Partnership as cultural practice in the face of neoliberal reform.

This is a pre-review draft of an article:

This article examines the nature of an on-going educational partnership between a Higher Education institution (HEI) and a number of Further Education (FE) colleges in the West Midlands region of England, forged against the backdrop of sectoral marketisation and neoliberal reform. The partnership originates in the organisation and administration of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses for FE student teachers across a range of sites. These collaborative ITE programmes prepare students to teach in FE settings and conceptualise the FE teacher as a critically informed practitioner, equipped to engage with research and knowledge production practices in the sector. The permeable grouping of teacher educators that has emerged identifies itself as a 'community of practice' and uses this concept in the development of a pattern of cultural interaction that scaffolds the continuing professional development of practitioners across the region. This article outlines the underpinning values of the HE/FE partnership and explores how the partnership has responded to the neoliberal policyscape. Through a number of examples, the authors illustrate how this community seeks to translate shared beliefs into every day practice, not least through a critical and participatory approach to practitioner research activities which challenges the performative practices that have come to dominate FE in England.

Key words: neoliberalism, marketisation, Further Education

Context: funding, instrumentalism and cultures of fear

This article takes as a starting point Harvey's definition of neoliberalism as being:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong property rights, free markets and free trade. (Harvey 2005, p. 2)

This quotation resonates powerfully with the tensions experienced by teacher educators in the partnership this article focuses on (see, for example, Garbett, Orrocks and Smith 2013; Literacy Study group 2010; Smith and O'Leary 2013 and Gleeson, Hughes, O'Leary and Smith (forthcoming, 2015). More broadly entrepreneurialism has been identified as shaping the incorporated identities of FE colleges in England (see Sachs 2001) while the 'well-being' of students has taken on a distinct meaning through the widespread acceptance of a discourse around skills as opposed to knowledge (see Brockmann *et al* 2008), employment and the economy. Generally, the marketisation of education in England has been uneven rather than linear but according to Ball (2012), the current context replicates arrangements prior to the 1870 Education Act during which educational provision was overseen by a 'reluctant state'. For Ball, the 'wide range of national and local charitable providers' (p92) created an uneven 'patchwork' presaging the *mélange* of free schools, academies, CTCs, grammar schools, private and state schools that has emerged since the Education Reform Act (1988). In his Ball's view, a chief aim of the Coalition government formed in 2010 was to foster still greater diversity in education and to place 'a greater emphasis on consumerism' (p95). In FE colleges, marketisation has brought features with it that strongly influence institutional cultures. In this brief section we outline key aspects of the reforms and the impact of these on college cultures.

For FE, market reforms were legislated for more than two decades ago in the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which incorporated colleges and made them independent of local authority control. The impact of incorporation on FE has been considerable (James and Biesta 2007) and forms part of the history of the gradual dismantling local authority power in education. Incorporation and the centralised model of managing education and

training that it has made possible provides a pointer to the consequences of the more recent policy of the academisation of schools and recent changes to HE funding. In FE, beyond the outward markers of competition: branding, multi-million pound new-builds and mergers, the use of advertisements and logos, other contingent effects are related to a specific model of performance-related funding for colleges that ties funding to students' achievement of qualifications and to their retention. Through the institution of an annual cycle, this model of funding has recast FE. The result is the widespread use of performance metrics, a casualisation of the teaching force (Leathwood 2000), the introduction of mechanisms of accountability requiring all providers to produce market data leading to cultures of management and leadership that have been labelled as New Public Management (NPM) (Lee 2012; Smith and O'Leary 2013; Tolofari 2005).

In addition to this distinctive centralised funding model, within the landscape of marketised education in England, FE is also more vulnerable than other phases to an instrumentalist discourse that links education to employment (e.g. BIS 2011; Foster 2005; Leitch 2006). These policy reports and initiatives provide evidence of the legitimisation of a skills discourse in which the well-being of students is more easily conflated with a focus on regulating the supply of skills and labour for the national economy. The intensification of the neoliberal agenda that this affords is arguably facilitated by the history of FE colleges as specialising in technical and vocational education. Colleges' historical heritage enables governments to assert more confidently the place of FE within neoliberal discourses on skills and global competitiveness.

Another feature of the FE sector that links to funding and instrumentalisation within a neoliberal agenda is the much smaller number of FE colleges (246 in August 2013, AOC 2014) nationally, compared to secondary schools - 3,268 (gov.uk 2014). Typically, an average-sized college has between five and ten thousand students; larger colleges can have more than thirty thousand. The size of the sector makes this branch-line of the "biggest train set in the world" (Keep 2006) more attractive to policy makers seeking rapid and

visible intervention through recourse to a 'policy palette (that) enables different policy effects to be achieved through the use of funding incentives and disincentives' (Smith and O'Leary 2013, p. 245).

A selective overview of policy initiatives that marketisation has made possible since incorporation provides some indication of the enthusiasm of policy makers when handed the controls. Policy innovation around vocational education has been addressed through a string of vocational qualifications e.g. General National Vocational Qualification (1994), Modern Apprenticeships (2001), the 14-19 diploma (2008), Functional Skills (2008), Entry to Employment (2003-2010), Train to Gain (2006). Across the same twenty year period, the balance has swung from incentivising young people's take–up of FE through Individual Learning Accounts (2000) and Education Maintenance Allowances (2004) to moves more recently to make require young people to participate in education or training to the age of 18 (DfES 2007). In addition, there have been significant structural changes. The Further Education Funding Council was replaced by the Learning and Skills Council, which in turn was replaced by the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This proliferation of policy provides some indication of the vulnerability of individual colleges within the marketised environment established by incorporation. According to Green (2013), the ideological commitment to marketisation that underpins these reforms sadly means that, despite this plethora of initiatives, the national coordination of education is piecemeal and incoherent, ironically resulting in England's falling further behind other countries in development of the skills needed to compete in a global economy.

Instability arising from an annualised funding formula and a consequent sense of fear and uncertainty amongst FE staff in relation to the security of their employment (O'Leary and Smith 2012, pp. 438-9) can be traced back to a neoliberal policy environment which emphasises an unstable present (see Bauman 2007 pp. 5-26 and Sennett 1998). The institutionalisation of uncertainty and the instilling of fear into the consciousness of FE teachers as a condition of their employment are aspects of what can be termed the

'government of individualisation' (Foucault 1982) of FE teachers as subjects. In FE colleges, this governmentality is expressed through neo-Darwinian discourses of survival that constitute and legitimate (to their staff) the identities of incorporated colleges as independent budget holders (Kerfoot and Whitehead 2000, Smith 2005).

Another distinctive aspect of FE that contributes to the pervasiveness of fear as a condition of employment in FE can best be understood by comparing student recruitment and retention practices with those of schools. Colleges are unlike most state schools that typically recruit and retain the majority of their students from a more or less stable catchment area thereby guaranteeing a predictable five year funding stream (the national 'stability' rate was 92.4% in 2013 according to Ofsted (DfE 2013, p. 7)). Instead, colleges run many courses that last one or two years and therefore have to negotiate bigger uncertainties of recruitment on an annual basis. As a consequence, particularly in urban areas with multiple competitors, each college competes through Open Days and publicity to maintain a market presence and September becomes a commercial event in the educational calendar. In addition to this seasonal cycle of uncertainty, the centralisation of FE funding also results in regular budget cuts and major policy changes (e.g. recent changes to policy connected to English and Maths provision, see below and DfE 2014) that frequently necessitate re-structuring within colleges.

A further element that contributes to sectoral fear is illustrated by the inherently unstable curriculum caused by the need for expansion and contraction in response to demand. Two decades of this marketised environment has led to practices and pedagogies that are assessment-driven as staff focus on securing funding (Nash *et al* 2008). The conditioning of fear propagates cultures that are corporation-centric and that demand compliance and conformity from staff whose practices then subordinate the educational needs of students to the financial needs of the college (Smith and O'Leary 2013 pp. 256-9). Taken together with management discourses within colleges that often have recourse to the threat of job losses

and redundancies, it is no exaggeration to state that a climate of fear has come to be seen as a 'natural' feature of college work.

It is within this landscape that the ITE partnership this article focuses on has sought to establish and sustain a set of courses that have at their heart values that consciously oppose the New Public Management cultures that predominate in FE colleges. The partnership comprises an HEI and (currently) nine FE providers. Significantly, none of the partner colleges have left the partnership and opted for a teacher training programme offered by an awarding body, despite the fact that these are a cheaper market option. While the main partnership focus is ITE, the courses offered within the partnership, through the establishment of an associated research centre, extend beyond this and encompass undergraduate, postgraduate, Masters and doctoral levels of study. The colleges employ staff who deliver ITE qualifications accredited by the HEI but the relationship is not one that can be characterised as a franchise. Rather than only offering quality assurance, the HEI has striven to make strong links between the full time PGCE that it offers and the part time qualifications offered in the colleges, thus creating a symbiosis between the two. The courses share a core of critically reflective practice (Brookfield 1995) and many features designed to enhance student development (e.g. a developmentally-centred approach to assessed observations, see below). In addition to this, there has been permeability in terms of staffing across the HE/FE boundary as FE staff have been seconded onto the HE courses and all the HEI staff have taught in FE settings.

To describe the relationship between partnership colleagues in this article we are using the term community in a particular way. Lave and Wenger's 'community of practice' concept (1991, p. 98) provides a useful starting point in suggesting that a community of practice involves 'participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what this means in their lives and for their communities'. This captures something of what we mean inasmuch as the partnership is constituted by a group of individuals undertaking similar roles across different institutions.

But in addition to this there is a strong dimension which could be termed counter hegemonic. This is in the sense that the community of the partnership has come about through the coming together of a group of people who are united in a shared perception of the fundamental issues facing FE (and education more generally in England) at the current time and the understanding that these issues have systemic origins. Cohen (1994) provides a concise perspective:

> I mean here, by community, the anti-market principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get out of doing so but because you need my service…. In such motivation there is indeed an expectation of reciprocation, but it nevertheless differs critically from market motivation, the marketeer is willing to serve but only in order to be served. (pp. 9-10)

Neoliberal hegemonic principles around markets as the best mechanisms available for organising public services in general and education in particular date back to Friedmanian and Hayekian economic theories (Saltman 2010, p. 23). What unites the teachers involved in the partnership is a shared understanding that education as a public good involves values that are distinctly anti-market, and that the current policy of marketisation has resulted in serious shortcomings – not least in the ability of FE to meet students' educational needs.

Having presented the particularities of the FE context and briefly outlined the principles underpinning the partnership that is the focus of this article, the next section looks at two specific examples in which the partnership has responded to the neoliberal policyscape: first through a project looking at vocational pedagogy, and secondly, in its response to the issue of grading lesson observations as an aspect of improving teaching and learning.

i.   **Vocational Pedagogy: practitioner voice against the policy maelstrom**
Our first example of the partnership operating as a community centres on a recent project sponsored by Learning Skills and Improvement Service: *Building and sustaining partnership*

cultures in vocational pedagogy: practice, theory, leadership and community. The project came about in part as a response to a policy drive around vocational pedagogy in which claims about "our failure to provide world-class vocational education" (Hancock 2013) were being used to justify policy intervention. This project began in the second half of the 2012-13 academic year. It was coordinated by the Centre for Research and Development in Lifelong Education based at the University of Wolverhampton and it set out to establish clusters of teachers in different subject specialisms drawing from colleges across the partnership. Clusters of between two and five people were established in Engineering, Construction, Hair and Beauty, Health and Social Care, Offender Learning and Media Studies. Participants were identified by college partners as experienced and highly regarded practitioners. These clusters came together in a series of twilight and full day workshops to establish a shared understanding of what principles and practices underpinned effective vocational pedagogy in their areas. Alongside that, discussions centred on common enabling factors and barriers to effective vocational pedagogy.

Central to the project was a belief that practitioners should be involved in research and writing about their own practice. This belief was a response to a perceived absence of practitioner voice in some of the recent policy literature (e.g. CAVTL 2013, Lucas *et al* 2012). To that end, built into the project was a research and evaluation strand as the project coordinators sought to build up an evidence base of qualitative data from this regional group of practitioners. The participants were encouraged to talk frankly (and confidentially) about their experience, to visit each other at work and share their pedagogical expertise. They were also guided through recent literature about vocational pedagogy and asked to relate this to their experience. In that way, the project involved empirical knowledge production practices – the production of critical knowledge that i) illuminated the lived 'chalk face' experience of FE teachers and that, ii) provided an under-narrative to the conditioning market-inflected knowledge whose production is now a primary function of the sector.

It is important to note here though that we do not see the localisation of research and writing practices that the project championed as the assertion of a particular 'voice discourse' (Moore and Muller 1999). Instead, the project relied on a shared understanding of social reality (see Young 2008, pp.24-34), one in which dominant knowledge production practices are deeply flawed. While we are sympathetic to a view that sees knowledge production as largely controlled by particular interest groups (and in FE largely excludes practitioners), we do not thereby claim that the localised research of the project is inherently more valuable simply because it is localised. However, we *are* claiming that the generalisation and decontextualisation of findings favoured by policy makers presents a distorted and inaccurate picture that omits the social reality experienced by FE practitioners to the extent that it makes effective intervention improbable. Worryingly, marketised FE has developed cultures of managerialist positivism that are, wilfully, a part of this:

> Managerialist positivism equates to the purposeful production and representation of data that deliberately excises inconvenient truths better to serve the interests of individuals/institutions acting within the 'fitness landscapes' of the marketised public sector. (Smith and O'Leary 2013, p. 246)

In this article we present three key findings that came out of the project that contribute to an understanding of the meaning of vocational pedagogy in FE. The first of these connects with the currency of subject specialist knowledge for vocational teachers. Anxiety about this is expressed through the importance of 'a clear line of sight to work' and the 'two way street' (between employer and educational provision) as expressed in CAVTL (2013). While this was a relatively small sample (eighteen participants from across thirteen providers), the majority of the participants had extensive industrial as well as educational experience. In subject specialist clusters, the participants discussed the issue of maintaining up-to-date knowledge of industry in order better to inform their pedagogy. However, their experiences re-framed the basis for the debate. First, they did not recognise this as an issue directly impinging on their practice. All participants recognised the importance of the close

link between the employment and educational domains. However, they did not articulate this in terms of 'dual professionalism' but instead saw the link remaining strong as a consequence of individual (harsh) economic reality: many of these vocational tutors and the colleagues within their departments were part-time and ran their own businesses outside college. In some cases this was from choice as FE work was retreated to during difficult economic times. In other cases, it was down to economic necessity as college employment was only part time so operating a part time business provided much needed additional income.

In these findings, participants supplied a narrative that is submerged beneath the more visible policy discourse. The dual professionalism concept has become a concept that seeks to emphasise the importance of developing a professional identity as a teacher alongside an established professional identity as an engineer or a builder, for instance. In other words, it is founded upon a deficit and provides a superficial label that focuses on the individual teacher as the subject to be conceptualised and worked on. The participants' insights repositioned the term as pragmatic and dynamic and as arising from a context of instability. While CAVTL (2013) suggests that improvements in vocational pedagogy hinge upon developing a current deficit in existing vocational teaching staff, this project saw contextual constraints as the most significant barriers to improving vocational pedagogy. The marketised context and the funding-driven nature of FE provision was seen as having eroded the quality of teaching in part as a consequence of disregarding any aspect of the educational experience that was not amenable to measurement and improvement through targets and metrics. In important ways then, dual professionalism could be seen as an illusory concept that deftly relocates discussion away from the underpinning problems of FE: the short term funding methodology and the cultures of managerialist positivism that have arisen in response to it. Instead, these problems are reidentified as an issue of governmentality, through the problematisation of teachers' identity.

The second key finding of the project again provides a perspective that jars with present policy representations. A discursive exercise that sought to explore the key priorities for vocational teachers threw up an aspect of practice that was seen to underpin and precede other more 'technical' aspects of knowledge and skills. Participants used different terms to denote this aspect of their practice including 'pastoral work', 'mummying' and 'caring'. Behind these terms were narratives of helping students with accommodation, dealing with lawyers' letters (in offender learning) and sometimes helping students buy household items. The examples given centred on the teachers' focus on engaging with students as people with lives (and sometimes significant problems) outside the classroom. This resonates strongly with findings from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme that the relationship between student and teacher is 'the most important link in the whole process of further education' (Nash *et al.* 2008, p6). There was an acknowledgement in this that i) students often had issues and that needed acknowledging and addressing as a part of the educational relationship between student and teacher and ii) that this aspect of their work as vocational teachers was often significant while remaining totally outside quality discourses connected to teaching and learning because of their reductive focus on achievement and retention.

It is interesting that the notion of 'care' is contentious when applied to teachers' work in FE (see Hyland 2006). In the policy discourse surrounding vocational pedagogy and in much of the literature, the contention resides in the complete absence of any reference to 'care'. 'Care' has been pushed aside by a much more subject specific emphasis as though there is some kind of magical and highly technical recipe for the 'delivery' of skills and knowledge in each vocational area and that only by following this recipe will practitioners summon it up. In these discourses, this may be either because 'care' is assumed to be in place before expert knowledge and skills transmission can take place, or, more likely, because it is viewed as unimportant or even irrelevant. But 'care' is also contentious within the literature when it is presented as an aspect of the 'therapeutic turn' (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) that seeks to work on vocational students' employability – their personal and social

skills, attitudes, confidence and motivation - in order to prepare them for the uncertainties of casual employment in an uncertain economic climate. Contrary to the perspective presented by Ecclestone and Hayes, the research participants didn't view 'care' as an aspect of "therapeutic education" – but rather as a neglected affective dimension of their practice that was a necessary precursor to teaching and learning in their work. Interestingly, the major barriers to effective vocational education were identified as originating in the restrictive nature of assessments and the atomisation of subject specialist cultures and practices into reductive stand-alone assessment criteria – the achievement of these being necessary to trigger funding. The time-consuming collation of evidence of students' achievement of learning outcomes in order to garner funding was characterised as excluding all other activities including 'care'.

The third key finding relates to the enactment of policy and the contention that in FE, as in other sectors of education in England, educational policy is performative. The actual effects on the ground are less important to politicians than the political capital that is amassed through policy interventions and initiatives. One consequence of this is that the political value of policy interventions quickly fades and this necessitates further interventions, sometimes with contradictory effects.

Despite CAVTL's focus on the importance of vocational pedagogy to England's economy within the global marketplace, the first meeting of the project participants in the 2013-14 academic year, revealed that another, connected, policy focus was undermining the quality of the vocational education in local colleges. Paradoxically, this was triggered by a policy announcement in June 2013 by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, Matthew Hancock, that all full time 16-19 courses for students who had not yet achieved a C grade in English and Maths had to include these subjects as a condition of funding. The impact of this, at a stroke, undermined any advances there might have been in focusing on the quality of vocational education or the professional identity of its practitioners. Across the majority of the colleges in the sample,

vocational teachers were being required to teach English and/or Maths as a part of their main teaching work. Typically, these sessions were discretely timetabled in classrooms and thereby displaced embedded Literacy and Numeracy within workshops. This was as a consequence of a shortage of specialist staff in those areas. But as one of the participants stated:

> We had Functional Skills dumped on us when we came back in September… Historically the kids at school didn't want to do Maths, they didn't want to do English. They are seen as boring subjects anyway. So you're having to sell the subject to keep them motivated and engaged. We're constantly having to tailor Maths and English to motivate our students. It's a hard job.

Unsurprisingly, most participants felt that the pressure of these reforms was diluting and undermining their focus on vocational pedagogy in their subject specialist area. They felt ill-equipped to teach these discrete classes – arguing that they were neither English nor Maths specialists. As a consequence, in their view, the imposition of this additional work on vocational staff across many subjects had become the greatest barrier to improving vocational pedagogy. Government intervention to introduce bursaries for full-time PGCE trainees with degrees in maths or English teaching has come after the event. Whether or not this will address the shortfall in Englsh and Maths specialists remains to be seen.

This example of policy flux and its impact on teachers' work also demonstrates the flimsy nature of the concept of 'dual professionalism'. In this example, the notion is seen to be displaced by the pragmatic flexibility of the generalist FE professional – the teacher who *nolens volens* takes any subject required irrespective of expertise or grasp of underpinning knowledge. This example of marketised educational policy illustrates the 'free-floating present' described by Bhaskar (2011) that is a feature of neoliberalism. In this, FE teachers are caught up in a vortex of competing and ever-changing demands. The idea of professionalism – with all its connotations of empowerment, stability and permanence –

cannot transcend this landscape and indeed it may be time to refocus theoretical efforts onto the landscape itself to explore why current conditions make the enactment of professionalism in FE so difficult.

ii.   Grading teachers: to grade or not to grade? - Surviving the buffets of policy

Few areas of practice have caused as much debate and unrest amongst FE teachers in recent years as that of lesson observation, particularly graded observations and the way in which they have been used as summative assessments to rank teachers' classroom performance against the Ofsted 4-point scale. Recent research in the field has described how graded lesson observations have become normalised, highlighting Ofsted's hegemonic influence and control over FE sector policy and practice (e.g. O'Leary 2013). At the same time, they have been critiqued for embodying a pseudo-scientific approach to measuring performance, as well as giving rise to a range of counterproductive consequences that ultimately militate against professional learning and teacher improvement (e.g. O'Leary and Gewessler 2014; UCU 2013).

Unlike the vast majority of other HEI ITE providers in England, the PCE partnership in this study chose not to use graded observations on its programmes. The underpinning rationale for adopting an ungraded approach to the assessment of its student teachers did not emerge arbitrarily but was developed collaboratively over a sustained period of time. This approach was underpinned by a core set of principles and shared understandings about the purpose and value of its ITE programmes, as well as being informed by empirical research into the use and impact of lesson observations in the FE sector and on-going discussions with its partners and student teachers. Given that an ungraded approach went against the grain of normalised models of observation, the partnership knew that it would be subject to heightened scrutiny and interrogation by Ofsted when it was announced that partnership ITE programmes would be inspected in 2013.

The tone was set soon after the arrival of the inspection team on the first day when the lead inspector asked the PCE management team to rate the quality of its provision against Ofsted's 4-point scale. This was despite the fact that the team had chosen not to apply this grading scale in its self-evaluation document (SED), which all providers were required to complete and submit at the end of each year and to which Ofsted had access before the inspection. It is important to emphasise that the partnership's resistance to embracing Ofsted's 'dominant discourses' (Foucault 1980) and normalised practice was not based on any wilful refusal to comply or obey their authority as the regulators of quality for ITE provision, but driven by more fundamental concerns regarding the legitimacy and reliability of its assessment framework and the impact of that on teachers in training. Needless to say this epistemological positioning of the partnership presented the inspection team with certain challenges, some of which are discussed further below.

It was a strongly held view across the partnership that the use of a metrics-based approach was neither the most appropriate nor the most effective means of fostering its student teachers' development, nor indeed of measuring the level of performance required to meet the 'pass' threshold criteria of its programmes. The partnership staff comprised largely experienced teacher educators who were comfortable and confident of being able to make judgements about the progress and performance of their students against the pass/fail assessment framework used on the programmes. In some ways this was akin to the notion of 'fitness to practise' used by other professions such as health. This 'fitness to practise' was initially mapped against the LLUK (2006) professional standards and more recently against the Education and Training Foundation's (ETF) revised standards (ETF 2014). As the partnership had been actively engaged with these standards through year on year collaborative work to revise and refine their application to its ITE programmes, there was a shared ownership of the assessment by those working on the programme. In contrast, partnership teacher educators were not convinced that the Ofsted 4-point scale could be applied with the same rigour, reliability and appropriateness to assess students' attainment

as its existing assessment framework and criteria, whereby students were either judged to have satisfied the criteria or not.

The partnership's ITE programmes were built on a developmental philosophy of teacher education in which the student teacher's growth was prioritised. Staff working on the programmes were committed to helping their students to develop their pedagogic skills and subject knowledge base. It was therefore their belief that judging them against a performative, numerical grading scale of 1-4 would compromise that commitment and jeopardise the supportive focus of the teacher educator and mentor's relationship with their students. The partnership also benefitted from being involved in and discussing the latest research into lesson observation as one of the HEI members of staff specialised in this particular area.

As mentioned above, recent research into the use of graded observation in FE reveals how it has become normalised as a performative tool of managerialist systems fixated with attempting to measure teacher performance rather than actually improving it (e.g. O'Leary 2012). The teacher educators and mentors in the partnership saw their primary responsibility as that of helping to nurture their student teachers as effective practitioners rather than having to rank their performance according to a series of judgemental labels (i.e. 'outstanding', 'inadequate' etc.) that were principally designed to satisfy the needs of external agencies such as Ofsted within the marketised FE landscape and carried with them absolutist judgements that were inappropriate to their isolated, episodic nature. This emphasis on measuring teacher performance was also seen as responsible for what Ball (2003) refers to as 'inauthenticity' in teacher behaviour and classroom performance during assessed observations. This is typically manifested in the delivery of the rehearsed or showcase lesson as the high stakes nature of such observations results in a reluctance to want to take risks for fear of being given a low grade. Teachers are thus aware of the need to 'play the game', which can result in them following a collective template of good practice during observation. Yet being prepared to experiment with new ways of doing things in the classroom and taking risks in one's teaching is widely acknowledged as an important

constituent of the development of both the novice and experienced teacher (e.g. Fielding *et al* 2005; IfL 2012).

Furthermore, findings from two separate studies on observation in FE (O'Leary 2011; UCU 2013) have revealed some of the distorting and counterproductive consequences of grading on in-service teachers' identity and professionalism. Partnership staff were determined to protect their student teachers from such consequences during their time on the programme. This did not mean, however, that they avoided discussing the practice of grading teacher performance with them or confronting some of the challenging themes and issues associated with it. On the contrary, this was a topic that was addressed explicitly through professional development modules and wider discussions about assessment and professionalism as part of the on-going critically reflective dialogues that occurred between teacher educators, mentors and students throughout the programme. Besides, this was a particularly pertinent issue for those part-time, in-service students who often found themselves having to juggle the conflicting contexts and purposes of observation as an employee in the workplace and as a student teacher on an ITE course. As employees, many of them were subject to annual quality assurance graded observations that were summative in their focus and largely driven by the need to generate data for performance management cycles. In contrast, the observations that formed part of their ITE courses had a much more formative orientation and were underpinned by a developmental focus.

As mentioned previously, these programmes are underpinned by the notion of critical reflection. Brookfield (1995) argues that what makes critically reflective teaching 'critical' is an understanding of the concept of power in a wider socio-educational context and recognition of the hegemonic assumptions that influence and shape a teacher's practices. The partnership viewed the use of graded observations as an example of one such hegemonic assumption. Thus the perceived or intended outcomes of graded observations (i.e. improving the quality of teaching and learning, promoting a culture of continuous

improvement amongst staff etc.) were not always the actual outcomes as experienced by those involved in the observation process. And then, of course, there was the thorny issue of measurement.

The fixation with attempting to measure teacher performance is symptomatic of a wider neoliberal obsession of trying to quantify and measure all forms of human activity, epitomised in the oft-quoted saying that 'you can't manage what you can't measure', a maxim that has its roots in a marketised approach to educational improvement and one which seemed to shape Ofsted's inspection framework. During the course of the inspection, it became apparent that the partnership's ungraded approach was problematic for Ofsted. Although the lead inspector categorically stated that the use of a grading scale was not an essential feature of being able to measure teachers' progress and attainment, he later contradicted this by maintaining that as the partnership did not grade, it was difficult to measure student progress from year to year or the value that the training added in each cohort. Despite the presentation of interwoven sources of qualitative evidence illustrating these student teachers' journeys throughout their programmes of study, the inspection team was reluctant or even unable to conceptualise the notion of improvement unless the outcome was expressed in the form of a number. This reveals the extent to which managerialist positivism has become an orthodoxy and Ofsted its agent of enforcement. Despite that, the partnership team defended its practice and emphasised how the broad range of evidence captured in the combination of formative and summative assessments provided a rich tapestry of these student teachers' progress and attainment throughout the programme and ultimately one that was more meaningful than the allocation of a reductive number.

Knowledge production as a function of Partnership

What these examples of HE/FE partnership activity illustrate is the development of a culture underpinned by a set of values that seeks i) to establish longevity beyond the annual funding cycle that dominates marketised FE cultures; ii) to cultivate knowledge production

practices that are an antidote to the performative variety that has been seen to dominate the marketised terrain of FE in England since incorporation (Randle and Brady 1997) and thereby iii) to provide 'resources of hope' (Williams 1989) for practitioners besieged by New Public Management (NPM) values and discourse.

Performative knowledge production centres on the manipulation of data to (mis)present performance in a favourable way – both in response to internal accountability procedures but also, more worryingly, for external audiences including Ofsted and FE funding bodies. The suggestion here is that purposive knowledge production practices within the marketplace are founded on the principle of the self-interest of individual colleges. Indeed, it is a reasonable assertion that institutional self-interest was a desired policy outcome of incorporaton. However, recent research has shown that this self-interest extends to the institutionalised manipulation of data and that practices related to this have become embedded in college cultures (for examples of performativity see O'Leary and Smith 2012; Smith and O'Leary 2013). Within colleges this is supported by a templated subjectivity that once more privileges self-interest over wider social and educational concerns. With this social frame in place, colleges' knowledge production practices produce market data that is fundamentally unreliable. In addition to this, marketisation militates against collaboration between educational institutions and this results in the growth of a fortress mentality within colleges in which there is reduced permeability of ideas between institutions' knowledge. Taken together, these factors militate not only against the spread of a sectoral understanding of what constitutes, for example, effective vocational pedagogy but also against participatory research and collaborative research and scholarship in general.

In contrast to these prevailing cultural practices of knowledge production, the partnership has sought to establish an environment in which there is an underpinning concern for colleagues, for their progression and an interest in their welfare. Rustin (2013) talks about the in-built understanding that educational aims are achieved through a shared culture of concern for the welfare and development of students and fellow staff as part of an

educational 'habitus'. In addition, the partnership fosters a model of research and knowledge production that views the process as being as of much or more value than any research 'output'. Partnership relations are based on trust and built through people and institutions . The HE setting provides a neutral space that allows for openness and the voicing of professional concerns about the FE workplace.

As the section on graded observations illustrates, the ITE programmes involve the management of complex sets of data relating to achievement and progression. In colleges, these are made more complex in the light of the instability of college curricula – as part time students in recent years have often lost teaching hours during their course as their employers close down provision. Typically, ten percent or more of each first year (part time) class either leaves during the academic year or at the end of the first year of the course. They may then re-join the course after a year out. This makes the ostensibly straightforward task of measuring success rates complex. The resistance then to focusing on quantitative metrics (e.g. retention figures, achievement statistics or teachers' 'grades') involves the partnership asserting the validity of qualitative and empirical data precisely because it is systematically devalued and excluded by managerial positivist approaches. Our contention is that qualitative research data produced by the partnership provides an under-story that accounts for and explains performative data, while at the same time contextualising it and providing a richer understanding of the reality such institutionally generated data purports to represent. In other words, this HE/FE partnership challenges the new realism of marketised FE and the 'free floating present' it inhabits – replacing this with a critical realism (Bhaskar 2011) grounded in adherence to educational values. Our claim is that as the partnership stands outside any individual corporation, its knowledge production activities are not governed by market interests (although they are influenced by them). The removal of this defining condition of performative data enables a higher degree of validity and reliability.

Conclusion

Marketisation, the preferred model of organisation of public services under neoliberalism, favours and promotes a model of the collective organisation (the competitive corporation) and entrepreurial identities that severely impact upon collaboration and the coordination of effort across institutions necessary to meet the needs and demands of FE. In terms of collective action, the corporation is the limit of the neoliberal imagination – governed by authoritarian relationships, brooking no opposition and incentivising low-trust environments and specious data production at the cost of authenticity and collegiality.

In the examples this article has provided, the partnership offers an affirming neutral space that recognises the alienation teachers experience in their workplaces from regimes that enforce compliance, efficiency and 'productiveness' over other professional and student-orientated values. These are founded upon a view of FE as something more than a commodity in which what Rustin (2013) calls 'market relations' intercede between FE teachers and their work, undermining teachers' ability to meet students' needs and replacing this with a hollowed-out conformity to meeting the financial and efficiency needs of the college. There is a counter-cultural element in this as the positions adopted directly oppose neoliberal models. As Saltman puts it, 'the value of knowledge is reduced in the neoliberal view to its exchangeability in the marketplace' (Saltman 2010, p. 122). In the FE context, this means the globalised instrumentalist discourse that governs the Subject within FE has reduced education to 'skills' that are valued only inasmuch as employers express a demand for them. This demand – imprecise and fluctuating precisely because of its 'invisibility' as a market mechanism - contributes greatly to the alienating aspects of marketisation.

Rustin (2013, p. 28) states that '(t)he "economic" logic of maximising financial (or reputational) returns for an institution often runs counter to the "needs-based" logic of fulfilling their professional and human goals'. In the experience of this partnership, this serves well as a description of the impact of NPM cultures in FE settings. For that reason,

the HE/FE partnership has sought to establish itself as a community in which 'people translate shared beliefs and values into concrete, daily practices' (Sennett 1998, p. 137).

The HE/FE partnership positions itself not just as being a critical meeting place for practitioners that oppose the NPM hegemony but as a vehicle in which a distinct set of values-based knowledge production practices can be nurtured and insisted upon as being better able to meet the challenges currently faced by FE in terms of educating and sustaining FE teachers in the current climate. A heartening thought is that a *laissez-faire* market doctrine allows such counter cultures to establish. More sobering, however, is how few and far between such partnerships are and while this is the case, the challenges faced by producers of contextualised knowledge in the face of neoliberal hegemonic claims will remain significant.

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