and 11 per cent for numeracy (De Coulon et al. 2007, p.13). Men and women obtain broadly similar benefits. An additional standard deviation in literacy attainment is associated with a 3.5 per cent increase in the probability of employment for women (4.7 per cent for full-time employment) but no significant increase for men. Higher attainment in numeracy is associated with a 2.3 per cent increase in employability for men (3.4 per cent for full-time employment), and there is weak evidence for an increase in the probability of full-time employment for women (De Coulon et al. 2007, p.24-27). However, it must be noted that these returns are based on improved skill levels *relative to other people*, rather than absolute attainment.

Although provision for lower-achieving young people may have considerable benefits in terms of personal development, it is striking how little impact on employment prospects is achieved by low-level vocational or basic skills qualifications. In some cases, this provision is associated with negative labour market returns; where positive returns exist, they are not large enough to have clear and obvious benefits for young people, being limited in most cases to a few per cent. When offset against the risk of failure, potential lost earnings and competition from others, it is not surprising that some young people continue to look for work rather than attempt to enhance their labour market position by acquiring such qualifications.

Young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to rely on immediate social networks for information, advice and recommendation (Ball et al. 1999; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Green and White, 2008), with friends, neighbours and family members valued more than official sources, which are often regarded as out of touch with labour market conditions. In such circumstances, young people are likely to perceive stark contradictions between official advice on the benefits of education and local realities. Indeed, Roberts (2004) argues that it is employers who have benefited from the upward trend in achievement, by populating lower-level jobs with young people better qualified than hitherto and reaping the consequent gains in productivity at no additional cost.

The failure of lower-level vocational qualifications to enhance employment opportunities is predicted in Boudon's (1977) model of the stability of class differentials in periods of educational expansion. In this model, increasing access reduces inequalities at lower levels and raises the average level of attainment. However, if social inequalities at higher levels of education remain, and occupational upgrading fails to keep pace with the number of qualified people, class differentials are maintained. Effectively, working-class young people who have achieved higher levels of education than their parents' generation are squeezed out of good jobs and elite higher education by corresponding improvements in middle-class achievement. In turn, these young people compete with the lowest achievers for those jobs which remain; in periods of chronic job shortages, this effectively excludes some young people from employment or consigns them to poor quality jobs for extended periods.

Roberts (2004) argues that this is precisely what has happened in the UK and elsewhere over the last forty years. He identifies four elements in this process. First, qualification levels have risen faster than the pace of occupational upgrading. Second, levels of general education are used by employers to 'screen out' those they perceive as having least ability – a process made easier by the downward extension of credentialism, which has more clearly identified the lowest achievers than when the majority left school without qualifications. As a result, those without marketable qualifications become progressively more disadvantaged. Third, fear of being left behind adds further impetus to the scramble for high-status qualifications amongst those able to achieve them. Finally, courses and schemes for those 'excluded' by this process – provision which is often segregated and viewed with suspicion by employers and the general public (Russell et al. 2010) – reinforces their

stigmatisation and discourages participation. Furthermore, Roberts (2009) observes that expansion of the middle class following the significant upward mobility of the 1950s and 1960s has formed a barrier to young people from working-class backgrounds who aspire to high-status education and employment. Using evidence from three large-scale datasets, Smith (2009) supports this view, proposing that immobility at the bottom of the class structure is structurally determined by the class distribution above it. On this basis, Smith suggests that a section of mainly working-class young people will continue to be marginalised, with low-skilled work or exclusion from the labour market their most likely prospects, and that NEET rates will continue at current levels or even increase.

### **Discussion: individualisation, social exclusion and policy**

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that the experiences of NEET young people cannot be accounted for purely in terms of the dispositions of individuals and the choices they make. Subjective factors are important, but they are embedded in and arise from objective conditions, including local structures of opportunity and more general interactions between labour markets and the social distribution of educational achievement. To use Bourdieu's concepts, habitus and field are inseparable, being interactively related through the experiences and outcomes of individuals and others in their social networks. Green and White (2008) note that young people derive from class, family and friends specific varieties of social and cultural capital rooted in local conditions, which may be enabling or constraining. Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) describe aspirations limited by patterns of class and gender differentiation, with higher education viewed as a remote prospect, and social networks directing young people into low-skilled – but available – jobs: 'Informal, collective knowledge about the right way of becoming and being a working-class young adult did much to govern the shape of school-to-work careers' (p.594).

This is not to suggest that post-16 participation is wholly deterministic, with some young people destined to be NEET and agency, along with policy interventions, relegated to the sidelines. As Table 1 shows, over 80 per cent of young people from low-SES backgrounds are participating at any one time, and arguably the ability to individually negotiate complex structures of opportunity is more important to young people from working-class backgrounds than to those who can draw on family and peer group resources more attuned to academic careers. However, it is important to appreciate the limits of agency in navigating the options available to working-class

young people. Particularly for those who are least well-qualified and live in the most deprived areas, 'inclusion' through education or training is likely to mean allocation to courses and training schemes which confer little benefit, either in terms of labour market advantage or educational progression.

Policy based on straightforward dichotomies between participation and non-participation fails to recognise the extent to which post-16 education and training is stratified in terms of the status and value of qualifications. There is some evidence to suggest that EMA has increased rates of participation in full-time education and, in a limited way, has assisted lower-attaining young people to achieve slightly higher levels of qualification than hitherto (Maguire, 2008). However, in view of the limited impact on labour market fortunes discussed in the previous section, this is unlikely to decrease social inequality. Although further research is needed, Maguire notes that the lack of impact on achievement 'raises alarm bells about young people being "warehoused" in education, as opposed to providing young people with the opportunity to make progress, in terms of qualification enhancement' (p.212).

If horizontal and 'weak' conceptualisations of social exclusion are inadequate to the task of formulating policy, how might vertical and 'strong' approaches help matters? Perhaps the most fundamental questions here are first, what is being done to NEET young people and by whom; and second, what could be done to reduce the power to exclude? From the work of Smith (2009) and Roberts (2004), one answer to the first question is that, simply by being there, an expanded middle class and its ability to manipulate educational markets poses a supremely difficult obstacle to upward mobility amongst young people from working-class backgrounds. In turn, this denies progression to decent jobs and training for those of lower attainment. Unfortunately, the solution proposed by Roberts (2004) – large-scale creation of decent jobs, through the public sector if necessary, will be even less acceptable to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration than it was to New Labour, and the introduction of more stringent welfare to work measures across all age groups is likely to depress further the chances of employment for young people. Of particular salience to this prospect is the view of Shildrick and MacDonald (2007), that a secondary market of 'poor work' accessed both by young people and their parents has replaced a separate youth labour market. Little is known about the experiences of young people in this secondary labour market and further research would be valuable, particularly longitudinal qualitative studies of those with few qualifications.

A 'strong' approach to social exclusion would also focus on inequalities within education, including the stratification arising from marketised approaches but also, and more generally, the effects of unequal access to economic, social and cultural capital throughout childhood and young adulthood. Again, despite the welcome aspiration of the Coalition Government to reduce educational inequality and increase social mobility (HM Government 2010, p.28), it appears likely that public expenditure reductions and policies promoting greater 'choice' and increased autonomy for schools will act in the opposite direction. In consequence, it is to be expected that policy on NEET young people will continue to be framed by a 'weak' conception of social exclusion which, although able to assist in the personal development of vulnerable people in their later teenage years, will be too limited and too late to make a real difference to social inequality.

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Table 1: Main activity at 17 by parental occupation (percentage)

	<i>Full-time education</i>	<i>Job with training</i>	<i>Job without training</i>	<i>Government-supported training</i>	<i>NEET</i>	<i>NEET as proportion of those outside FT education</i>
Higher professional	78	6	7	5	3	14
Lower professional	73	8	9	6	3	12
Intermediate	61	10	14	9	6	15
Lower supervisory	50	13	17	12	9	18
Routine	50	10	17	9	14	28
Other/not classified	57	7	11	7	18	42

Source: LSYPE Wave 5 and YCS Cohort 13, Sweep 2 (Adapted from DCSF/ONS 2009, p.30)

Table 2: Months NEET by parental occupation (percentage)

	<i>None</i>	<i>1-3 months</i>	<i>4-12 months</i>	<i>12+ months</i>	<i>Average time NEET for those who have been NEET (months)</i>
Higher professional	93	3	4	<1	<1
Lower professional	90	3	5	1	7
Intermediate	85	5	8	3	8
Lower supervisory	78	6	11	5	9
Routine	72	7	14	7	9
Other/not classified	69	5	16	11	11

Source: LSYPE Wave 5 and YCS Cohort 13, Sweep 2 (Adapted from DCSF/ONS 2009, p.33)

Table 3: Main reason for being NEET at ages 16-17 and 18-24 (percentage)

	<i>16-17</i>	<i>18-24</i>
Looking for work or suitable course	44	38
Waiting to start a job/course	14	6
Pregnant or caring for own children	8	27
Disability or ill health	7	11
Gap year before higher education	5	2
Caring for a dependant adult relative	<1	1
Refugee or asylum seeker	1	<1
Doing unpaid/voluntary work	<1	1
Other reason	20	13

Source: LFS, Quarter 3, 2009 (Adapted from DCSF 2009a, p.12)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010, the Coalition Government announced its intention to reduce spending on EMA by focusing support on the most disadvantaged.

<sup>2</sup> YCS and LSYPE use a family socio-economic status derived from the occupations of both father and mother and categorised according to the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) used in the UK.

## Reclaiming the disengaged? A Bourdieuan analysis of work-based learning for young people in England

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This paper uses Bourdieu's concept of field to analyse findings from an ethnographic study of Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes in England. Entry to Employment is a work-based learning programme which aims to re-engage young people with 'barriers to learning' inhibiting access to further education, training or employment. The paper examines field positions associated with E2E, such as learner and tutor, distinguishing between the taking of positions by individual agents and the construction of these positions by dominant institutions. The paper argues that official constructions are based on a discourse which positions E2E learners as a deficit category alongside young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and separates E2E programmes from those in mainstream educational provision. In consequence, although learners are supported and make individual progress, E2E contributes to the exclusion that Bourdieu identifies as the chief means of social reproduction in the education system.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu; field; habitus; NEET (not in education, employment or training); work-based learning

### Introduction

This paper analyses findings from a one-year ethnographic study of work-based learning programmes for young people in England aged 16–18 using Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus. The paper has two aims: firstly, to understand and synthesise the research findings by placing them in a conceptual framework of relations between positions in work-based learning, such as learner, practitioner, parent, employer and policy-maker. As Bourdieu (1989) notes, 'the truth of any interaction is never entirely to be found within the interaction as it avails itself for observation' (p. 16). Secondly, the paper relates work-based learning for young people to the broader field of post-compulsory education and training, including further education (FE), jobs without training (JWT) and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)<sup>1</sup> and considers the implications for policy and practice if a more advantageous position for these young people is to be achieved.

For adults, work-based learning tends to be associated with qualifications acquired within existing employment (Avis, 2004, p. 197). By contrast, work-based learning for young people has an ambivalent status. On the one hand, routes such as apprenticeships parallel the opportunities available to employed adults, leading to recognised vocational

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qualifications and, at least in theory, encouraging progression to higher levels. However, other forms of work-based learning for young people have significantly lower status and are associated with re-integrating those disaffected or disengaged from schooling (Avis, 2004, p. 211). In England this compensatory form of work-based learning is often seen as the main form of alternative provision for the disengaged (Thomson & Russell, 2009) and ‘practical’ learning is presented unproblematically as the pathway to re-engagement. However, Avis (2004, p. 212) argues that, although the interest of young people in the vocational and practical should not be discounted, they need access to forms of knowledge that allow them to understand and critique the practices and disciplines of the workplace. Similarly, Wheelahan (2009) argues that competence-based training, which provides the main form of qualification in work-based learning, denies access to the forms of knowledge required for full participation in society.

Entry to Employment (E2E), the work-based learning programme discussed in this paper, illustrates the tensions referred to above. Introduced in England following the Cassels report (DfES, 2001), E2E is intended for young people aged 16–18 who are unable to progress into FE or employment because they lack qualifications or have ‘barriers to learning’, such as poor basic skills, low motivation or self-esteem and behavioural problems. The programme is part of the UK Government’s strategy to reduce the numbers of NEET young people and attempts to re-engage participants through a work-based curriculum containing three main strands: personal and social development, basic skills and vocational learning. In this context, *work-based* refers to the characteristics of teaching and learning rather than their location, which is generally in specialist providers – although learners also spend time on unpaid work placement. Entry to Employment emphasises individual progression and has a developmental ethos; however, it suffers from low status, is strongly classed and gendered and, as Simmons (2009) argues, does not provide access to the kinds of knowledge called for by Avis and Wheelahan. Apart from an early study by Spielhofer, Mann and Sims (2003) and more recent work by Simmons (2009) and Ecclestone (2009), E2E has received little attention from academics.

The research discussed here took place during 2008–2009 in two neighbouring Local Authorities in the north of England. It comprised an initial mapping of provision in the authorities and a detailed ethnographic study of four learning sites, including an FE college, two private training providers and a charitable organisation. The ethnography included 87 hours of observation, 63 semi-structured interviews with young people and practitioners, photographs and documentary analysis. Detailed findings on young people are reported in Russell, Simmons and Thompson (under review) and on tutors in Thompson (2010). The paper synthesises findings from these articles, but also presents data not published elsewhere.

The paper begins by recapitulating certain aspects of field and the associated concepts of capital and habitus. It then uses these concepts to explore key positions in work-based learning for young people and the strategies employed by agents and institutions. The initial focus of discussion is on relations between E2E and the state and the positioning of learners within the ‘problem category’ of NEET young people. The paper then examines the ways in which learner and tutor positions are constructed within the field and ‘taken’ by individual agents. The paper argues that objective positions and the responses of agents cohere to produce further inequality for young people already on the margins of education.

### Thinking relationally – capital, field and habitus in Bourdieu

For Bourdieu, a differentiated society is an ensemble of relatively autonomous fields, each with its particular values and principles (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 16–17). The relative autonomy of a field allows it to conceal its contribution to social inequality, by focusing our attention on its specific characteristics rather than the homology between field positions and social positions, in which ‘Each field mirrors the social space in having . . . its own dominant and dominated agents and institutions, its mechanisms for reproduction and its struggles for usurpation and exclusion’ (Naidoo, 2004, pp. 459–460). Bourdieu conceives field as ‘a network, or a configuration, of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). External forces affect agents only through the mediation of the field, which imposes its own character to an extent depending on the degree of autonomy it enjoys. The field may not be singular, but a set of intersecting fields, so that a position may be exposed to conflicting and hierarchically arranged forces. Although capital – economic, cultural, social or symbolic – has a fundamental role in structuring positions, it does not have meaning or function independent of the field; rather, it provides its holders (to a degree depending on the nature and amount of capital held) with power in the field, facilitating the accumulation of further capital in its different forms.

Bourdieu’s conception of field is not static; a field is a space of social forces and struggles, in which agents and institutions attempt to preserve or transform its configuration. In these struggles, the field provides the objective conditions determining, at any particular time, the effectiveness of the strategies used by occupants of different positions. As the field changes, the strategies may change, or if the strategies remain the same their relative effectiveness will increase or decrease. However, unequal power relations within the field may limit the strategies available to agents in dominated field positions: ‘Those who dominate in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage’ (Wacquant, 1989, p. 40), although they must contend with the resistance of the dominated. Bourdieu’s conception of how capital operates within a field is also dynamic. As well as being both an object and an instrument of struggle, capital is mutable; not only do agents work to increase or conserve their capital, they also attempt to change its relative value compared to the capital of other agents. By discrediting the value of their opponents’ capital and valorising their own, agents work to change the field in their interests.

Bourdieu (1977) describes habitus as ‘a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks . . .’ (pp. 82–83, emphasis in original). Habitus is a complex notion in Bourdieu’s work and may be analysed in terms of at least four related aspects (Reay, 2004): as embodiment of the social world through durable modes of posture, movement and speech; as a practice-generating grammar, predisposing individuals towards certain behaviours; as the inscription in a single person of the whole collective history of their family and class; and as a complex interplay between past and present, whereby individual histories both structure and are re-structured by encounters with the outside world. Habitus is therefore ‘a multi-layered concept, with more general notions of habitus at the level of society and more complex, differentiated notions at the level of the individual’ (p. 434).

The relation between habitus and field operates as a conditioning relation, whereby the field structures the habitus and as a knowledge relation, ‘constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992,

p. 127). The habitus is both a lens through which everything in the social world is perceived and the set of principles governing an agent's responses. Thus, the strategies adopted by individuals may not be a result of conscious choice, arising instead from 'the unconscious fit between their habitus and the field they reside in' (p. 24). As Bourdieu explains, 'We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principle of these choices' (Wacquant, 1989, p. 45).

A habitus is not formed once and for all, and is a product of the different fields in which a person has resided and the positions they have occupied. In the context of this paper, a young person's encounter with E2E is structured by a habitus already formed and re-formed by earlier experiences. The primary habitus, constructed in the family and structuring their initial experience of school, is successively re-structured by the various fields constituting the young person's social environment as they encounter secondary and further education, work and peer groups. As Reay (2004, p. 435) notes, this process can give rise to a continuum of outcomes, from a habitus replicated by experiences reproducing its dispositions to one transformed by processes that raise or lower expectations.

### **E2E and the field of power**

According to Bourdieu, the analysis of a field should begin by examining its position in relation to the field of power – the meta-field defined by dominant positions in the economy and the state. This reveals the degree of autonomy of the field and the extent to which it can impose its own logic on external forces. In the present case, E2E is formed from the intersection of a number of fields, including FE, support and guidance for young people and various fields of low-skilled employment open to school leavers. Almost all of these occupy dominated positions with respect to the field of power, a relation intensified by 'modernising' approaches to public sector management, which emphasise greater productivity, marketisation, outcome-driven accountability and – in spite of the rhetoric – a centralised approach which severely curtails professional autonomy (Avis, 2007).

This situation is reflected in E2E by institutions such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), which allocates funding, determines the curriculum and monitors the achievement of targets,<sup>2</sup> and Lifelong Learning UK, which regulates teaching standards and training curricula in the FE sector.<sup>3</sup> The Connexions service, introduced in 2001 as an integrated support and advice service for young people aged 13–19, is responsible for approving E2E as suitable for a young person and referring them to providers. Although in dominant positions relative to E2E, these agencies have little strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, they have considerable discretion in operationalising strategic targets and funding plans and this can have a significant impact on practitioners and learners (Russell, Simmons, & Thompson, 2010). Yates and Payne (2006, p. 331) observe that, although Connexions advocates a holistic approach, from the outset its primary aim was defined as reducing the NEET population and the service was set targets – used in determining its effectiveness – for moving young people into education, employment or training. Consequently, those who are easiest to move into training or education receive the greatest attention (p. 331) and interventions such as E2E assume significance as a means of achieving targets with young people who cannot access other forms of participation.

The focus on NEET is the culmination of a process by which one field position – the unemployed young person – has been abolished, along with its entitlement to state resources in the form of unemployment benefits (Furlong, 2006), and replaced with a different position – the NEET young person. A problem for the state has been transformed into

a problem status for the individual. A similar situation exists in relation to JWT, in which young people in low-skilled employment are also perceived as a deficit category and positioned alongside those who are NEET (Lawy, Quinn, & Diment, 2009). For Bourdieu, these examples would illustrate the *power of constitution* of the state, the power to transform classifications of social status and the designations of individuals, groups or institutions (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). Although academics may contest the appropriateness of targets based on deficit categories, practitioners are constrained and ‘defined into’ specific forms of relation with young people by the creation of these categories and the strategies used to deal with them.

In comparison with public-service fields, arenas of employment occupy a markedly different position. Within the neo-liberal approaches to youth unemployment dominating UK policy since the 1980s, the development of individual ‘employability’ rather than employer regulation or job creation is presented as the route into paid work. However, as Roberts (2009, p. 361) points out, successive youth training initiatives have been discredited because of a lack of employers able and willing to offer training leading to decent jobs. Within this context, the autonomy of employers is considerable, at least in their dealings with young people seeking training or employment. As Unwin and Wellington (2001) observe, ‘The cards are all in the employer’s hands’ (p. 116). In the E2E case-study sites, the difficulty of obtaining work placements or paid employment was a recurring and significant theme, leading some practitioners to contest official targets based on finding employment with training and to regard *any* job as a positive outcome.

### The learner position in E2E

Bourdieu distinguishes between position-taking – that is, the system of practices and expressions of agents – and objective positions in the field; nevertheless he regards them as methodologically inseparable and bound by an asymmetrical relationship: ‘*the space of positions tends to command the space of position-takings*’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 105, emphasis in original). This section considers the objective position of E2E learners as ‘other’ in relation to post-compulsory education generally, whilst the following section explores position-taking by young people and the corresponding ways in which tutors mediate between learner and field.

UK policy categories such as NEET are conceptualised largely in negative terms, focusing on the generalised characteristics of ‘problem’ groups and the risks they face. To some extent, this conceptualisation is supported by empirical evidence and was reflected in the case-study sites, with many young people exhibiting ‘barriers’ such as family, health or behavioural problems, an aversion to formal learning and low levels of literacy and numeracy. However, such a picture is incomplete and does not take into account international evidence that, although more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds and less well-qualified, many young people in these categories are not fundamentally different from their peers in education and employment (Hillman, 2005; Kendall & Kinder, 2006; Russell, Simmons, & Thompson, under review). What *is* different is that, since the 1970s, the forms of capital these young people possess have been progressively devalued. Although three-quarters of E2E learners interviewed had one or more GCSE passes and half had experienced paid work, these assets are nullified by the effects of credential inflation and competition for jobs from adults and better-qualified young people. Entry to Employment learners are therefore particularly vulnerable to the effects of disruptive life events or changing external circumstances. Furthermore, some of the negative characteristics associated with NEET young people are ‘designed into’ E2E. For example, as

Ecclestone (2009) points out, E2E institutionalises low motivation in that young people do not ‘choose’ the programme, but are selected to attend, a key strategy for retention being the financial incentive of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA).<sup>4</sup>

Associated with this conceptualisation is a dispositional othering that presents E2E learners as practically, rather than academically, orientated and positions work-based learning as the alternative to knowledge-based education. The argument runs that they have failed at school because the curriculum was not relevant to them, that they are ‘good with their hands and not their heads’ (Thomson & Russell, 2009, p. 429) and that a work-based curriculum is a necessity, not only because school failure has closed conventional academic routes to them, but because they are strongly disposed towards practical learning. The outcome of this positioning is the specific nature of E2E as a programme employing what Bernstein (2000) calls the *generic mode* of pedagogic discourse and mainly concerned with ‘transferable skills’ rather than conceptual knowledge. Generic modes lack the status associated with academic disciplines or the professions and, in the weakly regulated field of English FE (Gleeson, Davies, & Wheeler, 2005), facilitate the degradation and intensification of labour in the teaching workforce. The implications of this for E2E tutors are explored later in this paper.

Reflecting this positioning of E2E learners is a spatial dislocation in which E2E provision often takes place away from mainstream vocational and general education provision, in small specialist organisations (both charitable and profit-making) or in distinct units within FE colleges. For example, of the case-study sites, the independent providers were accommodated in converted industrial or commercial premises, whilst in the college E2E was located away from its main operations, with different arrangements for attendance and holidays, and with teachers on different contracts to those working on other programmes. Furthermore, although learners in other providers were entitled to use a range of facilities at the college, in practice this was rarely taken up. A college tutor asked:

Why have you got . . . learners out there with a college number . . . but they never access the college? They never come . . . and [providers] never access the college for support or for the pastoral stuff or the IT, the library. Again, if your partnership is working why not use the college? This is where the lead provider is, so why aren’t these providers making use of the mother ship. . . . It just seems a bit odd.

A temporal dislocation also existed, the on-demand enrolment of E2E conflicting with arrangements on courses and apprenticeships which operated a traditional academic year. For some, this was a significant issue, and practitioners feared that delays in ‘moving on’ could nullify the progress made by learners. The positioning of E2E learners therefore had material effects, limiting their access to well-rewarded staff, progression opportunities, pastoral support and specialist learning resource centres.

### Resistance, mediation and habitus

Some E2E learners appeared ready to accept their positioning in a deficit category, reporting without contestation one or more of the characteristics found in official discourse – for example low confidence, disruptive behaviour, truanting or youth offending. The most commonly reported was low attainment in basic skills, although this was often qualified in terms of missed opportunities at school, rather than a lack of ability:

I’m going to start an apprenticeship in business administration . . . I’m doing Level 1 literacy on a Wednesday afternoon; Level 1 numeracy and Level 2 communication. And I need all of

them. If I already had my GCSEs I wouldn't need to do them but because I've come with nowt I've got to . . . I were expecting good grades at school.

This type of stance was widespread in the case-study sites and many E2E learners appeared to be 'taking' a conventional student position in spite of the more peripheral place assigned to them in post-compulsory education. For some, this was expressed explicitly in the language they used to describe themselves – as student rather than learner or by vocational identity such as 'doing building maintenance'. One young man remarked that he told his friends the course was called 'Education to Employment' because this 'sounds more smart' and a Connexions manager reported that, for many participants, E2E was valued for providing them with student status. Interviews with learners confirmed this perception and the opportunity to be productively occupied was an affordance frequently cited, along with more tangible benefits such as EMA and progression to paid employment. Tutors in the college supported the student stance by mediating between learners and the authorised schedule of E2E, which did not recognise academic terms – for example, by designing a project for the Christmas period so that learners could take normal college holidays yet still receive EMA.

More mundane resistance often involved testing the limits of tolerance in relation to punctuality, attendance and early finishing – without going so far as to forfeit EMA. Some tutors appeared to co-operate in this and early finishes or absence for reasons such as obtaining new bus passes were not uncommon. Various explanations were given, including learners having done enough for the day and safety issues caused by short attention spans. One learner had apparently provoked dismissal in order to achieve his aim of moving to another provider. However, resistance could only operate within fairly narrow boundaries. Unauthorised absence could entail losing EMA for a week and in more serious cases insufficient progress or disruptive behaviour would lead to referral back to Connexions. The incentive of work placements could also produce conformity, although in some instances the conditions of placements were contested, with learners arguing that they should receive the minimum wage or that there should be a reasonable expectation of gaining employment from a placement.

The response of learners to the non-academic discourse institutionalised in E2E and almost universally transmitted by tutors was complex. In practice, they appeared largely to accept that E2E was not about acquiring school-type knowledge and to value its more 'hands on' approach. As one learner said during a basic skills session, 'That's the point of being here, to not do exams'. However, disliking school appeared, for many, to be related to relationships with teachers, a lack of sustained personal attention in large classes and life events outside school rather than to the intrinsic nature of school knowledge itself. Some young people described themselves as academically able and, although it was rare to find explicit contestation of the non-academic discourse in their interactions with tutors, learners occasionally asked for more challenging work in basic skills sessions.

The role of habitus in producing different forms of practice from similar objective conditions implies that habitus itself should be seen as a site of struggle and contestation within programmes such as E2E. Thus, official discourse ascribes to NEET young people a particular set of perceptions and dispositions, which needs to be re-formed if the young person is to attain a normalised position in society. The focus on 'employability' characteristic of E2E centres on this re-formation and the work of tutors was largely concerned with developing a generalised vocational habitus containing positive orientations to attributes such as punctuality, personal appearance and interpersonal skills. In some case-study sites

there was an attempt to replicate features of Fordist employment conditions, with clocking-in and buzzers for meal-times and tutors dressed according to occupational norms. Skills associated with job applications and interviews were a prominent part of the curriculum in all providers. However, in spite of the plausibility of this approach, there was little evidence that E2E learners have a habitus differing significantly from working-class learners elsewhere in education and training. Indeed, the differences between them are better explained in terms of a shared, rather than contrasting, habitus.

Bourdieu's approach to class habitus is based on the notion of similarities deriving from common experience, rather than on a crude model of impersonal and substitutable practices and representations. The individual system of dispositions is seen as a *structural variant* of the class habitus – 'it is in a relation of homology, of diversity within homogeneity reflecting the diversity within homogeneity characteristic of their social conditions of production, that the singular habitus of the different members of the same class are united' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86). Thus, different orientations to education or employment can arise, within the same broad set of dispositions and broadly similar objective conditions, from specific differences in experience – not only of schooling but of all the fields constituting a social world. For Ellie, relocation following the breakdown of her parents' relationship was a decisive moment:

Ellie: I went to a grammar school in Bradford then I moved to another school in XXX and it were just completely different because I were used to grammar school and doing everything in silence and then I went to this other school and the teachers couldn't control the class so I just decided that I'd rather do my work at home.

Interviewer: So did your mum support you with that?

Ellie: Yeah, my mum got all my work from school . . . I got a C in maths, English and science . . . [and] Gs and stuff in history.

Interviewer: So was that what you were expected to get?

Ellie: No, at my grammar school I was predicted A-stars.

It is therefore reasonable to infer that the dispositions characterising a particular E2E learner constitute a specific variant response to the structural conditions obtaining during their life-course and that a propensity to be NEET is not so much a function of individual agency as embedded in the field structures of education, employment and class relations.

### Tutors and legitimate authority in E2E

Bourdieu writes that 'the most hidden and most specific function of the educational system consists in hiding its objective function, that is, masking the objective truth of its relationship to the structure of class relations' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 208). This ideological function of education, of concealing its contribution to social reproduction, takes place by structuring perceptions of legitimacy – the recognition of states of affairs as necessary, as part of the inescapable logic of the field. For institutions associated with the field of power, such as the LSC, legitimacy flows directly from their mediating role between the state and providers, tutors or learners. For others, legitimacy may be both more complex to negotiate and more expressive of the ideological function of education. That is, the continual process of negotiating and asserting a specific authority, particularly by tutors, must draw on practices and forms of symbolic capital legitimately associated with that authority (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21). What the field constructs as legitimate for a tutor can both reinforce the positioning of learners and conceal how it occurs. This section will consider two aspects of the process: (1) how E2E tutors negotiate their authority and (2) the simultaneous exclusion of parents from a position of legitimacy.

### *Taking the tutor position*

Research on teacher professionalism in English FE has established the weakly-regulated nature of employment, the limited conceptualisation of professional development and the proletarianisation of teaching that has taken place under modernising approaches to public sector management (see, for example, Avis, 2007; Gleeson, Davies, & Wheeler, 2005). A key element of these changes has been an increasing differentiation of teaching roles, exacerbated by the reductive approaches characteristic of competence-based training. In addition, marketisation has introduced providers from outside the public sector, including both profit-making and charitable organisations, further increasing the tensions around professionalism.

This situation profoundly affects E2E tutors. They are generally not regarded as teachers in the traditional sense, and – depending on the organisational context – are described variously by terms such as tutor, trainer and key worker. This classification was strongly contested by some of the tutors in the case-study sites, who argued that they had responsibilities directly comparable with those on teaching contracts in FE colleges (Thompson, 2010). Similar findings are reported by Ecclestone (2009), who describes how E2E tutors in a college had pressured managers to review teaching roles. However, in spite of such resistance, the status, pay and conditions of E2E tutors are in general significantly worse than for FE teachers, who in turn occupy a less favourable position than teachers in schools and sixth-form colleges.

The position of E2E tutors derives largely from the generic nature of E2E discussed earlier. If E2E is about generic employment skills and overcoming barriers to learning, then the personal qualities of tutors and their experience of the ‘world of work’ assume greater importance than academic, vocational and professional knowledge. In a market-driven environment, this allows tutors to be employed more cheaply and worked more intensively, an effect observed in the case-study sites in terms of the high proportion of tutors who were untrained or partly-trained, lacked graduate-level qualifications and appeared to have undergone limited forms of professional development. Although these features are also encountered elsewhere in English FE (Gleeson & James, 2007), they were particularly evident in the E2E programmes studied (Thompson, 2010).

For E2E tutors, traditional forms of symbolic capital in education, such as a recognised teaching qualification, academic credentials and official designation as a teacher, may not be readily available. This may explain why symbolic capital in other forms, and particularly those ‘fitting’ the vocational and non-academic position ascribed to E2E learners, were cultivated and valued by practitioners in the case-study sites. These included a willingness to engage in caring and nurturing relationships with learners and to use ‘flexible’ approaches to teaching, which recognised the often difficult lives of young people and their negative experiences of schooling. Tutors explicitly differentiated themselves in this respect from school and FE teachers and regarded themselves as having greater affinity for E2E learners. Some spoke of having to ‘undo things that they’ve done in school’ or of colleagues from more academic areas being unable to cope with E2E. Similar tutor dispositions are reported by Ecclestone (2009).

In addition to this pedagogical differentiation, practitioners also valorised their vocational and life experience. As well as helping to inculcate a vocational habitus corresponding to the specialist interests of providers, modes of dress operated as symbolic capital. One of the research team was told: ‘If you’re not in a collar you’ll be alright, the kids will talk to you’ and was requested to wear safety boots – a request not repeated on subsequent visits. In several respects, the tutor-learner relation was one of homology. Many tutors had left school early, experienced unemployment or redundancy and worked in industries corresponding to the specialist vocational areas of providers. Although some had

attained management positions in earlier employment, tutors generally shared a working-class background with learners. One tutor had participated in the Youth Training Scheme in the 1980s, a programme with some similarities to E2E; an administrator who aimed to become a tutor had herself taken part in E2E two years earlier.

### *Excluding parents*

Payne (2003) reviews evidence demonstrating the importance of parental influence on young people's attitudes towards education and training, even beyond the age of compulsory schooling. Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) draw attention to social class differences in the 'framing' established by parents with respect to young people's aspirations and Mann (1998) shows that mother-daughter relationships are particularly significant for working-class girls in post-16 education. However, parents and other carers of young people involved in E2E occupy a somewhat anomalous position in this respect. Whilst the parents of most students are regarded as consumers and resources, the parents of E2E learners are discursively positioned as 'part of the problem' and may have little or no involvement in the decisions affecting them. Some practitioners conceptualised learners as from 'families that have gone off the rails . . . from sink estates' and expressed low expectations of parents – for example, 'This type of young person has very little parental involvement'. Parents were also seen as excessively deferential to practitioners or unable to behave appropriately in meetings; for example, a Connexions personal adviser described one parent 'screaming at her son' and others automatically agreeing with tutors when disputes arose. Involvement by parents was therefore not encouraged by some practitioners and one tutor explained that 'we don't get a lot of feedback from parents and we try not to get them involved too much because we would be answerable to every single parent about everything then'. A second Connexions personal adviser expressed similar views:

Some of the parents do engage but that's very rare but some parents do have an input and they might ring up to say that their child won't be in today . . . or they might ring you up because they've got a trouble or need some information. But, again, the parents will always blame somebody else as well; it's never their fault.

Often, parental involvement was considered inappropriate for post-16 learners and confidentiality was cited as an inhibiting factor. However, other practitioners were more enthusiastic, welcoming parental interest as a sign that young people would be supported at home and also as an opportunity to enlist the aid of parents in building motivation or providing background information.

Many learners were positive about the support they received from their families. To some extent, this may represent taking a position of normality with respect to other young people; nevertheless, most gave credible accounts of family relations. Asked about her parents' feelings towards E2E, one young woman described a high level of support:

They love it. They want me to do really well and they did actually have an input on me coming back into college because . . . I was going to carry on being a cleaner and try and get another job but they kind of persuaded me to come back.

Learners also accessed the social capital provided by siblings and extended family, deriving aspirations such as progression to university or obtaining work experience from self-employed relatives. Given the strongly classed nature of E2E, social capital could also be constraining, and some young people intended to follow family members into low-skilled

employment. Not all families were supportive and several learners described parental attitudes that were dismissive, either of the programme or their child's capacity for achievement. Nevertheless, these young people had generally taken their parents' views into account and some had actively sought to change them.

These conflicting discourses suggest a relation between parents and practitioners somewhat different to that obtaining elsewhere in education. Rather than arising from a division of authority based on subject specialism and professional knowledge on the one hand, balanced by a legitimate interest in the child's well-being on the other, it stems from a negation of parental symbolic capital by the discursive position of E2E learner. Effectively, parents are positioned alongside their child in the same deficit category and therefore not admitted to legitimate authority. This is not to say that practitioners consciously strive to exclude parents; as Bourdieu notes, 'there is a production of difference which is in no way the product of a *search for* difference' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100, emphasis in original). Rather, it arises from the structuring of perceptions and dispositions provided by the field, which – in parallel with perceptions of E2E learners themselves – produces the misrecognition of compounded and cumulative structural effects as failings of individual agency.

## Conclusion

Bourdieu rejects the image of ideological domination as the imposition of an alien culture on working-class children who are thereby condemned to failure. On the contrary, he argues that domination operates firstly, by inculcating recognition of the dominant culture as the legitimate culture and, secondly, by excluding the dominated from that culture: 'The major thrust of the imposition of recognition of the dominant culture as legitimate culture . . . comes from exclusion, which perhaps has most symbolic force when it assumes the guise of self-exclusion' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 41). The evidence presented in this paper suggests that E2E is an excellent example of this process. Although misrecognised by participants and practitioners as promoting inclusion, and at the level of individual interactions undoubtedly containing an ethos of care, nurture and progression, E2E is permeated by exclusionary discourses and practices. In particular, the positioning of work-based learning as the best option for these young people, the focus on individual 'barriers to learning' rather than on extending knowledge, and the consequently devalued status of practitioners, serve efficiently to reinforce the position of E2E learners within the education system.

This is not to say that a pedagogy incorporating care and nurture – what Ecclestone (2009) highlights as the embedding of therapeutic approaches in E2E – is inherently flawed. The problem is with the inference that, because E2E learners require nurture, this is all they need and all their tutors need to be qualified to provide. If these young people are to acquire knowledge, or indeed greater personal capital, their positioning and that of their teachers must also change. As this paper shows, the discursive positioning of young people and their families converges with the practices of E2E tutors and learners. Learners encounter little disturbance to a habitus, which Bourdieu (1990) sees as '[avoiding] crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a . . . universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions' (p. 61). In particular, the antipathy of many young people to formal education receives ample reinforcement – perhaps leading to short-term benefits but in the end reducing E2E to a form of socialisation into low-paid work. Under present conditions, this confluence of learner habitus, tutor expectation and field positions – although precisely

what Bourdieu teaches us to expect – is a stable configuration that ensures learners continue to be excluded.

One of the advantages of a Bourdieuan analysis is to highlight the intricate relationship between field and habitus, thus transcending the distinction between structure and agency and integrating the observed characteristics of learners with an understanding of how they are produced and reinforced by social conditions. In their discussion of learning cultures in English FE,<sup>5</sup> Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2007) highlight the power of a field analysis, explaining that: ‘to understand the learning culture of any one site, it was necessary to understand the field of FE as a whole, and the relationship of the site to that field, and to other fields of which it was part or with which it interacted’ (p. 423). The research described in this paper tends to a similar conclusion. Furthermore, in the context of E2E, a field approach raises the prospect that a more comprehensive policy strategy, which addresses the needs and values of communities rather than stigmatising individuals, may help to ameliorate the multiple exclusions experienced by NEET young people.

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### Notes

1. Analogous terms for this UK policy category are, in Europe, ‘Young people disengaged from learning’ and, in Australia, ‘Young people outside the labour force and full-time education’.
2. Funding and curriculum arrangements for E2E were due to change during 2010. However, the establishment of a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010 has introduced some uncertainty into this situation.
3. In England, FE teachers have been required since 2001 to hold a recognised teaching qualification.
4. EMA is an allowance paid to young people in education or training and is analogous to the Australian Youth Allowance Scheme. In autumn 2010, following a review of public expenditure, the coalition government announced that EMA was to be replaced.
5. The paper cited reviews the conceptual framework of a major UK research project, *Transforming learning cultures in further education*.

### Notes on contributor

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# **Aiming higher: how will universities respond to changes in initial teacher training for the post-compulsory sector in England?**

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Initial teacher training for post-compulsory education in England is currently undergoing profound change in terms of central direction of curricula and the provision of financial support for trainees. Within a discourse of the ‘professionalisation’ of teaching in the sector, unprecedented control of the detailed structure and content of training courses has been established and is increasing in extent. At the same time, principles of free access to Cert. Ed. and PGCE courses are being set aside, so that those universities which provide training are simultaneously contending with imposed curriculum change and with a serious threat to student recruitment. This article examines the origins and nature of these developments, considers the political and economic background from which they stem, and discusses in detail some features of the characteristic discourse of the reforms instituted by central government. It goes on to consider the likely effects of the recent and on-going changes in university-led training and suggests that the outcome of the reforms might be to undermine the government’s own aspirations for professionalisation of the teaching workforce in post-compulsory education.

## **Introduction**

For many years, the former polytechnic sector in England has played a central role in the training of teachers for post-compulsory education. Initially based in the former Colleges of Education (Technical), such training has developed over the last decade to involve most of the new universities in the professional development of serving teachers in further education (FE) and, increasingly, the wider Learning and Skills sector. These universities have invested heavily in staff and built partnerships with FE colleges that are often models of collaborative provision and widening participation. The ‘core business’ on which such developments are often based is the initial training of teachers for the sector, leading to the awards of Postgraduate

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Certificate in Education (PGCE) and Certificate in Education (Cert. Ed.). These awards are the traditional initial teacher training qualifications for post-compulsory education in England and are aimed respectively at graduates and non-graduates with vocational qualifications. It is largely the demand for these courses, intensified since 2001 by government legislation requiring FE teachers to possess teaching qualifications, which enables education departments in the new universities to offset relatively lower research and postgraduate degree income and thereby maintain a distinctive position amongst teacher education providers.

The position of central government in this picture is an interesting one. Although it can be argued that successive strategies leading to the development of institutions of advanced technical education, the establishment of the polytechnics and the creation of new universities demonstrate a crucial government role in teacher education for FE, this role was essentially enabling rather than regulatory. To be blunt, the experts delivered the training and the government footed the bill. The state also assumed financial responsibility for individual trainees, with the result that training was both free at source and provided by institutions which were largely autonomous at the curriculum level (Young *et al.*, 1995; Lucas, 2004). Of course, these institutions were accountable, but accountability was to 'stakeholders' who in turn were relatively independent of central government: that is, the trainees themselves, their employers and Her Majesty's Inspectorate.

As is well known, the role of central government in initial teacher training within the English post-compulsory sector has changed profoundly since 1997. This article considers the changing landscape of initial teacher training in the sector, beginning with the historical background. It goes on to analyse the central government reforms of recent years and examines the situation, currently unfolding, of increasing curriculum control alongside the erosion of financial support for trainees. The newly dominant discourse of deficits to be rectified by compliance to a centralised system is uncovered, in place of the old system of negotiation and trust. In doing so, we discuss the political and economic framework within which these changes are taking place and consider their impact upon the teaching workforce and on learners. Finally, we consider the possible directions in which new universities in particular may feel impelled to move as a result of their location within a radically altered landscape.

### **The growth of FE teacher training**

Until recently, FE teachers have not been required to hold a formal teaching qualification. Although college staff usually held qualifications in their own field of expertise, it was not unusual for them to teach without a Cert. Ed. or PGCE (Ollin, 2002; Lucas, 2004). One reason for this was the predominantly craft-based, vocationally oriented nature of colleges, whose ethos had often derived from a tradition where, arguably, the main focus was upon learning from a skilled artisan or practitioner (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Robson, 1998). An implicit assumption of this approach was that subject expertise, rather than professional knowledge and skills in

education, would be the main determinant of teaching quality. This tradition was reinforced by the need to employ teachers with current industrial experience, often on a part-time or temporary basis, in order to ensure relevance and up-to-date knowledge in specialist areas. In consequence, the career trajectory of FE teachers has often been rather different to that of schoolteachers.

Nevertheless, initial training for FE teachers has existed for over 50 years. Following the McNair Report (Board of Education, 1944), the first four technical teacher training institutions were established (which were eventually to become part of the universities of Bolton, Greenwich, Huddersfield and Wolverhampton). Initially, one-year full-time Cert. Ed. courses were offered but following the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), two-year in-service courses became available (Bridge *et al.*, 2003). Of those choosing to gain teaching qualifications, most took this route and trained on a part-time basis whilst in employment, usually via block or day-release attendance. To facilitate attendance the four institutions increasingly made provision available through extramural centres, a development influenced by the Haycocks Report (Haycocks, 1977). Part-time, in-service training remains the norm today with most qualified FE teachers having gained their awards through in-service courses. However, a significant development over the last decade or so is a shift towards trainees attending courses in their own time—often during the evening—as a result of employers' increasing reluctance to release staff during the working day. This is perhaps one symptom of the general straitening of resources that resulted from the changes brought upon FE from the early 1990s onwards.

From the late 1980s, particularly following the 1992 Further and Higher Education (F&HE) Act, increasing numbers of higher education institutions (HEIs) began to offer teacher training for the post-compulsory sector. Today, around 50 HEIs provide such courses (Standards Verification UK, 2006), the overwhelming majority being 'new' universities. A significant feature of these programmes is that, although some older institutions simply operate as validating bodies for courses designed by a single FE college, the majority of institutions develop their own awards and teach them to significant numbers of trainees. In the larger programmes, these courses are delivered in partnership with FE colleges and many trainees undertake their studies at a local FE college rather than at the HEI itself. For many universities, post-compulsory sector teacher training represents big business, with over a thousand trainees in some institutions. This means that, while universities can offer a great deal to their partners in terms of specific curriculum support, they are also highly sensitive to fluctuations in trainee numbers due to their dependence on fee and funding body income generated by these trainees.

In parallel with the awards of universities and other HEIs, an alternative source of teacher training has been provided by national awarding bodies. Courses such as the City & Guilds 730 series and the Training and Development Lead Body awards have made available an academically less rigorous, but practically useful, introduction to teaching. These courses were typically delivered by colleges of further education and in many cases allowed progression, by means of accreditation of prior learning, onto the later stages of a Cert. Ed. or PGCE. More recently, the awarding bodies have

begun to offer teaching qualifications at Level 4 (HE Level 1), in direct competition with the qualifications offered by HEIs.

### Changing terrain

Following the 1992 F&HE Act and the subsequent incorporation of colleges, there have been great changes in the management, funding and organisation of FE (Beale, 2004). Instead of being run by local education authorities (LEAs) and provided with regionally co-ordinated services, individual colleges became responsible for running their own affairs and providing their own financial and management infrastructure. Under local authority control the resourcing of FE (including a commitment to teacher training) varied according to the approach and priorities of individual LEAs (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; McDonald & Lucas, 2001; Ollin, 2002; Lucas, 2004). In contrast, incorporation of FE colleges created a national rather than a local system, the central direction of FE by the state, initially through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and, since 2001, via the Learning and Skills Council, and an increasing culture of performance management.

The unevenness of FE provision nationally was a significant causal factor in the removal of colleges from LEA control (Ainley & Bailey, 1997). However, it also needs to be understood as part of a broader political and ideological project to restructure and redirect the public sector and to reconfigure it as subservient to the perceived needs of the economy (Simmons, 2006). In particular, successive governments have sought to engineer increased central control and reduced costs and to reproduce the conditions of the private sector (Kessler & Bayliss, 1998).

The shift to a system of central control also represents an increasing emphasis upon the perceived deficiencies of an 'unreformed' FE in developing the knowledge and skills base deemed necessary for economic competitiveness (Foster, 2005; DfES, 2006; Rammell, 2006). This is given its clearest expression in the strategic aspirations of *Success for All* (DfES, 2002) and is re-emphasised in the White Paper *Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (DfES, 2006). Both publications extend the evaluation of FE within a discourse characterised by its emotive analysis of deficiencies and imperatives for radical improvement expressed in terms of quantifiable targets. In particular, the popular notion that high skill levels are the key to economic success appears to have become established as an almost unquestionable axiom (Gouthro, 2002; Avis, 2003; Ananiadou *et al.*, 2004). However, as Avis (2003) highlights, despite the pervasiveness of the 'competitiveness settlement', its central assumptions are not necessarily valid. Arguably there are a number of routes towards economic competitiveness that can be pursued, many of which do not rest upon high skills (Keep, 1997, 1999; Brown, 2001). There remains a significant and arguably growing proportion of low-skill, low-waged work in the English economy with competition on price rather than quality commonplace (Avis, 2003). Indeed, Wolf (2002, 2005) argues that there is little evidence to suggest that there is any direct relationship between education and economic growth.

The tighter financial accountability required by incorporation certainly led to a more intensive utilisation of staff and arguably to a damaging focus upon the productivity, performance and cost of teacher labour (Randle & Brady, 1997a, b). Although there is debate about the degree and extent to which these trends prevail, there is now an extensive literature on the diminished circumstances of FE teachers that highlights a number of key features including increased hours of work, a relative decline in pay, less job security and reduced professional autonomy accompanied by an increased managerialism focused upon expanding, controlling and intensifying the day-to-day work of teachers (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Hodgkinson, 1997; Randle & Brady, 1997a, b; Avis, 1999, 2003; Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Shain & Gleeson, 1999; Kerfoot & Whitehead, 2000; Avis & Bathmaker, 2004). Incorporation also saw the increased employment of part-time and temporary teachers and the use of casually employed agency staff by many colleges (Labour Research Department, 1998; Hill, 2000; Burchill, 2001). In fact the fragmentation and turmoil caused by the early years of incorporation led to a decrease in the proportion of FE teachers holding DFE/DfEE-recognised teaching qualifications (Ollin, 1996; Lucas, 2004). In addition, FEFC inspection reports during the late 1990s identified major weaknesses in pedagogy in some colleges (FEFC, 1999; Ollin, 2002).

Accompanied by relatively high levels of industrial action, some well-publicised instances of corruption and a generally demoralised workforce, it could be said that New Labour inherited a sector in crisis when it came to power (Robson, 1998; Burchill, 2001; Williams, 2003). Although, as Williams (2003) argues, many of the inherent conflicts of interest remain, there has been some shift in stance and arguably a more conciliatory and pragmatic approach to running FE under New Labour (Burchill, 2001), as well as increased funding and a higher profile for the sector. This perhaps derives from the present government's identification of FE as central to delivering the human and social capital necessary for economic prosperity (Avis, 1999, 2003). Nevertheless, any discussion of in-service training needs to bear in mind the background of general malaise and variable morale within the workforce (Hayes, 2005).

### **Recent developments in FE teacher training**

As already noted, one part of New Labour's strategy for FE has been an increasing focus upon teacher training. This is highlighted in the Fryer Report (Fryer, 1997) on lifelong learning and the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) on widening participation, which both identify the need for a system of coherent, nationally recognised teacher training for FE. Following the establishment of the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO), new standards for FE teachers were produced in 1999 and the view that professional knowledge and skills in education are central to successful teaching became commonplace. From 2001, FE teachers in England were required to obtain an initial teaching qualification within a specified period (two years for full-time teachers). This requirement was welcomed by many and could be interpreted as driven in part by the government's desire to professionalise an increasingly casualised and transitory

workforce. Partly as a result of this, by 2004 over 70% of full-time staff in FE were 'fully qualified', although the proportion of fully qualified part-time staff remained much lower at 47% (Lifelong Learning UK, 2005). However, the 2001 reforms did not establish parity of esteem with school teaching (Lucas, 2004). In particular, the general academic requirements were still significantly different from those relating to schoolteachers, with no formal requirement for GCSE Mathematics, English and Science and no move towards an all-graduate profession.

The quality of the training itself also came under considerable scrutiny, as it became clear that a fully qualified workforce would not be able to deliver the desired improvement in teaching quality unless the qualification process guaranteed certain levels of performance. A new inspection regime, developed by Ofsted using a similar model to the inspection of schoolteacher training, began to operate in 2002 and carried out an initial survey inspection of eight HEIs and 23 FE colleges, concluding that:

The current system of FE teacher training does not provide a satisfactory foundation of professional development ... While the tuition that trainees receive ... is generally good, few opportunities are provided for trainees to learn how to teach their specialist subjects, and there is a lack of systematic mentoring and support in the workplace. (Ofsted, 2003, p. 2)

More recently, *Equipping our teachers for the future* (DfES, 2004) and the Further Education White Paper (DfES, 2006) aim at 'full professionalisation' of teaching in the Learning and Skills Sector, with extended requirements for initial and continuing professional development (including an external assessment of literacy and numeracy skills) and a professional body for FE teachers. Whether or not such reforms do in practice provide parity with qualifications for school teaching, there is no doubt that they represent an attempt to 'raise the bar' in terms of professional status. At the same time, it is clear that the effect of the regulatory and curriculum reforms since 2001 will be to further underpin the government's increasing intention to direct, monitor and control provision in this area. Requirements such as the endorsement of initial teaching qualifications by Standards Verification UK and the introduction of a 'literacy and numeracy minimum core' make compliance, at the expense of criticality, a major concern of university teaching teams and provide the government with an unprecedented degree of control over FE training curricula. Thus far, FE teacher trainers have (albeit reluctantly) accepted this increasing direction, already familiar to their school teacher training colleagues, in exchange for the perceived commitment by central government to a professionalisation agenda. One argument of this article is that overextending central control at the same time as changing profoundly the nature of financial support for trainees will undermine this 'social contract'.

As is the case in the FE system in general, where Wolf (2005) characterises the level and extent of government-led intervention as truly 'Stalinist' in conception, it is interesting to note the dominant discourse of training reform in justifying the extension of central control of curricula and training methodology. Although this is perhaps more limited than in FE itself, an immense amount of bureaucratic effort has been expended in developing, enforcing and complying with the current system of regulation (Lucas, 2004). Alongside this burgeoning system goes a discourse in

which proposals for change and improvement are given the status, not merely of regulatory directives, but of moral imperatives. However, just as the economic argument for centralisation of the FE sector as a whole contains unquestioned but quite possibly invalid assumptions, so too do the regimes of truth constructed around the reform agenda for FE teacher training. Two examples of such constructions will serve to illustrate this point.

Firstly, recall the considerable attention that has been given to the issue of ‘standards’ for teachers in the FE sector. Beginning with the *Standards for teaching and supporting learning* (FENTO, 1999), and continuing with a plethora of standards for various specialist roles within the sector, training institutions have found themselves beset by detailed and extensive specifications with which their courses must comply. Indeed, ‘annual monitoring’ of courses against the standards is a requirement if ‘endorsement’ is to be maintained. Yet how effective are these standards in ensuring the competence of trainees as they complete their courses? One criticism made by the Ofsted survey inspection was that trainees did not systematically use these standards in self-assessment (Ofsted, 2003). This is perhaps less surprising when one considers that Ofsted and DfES were both highly critical of the standards themselves, leading to a major rewriting process which culminated in the publication of new draft standards in April 2006. More generally, Ofsted noted that: ‘The FENTO standards are not an appropriate tool for judging the final attainments of trainees. Also, the standards are too wide-ranging to define the curricula for ITT’ (Ofsted, 2003, p. 4).

These standards contain uncontroversial statements of what should be known, and what attributes should be possessed, by experienced FE teachers. There is little attempt to differentiate what is appropriate to different levels of experience, nor to set criteria for a minimum level of competence. Where standards are relevant to trainees, the great majority refer to content and criteria that are common currency within any Cert. Ed. or PGCE, and it is inconceivable that the normal processes of quality assurance within HEIs, combined with the Ofsted inspection framework, would not produce an equally effective course in their absence. As Lucas (2004) points out, many HEIs have approached the requirement to conform to the FENTO standards as a cursory mapping exercise. It is a straightforward conclusion that, notwithstanding the degree of effort expended in developing and aligning to the standards, they have had little influence on the quality of FE teacher training curricula. Regarding the endorsement process as a whole, Lucas (2004) contends that it has been ‘regulatory’ rather than ‘developmental’, serving merely to standardise training programmes.

A second example of how the dominant discourse of training reform is based on certain highly contestable assertions may be found in another pillar of the reform agenda—the place of mentorship and subject specialism within initial training courses. A major theme of the Ofsted survey inspection, and of *Equipping our teachers for the future* (DfES, 2004), is the assumption, based on school teacher training, that subject specialist pedagogy must be explicitly developed. This may include identifiable subject specialist components of training courses but, within this discourse, is largely associated with the notion of subject specialist mentoring. In a recent report

on the training courses offered by national awarding bodies, Ofsted (2006, p. 2) notes that ‘a striking contrast between the quality of the taught element of ITT courses, which is generally good, and the quality of the practice elements, which is inadequate ...’ has persisted since the survey inspection, and ascribes it (at least in part) to the slow development of mentoring systems. Although the report concedes that most trainees reach a satisfactory standard of practical teaching, it warns that ‘none of the trainees observed by inspectors demonstrated very good standards of teaching. Knowledge of how to teach their subject ... is not extended sufficiently ...’, and that ‘the lack of systematic support from more experienced teachers constrains the progress of capable trainees, who do not achieve their full potential’.

Whatever the validity of the purported relationship between quality of practical teaching, knowledge of subject specialist pedagogy and mentoring, it is at least conceivable that alternative explanations exist for the lack of progress observed in trainees. These are either not explored, possibly because some of these explanations are unpalatable, or are treated as cause to extend the regulatory approach. For example, the concurrent workload on in-service trainees, the casualised nature of employment for many, concerns about the low standard of general academic achievement of some trainees (to which the literacy and numeracy ‘minimum core’ may largely be traced) are systemic issues not amenable to short-term solution. Furthermore, whether or not subject-specific mentoring can be shown to be an effective way of developing practical teaching, the dominant discourse treats its underdevelopment as a deficit within training partnerships rather than an inevitable consequence of the way in which the ‘benign neglect’ described by Young *et al.* (1995) has led these partnerships to develop alternative and often highly creative approaches to subject-specialist teaching issues (Fisher & Webb, 2006). The reinforcement by the state of one particular ‘truth’ about subject specialist teaching can only serve to limit and dilute such initiatives.

The dominant discourse also attempts to change the way in which we think about financial support for trainees by insisting that ‘teachers are expected to invest in their own development, supported by their employers’ (Rammell, 2006, p. 5). Over the last five years, trainees required to become ‘fully qualified’ (by obtaining a Cert. Ed., PGCE or equivalent) have undoubtedly benefited from government funding for tuition fees via local authorities. In consequence, institutions providing FE teacher training have been able to expand to meet a demand fuelled by legislation and unrestrained by the cost of fees. Indeed, the last five years have seen a doubling of student numbers for some HEIs. However, changes to financial support introduced in 2006 represent a decisive break with the past: for the first time, trainees are required to pay tuition fees. Although this situation appears to be alleviated by a non-means-tested maintenance grant, eligibility for the grant is highly dependent upon the structure of the course attended, and it may well be the case that many trainees fail to qualify (Simmons & Thompson, 2006).

For the first time, therefore, FE initial teacher training is effectively not free at source: a situation that may become increasingly problematic if, over time, a significant discrepancy emerges between the levels of fees and grants. In effect,

whilst the government demands an increased supply of FE teachers and ever higher levels of performance, it intends to commodify initial training rather than promote it as a professional responsibility supported by the state. This is despite the aspiration to ‘attract the very best staff in order to help every learner achieve their potential’ (Rammell, 2006, p. 2). Of course, the implication is clear: whatever discrepancy between fees and grants should emerge, trainee and employer are expected to negotiate a sharing of costs. This can be seen as part of a long-term trend initiated by Conservative governments in the 1980s and extended under New Labour: the continued erosion of free education and the transfer of costs elsewhere. More broadly, it can be interpreted as part of the reconceptualisation of post-compulsory education from a multifaceted service emphasising democracy and egalitarian values towards a business model that purports to prioritise competitive advantage for individuals, groups and even the nation-state (Gouthro, 2002).

### **Aiming higher?**

This final section examines some possible scenarios arising from the redefined landscape and changing discourse described earlier, and their consequences. In particular, we argue that there may be profound effects on those new universities that have invested most heavily in FE teacher training and, through the partnerships they lead, on the quality of training available on an in-service basis. These effects would, ultimately, filter through to learners in FE and imperil the *Success for all* targets that the reform agenda was designed to help achieve.

The most likely scenario is that the new universities will strive energetically to retain the ‘business’ they have established: the income from FE teacher training is simply too important to relinquish without a struggle. In practice, this means that compliance with the regulatory framework and adoption of the ‘newspeak’ of training reform will be the norm, at whatever cost in time that could be better spent in pursuing the critical function of a university and promoting such an approach in trainees. As course teams scramble to keep up with the bewildering level of change being imposed (Lucas, 2004), ‘quality’ may become redefined as regulatory compliance rather than as the vitality and challenge which should characterise teacher training. Within the changing discourse discussed above, unidirectional change may squeeze innovation and diversity along a narrow channel of predefined solutions to ‘problems’ that are creations of the discourse itself, whilst other, more fundamental, issues are ignored. A critical and rigorous course of training which places classroom-centred skills within a philosophical and social context and models the innovatory and creative approaches desired of trainees, would be seriously compromised. This may result in the recasting of Cert. Ed. and PGCE courses as an experience based upon the rather mechanistic, technical-rationalist approach that now characterises much of the teacher training offered by awarding bodies directly to colleges.

More insidiously, the delicate balance that now exists between tuition fees and maintenance grant will increasingly attract attention from HEIs, with a view to aligning the structure of courses with the grant regulations rather than the needs of

trainees; at the same time tuition fees themselves will be constrained by the level of grant support available, so that the disparity between the two does not act as a disincentive to recruitment. In effect, variable tuition fees will not exist in university-led FE teacher training and this will compromise the ability of partnerships to deliver the desired 'step-change in initial teacher training' (DfES, 2004, p. 4) through improved training of mentors, increased teaching observations and the other changes called for in the reform agenda.

It might be argued, of course, that it is unreasonable to treat FE teacher trainees as different from any other group of HE students; that financial support is available, albeit in the form of loans, to encourage 'investing in one's own development'; and that, in any case, many trainees (for example, police trainers) are in well-paid jobs. Rather than take each of these arguments individually, we merely note that this point of view is essentially derived from the view, discussed above, of higher education as linked to individual economic competitiveness. As such, it cannot be assumed to apply equally to a population of predominantly middle-class school-leavers faced with a free choice of course and a distinctly different group, largely of working-class origin, entering in mid-career an occupation not noted for its financial rewards. Any shortfall in recruitment to in-service courses due to fee-related issues, or conversely reductions in funding per trainee caused by artificially holding down tuition fees, is likely to prevent the achievement of the government target of 20,000 newly qualified teachers each year for the Learning and Skills sector (Rammell, 2006). It is likely that the shortage of well-trained teachers, already acute in many subject areas, will be further exacerbated.

Another possible scenario is that the new universities in particular (being those most dependent on initial training partnerships) will seek to further increase their diversification into more advanced courses, transferring resources to continuing professional development of a more academic nature in which the relationship between university and student is unmediated by immediate government priorities (Simmons & Thompson, 2006). Although there could be difficulties in this approach, not least in competing with the pre-1992 universities, it could eventually provide a platform for some new universities to withdraw from, or at least greatly reduce, their involvement in delivering in-service teacher training. This process of 'academic drift' could mean that some experienced teacher trainers face redundancy and future training capacity is reduced. The effects of this will not necessarily be confined to universities. As discussed earlier in this article, because many awards are delivered through FE/HE partnerships, teacher education teams within FE colleges will lose both income and the opportunity to work alongside university tutors, with a consequent reduction in their capability to deliver high-quality training. More broadly, the long-standing partnerships between universities and FE colleges may well be seriously affected, perhaps terminally.

Finally, the most significant impact could be for learners in FE whose education may be compromised by a lack of suitably trained and qualified teachers or who are taught by staff having undertaken an impoverished training devoid of the depth and breadth of learning that universities strive to provide.

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## Changing step or marking time? Teacher education reforms for the learning and skills sector in England

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The unprecedented degree of attention given to the learning and skills sector in England by successive New Labour governments has led to a significant increase in what is expected of the teaching workforce. To help meet these expectations, a 'step change' in the quality of initial teacher training for the sector is promised, alongside provisions for career-long professional development. In this article, the authors argue that the effectiveness of these reforms is likely to be compromised by a combination of under-funding, poor integration of initial teacher training into human resource policies within colleges, and an over-prescriptive curriculum. In addition, they consider the re-definition of teaching roles currently taking place in the sector and warn that this may further undermine the reforms by simultaneously discouraging many teachers from achieving fully qualified status and downgrading their professional standing.

**Keywords:** teacher education; learning and skills; further education

### Introduction

The consultation document *Equipping our Teachers for the Future* sets out the government's aspiration to achieve a 'step change' in the quality of initial teacher training (ITT) for the learning and skills sector in England (DfES 2004, 4). This aspiration arises from a combination of two beliefs: that better education and training in the learning and skills sector is essential for national economic competitiveness and social inclusion; and that the present arrangements for ITT in the sector are inadequate to achieve the desired improvement. These beliefs are articulated in another key policy document, *Success for All*, which expresses the desire to 'put teaching and learning at the heart of what we do' and insists on 'the right of every learner to expect and receive teaching of excellence' (DfES 2002a, 15).

In consequence, a new structure for ITT in the learning and skills sector has been developed and is being implemented from September 2007. It addresses the perceived inadequacy of existing provision by attempting to raise the status of teaching in the sector and to create a more 'professionalised' teaching workforce. Although parity of esteem with school teaching is presented as a long-term aspiration rather than an immediate objective, the reforms borrow several of the features of school teacher training, including new 'professional standards' (LLUK 2007a), a subject-based approach to pedagogy and minimum levels of literacy and numeracy for teachers. However, the environment of the reforms is radically different to that in the compulsory sector. The transformation of the old further education (FE) system into a wider learning and skills sector has subjected teachers and managers to a 'whirlwind of change' (Beale 2004; Edward et al. 2007), inspired by the government's

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image of lifelong learning as the acquisition of economically useful skills (Finlay et al. 2007) and underpinned by a centrally imposed, quasi-market system. The resulting notion of professionalism is driven by a performative culture reminiscent of Fordism (Avis 2005, 212), which embodies low-trust work relations at odds with New Labour rhetoric on education. This is seen in particular in relation to the new LLUK teaching standards, which signally do not meet the criticisms of Lucas (2004b, 105–6) concerning the occupational rather than professional orientation of the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards and their inability to ‘deliver a professional framework to raise the quality of teaching in further education’.

The aim of this article is to examine critically the new structure for ITT in the learning and skills sector and to discuss some factors that may prove to be significant obstacles to the promised ‘step change’. In particular, the possible effects of issues relating to mentorship, subject-specialist pedagogy and employer support for trainees’ study are analysed. Preliminary results from ongoing empirical research into the experiences of trainees and mentors are used to inform this discussion. This research forms part of a longer term study of trainees’ perceptions of their experiences, and an initial survey of the changing trainee profile, particularly relating to in-service programmes.

### **Initial teacher training in the post-compulsory sector**

The history of ITT for the post-compulsory sector in England has been described, quite aptly, as one of ‘benign neglect’ (Lucas 2004a). Although well documented elsewhere (Lucas 2004a, 2004b; Robson 2006), it is worth noting here some salient features. Perhaps the greatest influence on the development of ITT within the sector has been the origins of today’s further education colleges in working-class institutions such as mechanics’ institutes, and the municipal provision of technical education. The nature of this provision meant that technical expertise was accepted, no doubt pragmatically, as the key determinant of employability as a teacher. Teaching skills were seen as something to be ‘picked up’ through experience, and professional knowledge, when valued at all, was equated with subject expertise. As Robson (2006, 14) notes, ‘The assumption has been ... that if I know my subject, I can, by definition, teach it to others.’

Such attitudes were arguably reinforced by the vocational nature of much of the FE curriculum. The requirement for teachers to be experienced practitioners led inevitably to a situation in which FE teaching was a ‘second-choice’ career. Often, part-time employment in FE teaching ran in parallel with, rather than replacing, a teacher’s main employment. In this context, it is not surprising that the majority of ITT was in-service, rather than pre-service, and often undertaken (if at all) after some considerable time in teaching. Although modified to some extent by changes in the curriculum and organisation of post-compulsory education, this pattern of employment preceding training still exists today and is accepted, rather than challenged, by the reform agenda.

The development of the colleges of education (technical) following the Second World War and the expansion of ITT, initially through extra-mural centres and later in FE/HE (higher education) partnerships (Bridge, Fisher, and Webb 2003), shows that national strategy, together with the commitment of individual teachers and their employers, can have a significant impact on the quality of provision. Nevertheless,

the nature of the post-compulsory sector and in particular the effect of other government interventions, such as the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993 and the resulting increase in part-time and casualised employment, meant that the largely voluntary system of teacher training could not keep pace with the number of entrants to the sector. Indeed, the proportion of trained teachers actually declined in the four years following incorporation (Lucas 2004a, 37). As late as 2004, only 44.8% of teaching staff in FE colleges held full teaching qualifications (LLUK 2005, 10).

There was also considerable diversity in the available ITT qualifications. As well as the university awards of Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) and PGCE, numerous other qualifications were provided by awarding bodies such as City and Guilds and delivered within FE colleges. These often provided a ladder of progression to university courses but, following the 2001 reforms, were sometimes offered at level 4 in direct competition with higher education institution (HEI) awards. The programmes offered by HEIs are themselves considerably diversified, with PGCE programmes being increasingly differentiated into professional graduate and postgraduate awards, although the extent to which trainees or employers value such distinctions is questionable.

Although 'benign neglect' is a fair description of successive government attitudes to ITT in FE, the sector itself has increasingly been perceived as central to national competitiveness (Avis 2007). It was almost inevitable that when New Labour came to power in 1997 they should turn their attention to post-compulsory education. Improvement of the teaching workforce was soon identified as essential if the nation was to 'put teaching and learning at the heart of what we do' (DfES 2002a, 15). The establishment of FENTO in 1999 and the introduction, in 2001, of regulations making teacher training compulsory for new entrants in further education were two early signals that the period of 'benign neglect' was coming to an end.

Ultimately, the aim of New Labour was for a 'qualified' teaching workforce, although the heterogeneous nature of FE led to considerable debate about what should constitute qualification, and to whom it should apply. Post-incorporation FE colleges, with large numbers of part-time staff and a variety of restricted teaching and assessment roles, were not amenable to straightforward analysis, and the wider learning and skills sector provided an even greater challenge to classification. A model based on three 'stages' of qualification was adopted, related to the degree of autonomy and responsibility of the teacher. By 2010, all FE teachers were to be qualified at an appropriate stage through FENTO-endorsed programmes. Interim targets were set for 2005–2006 of 90% of full-time and 60% of part-time teachers (DfES 2002b, 37); at a more detailed level, DfES targets for qualified teachers in FE would be imposed through Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Development Plans agreed with individual colleges.

Endorsement of programmes was based on a set of 'standards' developed by FENTO (1999) as a functional analysis of the work of FE teachers. Later, endorsement also depended on coverage of a 'minimum core' of knowledge and skills in the areas of language, literacy and numeracy (FENTO 2003). Although it included pedagogical knowledge, the minimum core was largely an attempt to impose standards of literacy and numeracy (at level 2), in line with the entry requirements for school teacher training. As such, it recognised that one of the chief obstacles to parity between FE teaching and the school system was the relatively low level of attainment in general education of many teachers in the FE sector (LLUK 2005, 7), a

consequence partly of the historical development of FE. However, as with many initiatives intended to grapple with the education of FE teachers, pragmatic considerations of labour supply prevented literacy and numeracy at level 2 becoming an entry requirement. In fact, the summative assessment of these skills at any stage of ITT was never implemented under the pre-2007 arrangements, although formative assessment was one of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection criteria for FE teacher training (Ofsted 2004, 7).

At the same time as it re-drew the boundaries of ITT for the sector, New Labour was also scrutinising the quality of the training itself. The allocation of responsibility for the inspection of ITT for FE to Ofsted, and the consequent survey of ITT provision (Ofsted 2003), detonated a re-consideration of training, the standards used to inform qualifications and their scope. The survey had been undertaken as an exploration of the effectiveness of the 2001 regulations and the resulting impact of training on the standards of trainees. Coming to the FE sector from a paradigm of school teacher training that is overwhelmingly pre-service, all-graduate and highly evolved in terms of links between training and placement providers, it is not surprising that Ofsted found what were, in its view, serious deficiencies. Although, in general, the learning experiences provided by teacher educators were found to be of a good standard, the survey found that 'Overall, the attainment of trainees ... is uneven. Many trainees fail to reach their full potential' (Ofsted 2003, 4). The explanations put forward by Ofsted for these weaknesses are consonant with their experience of school teacher training: lack of attention to subject knowledge and pedagogy; insufficient links between trainees' practical teaching and their own training; and poorly developed systems of mentoring. Whilst these criticisms may have been valid (at least in relation to the sample of providers inspected), it is unfortunate that the subsequent discourse has focused largely on the problems themselves rather than on the political, economic and social context underlying them. This point will be returned to in discussing the current reforms.

A further criticism made by Ofsted was that the recently developed FENTO standards themselves were not fit for purpose in identifying the threshold level for initial teacher training programmes (Ofsted 2003, 2–5). This is borne out more generally by later analysis; for example, Lucas (2004a, 45) argues that the standards have been merely 'regulatory' rather than 'developmental'. FENTO was, in any case, about to leave the scene. The limitation of its remit to the training and development of FE teachers (Robson 2006, 121) was not sufficient to the range of contexts, including workplace training, which was implied in *Success for All*. In January 2005 Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), as one of the new Sector Skills Councils, inherited the responsibility for teacher training in the learning and skills sector, including the task of introducing what is now commonly referred to as the 'reform agenda'. However, statutory power, in the form of the *FE Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations* (HM Government 2007), remains limited to the FE sector – the application of these regulations to providers outside FE is by means of contractual arrangements with the LSC.

### Planning the step change

The 'vision' expressed in *Equipping Our Teachers* (DfES 2004, 5) is of an elective workforce enjoying parity of esteem with school teachers:

The reforms ... will raise the standard of teacher training across the whole sector. Over time they will result in greater public esteem for teachers, their institutions and their sector; they will help achieve joint working with schools, leading to parity of status and professionalism; and they will make teaching in the learning and skills sector a career of choice ...

To this end, the reforms incorporate three key strategies: an improved curriculum 'offer' to trainee teachers, effectively introducing a 'national curriculum' for ITT in the sector; investment in improving workplace practice and partnerships between colleges, HEIs and other providers, underpinned by the quality assurance role of LLUK and Ofsted; and development of new standards to be applied across the learning and skills sector (DfES 2004, 7–13).

### ***The curriculum offer***

The improved 'offer' includes a number of relatively minor measures, such as a requirement for eight teaching observations across the full programme (a significant increase for many courses in the sector) and greater emphasis on subject pedagogy development. More importantly, it establishes the status of 'Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills' (QTLS), introducing for the first time a formal licence to practise as a fully qualified teacher in the sector (DfES 2004, 7). This licence is not simply coterminous with a teaching qualification; it will be subject to annual renewal based on evidence of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) monitored by the Institute for Learning (IfL).

The curriculum offer was initially envisaged as having only two levels of qualification, leading to a 'threshold licence' (essentially a 'survival kit' equivalent to six credits at level 3) and QTLS (at level 5), respectively. Although this structure established QTLS as the status to which teachers in the sector would aspire, it allowed those whose role was 'limited to the delivery and assessment of their specialist area' (DfES 2004, 7) to exit at the threshold level. This would have legitimated a minimal level of training for many teachers, and was replaced with a more complex scheme including 'an "associate" teacher role which contains fewer teaching responsibilities' (LLUK 2007b, 6). This role is prescribed in the regulations (HM Government 2007) as involving:

significantly less than the full range of teaching responsibilities ordinarily carried out in a full teaching role ... [it] does not require the teacher to demonstrate an extensive range of knowledge, understanding and application of curriculum development, curriculum innovation or curriculum delivery strategies.

Associate teachers are required to complete a Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector, offered at level 3 or 4 and comprising a total of 24 credits; those undertaking the full teacher role will be required to complete a level 5 Diploma (120 credits), which will confer eligibility for QTLS. Movement through the framework to QTLS (where appropriate) must be completed within five years of entry, although the precise meaning of 'entry' is yet to be determined. At present, it means 'new to teaching'; however, it appears likely that from 2009 it will mean 'new to post', possibly significantly increasing demand for the new qualifications.

Although the associate teacher role can be seen as a progressive step compared with the initial proposal to allow exit at the threshold stage, the in-service nature of most teacher training in the sector makes trainees' own development at least partly dependent on employer perceptions of their role. This raises a number of questions

about the implications of legitimating a role which will inevitably be poorly paid in comparison with QTLS, and is open to interpretation by a cost-conscious, marketised sector. We suggest that the resulting division of labour will not reflect the work of teachers and will act as a barrier to the professionalisation of those locked into an associate role, with little opportunity to develop and improve their qualifications. Work previously undertaken on roles such as instructors, trainers and part-time teachers (Kedney 1999; Walker et al. 2000; Watkinson and Hardman 2002) supports this concern.

Progression from the threshold licence to QTLS may take up to five years – perhaps rather longer than might be expected from a reform agenda based on the right of learners to ‘teaching excellence’. This pragmatic response to the in-service nature of most ITT for the learning and skills sector at least enables some measure of training to precede the rather lengthy period during which the new teacher will work towards more substantial qualifications. Furthermore, the original intention that the ‘threshold licence’ be taken either before employment or concurrently with the first three or four months of teaching has been diluted in response to employer concerns about labour supply. Teachers will have up to one year to achieve a ‘threshold’ award of a mere six credits (HM Government 2007).

### *Improving workplace learning*

In addition to the curriculum framework described above, the reforms aim to invest in better integration of workplace practice with the more theoretical learning taking place in ITT programmes. Trainee teachers are said to:

model their future practice by observing colleagues and mentors who teach the same subject or vocational area. Without good role models of teaching and comprehensive support, their development is severely inhibited. (DfES 2004, 11)

However, the basis for these remarks is unclear and seems to rely on a rhetoric of self-evidence deriving largely from the views of Ofsted. According to Ofsted (2003, 18), poorly developed mentoring arrangements are a ‘major weakness’ which deprives trainees of ‘support from experienced practitioners who can assist them in developing good teaching skills in their own subject’. Unfortunately, Ofsted does not reveal the process by which teachers trained under the preceding, ‘inadequate’ system of ITT, through the passage of time, become those best placed to initiate younger colleagues into subject-specialist pedagogy.

In contrast to this approach, Fisher and Webb (2006) discuss alternative pedagogies for subject development in ITT, including interdisciplinarity, and question the appropriateness of ‘subject specialism’ as a concept to the learning and skills sector. Further support for this critique can be found in Lucas (2007). The growing emphasis and focus of the work of the FE teacher, he claims, depends more on the skill of the teacher to work within and between multi-specialist teams ‘that goes beyond that of delivering “subject” knowledge’ (Lucas 2007, 96). These critiques raise the prospect that a major part of the new curriculum offer may be inflexible or, at worst, inappropriate to the demands of the sector.

The required investment in workplace practice is intended to take place largely through the creation of a network of Centres for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT), which will be expected to take ‘a lead in active local partnerships of ... providers from the learning and skills sector and HEIs’ (DfES 2004, 11). These

partnerships are intended to provide access for all trainees to high-quality mentoring and subject-specialist development. However, funding is severely limited and the CETTs themselves will receive financial support for only three years, after which they are meant to be self-financing. The sum of £30 million (DfES 2004, 16) to be made available to learning and skills providers for supporting the workplace learning of trainee teachers will prove to be spread extremely thinly.

### ***New professional standards***

The final strategy embodied in the reforms is the introduction of new, overarching professional standards to replace the FENTO standards and apply across the learning and skills sector. Much has been written about the FENTO standards, in particular the criticisms noted above of Ofsted (2003) and Lucas (2004a,b), and it is difficult to see how the existence of new standards as such can be of value in effecting a 'step change' in quality. As already mentioned, the new standards – with around 200 separate statements – do not move beyond the industrial model of minutely described occupational procedures. By contrast, the new teaching standards for the schools sector, whilst still prone to excessive proliferation (33 QTS standards and a further 41 'core' standards to be achieved by the end of an induction period for newly qualified teachers) provide a more professional and developmental framework which integrates career progression (TDA 2007).

More generally, Nasta (2007, 3) questions whether either the old or new standards can 'capture in written statements – codified knowledge – the richness and complexities involved in the process of teaching'. Using a combination of analytical and empirical research, he shows that the FENTO standards were unable, except in the most limited ways, to contribute to the improvement of trainees' practice and casts doubt on the ability of the LLUK standards to be more constructive in this respect. Nasta also draws attention to the complexities of translation from standards to qualifications in such a diverse sector and the difficulty of 'converting policy aims into the complex pedagogical context of colleges'. He warns:

Cultural tools, such as educational standards, will be interpreted and re-interpreted in ways which their designers may not have envisaged and which may indeed run counter to their original purpose. Agreeing standards should be seen as very much the beginning and not the end of reform. (Nasta 2007, 15)

One way in which unforeseen consequences may emerge from an excessive reliance on employer-led standards is highlighted by Lucas (2007, 95), who points out that a more work-based focus for ITT could lead to marginalisation of the taught part of the course and a resulting devaluation of knowledge in favour of competence-based assessment. Lucas calls for a reappraisal of pedagogies for the workplace learning of teachers. He emphasises the role of the workplace as the place where prior learning and specialist knowledge are contextualised and transformed into pedagogic knowledge.

### **Different but less than equal**

Whilst the aspirations of successive policy statements on improving the professional status of teachers across the learning and skills sector are laudable, and measures to achieve this improvement are long overdue, a critical analysis of the apparently

rational framework contained in the proposals reveals a quite different picture. A fundamental flaw of government policy is that it contains no robust conceptualisation of how initial teacher training for the sector should work in a way that is adapted to the distinctive features of learning and skills provision. Instead, it draws partly on models derived from school teacher training, and partly on pragmatic considerations aimed at ensuring an uninterrupted labour supply in the short term. This, in turn, leads to internal contradictions in policy, a serious underestimation of the funding required to implement reform, and a misconception of the type of regulatory framework that is necessary to facilitate them.

Consider, first, the discourse around professionalisation and parity of status with school teaching. Although this is presented as an aspiration of the reform agenda, it is to be achieved indirectly, 'over time', through laying the groundwork for 'joint working' with schools; the QTLS requirements will not in themselves enable parity. In particular, there are no strategies aimed at increasing the proportion of pre-service entrants; entry requirements continue to relate more to considerations of labour supply than to professional demands; and QTLS retains a lower level of academic challenge compared with the schools sector (a minimum of level 5 for diploma courses as against level 6 for schools).

As already noted, Lucas (2004a) concludes that the FENTO standards turned out to be merely regulatory rather than developmental. This is a general feature of the 2007 reforms, which seek to regulate the ITT curriculum and dictate learning strategies (for example, by institutionalising the role of a mentor in delivery). However, as Simmons and Thompson (2007) argue, this ignores a range of other factors that may explain the weaknesses detected by Ofsted. These factors relate to the context of ITT in the learning and skills sector, which perforce must operate in the marketised climate created since incorporation, as well as taking place against the backdrop of longer term societal attitudes to vocational education discussed in the introduction. Three such factors will be analysed, with reference to the contrasting situation in school teacher training: support for new teachers through reduced contact hours; the funding of ITT in HEIs; and the availability and support of mentors.

### ***Reduced contact hours***

There now appears to be a culture within the learning and skills sector that refuses to acknowledge the importance of training new teachers by providing support in the form of reduced teaching hours. In schools, a probationary year for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is well established and provides substantial reductions in contact hours alongside a range of other support mechanisms. Although in the past, a limited form of this arrangement was not uncommon in FE (with remission of teaching hours for those undertaking an in-service training course), the years since incorporation have seen an erosion of this practice. In order to assess the current extent of support for FE staff following Certificate in Education or PGCE courses, a small-scale survey was carried out by one of the authors, within a large FE/HE partnership. Teacher education managers from 29 FE colleges were asked about support for their own FE staff in the form of remission of class contact hours. It was found that, first, only limited support was provided by these colleges, and second, that the available support often did not materialise once the teaching year got under

way. Overall, 19 of the colleges surveyed provided some remission (at least in theory), with 10 allocating 2 hours per week and the remaining 9 allocating from as little as 6 hours *per annum* to as much as 3¾ hours per week (the latter figure applying in just one college). Ten colleges gave no remission at all.

Furthermore, although support was theoretically available in approximately two-thirds of the colleges surveyed, five colleges reported that staff either did not receive or did not take up their allocation. When asked the reason for remission not being taken up in practice, these colleges reported either that staff found that their timetables were full with no recognition of the allocation or that managers simply ignored college policy and cited pressure on staff or lack of funds as reasons to refuse release.

### ***Funding of ITT in HEIs***

It is clear that financial pressures on employers are a significant factor affecting the quality of experience of trainees. This is compounded by inequities in the funding of ITT in HEIs, in which full-time school teacher training, supported by the Teacher Development Agency (TDA), enjoys a considerable advantage over HEI in-service provision for the post-compulsory sector. Although the funding mechanism used by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is complex (HEFCE 2006), a broad comparison for the two sectors is not difficult to make. In 2006–07, standard HEFCE funding for Band C activity (the band appropriate for most ITT) was £5209 per full-time equivalent (FTE) for part-time, in-service trainees, including an assumed fee income of £1200 per FTE (HEFCE 2006, 12). Because most HEIs delivering in-service ITT have attempted to hold down their variable tuition fees, this assumed income is quite close to the actual fee, which in many cases has been set at around £1500 per FTE. The actual income for in-service ITT in post-compulsory education (PCE) in 2006–07 may therefore be taken as around £5500 per FTE; pre-service provision with tuition fees of £3000 would attract around £6600.

For TDA-funded provision in HEIs, which is largely pre-service and full-time, funding varies with subject according to priority and the cost of training. For standard cost, non-priority subjects such as history, £4670 was provided per FTE in 2006–07 (TDA 2006, 6). Taking full-time tuition fees into account, this leads to a total income of £7670, significantly in excess of pre-service PCE income per FTE and nearly 40% more than in-service. The difference is even more marked for priority subjects.

It could be argued that, in the years following incorporation, HEIs have colluded with employers in providing a conservative, low-cost approach to ITT for the post-compulsory sector in which ever-shrinking attendance patterns, infrequent observations and relatively low academic demands have been tailored to the short-term concerns of employers and trainees. However, as the above figures show, the ability of HEIs to meet the requirements of teacher education reform, including more frequent teaching observations, individual learning plans and the quality assurance of mentors, is severely compromised compared with school teacher training.

### ***The role of mentors***

One of the main principles of the reform agenda is the improvement of training through the greater involvement of subject-specialist mentors. We have already

questioned the empirical basis of this principle (see also Simmons and Thompson 2007); however, even accepting its validity raises serious questions about the likely effectiveness of implementation.

Although little research has been undertaken on mentoring within the learning and skills sector (Hankey 2004; Cullimore 2006; Cunningham 2007), the work that exists confirms the findings of a pilot on mentoring undertaken in the large FE/HE partnership discussed above. The pilot, supported by funding from the DfES Standards Unit, ran for one year from September 2004. Some 403 trainees (just under 50%) and 140 mentors responded to questionnaires on their experiences. The vast majority of trainees valued the support of a mentor; however, concern was expressed regarding the lack of a systematic approach to mentoring within their institutions, with little or no support for the mentor to undertake their role. The proportion of volunteer mentors was 64% and some mentors commented that they would be reluctant to continue on a voluntary basis. This is not to say that volunteers were lacking in commitment to their trainee. Cunningham (2004) found that, in the survey he undertook with pre-service mentors, 'the sheer personal rewards accruing from mentoring already represent, in themselves, a quite substantial incentive' (281). However, the dependence on volunteers raises questions of trainee entitlement and constitutes a threat to the overarching objectives of the reform agenda.

## Conclusion

There is little doubt that the reform agenda represents a commitment by the government to improve the quality of teaching in the learning and skills sector, and the establishment of QTLS status represents at least an initial step towards parity with school teachers. More subtly, it has strengthened the move from a culture in which pedagogy came a poor second towards one in which new entrants can develop a professional identity as teachers. The question is no longer *should* FE teachers be trained, but what form should their training take? Arguably, such a move was inevitable given the more challenging cohorts of learners now commonly encountered in the sector; nevertheless, the reforms may be cautiously welcomed.

However, as we have argued, successful implementation of this policy is threatened by its reliance on employer commitment in a sector still bearing the scars of incorporation and the successive waves of 'endless change' (Edward et al. 2007) initiated by New Labour. We have highlighted the potential weaknesses of an under-funded mentoring system, as well as the generally poor provision of employer support for trainees in the form of reduced teaching loads. These two examples are symptomatic of a general approach by the government which seeks to regulate and inspect training curricula by ever-increasing systems of central control, and yet hesitates to institute concomitant regulation of support by employers.

We have also drawn attention to funding differences in HEIs between training for schools and for the post-compulsory sector. Such differences are compounded by chaotic new arrangements for the financial support of trainees (Simmons and Thompson 2007). Although there is some convergence between school and FE teacher training in terms of the introduction of a 'professional formation' period, national tests in language, numeracy and ICT, and greater attention to subject pedagogy, significant differences exist in the way initial professional development is

conceptualised and an occupational rather than professional paradigm continues to dominate FE teaching standards.

Tensions between aspirations to professionalisation, employer concerns over its effect on labour supply, and the persistence of 'last choice' attitudes to FE from students and parents (Richardson 2007) highlight some of the contradictions inherent in New Labour's approach to developing the newly discovered territory of further education. How effective ITT reform can be in the face of such tensions remains to be seen; however, it appears likely that, unless the issues highlighted here are addressed, the current 'step change' will turn out to be another lost opportunity for the Cinderella sector.

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# Creativity and performativity: the case of further education

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This article examines the circumstances affecting creative teaching and learning within the specific context of English further education (FE)—a sector which has proved to be particularly fertile ground for performativity. Beginning with an analysis of notions of creativity in education and a description of the peculiar history and policy context of FE, the article problematises the relationship between representations of creativity and the current situation of teachers and learners. Drawing on a range of empirical studies and policy analyses, it is argued that FE is increasingly positioned at the ‘lower end’ of a largely class-based division of post-compulsory education in England. In such a division, the authors argue, meaningful creativity is difficult to achieve. Within the performative context of FE, attempts to interpret official discourse on creativity may only serve to reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities in education.

## Introduction

The considerable attention given to creativity in education in recent years has introduced a number of tensions between different aspects of creative teaching and learning. Official discourse emphasises the role of education in the drive to maintain economic competitiveness and well-being. Introducing *Opportunity for all: skills for the new economy* (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000, p. 3), David Blunkett claims that

Knowledge and skills are now the key drivers of innovation and change. Economic performance depends increasingly on talent and creativity. And in this new economy, it is education and skills which shape the opportunities and rewards available to individuals.

Within such discourses, creative and cultural education is identified as having a key role in developing the attitudes and skills required to prepare learners to take their place as flexible and adaptable employees and consumers in western capitalist societies. In England particularly, this is underpinned by a performative education system in which the autonomy of teachers has been progressively eroded and replaced by a machinery of

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targets, measurement and control. In contrast, creativity has often been conceptualised rather differently by teachers, as a means of liberating the experience of teachers and learners from the confines of narrow and centralised curricula. The translation of discourse on creativity into classroom practice is therefore likely to be complex and problematic, with the interaction of economic, performative and liberal accounts leading to purportedly creative practice that is seriously compromised.

The roots of performativity in education, for England at least, can arguably be found in James Callaghan's 1976 'Great Debate' speech, which questioned the purpose of education within the context of Britain's relative economic decline—particularly its rising rate of unemployment and the decline of its traditional industries. From this point it is possible to trace growing levels of state intervention in education and the growth in English education of performativity: the definition and regulation of professional life in relation to bureaucratic targets, measures and sanctions (Ball, 2000, 2003; Ecclestone, 2004). Avis (2003, p. 324) compares the demands of performativity with Fordist work relations, in which 'the worker is tightly surveilled, with attempts to render transparent the details of their practice'. He further argues that performativity creates a 'blame culture' where an institution calls to account its members—the very antithesis of the high-trust work relations that Finegold and Soskice (1988) identify as necessary to flourish in a high-skills knowledge economy. This is not an environment in which risk taking or creativity will readily take place, and arguably stifles innovation and encourages deeply conservative practices (Avis, 2005, p. 212–213).

This article examines the circumstances affecting creative teaching and learning within the specific context of English further education (FE)—a sector which has proved to be particularly fertile ground for performativity. This traditionally low-profile sector has in recent years been subjected to a 'whirlwind of change' (Beale, 2004) affecting governance, curricula and funding, largely due to its 'discovery' by central government as a key factor in economic development and social inclusion. Although the rhetoric of FE reform has presented an aspiration to a high-trust, high-skills sector that would indeed be conducive to the development of creative teachers and learners, the reality is rather different. *Transforming learning cultures in FE* (TLC), a major empirical research project funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), has found that 'in some situations, current funding and management regimes are likely to reduce the quality of learning' (Hodkinson & James, 2003, p. 403). More recently, the project reports that

Learning in FE is pressured by a combination of inadequate and unstable funding and a rigid audit regime ... Tutors spent much of their time striving to protect the existing learning culture from external damage such as dramatic reductions in class contact time ... and tensions between inclusion and high achievement rates. This frequently entails tutors ... working well beyond their job descriptions. Such nationwide managerial approaches pose a significant threat to learning quality and tutors are running out of the energy and morale needed to mediate them. (TLRP, 2005, p. 2)

Both TLC and its sister project, a large-scale empirical study entitled *The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector* (Edward & Coffield, 2007),

make clear that this climate has not completely erased creativity and innovation within the FE sector; nevertheless, the pressures they describe make FE a particularly inhospitable environment for progressive approaches to teaching and learning.

The article begins by reviewing aspects of creativity policy and research relevant to the ensuing discussion, using Buckingham and Jones's (2001) notion of a 'cultural turn' in New Labour's education policy to identify incipient fracture lines between economic and liberal conceptions of creativity. It then outlines the development of English further education and analyses in greater detail the growth of a centralised and performative culture since the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993. The 'downward drift' of the FE curriculum is discussed and identified as a significant obstacle to the implementation of genuinely creative education. Finally, we discuss the implications of the further education context for the ways in which creativity is embedded in the daily work of FE teachers, drawing on recent empirical studies of teachers' practice and the ways in which it is affected by policy.

### **Creativity in education**

Notions of creativity currently occupy a somewhat paradoxical position in educational discourse, being at once a symbol of liberation from the confines of centralised, instrumental systems of education and yet, increasingly, an important element of those systems. On the one hand, teachers may welcome the creativity described by Cullingford (2007, p. 133) as signifying 'open-mindedness, exploration, the celebration of difference and originality ... an automatic opposition to the language of targets, to instrumental skills, the measurement of outcomes and the dogmas of accountability'. However, the 'cultural turn' of the first New Labour government, identified by Buckingham and Jones (2001), positions creative and cultural education as a vital component of attempts to fashion an education system deemed appropriate to the 'knowledge economy'. As such, it receives the accolade of performativity: a machinery of initiatives, outcomes and measurement which attests to its perceived importance to international competitiveness. In this section, we examine the current discourse of creativity in education, its perceived usefulness to the economy and the relationships with performativity that result from this.

One might begin by questioning whether 'creativity' signifies anything at all, beyond the level of metaphor and subjectivity. It is not difficult to find examples of educational discourse in which the word 'creativity' is redundant, adding nothing to descriptions of teacher or pupil action, or simply represents approval. Compton (2007) refers to several examples of how the word 'creative' is used as a term of praise, and also notes the converse association of creativity with suspicion (as in 'creative accounting'), quoting Marshall (2001, p. 116) on the 'ambiguous place' held in the UK by creativity. Nevertheless, there have been numerous attempts over the years to reach an agreed definition of creativity, including attempts to define and characterise creativity in ways which are appropriate to education (see, for example, Craft, 2001; Bleakley, 2004; Jeffrey & Craft, 2004; Gibson, 2005). A substantial amount of this research has attempted to identify characteristics of highly successful

creative people (Craft, 2001, pp. 6–7); because these people tend to share high expertise in their field with many others who are less successful, the characteristics reported tend to cluster around features of personality and culturally specific attitudes such as high motivation, hard work, perseverance and self-control. The development of such characteristics is particularly attractive to policy makers in education and the temptation to elide the distinction between association and causation in presenting accounts of creativity to young people may prove irresistible.

In the context of education, attention is commonly given to three closely linked strands: the nature and distribution of creativity; teaching to support creativity; and teaching creatively (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education [NACCCE], 1999; Jeffrey & Craft, 2004). Official definitions of creativity in education largely approach their subject by taking a universalist view: that is, creative action and the ability to appreciate creative acts are assumed to be accessible to all: ‘creativity is possible in all areas of human activity and ... everyone has creative capacities’ (NACCCE, 1999). An evangelising discourse is often evident, as in the following quotation from the website of the Creative Partnerships initiative (Anderson *et al.*, 2005, p. 4): ‘At the heart of its programme is the passionate belief that everyone is inherently creative and that everyone has the right to participate in the varied and exciting culture of this country’. This entails framing a definition of creativity that will allow universal participation, not confined by the traditional identification of creativity with the ‘creative arts’ and relative rather than absolute in terms of originality and achievement. Thus, in *All our futures* (NACCCE, 1999, p. 30), creativity is defined as ‘Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value’, a definition which is immediately qualified to make it clear that originality may be merely ipsative and value related to a ‘task at hand’. Originality, however, must not be too uncomfortable. Criteria presented as determining value, for example, encompass ‘safe’ words representing inclusion, enjoyment and usefulness; the construction or communication of challenging situations do not appear.

At this point, evangelism joins forces with New Labour’s ‘cultural turn’: if the needs of the knowledge economy are to be met, then forms of creativity perceived as desirable in business and industry must be developed, not just those in the arts. The goal of a universally flexible, docile and adaptable workforce makes creativity, when defined as including just these attributes, an important facet of the emerging curriculum of competitiveness. Buckingham and Jones (2001, p. 5) note how, in early twenty-first-century England, discourses of creativity permeate the business world: ‘the language of creative practice and personal development is more a feature of contemporary business rhetoric than it is of an education system dominated at all levels by centrally and narrowly established performance indicators and norms’. In their analysis of the Creative Partnerships initiative, a government-funded programme intended to give learners and teachers ‘the opportunity to explore their creativity by working on sustained projects with creative professionals’, Hall and Thomson (2007, p. 319) show that many of the programme objectives are concerned with redressing this shift and are underpinned by a tacit acknowledgement that

teachers and young people alike are bored and stifled by a 'narrow and dull' curriculum embedded in a performative system. However, they also note that in such programmes creative education is held away from the mainstream of the 'real' curriculum and remains at the level of 'a treat and a pick-me-up' for teachers and learners, and that the aim is less to change the curriculum than to ensure that learners fit more comfortably into it. According to this point of view, officially-sponsored creativity does not challenge or subvert existing educational norms; rather it makes them more palatable to teachers and students.

In official discourse, the promotion of 'teaching for creativity' is not just about enriching a narrow curriculum or developing economically valuable skills; it is also seen by government as part of a strategy for social inclusion, developing 'a new mode of social cohesion, no longer so dependent on tradition and authority' (Buckingham & Jones, 2001, p. 5). Creativity is seen as important because, among other things, it 'improves pupils' self-esteem, motivation and achievement' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2007b). For example, Creative Partnerships 'focuses on the most deprived communities in England' and includes among its objectives: building school-community relations; improving learner self-confidence and attitudes to learning; and enhancing achievement across the curriculum. Although the development of self-esteem may be thought of as unproblematic, Ecclestone (2004) highlights the potential of *teaching* for self-esteem for initiating a retrograde process of 'de-moralisation' in which learners see themselves as victims to be saved rather than as individuals developing greater autonomy, knowledge and skills. She warns that making self-esteem a core educational objective may create a dependency on the part of learners on continued intervention that would be the antithesis of creativity. This is a particularly sharp example of the dangers inherent in an uncritical acceptance of official discourse.

Teaching creatively is defined as:

using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective. Teachers can be highly creative in developing materials and approaches that fire children's interests and motivate their learning. This is a necessary part of all good teaching. (NACCCE, 1999, pp. 102–103)

These ideas are disseminated to teachers through a range of officially-sponsored websites and resource packs, each taking pains to set out the democratic, universalist conception of creativity and promoting its benefits. At the same time, creativity is underwritten by, and in turn used to legitimate, centralised curricula and performative surveillance. In a teacher resource describing a 'creative' science lesson (QCA, 2007a), links are given to National Curriculum programmes of study and to the framework for teaching English; the teacher comment associated with the lesson is particularly revealing: 'one pupil asked me when we were going to do some work, which made me smile! They had already met the main objective of the lesson'. Thus it is safe for a teacher to teach 'creatively'; they can still achieve their prescribed targets. The obvious corollary is that centralised targets are in themselves no bar to creativity and teachers are to blame, not central authority, if learners are not motivated.

In spite of ambiguities associated with the term ‘creativity’, in education at least, creativity has for the most part been seen as a worthwhile end in itself, and essentially characteristic of the way in which we see ourselves as a western capitalist society. However, this leads to a tension between creativity education, with its emphasis on the new, and other emerging curriculum areas (such as citizenship and sustainability) which seek to promote an awareness of the implications of a consumer society. Craft (2006, p. 339) draws attention to this tension, locating discussions of creativity within ‘the value framework of western individualism, driven by the capitalist, globalized marketplace’. She goes on to identify two ‘fundamental problems with the market driven context’ of creativity. One is the lack of attention to the cultural matrix within which educational discourses of creativity operate, leading to a lack of reference to value in culture and the ways in which values vary between and within cultures. The other is the elevation of innovation to an end in itself, in which ‘Designing products and services not only to be out of fashion within a short time but also to cease working, so that they have to be thrown away rather than repaired or restored, is seen as unproblematic’ (p. 341). Of course, discussion of such issues is not ruled out by the definitions of creativity discussed earlier, and may even be seen to be invited by the NACCCE (1999, p. 30) definition, with its explicit appeal to judgements of value. However, the pressure on teachers to conform produced by performative, competitiveness-driven educational systems is unlikely to contribute to the nuanced discussion of values required to counterbalance the problems identified by Craft.

### **Disciplining creativity**

A significant consequence of performativity is that it requires teachers to look for external legitimation of their activity. The erosion of an already precarious professional status so evident in education over much of the last two decades has led to a need for interpretation, in which the operational meanings of educational policies are explained in ways that can frame the behaviour of individual teachers. Much of the literature on creativity aimed at the teacher is concerned with this sort of explication: as noted above, there is a concern to reassure teachers that creativity is not mysterious, elitist or inaccessible and to define teacher and student behaviours that may count as ‘creative’. This prepares teachers to meet the demands of the various levels of surveillance apparatus and enables alignment between the creative and performative discourses.

Some elements of this interpretive discourse may arguably be seen as attempting to compensate for deficiencies in an increasingly performative system of initial teacher education, where the virtual disappearance of the ‘foundation disciplines’ and their replacement with ‘standards’ is depriving many trainees of the opportunity to develop systematic knowledge of theory and to debate the meaning and purpose of education. The bland advice to be found in the creativity pages of official websites (see, for example, QCA, 2007b) should be entirely superfluous to teachers with a secure grounding in educational theory but are clearly felt to be necessary both to

legitimate creative teaching as democratic rather than elitist and to remind teachers of standards ‘achieved’ rather than internalised.

Performativity also leads to increasingly ‘packaged’ curricula in which approaches to particular areas of learning are externally (often centrally) prescribed and pre-approved as ‘good practice’, further reducing teacher autonomy and inviting acquiescence in the world-view they contain. A quarter of a century ago, Apple proposed this as a threat to the ability of teachers to foster critical awareness in the classroom: according to Whitty (1985, p. 48):

he claims that there is a clear, though mediated, relationship between the movement towards packaged curricula in schools and the changing modes of control within capitalist production relations ... He suggests that these curricular packages constrain teachers in ways that make it difficult for them to organise the social relations of the classroom in a manner that would contest the messages implicit in the materials.

Whilst the above comments apply to both compulsory and post-compulsory education, they are particularly relevant to further education, a sector where turbulent change within a performative culture has become the norm and FE teachers and learners are especially vulnerable to the effects of performativity, for reasons to be discussed in the following sections. For example, reporting on part of the *Impact of Policy* project, Edward *et al.* (2007, p. 160) discuss the deleterious effects of packaged *Skills for Life* materials on the creativity of new teachers, noting the concerns of experienced practitioners about ‘the extent to which some new tutors relied upon these materials, almost as a substitute for pedagogy, simply handing out workbooks to learners, instead of using the *Skills for Life* materials creatively or designing their own imaginative learning materials to meet the needs of their group’.

Before discussing further how the current FE environment affects the implementation of creative teaching and learning, the following sections describe in detail the development and current circumstances of the sector.

### **The development of further education**

This section examines how further education in England developed in the period between the end of the Second World War, when a nationwide, although not national, system of FE was first created, and the introduction of a centralised national system in the early 1990s. Our aim is to help the reader unfamiliar with FE to understand the background to the current situation and its implications for creative teaching and learning in FE.

Although FE has its roots in the later stages of the industrial revolution, it was not until the 1944 Education Act that it was given coherent attention by central government (Barnett, 1986; Lucas, 2004, p. 4). For almost 50 years thereafter, responsibility for FE in England lay with local education authorities (LEAs). In spite of a marked expansion following the Labour election victory in 1945 (Lucas, 2004, p. 14), FE had a particularly low political and public profile, well deserving its later description as the ‘Cinderella’ of the education sector. The level of provision required by the 1944 Act was open to interpretation by individual LEAs and

consequently there were marked regional variations in the extent, funding and quality of post-compulsory education (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Lucas, 2004, p. 36).

The low profile of FE in those years can be at least partly explained by a peculiar history that was predominantly working class yet, paradoxically, also somewhat elitist. FE has always focused mainly on practical and technical skills and knowledge for the workplace, but until relatively recently the majority of FE students and teachers were drawn from a predominantly male working-class elite consisting of skilled manual and technical workers. FE was therefore associated mainly with 'trades' rather than the professions and few policy makers had direct knowledge or experience of colleges. Consequently FE remained, for decades, on the margins of education—lacking the visibility of schools or the prestige of universities (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, p. 2; Allen & Ainley, 2007, p. 52).

Traditionally, FE teachers enjoyed exemplary working conditions which were intended to be generous enough to draw skilled practitioners away from industry and into teaching (Taubman, 2000, p. 83). For their part, FE teachers (collectively at least) exercised a high degree of control over their labour process. Employer support for trade unions, remote collective bargaining and low levels of managerialism combined with a tradition of teacher autonomy to cushion them from an excessive exploitation of their labour (Ainley & Bailey, 1997). Although, as Gleeson and Mardle (1980) highlight, awarding body requirements shaped the culture and practice of FE teachers to some degree, generally they were allowed significant discretion in the scope and emphasis of their work. Such working conditions would seem to provide the high-trust, high-skill relations that, in contemporary discourse, are argued to underpin future economic prosperity.

Despite its attractions for employees, FE under LEA control had a number of weaknesses. It was often inflexible and unresponsive to learners and arguably LEAs prevented colleges from developing the scope and nature of their work (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, pp. 6–7). FE teachers often saw themselves as subject experts or tradesmen first and foremost, lacking a professional identity *as teachers*. The absence of compulsory teacher training for FE arguably reinforced such attitudes and a culture dismissive of innovative teaching was not uncommon (Simmons & Thompson, 2007a). In addition, many colleges tended to overlook the needs of underachieving young people, and poor retention and achievement attracted little financial penalty (Reeves, 1995). Similarly, FE did not always actively engage with minority ethnic groups or mature students (FEU, 1979) and the culture of many colleges was not conducive to the entry or career progression of women staff and students (Simmons & Thompson, 2007b).

Official discourse prior to the incorporation of colleges in 1993 positioned FE as a sector with serious defects and the removal of colleges from LEA control was presented as 'freeing' them from old-fashioned county hall bureaucracy by introducing supposedly more efficient forms of organisation and management modelled upon private enterprise (Allen & Ainley, 2007, p. 66). Although it is tempting to see incorporation as a sharp divide between two separate eras, a growing central government focus upon FE was evident for over a decade before the 1992

Further and Higher Education (F&HE) Act. During the 1980s a variety of inefficiencies and inconsistencies in FE were highlighted (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1985; Audit Commission, 1985), providing an impetus towards marketisation, regulation and the use of performance indicators (Lucas, 2004, pp. 21–23). In response to Britain's relative economic decline and, in particular, growing levels of youth unemployment, agencies such as the Manpower Services Commission drove colleges to broaden their remit. FE came to encompass a variety of pre-vocational courses, 'life skills' provision, general and adult education (Hall, 1994). Responding to political initiatives became the norm as government policy, underwritten by targeted funding, required FE colleges to diversify their mission. By the early 1990s as much as 20% of FE funding came from central government departments and national bodies (Ainley & Corney, 1990).

The F&HE Act restructured the management, funding and organisation of FE—its most obvious measure being the removal of colleges from LEA control and their establishment as corporate bodies, but perhaps more far-reaching was the introduction of performance-related funding in which college income became directly related to the recruitment, retention and achievement of individual students. Despite the rhetoric of freedom that accompanied incorporation, this effectively established a system of centralised state control, reinforced by the establishment of a more stringent national inspection regime. Indeed, to fully understand incorporation it also needs to be seen as part of a broader political and ideological project to restructure and redirect the public sector and to reconfigure it as subservient to the perceived needs of the economy. In this context successive governments have sought to increase central direction, control costs and to engineer quasi-market conditions in order to reproduce conditions similar to that of the private sector (Simmons & Thompson, 2007a, p. 174).

The early years of incorporation were characterised by malaise and disarray, largely resulting from centrally-imposed funding reductions in a search for greater 'efficiency'. Combined with quasi-market competition and new management structures often imbued with a 'business ethos', this created profound deficiencies: high staff turnover and a demoralised, highly casualised workforce (Burchill, 2001); relatively high levels of industrial action; and major weaknesses in pedagogy in some colleges (FEFC, 1999). As a result, New Labour inherited a sector in crisis when it came to power (Robson, 1998).

### **New Labour and further education**

New Labour policy towards FE is shaped by a central image of learning as the formal acquisition of economically useful knowledge and skills (Finlay *et al.*, 2007). Since the Labour election victory in 1997 there has been an almost never-ending succession of reports, initiatives and legislation aimed at directing the expansion and development of the 'learning and skills sector' (which includes, as well as FE, workplace and community learning) in line with this image. However, although there has been greatly increased funding and a higher profile for the sector, the

quasi-market conditions established at the time of incorporation have been retained, albeit controlled by higher levels of surveillance and ever tighter performance management (Coffield, 2006). As a result many of the inherent contradictions produced under Conservative governments remain (Williams, 2003, p. 314).

Finlay *et al.* (2007, p. 141) discuss the complex layers of meaning that may be discerned within New Labour policy towards FE. On the one hand, government discourse based on the individual learner may be seen as 'a manifestation of a progressive movement in education with a focus on learning not normally associated with education (e.g. the workplace) and on student-centredness'. At the same time, however, the virtual disappearance of the term 'education' and its replacement by 'learning and skills' is representative of the way in which New Labour 'is continuing the modernization project [of] Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997, which deliberately sought to remove power and influence from education professionals and concentrate it in the hands of central government' (p. 141). They also suggest that New Labour discourse can be seen as a 'rebranding' of the education system, which is seen as compromised by its association with poor economic performance, and a consequent transfer of responsibility for learning from the state to the individual. The discourse of central control under New Labour emphasises the perceived deficiencies of FE, particularly its 'failure' to develop the human and social capital deemed necessary for economic competitiveness and prosperity (Avis, 1999, 2003, 2007; Foster, 2005; DfES, 2006). Although this theme dominates the Government's education policy in general, it is particularly sharp in the case of FE and is perhaps most clearly expressed in the 2006 *Further Education and Training Bill*.

Coffield (2006, p. 13) argues that teachers are enmeshed in a growing culture of accountability whose measures are ever more stretching, numerous and robust. FE is a prime example of the excessive regulatory regimes that have been imposed upon public services by New Labour. In just one instance, the Learning and Skills Council's (2006) *Framework for Excellence* proposes 27 new 'performance indicators' for colleges. More generally, the extension of the Office for Standards in Education's remit to FE, requirements for comprehensive self-assessment and an increasingly complex landscape of agencies to measure and police college activity are characteristic of the present Government's approach to the sector (Coffield, 2006). Through such measures, performativity becomes embodied in a regime of truth that denies legitimacy to alternative forms of 'good practice' (Avis, 2005, p. 211). However, the irony is that the very countries whose higher productivity we seek to emulate lack such complex mechanisms of accountability and levels of central control (Foster, 2005, p. 97). Education in Scotland and Wales, let alone Scandinavia, the Netherlands or the USA, has notably less state intervention than in England (Coffield, 2006, p. 15).

At the curriculum level in FE, some of the real cost to creativity of the performative approach to education becomes evident. The view of learning embodied in New Labour's image of education is based on the individual development of behavioural competence, largely by transmission in formal situations

(Finlay *et al.*, 2007). There is little recognition of the social aspects of learning, and constructivist or situated learning models are effectively ignored, despite their appropriateness for the development of creative teaching and learning. Hodkinson and James (2003, p. 401), reporting on interim findings from the *Transforming Learning Cultures* project, note how learning in FE appears to be strongly culture and context dependent: 'what works, or is deemed good practice in one learning site may not work or be good practice in another'. Nationally applied practice guidelines, unless flexibly applied, would appear to conflict with such findings and operate to reduce the effectiveness of curriculum initiatives.

### **The FE curriculum**

Young (1971, p. 14) argues that the selection and organisation of the curriculum needs to be located in the wider social structure, and although the FE curriculum is complex and varied it is possible to identify two trends in its direction. Firstly, it has been driven downwards. Over the past two decades FE has played a major part in expanding post-compulsory education, driven by policies to widen participation and increase social inclusion alongside the collapse of the labour market for many younger workers. However, as school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and universities have absorbed the majority of the expansion from the higher social classes, the remit of FE has been adjusted downwards. Reversing the 'academic drift' of the 1970s and 1980s, colleges have been driven away from higher-level and academic work (Hyland & Merrill, 2003). FE has increasingly been encouraged to focus its curriculum offer on 'skills development' (Foster, 2005, p. 15). Much of the remaining higher-level work is now based around prescriptive and low-status foundation degrees.

FE now contains significant numbers of unskilled, unemployed and otherwise socially disadvantaged students rather than its previous intake of the 'aristocracy of the working class'. Thus, as it increasingly caters for lower social strata, it is unsurprising that FE is funded less favourably than other forms of education (Frankel & Reeves, 1996, p. 54). Such conflicts and dichotomies are not new, but marketised post-compulsory education has increased institutional polarisation and adds impetus to a class-based analysis of education in England. As colleges close courses deemed not relevant to 'employability', FE is increasingly positioned as the residue left over after the extraction of other more dominant curricula (Frankel & Reeves, 1996, p. 4; Coffield, 2006, p. 5).

Secondly, the FE curriculum has become increasingly centrally controlled, prescribed and codified. This is perhaps best illustrated by competence-based, occupationally orientated courses such as National Vocational Qualifications, but is also evident in pre-vocational and academic courses as well as specific areas such as FE teacher education (Simmons & Thompson, 2007a). The tradition of teachers interpreting a broad syllabus, with freedom to determine course content and methods, has been significantly curtailed (Reeves, 1995, pp. 74–76). Hyland (1994) criticises such qualifications as narrow, instrumental and lacking in underpinning knowledge. Thus whilst high-status courses and the creation of knowledge are

located in more prestigious institutions, the FE curriculum can be seen to reflect the production of obedience and conformity in the 'lower orders' that is also a significant tradition in English education (Lawton, 1975).

All this should make us deeply suspicious of some of the claims made for the benefits of creativity in the context of FE. Anyon (1980) has shown how education operates as a preparation for a specific position within capitalist systems of production. By studying a range of institutions catering for different social strata, she demonstrated that working-class children were given work that reflected the routine, mechanical nature of their likely roles in the future, while children from professional and elite classes undertook tasks relating to the knowledge-based or higher managerial work for which they were destined. From a more theoretical point of view, Bourdieu (1976) makes a similar claim in terms of the inevitable curricular bias that operates as a consequence of the differential access to the cultural capital required to make sense of educational activities. Curriculum 'dimensions' such as creativity, therefore, will not necessarily operate in uniform ways across different educational institutions, and are likely to be operationalised differently in the largely working-class environment of further education than in other, more socially varied sites of learning.

With classroom teachers now subject to multiple layers of internal and external observation, inspection and verification, it is difficult to argue that space for meaningful creativity is encouraged or fostered in contemporary FE. The following section takes up this theme and demonstrates how the impact of current FE structures plays out in the creative lives of teachers.

### **Operationalising creativity in further education**

Avis (1999, p. 251) summarises research on the circumstances of FE teachers since incorporation, highlighting: an intensification and expansion of their labour; a loss of autonomy and control over their work; far higher levels of surveillance; an increased number and range of non-teaching duties; the perceived marginalisation of teaching; and stress upon measurable performance indicators. There is extensive evidence for the intensification of labour and, despite some individual differences in the labour process, teachers are under high levels of pressure and are overburdened with excessive workloads. The reality of daily life for FE teachers is a heavy timetable of conventional classroom teaching accompanied by onerous administrative burdens, leading, for many, to the adoption of an instrumental, minimalist approach to practice (Avis *et al.*, 2001, p. 76). More recently, these findings are supported by the extensive research projects reported by Hodkinson and James (2003) and Edward and Coffield (2007).

Avis (2005, pp. 212–213) believes that performativity, with its blame culture, sits with a low-trust model of work relations in which workers are surveilled and held accountable to systems and targets. As such it runs contrary to the supposed needs of the knowledge economy with its emphasis upon high-trust relations and the development of human, intellectual and social capital. Therefore it can be argued that the impact of performance management upon teachers is to stifle innovation and to encourage deeply conservative practices. Similarly, Gleeson and Husbands

(2003) argue that a performance culture based upon accountability runs contrary to the development of creativity.

Using a case study approach to explore the work of newly appointed FE teachers in England, Eastwood and Ormondroyd (2007) found deep tensions and conflicts between the desire for creativity and the organisational environment prevalent in FE. Focusing upon three themes—creativity in teacher practices; creativity in curriculum planning; and creativity in student learning and capability—they reported that opportunities for both teachers and students to work creatively were seriously restricted. In examining teacher practices it was found that, whilst new practitioners are initially keen and motivated by their initial training in wishing to implement a range of imaginative and active practices in the classroom, the conditions in which they are employed and the expectations placed upon them militate against this.

Heavy workloads, scant resources and a culture of anxiety produced by hierarchical organisational ethos were found to thwart creativity. New practitioners were pushed away from their preferred teaching style towards more didactic approaches as a pragmatic survival strategy. Furthermore, Eastwood and Ormondroyd found that attempts to develop the curriculum and to exercise professional autonomy were significantly limited and curtailed by external verifiers requiring close adherence to standardised approaches. The main form of ‘creativity’ required was for a new teacher to find a ‘fast track’ solution to course delivery—to run a course on fewer teaching hours as a result of low student recruitment. This perhaps exemplifies the dubious use of discourses of creativity that Marshall (2001) argues are often found in education in the UK.

The same research highlights that students earmarked by the teacher as demonstrating high levels of creativity in their approach to study—which Eastwood and Ormondroyd (2007, pp. 5–6) identify as ‘imagination’, the ability to make unusual connections, the generation of original ideas and the combining of ideas—were also identified as the least likely to succeed. These students were reported as having difficulty in meeting deadlines, in meeting course outcomes and satisfying the demands of the examination board. Alongside the constraints of organisational restrictions and the requirements of inspection regimes, it was also found that assessment strategies inhibit student creativity. Such findings are particularly sobering as the area in which Eastwood and Ormondroyd’s study was carried out (media studies) is arguably representative of the creative, high-skills employment for which FE teachers are supposedly tasked with preparing students. The harsh reality of FE reveals a paucity of opportunities for creativity for either teachers or students. Those opportunities that do exist are likely to be squeezed and distorted beyond any meaningful conception by the layers of managerialism and performativity that characterise contemporary FE.

A further obstacle to creativity in FE is provided by its tendency in some curriculum areas to act as a site of social reproduction rather than as a transforming agent. Colley *et al.* (2003), in an empirical study of vocational courses for nursery nursing, health and engineering students, show how the dispositions and behaviour of a largely working-class cohort are moulded and circumscribed by a strongly embedded

vocational culture. They describe how a ‘vocational habitus’ emerges through an acculturation process in which tutors, students and employers are closely involved in reproducing class and gender relations that are largely unchallenged. One may question whether, in these circumstances, creative teaching and learning may not simply contribute to the more effective reproduction of such relations. Indeed, as Colley *et al.* (2003, p. 490) point out in a report of findings from the TLC project:

Tutors are likely to be immersed in the vocational culture themselves ... it may be hard for them to perceive—let alone implement—opportunities for change. Where tutors have sought to transform the learning culture, this has sometimes depended on changing themselves, rather than altering technical aspects of pedagogy or curriculum.

Whether such personal transformation is likely in the prevailing conditions of FE is questionable. Arguably, these have resulted in the technical and ideological proletarianisation of teachers (Randle & Brady, 1997a, b). Whilst others are more equivocal (Gleeson *et al.*, 2005), it would be fair to say that FE teachers are now closely monitored and directed by performative mechanisms. Using Brown and Lauder’s (1992) typology, the environment in which FE now operates reflects Fordist *modus operandi* under which colleges are controlled by bureaucratic, hierarchical structures and compete in mass production, standardised markets via full capacity utilisation and cost restraint. Furthermore, the fragmentation and standardisation of work tasks, via the use of ‘quality systems’, uniform lesson plans, schemes of work and learning materials, are indicative of the high levels of codification characteristic of Fordist work relations. Although, as we have seen, the strengths and weaknesses of ‘old’ FE are debatable, it seems clear that the levels of autonomy and discretion that traditionally characterised practice in college classrooms and workshops have been significantly curtailed.

In stark contrast, the dominant discourse that now pervades FE resonates with industrial and mechanical metaphor more likely to reflect than to challenge vocational habitus: the curriculum is delivered, targets set, benchmarks made, and tools applied (Coffield, 2006, pp. 14–15). There is little evidence of the flatter, flexible organisation structures, competition through innovation and high-trust, high-discretion work relations that Brown and Lauder argue to be characteristic of post-Fordist work relations. In addition, although some argue that the overtly aggressive forms of macho-management frequently found in colleges during the early years of incorporation have subsided (Cole, 2000; Deem *et al.*, 2000; Hughes, 2000), there are still notable recent examples of such practices. FE teachers continue to labour under pressured and sometimes unreasonable circumstances. The forms of creativity that are able to flourish under such regimes are most likely to be in finding ways of coping and complying with the rigours of performative demands rather than in developing approaches conducive to enhancing teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

Creativity currently represents disputed territory within education. Whilst official discourse in England promotes creativity as central to social and economic well-being

and exhorts teachers to engage in exciting and innovative practice, central government intervention increasingly attempts to impose performative measures which seek to prescribe, direct and control teaching and learning. This article has outlined how such contradictions and conflicts are played out in the case of further education. It is argued that the effects of performativity are felt particularly sharply in FE. Driven by an ideological position that has almost entirely replaced economic policy with a focus upon education that is disproportionate and unrealistic in relation to its contribution to economic competitiveness (Keep, 2006; Avis, 2007), FE has become redefined in an almost purely utilitarian and instrumental form.

The shifting of colleges away from their traditional location on the margins of English education has taken place within a culture of discipline and a discourse of deficit. Recent years have seen successive waves of state intervention whereby FE has, in marked contrast to official discourse, been driven downwards. FE now caters for large numbers of socially disadvantaged students; its curriculum has become mechanised, centrally controlled and codified; and FE teachers labour under heavy workloads, close surveillance and multiple performative measures. We have argued that under such regimes meaningful conceptions of creativity are unlikely to flourish. Despite its supposed remit in feeding the knowledge economy, there is strong evidence to suggest that the environment now found in England's FE colleges is unlikely to foster creativity in its teachers or students. Those most able to engage in creative practice are likely to be those with the intellectual and cultural capital necessary to access learning opportunities in sectors of education inhabited by higher social classes. In contrast to the situation found in FE, teachers and learners in elite institutions are those that in reality are able to enjoy the autonomy and culture conducive to creativity.

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## CREATIVITY, KNOWLEDGE AND CURRICULUM IN FURTHER EDUCATION: A BERNSTEINIAN PERSPECTIVE

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*ABSTRACT: This paper draws on the work of Basil Bernstein to offer a (re-) conceptualisation of creativity for the English further education (FE) sector. It begins by locating creativity within the political economy of FE and argues that teaching and learning is constrained by an instrumental remit for the sector, which prioritises perceived economic needs over broader conceptions of education and training. The paper goes on to analyse the FE curriculum, relating Bernstein's work on generic modes to critiques of competence. It proposes a central role for knowledge and broad conceptions of skill in FE in order to contest an instrumental approach to teaching and learning arising from official discourse on competitiveness. The paper uses Bernstein's typology of vertical and horizontal discourse to argue that creativity needs to be re-defined in a way that recognises the value of principled, conceptual knowledge in vocational education whilst acknowledging the socially constructed nature of creativity and knowledge.*

*Keywords: creativity, further education, Bernstein*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The educational discourse of creativity contains diverse but intersecting narratives, with rhetorics of individual empowerment, social cohesion and economic benefit competing for attention in all phases of education. More accurately, perhaps, we can think of creativity as evoking a series of discourses, each with its own particular understandings of the social world and each partly responsible for the current fashionable status of creativity in the UK and elsewhere. This paper argues that, for English further education (FE), creativity can be little more than a fashion unless fundamental issues of curriculum, knowledge and skill are addressed.

A discourse is much more than a matter of the words used to express ideas; it structures our understanding and governs the paths of action which appear to be open to us (Levitas, 2005). The projection of a specific discourse of creativity, whether by the state or within educational communities, is therefore overshadowed and subsumed by more powerful discourses characteristic of western neo-liberal democracy. Such discourses, as applied by successive UK governments, have had significant consequences for the FE system, to the extent that any account of creativity must be situated within an understanding of its general condition, and of the FE curriculum in particular (Simmons and Thompson, 2008).

The paper begins by placing creativity within its current policy context and explores the supposed relationship between FE and economic success, highlighting tensions between the ‘condition’ of FE and possibilities for creativity. Following recent work by Michael Young, which makes a powerful argument for the central place of knowledge in curriculum theory, the paper focuses upon conceptions of knowledge and skill within FE and their implications for creativity in teaching and learning. It argues that the role and status of knowledge in FE is being eroded and draws on the work of Basil Bernstein to analyse the nature and implications of these shifts in the FE curriculum. The paper suggests that, by decoupling atomised ‘skills’ from holistic conceptions of skill which value knowledge, the FE curriculum not only limits the scope for creativity but is also implicated more broadly in maintaining and exacerbating social divisions. The final section discusses the implications of this framework for developing approaches to creative teaching and learning in FE.

## 2. CREATIVITY, COMPETITIVENESS AND FURTHER EDUCATION

To understand the attractiveness of creativity to policy makers, it is first necessary to examine the position of education in the New Labour project more generally. Broadly, education has been assigned the dual role of driving economic competitiveness and increasing social justice – a task in which individual and social well-being and the needs of the economy are conflated and assumed to be coincidental (Avis, 2007). The 1998 Green Paper *The Learning Age* set the tone for much of New Labour’s education policy:

Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. (DfEE, 1998, p. 1)

Such assertions have become commonplace – indeed, New Labour discourse argues that all social formations, but especially education, must conform to the new economic stringencies of globalisation.

The roots of the current emphasis upon creativity in education policy lie, at least in part, in what Buckingham and Jones (2001) describe as the ‘cultural turn’ of the first New Labour government. Since the late 1990s it is possible to trace a growing trend which champions creative and cultural education whilst placing it within a discourse of economic competitiveness and the needs of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Jones, 2003, pp. 164–166). Within this discourse, creativity is identified as a key disposition for learners operating in the knowledge economy. As Jones (2003, p. 166) points out, the cultural turn rehabilitated creativity under the sign of capital, dissociating it from earlier Conservative views which equated creative learning with progressivism and a lack of commitment to standards.

A concern with the economic benefits of creativity continues to permeate Government rhetoric. The discussion paper *Realising Britain's Potential* (Cabinet Office, 2008) highlights a number of key challenges facing the nation. Whilst claiming prosperity and social justice to be the Government's central priorities, it warns that, due to the forces of globalisation, the UK faces challenges ‘unique to this generation’ and that ‘no country can take its place in the world or its prospects for granted’. The document emphasises the need for creative and innovative responses in education and training (Cabinet Office, 2008, pp. 3–4).

The remainder of *Realising Britain's Potential* develops these themes. A central concern is the threat posed to the UK by ‘emerging’ economies in an increasingly global marketplace. There is an implicit assumption that much of the world's manufacturing base will become concentrated in such low cost locations. These movements should not be resisted but should be used as a stimulus to develop new skills and a dynamic economy. Failure to respond creatively to these demands, it is argued, will lead inevitably to long-term economic decline. The UK's response should lie in ‘value-added’ goods and services (Cabinet Office, 2008, pp. 45–46) – of which ‘creative’ industries such as television, film and music, advertising and publishing are emblematic. However, although high-skill employment is evident in some sectors, this is not the case for the majority of workers in the UK; in fact, the demand for high level knowledge and skills is significantly overstated, with a high proportion of jobs located in highly competitive, labour intensive and predominantly localised parts of the service sector (Avis, 2007). Arguably, the discourse of creativity can be seen as one

way to legitimate ‘the myth of the knowledge economy’ (Coffield, 2000, p. 241) in the face of this reality.

Creativity in education is commonly taken to include both creative teaching – defined as ‘using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective’ (NACCCE, 1999) – and teaching to develop the creativity of learners. However, as we have seen, much official discourse on the development of creativity is concerned with instrumental justifications based on supposed economic and social need, rather than with reaching a Durkheimian ‘profound condition’ of the self. Similarly, creative teaching can be seen instrumentally, as a way of making palatable a narrow and dull curriculum (Hall and Thomson, 2007, p. 319). In order to move beyond this position, it is necessary to consider *exactly what it is that will be taught and learned creatively*, and the resulting discourse and practices in which learners will be encouraged to be creative. As Young (2008, p. 31) argues, ‘knowledge is precisely the central category that is missing from debates about the knowledge society and its educational implications’. This paper uses Bernstein’s work on knowledge structures to conceptualise creativities for FE which contest the instrumental focus currently directing the sector. However, to understand the applicability of Bernstein’s ideas to FE it is first necessary to consider the recent history and current circumstances of the sector.

Education systems are not just an expression of economic need, but are also a reflection of a country’s broader culture and values; in England, vocational education has always been regarded as inferior to liberal, academic learning (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p. 4). What goes unspoken is that, to many, FE colleges are something better suited to ‘other people’s children’ (Richardson, 2007). Nevertheless, New Labour rhetoric continually reiterates the potential contribution of FE to economic success. Documents such as the Leitch Report (2006) promote the notion that, above all else, high skills are vital to economic competitiveness. Such beliefs underpin the present Government’s intensive focus upon FE – a sector which Keep (2006) describes as the most highly regulated and centrally directed education system in the world.

Although state control of FE had been increasing since the early 1980s, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act was a pivotal event in the history of FE – removing colleges from local education authority (LEA) control in a process known as ‘incorporation’ and leading to a quasi-market system of FE with centralised direction by the state (Beale, 2004). The consequences of these changes have been profound. Incorporation brought increased financial restraint,

formula-based funding and a culture based upon performativity – Burchill (1998) argues that, in the first five years after incorporation, FE was placed under greater pressure than any other part of the public sector.

Since 2001, spending upon FE has been significantly increased; however, many of the competitive forces introduced by incorporation have been retained (Foster, 2005). In addition, the Government has become increasingly directive and interventionist, with wave upon wave of regulation and ‘reform’ in recent years – not always with beneficial effects. Two major projects funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme report on the threat to learning quality posed by managerialism and ‘endless change’ in the sector, and cast doubt on the ability of FE staff to compensate for the effects of these pressures (Edward *et al.*, 2007; James and Biesta, 2007).

### 3. THE FURTHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Incorporation, together with its associated funding regime, drove colleges to embrace new areas of work and new constituencies of students (Ainley and Bailey, 1997). However, economic change had stimulated engagement with ‘non-traditional’ students much earlier than this. From the mid-1970s, colleges were forced to come to terms with growing levels of unemployment and the accelerating decline of many of Britain’s traditional industries. Consequently, high proportions of unskilled, unemployed and socially disadvantaged students replaced the young employed workers that previously dominated FE. The 1980s saw the increasing intervention of a central agency, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), in funding and directing the work of colleges; by the early 1990s as much as 20 per cent of FE funding came directly from government agencies (Ainley and Corney, 1990).

Reflecting these changes, the FE curriculum has also been transformed. One clearly identifiable shift has been in relation to the changing nature of competence in the curriculum. As Jones and Moore (1995, p. 81) point out, there are a number of understandings of ‘competence’ which carry very different theoretical, methodological and practical applications; Gonczi’s (1994) typology provides a useful framework to help understand these issues. He identifies three different models of competence: behaviourist, generic and holistic. It is possible to detect elements of each of these models in FE but, as will be explained, recent trends have increasingly driven the curriculum towards behaviourist and generic modes of competence at the expense of a holistic approach.

Although deficient in many ways, the craft-based and professional training courses that traditionally dominated the FE curriculum reflected a holistic mode of competence. Vocational education and training programmes aimed to combine the acquisition of skills with knowledge, values and ethics as elements of competent performance. In this mode, competence is seen as related to context and can be located in social relations and cultures of practice (Gonczi, 1994, p. 30). Such a model aspires to provide workers with the opportunity for informed critical reflection upon individual and collective practices: ideally, the accounting technician can relate her role to company strategy, economic policy and the wider political environment; the trainee electrician can contextualise his work, not only in relation to other construction practices, but also through a broader understanding, for example, of architecture and the built environment.

Such an approach can be seen as part of the liberal educational, technical and craft traditions that formerly dominated FE (Jones and Moore, 1995, p. 86). However, against a background of radical labour market change, from the 1980s onwards the FE curriculum has been reshaped to reflect alternative models of competence. Central to this has been the role of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and its 'functional analysis' model of competence, deriving from behaviourism. In this approach, competence is conceived in terms of discrete behaviours. By breaking down an occupation into atomic, observable tasks, competence is supposedly rendered transparent and debate about what constitutes satisfactory performance is eliminated.

Even creativity has been subject to this type of analysis. Leigh (1993) outlines practitioner views on the feasibility of capturing creative behaviours which characterise certain occupations and raises the question 'Is functional analysis capable of describing creativity?' In his model, creativity is conceptualised in somewhat limited terms as the production of something 'new', whether totally original or as a novel combination of existing components. Leigh suggests that, with this definition, elements of competence for creative behaviours can be derived in a straightforward way from existing elements.

The movement towards behavioural competences represents part of a broader policy context in which control of the curriculum has been shifted from educationalists towards the perceived needs of employers. This can be associated with New Right-inspired managerialist initiatives that aimed to displace the liberal professional ethic and culture previously dominant in the public services (Hickox and Moore, 1994, 1995). Such an approach discourages teachers and learners from making connections between tasks and assumes an unproblematic

consensus of definitions and judgement. Jones and Moore (1995, p. 80) argue that, in ignoring professional judgement and the complexity of performance in the social context of the workplace, the NCVQ approach has a theoretical underpinning which is positivist and reductive in nature.

The behavioural codification of learning enables competence to be commodified and facilitates the transfer of control from professionals to managers. Jones and Moore (1993) argue that the behavioural competency movement is essentially to do with the control of expertise. Disaggregation and atomisation of occupational behaviour allows skill to be technicised, regulated and laid open to market values – a process related to what Bernstein (2000, p. 86) calls ‘the divorce of knowledge from the knower’.

Gonczy (1994, pp. 28–29) regards such a model as unsuitable to conceptualising almost any form of work but, in particular, he regards the narrow, atomised behavioural approach to competence as particularly inappropriate to professional occupations. An example of these changes can be seen in the transformation of initial teacher training – beginning with the school sector in the 1990s and extending to the post-compulsory sector from 2001 onwards (Beck, 2002; Simmons and Thompson, 2007). Stripped of the ‘foundation disciplines’ – although it must be admitted that many universities had already dispensed with such luxuries in a quest for ‘relevance’ – these courses find little opportunity to build critical discourse into a curriculum crowded with mechanistic outcomes. As a result, particular notions of behavioural competence are emphasised at the expense of broader forms of skill based upon informed professional knowledge and judgement. As Beck (2002, p. 624) argues, this denies trainee teachers ‘access to alternative discourses ... not by explicit censorship, but by filling the course time available with “essential” (and audited) practice-related content’.

Alongside the rise of behavioural competence models, Gonczy highlights the growing use of a generic approach to competence. In this model competences are thought of as general, transferable attributes divorced from the specific context in which they might be applied; learner disposition and other broad attributes are assumed to be more important than effective performance (Gonczy, 1994, p. 29). This approach underpins a range of pre-vocational and ‘life skills’ programmes now commonly found in FE. For example, courses aimed at preparing the disengaged and socially excluded for the workplace concentrate on attempting to build motivation, improve ‘key skills’ and thereby increase ‘employability’. De-contextualised competences are abstracted from purposeful situations in which

skills can be exercised in a meaningful way. This is despite doubts about the viability of so-called transferable skills and a lack of any convincing evidence to suggest that 'generic' competencies exist at all (Jones and Moore, 1995, p. 80).

Thus, whilst high status courses and the creation of knowledge are located in more prestigious institutions, significant parts of the FE curriculum can be seen to reflect the production of obedience and conformity in the 'lower orders' that is a significant tradition in English education (Lawton, 1975). Bourdieu (1976) proposes that such curricular bias is inevitable in that it operates as a consequence of the differential access to the cultural capital required to make sense of educational activities. He claims that education systems disguise this by a process of misrecognition in which supposed hierarchies inside the system – such as a division between those who are able to benefit from academic study and those who are not – are presented as being responsible for differences in achievement, rather than external hierarchies of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

#### 4. BERNSTEIN, PEDAGOGIC DISCOURSE AND THE FE CURRICULUM

The work of Basil Bernstein provides a conceptual framework for the analysis of pedagogic discourse and, in some aspects, builds on the critique of competence discussed above. In seeking to go beyond approaches (such as reproduction theories) which treat education as a 'relay' for external power relations, Bernstein is concerned largely with the intrinsic features of pedagogic discourse – the distinctive form and structure of what actually goes on in the process of education. This section outlines some elements of Bernstein's framework of particular relevance to the discussion of creativity in FE, including the distinction between vertical and horizontal discourses; differing modes of pedagogic discourse; and pedagogic identities.

There has been a growing interest in these aspects of Bernstein's work in recent years, stimulated by attempts to resolve what Young (2008, p. 28) calls the 'educational dilemma' – either the knowledge embodied in the curriculum is objectively given, or it arises from the competing interests of powerful groups, who legitimate 'their' knowledge and exclude that of others. Thus we are faced with an unwelcome choice between a neo-conservative defence of the traditional curriculum or a position vulnerable to neo-liberal curriculum approaches based on market forces. A possible solution to this dilemma is to accept that, whilst knowledge is indeed socially constructed, it is not *purely* a social construction – that is to say,

knowledge has an intrinsic value in terms of its relationship with the world and ‘the capacity to transcend the social conditions under which it is produced’ (Moore, 2000, p. 32). This social realist position (Young, 2008), in which knowledge is objective but relies on its social origins to provide its objectivity, leads to an interest in how knowledge relates to social and epistemological structures, and in particular to Bernstein’s discussion of knowledge structures.

Bernstein (1999, pp. 157–159) distinguishes between ‘two fundamental forms of discourse’ arising from the dichotomy between school knowledge and everyday, common-sense knowledge, and attempts to provide a language of description leading to greater differentiation between and within these forms. The first, *horizontal discourse*, is embedded in on-going practices and directed towards immediate goals; it may be understood as common-sense knowledge and is ‘likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered, and contradictory across but not within contexts’. The knowledge contained in a horizontal discourse may be transmitted tacitly, within the context of its performance and by means of modelling or showing; both the knowledge to be transmitted and the pedagogy are segmented, applying discontinuously and specifically to different practices.

By contrast, a *vertical discourse*:

takes the form of a coherent, explicit, and systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised, as in the sciences, or it takes the form of a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and specialised criteria for the production and circulation of texts, as in the social sciences and humanities. (Bernstein, 1999, p. 159)

This division of vertical discourses into two categories: *hierarchical knowledge structures* (Bernstein gives physics as an example) and *horizontal knowledge structures* is further elaborated, in the case of horizontal structures, to distinguish between those with strong and weak grammars (referring to the robustness of the conceptual system used to describe and model empirical situations) and between explicit and tacit transmission. Taking the ‘weaker’ alternative at each stage moves the knowledge structure closer to horizontal discourse – Bernstein discusses a traditional craft apprenticeship as an example of a horizontal knowledge structure with weak grammar and tacit transmission, identifying it as the specialised practice nearest to horizontal discourse.

The distinction between vertical and horizontal discourse is closely related to Bernstein’s distinction between *esoteric* and *mundane* knowledge

(analogous to Durkheim's sacred and profane), which he regards as intrinsic to language itself (Bernstein, 2000, pp. 29–30). The horizontal discourse of mundane knowledge is directly and inextricably linked to a material base, providing at once its power in dealing with immediate concrete situations and its limitation in being unable to transcend its specific contextual origins. On the other hand, the vertical discourse of esoteric knowledge has only an indirect relationship with a material base, a relationship mediated by theoretical concepts and general principles. Bernstein calls this 'distance' between a vertical discourse and the 'real world' the *discursive gap*, regarding it not as a weakness of vertical discourse but as a strength – the discursive gap is where room for manoeuvre occurs, where new concepts and principles can emerge and greater generality be achieved. According to Bernstein, it is 'the crucial site of the *yet to be thought*'. In vertical discourse, the knowledge produced is powerful – perhaps dangerously powerful – and Bernstein argues that, although the line between esoteric and mundane knowledge changes over time and between societies, all societies have distributive arrangements which regulate access to the esoteric (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31).

It is possible to conceptualise some aspects of 'creative teaching' in these terms, in that attempts to make formal learning more accessible or interesting often take the form of making connections between the knowledge to be acquired and the everyday world, either by emphasising its applications or by embedding the acquisition of knowledge within a context that is assumed to appeal to students. For example, a television game show format may be used to enliven the teaching of a particular topic. Bernstein notes that such moves to insert segments of horizontal discourse within formal education 'are likely to be mediated through the distributive rules of the school [and] confined to particular social groups, usually the "less able"' (Bernstein, 1999, p. 169). He points out the problematic nature of this approach, citing evidence that the recognition of elements of vertical discourse as applying to or embedded within segments of horizontal discourse is mediated by social class (Cooper and Dunne, 1998) and that subjects such as Personal, Health and Social Education, which draw heavily on horizontal discourse, may not be recognised by students as realisations of vertical discourse (Whitty *et al.*, 1994).

Within the wider neo-liberal discourse of education as an instrument of economic competitiveness, distributive arrangements operate more generally to regulate access to vertical discourse. Wheelahan (2007) suggests that the current dominance of reductive competence models in vocational training contributes to the exclusion of working class students from the 'powerful knowledge' represented by academic

disciplines. Building on Bernstein's analysis, she argues that students need access to such knowledge for epistemic reasons, because it provides them with a relational understanding that goes beyond specific and isolated examples of content towards the mechanisms for generating new knowledge. According to Wheelahan (2007, p. 648) competence-based training 'fundamentally transforms the nature of knowledge by delocating it from the vertical discourse ... and relocating it closer [to] horizontal discourse'. This denies students access to the systems of meaning present in vertical discourse and makes it difficult for them to select relevant knowledge in unfamiliar contexts or to engage in the critical enquiry made possible by holistic competence models.

The knowledge that is taught and acquired within a school or college 'subject' is by no means identical to the knowledge produced in the discourse from which the subject derives its identity. In Bernstein's terminology, the transformation of the original discourse into school knowledge is regulated by a process of *recontextualisation* which in turn generates a *pedagogic discourse* by means of a principle for 'the circulation and reordering of discourses' which have been selected and sanctioned (by agents such as the state, professional bodies and individual teachers) as appropriate elements of a curriculum. Bernstein distinguishes three particular modes of pedagogic discourse: the *singular* mode represented by traditional academic subjects, strongly insulated from each other; the *regional* mode often encountered in modern higher education and particularly associated with the higher professions; and a *generic* mode of much more recent origin and significantly lower status. This generic mode, which is related to the generic competence of Gonczi's typology, appears to underpin much of the discourse of creativity in education and is discussed here in more detail.

Generic modes originated in FE in the 1980s, linked to the collapse of youth employment and the demise of traditional industries discussed earlier. Bernstein notes that these modes were 'constructed and distributed outside, and independently of, pedagogic recontextualising fields' by organisations such as the Manpower Services Commission, and were explicitly directed towards experiences of work and life – essentially constituting an education for (re-)employability and 'directly linked to instrumentalities of the market' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 55). As Bernstein points out, this movement underpinned the emergence of behavioural, competence-based methodologies and their reductive use of the functional analysis of practice. Young (2008, p. 156) also notes the more recent extension of generic modes to all areas of education, as expressed in notions of key and core skills, thinking

skills and teamwork, and the promotion of the generic mode implicit in government policy since the early 1990s. Generic modes employ horizontal knowledge structures, with specialised languages being used to describe practices abstracted from specific occupations or fields of study on the basis of similarity. Although some of these languages (for example, numeracy) may have a strong grammar and the possibility of more or less explicit pedagogies, the ill-defined nature of many generic practices mean that weak grammars and tacit transmission are more likely, placing generic modes close to horizontal discourse. This is a general expression of the ‘delocation’ noted by Wheelahan (2007) in the case of competence-based training.

Bernstein sees the emergence and spread of generic modes as an expression of a more fundamental assumption, based on the concept of *trainability* – the ability to profit from a continual engagement in ‘the acquisition of generic modes which it is hoped will realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 59). Thus, trainability entails competences being thought of as in Gonczi’s generic mode, as general attributes divorced from the specific context in which they are applied. However, Bernstein argues that ascribing the capacity to continuously re-engage with changing circumstances of work and life to a pedagogically formed trainability is to misrecognise an essentially social process as an individual one. Such a capacity ‘rests upon the construction of a specialised identity ... which is the dynamic interface between individual careers and the social or collective base [and] cannot be constructed by lifting oneself up by one’s shoelaces’ (ibid.). The effect of elevating trainability to become *the* fundamental pedagogic objective is to put a socially empty concept at the heart of education. Furthermore, because generic modes are constructed from relations of similarity between elements of different practices, taking these similar elements from their original social contexts silences their cultural basis, thereby producing and reproducing ‘imaginary concepts of work and life which abstract such experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions and negate the possibilities of understanding and criticism’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 59).

Bernstein sees the promotion of pedagogic identities as a struggle between different social groups to promote their interests through state policy and practice. The outcome of this struggle is that a particular bias or focus is ‘projected’ by the state with the intention that it should become embodied in teachers and students, constructing ‘a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 65). It will be clear from the earlier discussion of education and economic

competitiveness that New Labour discourse projects what Bernstein calls *prospective* pedagogic identities. Prospective identities are intended to deal with cultural, economic and technological change and are constructed by selective recontextualising of features of the past to defend or raise economic performance (Bernstein, 2000, p. 67). In particular, the adoption of creativity as an accommodation between education and business involved a re-contextualisation of older views of creativity as part of ‘progressive’ education and presented it in a way which ‘synthesized and transvalued elements from the past, rehabilitating “creativity” under the sign of capital’ (Jones, 2003, p. 166).

According to Bernstein (2000, p. xxi), the transmission of school knowledge is based on a distributive principle whereby different knowledges and their possibilities are made available to different social groups. He discusses the distributive implications of projected identities based on neo-liberal market philosophies, with élite institutions being relatively immune whilst others must continually adapt their discursive organisation to the projected identity and take advantage of changing market contingencies. We might therefore expect a stratification of institutions at all levels, with singular or regionalised modes predominating in the élite and generic modes carrying greater weight in less prestigious institutions.

Where established academic subjects and professions are concerned, projected identities must compete with strong introspective identities that are resistant to change. However, where generic modes predominate, trainability denotes ‘a vacant space waiting to be filled with whatever temporary contents market, or institutional, or governmental imperatives may dictate’ (Beck, 2006, p. 193). This is particularly evident in the Leitch Report, which embraces trainability and recommends a system of further education and training with a strengthened employer voice; a system that is ‘fully demand-led and focused on economically valuable skills’ (Leitch, 2006, p. 71) – in other words, a system for those whose social and cultural capital is insufficient to permit access to the less instrumental regions of education.

##### 5. TOWARDS A RE-CONCEPTUALISATION OF CREATIVITY FOR FE

The framework outlined in the previous section throws into stark relief some of the problems implicit in applying the discourse of creativity to English FE. First, the association of creativity with the prospective identities of flexibility and economically valuable skills projected by central government locates it in an essentially instrumental

agenda which is likely to be as volatile as any other aspect of genericism – although strategic compliance with this agenda may generate funding for initiatives connected with creativity, ‘instrumentalities of the market’ may prevent any benefits obtained from being more than temporary. Second, the effect of generic modes in de-locating performances from their original context and rendering them socially empty may lead to a mis-representation of creativity as divorced from any social, cultural or political context; the strong focus on individualised dispositional features in the literature on creativity – particularly the more practical literature aimed at teachers – is an illustration of this. As Gibson (2005, p. 161) notes, in spite of widespread agreement in other fields that the nature of individual identity needs to be defined in terms of social and cultural practices, the dominance of individualistic conceptions in the field of creativity has divorced it from the worlds of politics, society and history. Third, the decline or weakening of vertical discourse in FE, characterised by the increasing insertion of generic modes and the use of segments of horizontal discourse in attempts to facilitate access to vertical discourse, creates distributive problems related to social class, gender and ethnicity.

Rather than simply accept the depressing consequences of such an analysis, it is possible to discern an alternative approach to conceptualising creativity within the Bernsteinian framework discussed above. As Young (2008, p. 31) argues, ‘knowledge is precisely the central category that is missing from debates about the knowledge society and its educational implications’, and knowledge can be seen as central to creativity. If, as Bernstein claims, the discursive gap inherent in vertical discourse can become ‘a site for alternative possibilities, for alternative realisations of the relation between the material and the immaterial’ and ‘the site for the unthinkable, the site of the impossible ... the crucial site of the *yet to be thought*’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 30), then access to vertical discourse becomes a *precondition* of creativity. The essentially reactive official identities currently projected in FE, and the continued penetration of generic modes, cannot fulfil this condition – either because they intentionally replace knowledge with reductive forms of competence, or through the process of displacement noted in teacher education by Beck (2002).

These considerations suggest that it is important to establish an *epistemological discourse* of creativity based upon a social realist conception of knowledge. Such a discourse would privilege critical enquiry into the conditions for the production of knowledge within a particular vertical discourse and for its subsequent acceptance *as* knowledge. As a consequence of its social realist basis, this type of discourse would

combine questions about the *emergent* properties of knowledge – the ability of new concepts, knowledge and procedures to account for and control a world ‘out there’ (Moore, 2000, p. 32) – with questions about how such conceptual frameworks are produced and legitimated within social practices. In this way, the holistic mode of competence discussed earlier in relation to the liberal educational and craft traditions of FE is brought back into play. This approach shifts the focus of debates on creativity away from issues of definition – of approving certain types of activity as ‘creative’ (or not) – and towards the contribution specific generative activities make to the social practices in which they are embedded.

Although not primarily concerned with enumerating different categories of creative activity, an epistemological discourse integrates quite naturally several of the ten forms of creativity within the typology constructed by Bleakley (2004). For example, Bleakley’s ‘problem stating’, ‘originality’ and ‘serendipity’ can be seen as part of a logic of discovery within vertical discourse, possibly leading to paradigm change, whilst ‘problem solving’ and ‘ordering’ might relate to the development of knowledge structures within an accepted paradigm. Bleakley (p. 469) raises the interesting point that a transgressive tradition of creativity is well-established in the sciences as well as the arts, and this type of tradition can also be viewed in epistemological terms as relating to a process of paradigm change.

In Bernsteinian terms, one might look for creativity in the development of new, stronger grammars which enable greater vertical integration of knowledge, or in the addition of new specialised languages which extend horizontal knowledge structures – extraordinary examples related to ‘élite’ creativity. More commonly, one might find the application of vertical discourse in new or unfamiliar situations: less exciting examples of the democratic, ‘everyday’ creativity valued in much educational discourse (for example, see NACCCE, 1999). Whatever creativity is identified, however, is found located in a specific epistemological context and must draw its validity from the social practices legitimating the knowledge on which it depends.

As we have seen, Bernstein argues that abstracting certain generic performances from their location in practice ‘negate[s] the possibilities of understanding and criticism’. If creativity in particular is a social construction, dependent on judgements made within a specific community or field, questions arise concerning the credentials and power of the authorities involved. A discourse of creativity based on a social realist account of knowledge relocates creative activity within the social and cultural contexts in which it is encountered. It connects specifically with the validity of knowledge produced or used within

the creative activity – ‘how communities construct, challenge and modify knowledge, and how they are challenged from within and from without’ (Young, 2000, p. 528), as well as more broadly with judgements of value. This helps to answer the criticisms of Gibson (2005, p. 164) and of Craft (2006, p. 340), that much of the literature on creativity neglects the issue of culture value and leaves issues of authority and justice uncontested.

This paper has discussed how opportunities to access and critique vertical discourse can enhance the creativity of students. Bernstein (2000, pp. xx–xxi) and Wheelahan (2007) highlight wider issues of social justice and epistemic benefit, and argue for greater equality of access to such ‘powerful knowledge’. A significant challenge for creative *teaching* in FE, therefore, is how to enable students to engage with vertical discourse within a climate increasingly focused on instrumental outputs and in which curriculum change is more likely to exacerbate than reverse the relocation of vocational knowledge ever closer to horizontal discourse. As Wheelahan (2007) notes, identifying the importance of vertical discourse says nothing about the way in which vocational students should be taught disciplinary knowledge; however, it is crucial that such issues are tackled if the elitism and inequality associated with such discourse in the past are to be contested.

No ‘packaged’ solution to this problem is ever likely to be available – as Hodkinson and James (2003, p. 401) report, learning in FE appears to be strongly culture and context dependent: ‘what works, or is deemed good practice in one learning site may not work or be good practice in another’. Creative teaching – based on the ingenuity, imagination and resourcefulness of teachers – is needed to find contextually valid solutions to the difficult problem of access to knowledge and to handle the delicate issues involved in a socially and epistemologically aware engagement with creativity.

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