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Further education and mental health during the pandemic: the moral impasse of meritocracy

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ABSTRACT
Since 2010, government policy in England has positioned further education almost exclusively as employment-orientated training for school leavers whilst also imposing severe budget cuts. During this period, values-based pedagogies that foreground social justice for students, many of whom come from low-income households, have been undermined. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there is evidence that the mental health and well-being of further education students has suffered but little is known about the pandemic's effects on teachers.
This paper presents analysis of primary research data drawn from interviews with a small sample of further education teachers and managers in the English West Midlands about their mental health and well-being during the pandemic. The paper frames the research data by acknowledging that both mental health nursing and further education teaching are currently riven by contradictions with an epistemological basis anchored in meritocratic and neoliberal policy. Using Lefebvrian theory, our analysis suggests that for further education staff, the pandemic has sharpened the tensions experienced in an already precarious professional role. Key findings were that the further education funding regime drove a 'business as usual' management attitude during the pandemic, and an intensification of work and the erosion of pedagogical practice negatively affected staff's mental health.

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Policy context

Further and adult education occupies an important position in providing (often vocational) pathways between education and work for post 16 students in many advanced post-industrial nations. In the US, federal structures result in a patchwork of vocational (or 'career and technical') education courses and colleges. Broadly speaking though, school leavers can pursue education pathways that have recently been invested in (Brunner, Dougherty, and Ross 2019). For adults returning to learn with basic skills needs, there are community colleges, but these continue to carry stigma (Michael 2020). In Australia, which has experienced neoliberalisation much like that in England,

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according to Pennington, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) has suffered neglect and 'policy vandalism' (Pennington 2020, 8).

In England, as an area of educational provision that sits between schools and the HE sector, further and adult education continues to occupy a position of neglect. A point of origin can be identified as the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which largely shapes the current working conditions of further and adult education staff (Gleeson and Shain 1999; Perryman 2022). Over the long term, the Act reified an instrumentalist abstraction of a 'sector' and enabled ongoing policy interventions that positions providers as producers of human capital (Becker 1993) in the emerging global economy at the end of the twentieth century (Foster 2005; Leitch 2006) and later, (as the post-industrial era materialised) as a purveyor of the 'technical skills' required by employers (DfE 2021). Importantly, the Act also established a quasi-market: a competitive data-driven system that enabled tight regulation of annual funding linked to 'performance' (Smith 2015). Within this quasi-market, further education colleges compete for students with other (including private) providers – a context that has hardwired a 'bums on seats' approach to recruitment (Smith 2007).

In 1997, the Kennedy Report, *Learning Works*, acknowledged the negative effects of quasi-marketisation and the organisational cultures arising from it. Kennedy identified a hollowing out of the broader social benefits of further and adult education: the systemic incentive for institutions to 'perform as if they were businesses' and the pressure to subordinate the needs and interests of students to those of the competing institution. More than a decade later, the Wolf Report (2011) identified self-interested corporate behaviour that resulted in many school leavers being put on low level vocational qualifications not valued by employers but that drew down funding for providers. This illustrates how the further education quasi-market created the structural conditions for the objectification of students (Duckworth and Smith 2018).

Neoliberalisation and meritocracy

Neoliberalism, 'the policy paradigm that has shaped the world like no other over the last forty years' (Beckert 2020, 319), informs the deep structure of further and adult education in England. Davies emphasises neoliberalisation as a 'constructivist, modernising force' that seeks to re-invent institutions in a 'market-like' way through 'competitive activity, that is, the production of inequality' (Davies 2014A). Drawing on rational choice theory (Archer and Tritter 2001), neoliberal thinking privileges two key abstractions relevant to this paper. The first: markets – we have touched on above. Marketisation has been viewed as the most efficient and effective way to organise further and adult education in England and, since incorporation, the number of colleges has shrunk from 427 to 228 (Association of Colleges AoC 2022). Policy documents may acknowledge broader conceptualisations of further education that stress social and individual benefits (for example Snelson and Deyes 2016, 146) but, these are largely occluded by an instrumental emphasis on 'productivity' (e.g. Nelles et al 2023) and 'skills' (e.g. Williamson 2020).

That further and adult education are positioned at the bottom of the current educational hierarchy in England is evidenced by funding cuts since 2010. As part of a national austerity programme (2010–2015), while school funding was 'ring-fenced' (Peraudin and Wintour 2015), further education funding was reduced by 24% whilst the Adult Skills

Budget, covering education for people older than 19, shrunk by 29% (Belfield, Farquharson, and Sibieta 2018, 19–21). These cuts were accompanied by a sharpening of an instrumentalist focus that positioned colleges as part of a skills system that aims to reduce the 'productivity gap' (BIS 2015, 26) and caters mainly for 'unacademic' 16–18 year olds following vocational courses.

The second key abstraction is that of the self-interested individual and this relates to the meritocratic model of ethical (and political) rationality underpinning neoliberalism (Brown 2003). This model promotes and attaches benefits to individual as well as institutional competition and, while on the one hand celebrating winners, it also requires losers – public opprobrium supposedly incentivising greater effort across the board. This highlights how the market functions through institutionalising structural inequality.

Promoted and 'endorsed by stealth . . . as a plank of neoliberal political rhetoric and public discourse' (Littler 2013, 52), meritocracy works through an individualisation of success and failure and through the way in which this reifies an existing social hierarchy. To that extent, discourses of individual 'deficit', 'resilience' and mental health become significant, their deployment serving to 'normalise inauspicious circumstances' (Davies 2021, 126) and to pathologise the individual. From this perspective, a reading of the English further education context sees providers as offering a work-based curriculum for school leavers adjudged to be 'unacademic' and who are, arguably, are also 'classed' by this discourse as part of the abstraction of the sector as a whole (Duckworth and Smith, 2019).

Through this lens, meritocratic policy can be seen to subjectify further education students as either ungifted with 'talent' and/or not hard-working enough. According to a meritocratic logic, the 'also-ran' provision of further education is where they belong. Rather than overturning or destabilising that structure of inequality, policy informed by meritocratic principles would seek to consolidate it, functioning to *reproduce* inequality. This has implications for the role of further education staff. Such a perspective also supports the continuation of a marketised structure in which further education remains an unattractive and under-resourced 'sorting house'. Arguably, this interpretation fits with the objectifying skills discourse and also explains the disproportionate de-funding endured by further education providers since 2010.

Sandel (2020) provides several insights into meritocracy that seem important to examine in the context of further education and mental health. Sandel's overarching argument is that meritocracy is a contemporary, secular retelling of an argument that has plagued theological debate since the New Testament: whether we are to be saved (read rewarded) by 'grace' (luck) or by 'works' (effort) (Sandel 2020, 38). A meritocratic world view denies the relevance of grace and enables a successful person to explain without self-incrimination the alarming inequality they see. This refusal to acknowledge the social role of grace has the effect of creating unjustifiable hubris in the 'successful':

> Those who, by dint of effort and talent, prevail in a competitive meritocracy are indebted in ways the competition obscures. (2020, 14).

This is accompanied by unjustifiable condemnation of the 'failed'. Sandel also argues that this refusal to find space for fate within explanations about inequality drives a worldview that, he says, is 'corrosive of commonality' (2020, 59) triggering a discourse of blame and

reward. As we will see in the next section, the wraparound pastoral element of much further and adult education pedagogy sits very much at odds with this meritocratic perspective.

Contextual factors impacting on the mental health and well-being of further education staff

From the context above we can see how a policy environment underpinned by a meritocratic and instrumentalist purposing can be construed as a diminution of the dignity and agency of further education students. This section will move the argument on to explore what insights existing research has offered into how further education as a working environment impacts on staff.

To return to the legislative framework, one important effect of incorporation was to undermine the power of organised labour (Davies 1999). One long term effect of this has been the widening of the pay gap (currently c. £9000) between college teachers and schoolteachers (Parker 2021).

Traditionally, further education colleges have been deeply-rooted in the history and industrial heritage of their localities. As 'second chance' institutions, the professional identities of their staff have been characterised as incorporating a strong pastoral element of 'care' (Smith and Duckworth 2022; Feeley 2014; Noddings 2005). However, the neoliberalisation of further education policy works against such ethical orientations. Stephen Ball has written memorably about how, in a marketised education system, teachers are being reduced to 'technicians' or 'operatives' (Ball 2003, 154) who deliver courses and are at risk of losing their 'soul'. This is seen as being caused by, amongst other things, an increase in administrative work related to performance. Other literature sees this phenomenon in terms of 'de-professionalisation' (Yarrow and Esland 1998, 11) and 'proletarianisation' (Randle and Brady 1996, 134). The deregulation brought about in 2014 by the infamous Lingfield report (Lingfield 2012) effectively upended the notion that any teaching qualification was necessary to teach in further education. This supports the argument that the low status of further education students may extend to teachers and their work. Their employment is certainly more precarious (University and Colleges Union UCU 2016). Indeed, in meritocratic terms, if further education is representative of a 'natural' stratification through which people arrive at their (deserved) ends, it follows that teaching in further education is 'naturally' of a low standard.

The apparatus of funding, accountability and performance (FAP – see Smith and Duckworth 2022) and the cultures that have accompanied the marketisation of further education, can be seen as working on staff as 'subjects' through a reorganisation and re-prioritisation of their practice. Existing literature also suggests that in the further education quasi-market, fear and uncertainty are a feature of staff's working lives. Instability deriving from an annualised funding regime and a consequent lack of job security amongst staff (O'Leary and Smith 2012, 438–439) emphasises an unstable present (see Sennett 1999). Every autumn, for a class to run, a minimum number is required. Fear as a condition of teachers' employment connects to student recruitment and retention.

An annual cycle of uncertainty originating in budget cuts and policy changes further destabilises curriculum and staffing frequently triggering college 'restructures'. This neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 1978, 87) militates towards

conditioning staff to adopt a disposition of self-interest and to align themselves (through performativity) with the corporate interests of the college/provider over and above those of students (Smith 2013, 256–259, Smith 2015). In further education, precarity is arguably not a distinct category of employment (Standing 2011) but has become instead integral to teachers' 'professional' identity under quasi-marketisation.

A further contributory factor to workplace fear connected to the FAP apparatus is invoked by the quasi-market regulator: Ofsted. While almost three decades of a quasi-marketised environment have led to assessment-driven practices and a staff focus on securing funding (Nash et al. 2008), providers are still subjected to a ritual of compliance to performance standards by the market regulator. The three-day notice period prior to an inspection embeds fear as an everyday aspect of the college teacher's lifeworld; even in the absence of an inspection, teachers are left hanging in anticipation of its imminence. Fear is the vehicle through which marketisation reaches into teachers' embodied experience and is implicit in how Ofsted operates to bring about change (Gallagher and Smith 2018). Taken together with management discourses within colleges that often have recourse to the threat of job losses and redundancies, a climate of fear is normalised as a 'natural' feature of college work, rhythmically ratcheted up and then defused to reflect the inspection cycle.

Clearly, de-professionalisation, deregulation, funding-driven practices and fear are all likely to abrade pedagogical practice that is founded on principles of social justice and orientated towards realising the pastoral and 'wraparound' aspects of holistic further education work. Interestingly though, while such values may be devalued and their impact unmeasured, grotesquely, they are still harnessed as a motivational force. Archer and Tritter argue that:

> neoliberalism is … parasitic upon forms of motivation which it cannot comprehend. In other words, the undergirding notion of instrumental rationality can neither embrace nor explain the altruism upon which it depends in practice … (Archer and Tritter 2001, 2)

It seems likely that this parasitism might impact on the mental health and well-being of further education teachers, especially those who ascribe to altruistic values and find these diminished and ignored by policy. Whether and how the demands brought by the COVID-19 pandemic affected teachers in relation to this is something this paper will seek to address.

What this section has argued is that further and adult education has been assigned a specific role and position by policy in a meritocratic and hierarchical education system. This role presents the provision of vocational courses for 'unacademic' young people as a pathway to successful integration into society while over-writing their individuality through a skills discourse in which they supposedly contribute to a greater (national) good. This section has also looked at how teachers in further education are positioned as subjects within a meritocratic hierarchy and how their existing working conditions appeared to be in tension with a values-based pedagogy before the impact of the additional pressures brought about by the pandemic.

Neoliberalisation and mental health

Within the field of mental health, many commentators have expertly dissected the growing infusion of concepts of health and recovery with social inclusion or marginalisation, employment, property and conformity to the behaviours and values of a market economy (Harvey 2007; Harper and Speed 2014; Sweeney et al. 2016), including identifying the emergence of a newly constructed pathology: the 'employment-resistant personality' (Friedli and Stearn 2015). This can be seen as a response to the neoliberalisation of mental health discourses. Long before anyone was shamed for wearing or not wearing a facemask in the COVID-19 pandemic, the remarkable volume *Against Health* explored the idea that health had become the new morality and that health and employment were often viewed as one and the same (Kirkland 2010). Then came the wider criticism that mental health services had appropriated the terms of the peer-to-peer *recovery movement* and created a new form of oppression in which people not only failed to be well but also failed to recover, spawning a new form of Internet survivor activism in the shape of the Facebook group, *Recovery in the Bin*, which argued for the right to be considered 'unrecovered' (see In the Bin 2016, for example).

Criticism of mental health services from the political left (Coles, in Coles, Diamond, and Keenan 2013) tends to outline the ways in which psychiatry and psychology both individualise distress and happiness in the same way that meritocracy individualises failure and achievement, preventing the formation of solidarity amongst groups whose distress might otherwise become a more organised dissent. In light of this, it is quite possible that mental health services and further education colleges are not just seeing caseloads with similar themes but sometimes the very same caseload.

Bringing the contested concepts of mental health discourse into further education

This article is premised on the contention that just as the motivations and purposes of further and adult education are subject to a policy context described here as meritocratic and neoliberal, so too are mental health services, mental health professionals, mental health service users (or service refusers) and the concepts of mental health, resilience and ill-health at their disposal (Foth and Homes 2017; McKeown, Wright, and Mercer 2017; Foth, Lange, and Smith 2018; Mckeown and Glenn 2018). Just as care is required to explore the experience and context of further education, so too the phrase 'mental health' must not be taken as a settled, universal, 'natural kind' (Hacking 1995, 2002) but as something much more infused with reflexive narrative and ideology. As Oscar Wilde famously quipped:

> [t]he word 'unhealthy,' however, admits of analysis. It is a rather interesting word. In fact, it is so interesting that the people who use it do not know what it means (Wilde 2004, 14).

Authors in the 20th Century broke open questions about the normative practices that seemed to pervade questions of mental health, not least, of course, Foucault (Foucault 2001), who perhaps had some similar reasons to Wilde to notice. Although generally outside of the training of mental health professionals, within the scholarship of the humanities it is not at all unusual to explore ways in which a political *zeitgeist* gives

rise to a mental health one (Kirkland 2010). In the 21st Century this has sharpened into a proposed complete alternative to diagnostic psychiatry, *The Power Threat Meaning Framework* (Johnstone and Boyle 2018), placing the primary source of distress not as internal imbalance but of an external imbalance of social power, leading to threat responses in which some patterns may be discerned, but which do not amount to diagnoses. The battle for the meaning of the phrase 'mental health' has never been fiercer, although it has always been controversial (Scull 2022), with the largest funder of mental health research in the world, the US National Institute for Mental Health, rejecting the most used framework of diagnosis (Moncrieff 2020).

Just as neoliberalisation foregrounds business interests in the perceived function of further education, so too parallels are found in the field of mental health. The pharmaceutical industry's role in the construction of diagnosis and treatment and research is as clear as it is commonly ignored (Moncrieff 2020). The manifold and 200 year-old insecurities of the medical profession about their uninspiring cure-rate has produced an array of barbarisms and the most unethical experimentations imaginable (Scull 2022) and also connection to (and popularisation of) some of the most extreme ideologies of genetic degradation and eugenics in the 20th Century (Foth 2012). Scull argues that such insecurities led to what amounts to the capture of the whole profession by the pharmaceutical industry since the 1980s, during which time the almost exponential growth of psychiatry into the classroom, seen especially in diagnoses of ADHD and corresponding pharmacy, can be viewed much more as the discovery of untapped markets than a genuine explosion of illness (2022: 335).

It is this contested field which backgrounds apparently simple questions about the mental health of further education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The danger is that in asking questions about a group's mental health experiences one is not importing expertise but reinforcing existing tensions and creating fresh pathways for the reach of psychiatry, which can hardly be thought of as uncontroversial. The pandemic itself has played a part in the ongoing arguments about what mental health is, with some asserting that it has tipped the scales of public perception towards a contextualised and less medicalised understanding of mental health problems, but, despite great complexity, there is agreement that it has produced an even greater level of need (Zavlis et al. 2021). The questions about structural inequalities in health outcomes that the pandemic has sharpened also have a strong resonance within mental health services.

In tandem with teachers whose values make them a poor fit within the discourses of further education, mental health nurses hope to be the 'smiling face' of what is nearly always referred to as 'the mental health system' and many claim to be 'working to change the system from within' (Gadsby 2018). There is a persistent feeling on the part of MH nurses that our cherished Nursing and Midwifery Code of Conduct (NMC 2015) is something we try to remember within institutions that have less libertarian ambitions. Nurses seem caught between the desire to assess, diagnose and treat mental illness and to *be with* people in their distress, perhaps baffled that these seem so often in conflict. There certainly seem to be parallels with further education teachers, where the fault-lines run between assessment as part of the overseeing of human capital production and a more socially-orientated and 'caring' approach to education as personal development.

These kinds of barriers illustrate the challenge of trying to connect contemporary sociological thought such as Sandel's theory of meritocracy with the subject of 'mental

health'; our institutional narratives make the past, and philosophy, irrelevant. At the end of a typical working week a mental health nurse might feel that, had they been able to finish the list of activities that are priorities within the institutions in which they work, a lot of things that they think of as real nursing would still have been missing. This might also be said to mirror the experiences of teachers in further and adult education settings.

Research methodology

This small-scale project used online semi-structured interviews to address the following research questions:

(1) What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the health and well-being of further education teachers and managers?
(2) What insights does this give us into the macro and micro impacts of meritocratic market-based policymaking in further education?

To recruit participants, a snow-ball sampling method (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019) was used. Snow-ball sampling relies on informal networking and referral and is both purposive – premised on targeting particular groups or individuals, and opportune – accepting the need to follow up possible 'leads' as they present (Campbell et al. 2020). Having extensive professional contacts in further education providers in the West Midlands of England and nationally, Rob sent an email to contacts with the aim of recruiting so-called 'main grade lecturers' as well as middle and senior managers. This breadth, it was thought, would provide insight into perspectives on the issue of mental health and well-being from different vantage points within colleges. Geographically, most of the participants worked in a range of different further education settings in and around the West Midlands of England. In England there are significant differences between the working conditions in different colleges but also between further education colleges and VIth form colleges (the latter generally offer more 'academic' qualifications like A levels). Training providers are generally much more focused on offering courses that provide routes into employment – and indeed often recruit from Job Centres.

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the university where the authors work. Ethical considerations included the importance of providing detail about steps to take if any participant became upset during the interviews. The positionality of the researchers was a consideration here. Seven people were interviewed; all of them known to the interviewer. Typically, the interviews lasted between forty minutes and one hour. A common set of questions was used but as a picture of each participant's context emerged, additional follow up questions were asked for clarification. Participants were asked how their daily routines/rhythms had changed; if they had managed to keep a healthy work-life balance; what changes they had noticed in workload; if they had noticed a difference in student welfare issues.

The approach also utilised the *Power Threat Meaning Framework* (Johnstone and Boyle 2018). The Framework moves beyond medicalisation (and the pathologizing of individuals) and instead asks a series of questions related to external factors and power

Table 1. Details of interview participants.

Pseudonym	Role	Institution
Annie	Middle manager (Quality) White, late 50s, mother, grandmother	General Further Ed College (South)
Subhan	Head of Dept (English) White, early 30s, married.	VI Form College (West Midlands)
Claudette	Middle manager (Quality) African-Caribbean, parent, late 30s	Training Provider (West Midlands)
Harry	Teacher (Music Tech), White, early 60s, father	General Further Ed College (West Midlands)
Noel	Faculty head (Construction) White, early 50s, father	General Further Ed College (West Midlands)
Diana	Middle manager (Creative Arts) African-Caribbean, 40s,	General Further Ed College (West Midlands)
Salam	Teacher (ESOL), late 50s, mother, Arab.	General Further Ed College (West Midlands)

imbalances:

> What has happened to you? (How is Power operating in your life?)
> *How did it affect you? (What kind of Threats does this pose?)*
> *What sense did you make of it? (What is the Meaning of these experiences to you?)*
> *What did you have to do to survive? (What kinds of threat response are you using?)*

This orientation underpinned the interview approach, seeing participants as active meaning makers in their lives and recognising that the mental health and well-being of the participants was rooted in their history and circumstances and cultures in which they work.

Microsoft Teams was used which provided an ongoing transcript (although this had to be 'cleaned' and amended in places where inaccuracies became apparent). All the participants had been teaching in further and adult education for between 5 and 20 years. All were full time staff. The sample drew on staff from a range of subject areas and with different levels of teaching/management responsibility (see Table 1.)

Analytical process

Our approach to the data analysis was discursive and thematic but did not adhere to a linear model with distinct stages as suggested by Braun and Clarke 2006. For example, as experienced practitioner researchers in our respective fields, we acknowledge that this experience positions us both epistemologically and politically in relation to the data. This ruled out the adoption of a 'pure' inductive, data-driven approach. The foregrounding of our positionality (Merriam et al. 2001; Holmes 2020) also precludes the practice of 'bracketing' that originates in grounded theory and some phenomenological research.

The themes we fixed on from the data were the fossilisation of the everyday, intensification of work, the erosion of pedagogical practice and the eclipse of the informal. These were generated broadly by a resistance to the forces of neoliberalisation which both authors feel have inscribed their professional lives. Being a researcher of the impact of further education policy on issues connected to social justice and a researcher with an interest in the infusion of ideology with mental health concepts, and a practitioner who rejects the purely psychological models, these different positionalities (Lather 1991, 6) made an inductive approach

impossible as we understood ourselves to be 'entangled' (Barad 2007) in the knowledge production practice. The analytical process was also enriched by the interaction between the two different disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers. The theoretical perspectives we brought to the data were the product of a generative mash-up of mental health theory and further educational policy critique. To cast a critical light on the meritocratic ideas undergirding both fields, we fixed on Lefebvrian theory. Lefebvre's philosophical work is increasingly influential in its treatment of spatiality and temporality (Lefebvre 1991, 2004) as diffracted through a phenomenological lens of embodiment. Lefebvre's monumental work: *A Critique of Everyday Life* has as a central aim 'the study of interactions between cyclical time and linear time' (ibid. 343) – an aim that was refined further in his final text, *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2004). This seemed appropriate to an analysis of the impact of the pandemic: a period of time marked by the disruption of normal of the rhythms of the teachers' everyday.

The analysis was more iterative and organic than is suggested by a model that proceeds in a linear fashion with clear consecutive steps. Instead, the process we followed is more closely allied to critical reflective practice (Brookfield 2005) in which immediately after interviews, reflection took place. As the number of interviews increased, we were able to identify instances where participants' accounts and views resonated with those of earlier interviews or built upon interpretations of data already gathered. Our familiarisation with the data through immersion and review was preceded by a 'spotting' of 'glowing' data (MacLure 2010) – often noted immediately after an interview. Sometimes these nuggets of data were when the participant re-framed or recontextualised existing interpretations in new or unexpected ways.

Findings

A meritocratic perspective might suggest that the impact of the pandemic on further education staff would be dependent on the 'resilience' or otherwise of individuals, on essentialist qualities like individual talent, hard work and effort. A Lefebvrian lens however resonates with the *Power, Threat Meaning Framework* by offering opposing insights centring on the social factors influencing the working environment, questioning: to what extent were human, cyclical and bodily rhythms already disrupted by the FAP apparatus further disrupted by the pandemic? But also, did the pandemic open opportunities for new thinking and any practice consistent with the humanistic and social justice purposes of further education?

The fossilisation of the everyday

According to our participants, the pandemic had a disruptive influence that was forcefully played down by senior leaders within institutions. Campuses were closed. Most teaching went online. Even so, Noel, a senior manager, talked about regular meetings at which managers were still being pushed to gather students' attendance and attainment data in order to maintain the focus on performance measures required by funding agencies. Despite the pandemic, the FAP apparatus still had to be serviced at the

institutional level as annualised funding is dependent on it. In that sense the FAP apparatus provides a meritocratic backdrop to further education cultures generally and this impacts ultimately on individual staff. The overshadowing centrality of this apparatus cannot be overstated when considering the everyday in further education providers (Smith and Duckworth 2022, 18–26). In addition though, there was a performative element that can be seen as connecting with a meritocratic essentialism: Noel felt many of his senior colleagues felt the need to show they were unaffected by the pandemic and *to be seen* to be enforcing business-as-usual. For Noel this was a missed opportunity for change and development:

> It's almost justify your position type thing . . . by measuring everything but then. . . if that was me, I'd be sitting there thinking I'm never g'na have an opportunity like this again to rewrite, you know that there was a million things we could have done. Instead we just . . . kept rolling on down the same path, you know? (Noel)

The FAP apparatus enforced a path dependency in which the fragmented linearity of the funded year dictated and even intensified everyday practices despite the displacement of staff and students from college premises. Alongside this, Noel's comment reveals managers competing to be seen to monitor and measure (student/staff) activity. While Noel viewed the disruption as offering space for reflection and a re-evaluation of processes and practices, his senior colleagues thus resorted to a brutal form of institutional resilience: a fixity of purpose in maintaining the institutional activities connected to FAP.

> Interviewer: At what point did SLT start to take account of the mental health needs of staff or provide some kind of support for them?
>
> Noel: It never, never happened. There was a . . . I think there was an online session that went on, if anything. Because of targets particularly recruitment targets. As we went through the first lockdown, it got worse. So the pressure not only from teaching, you know, and making sure that the kids were turning up. We then started hitting the pressure of recruitment for the next academic year to form the budget.

Noel's comments illustrate the tyranny of college cultures under the FAP apparatus during the pandemic. Institutional needs were prioritised and this colonised managers' thinking. The rhythms established pre-pandemic were fossilised and this meant staff needs were ignored. This fossilisation, according to the data, resulted in a huge increase in stress and feeling pressured on the part of staff. A key aspect of this is seen in the theme of intensification.

Intensification

The established routine rhythms of further education were threatened by the pandemic and the closure of providers' campuses followed by a strictly controlled return of the students. An intensification of labour inherent in these arrangements was signalled by half of the participants saying they seriously considered resignation in January 2021. In order for things to continue as 'normal', teachers were required to undertake additional tasks, for example, converting the content of face-to-face lessons for online contact. The institutional drive to maintain as far as possible existing everyday rhythms despite the increase in work this required was a wider finding across a majority of participants:

> There is no doubt there is more work to do. (Noel)
> Enjoyment has gone; I am exhausted. (Salam)
> Email has gone nuts, training and CPD have become reading an email. It's crazy. We're dealing with parents, students and staff not knowing what's going on. (Claudette)

These statements suggest that the impact of the pandemic on staff's mental health and well-being, theorised through Lefebvrian concepts, sees the fixed institutional and linear timescales (driven by funding) over-riding the (disruptive) contextual priorities triggered by the pandemic. Intensification in this rests on a layering of additional everyday activities: a thickening of the linear rhythms associated with a policy environment in which warehousing young people and managing their acquisition of 'skills' is seen as the key function of further education. Of further interest is how digital communication platforms facilitate intensification. In the absence of face-to-face contact, the volume of emails swelled to unmanageable proportions. Power operated through email, which took on the qualities of transmission: complex social interactions (like CPD) were assumed to be 'delivered' in the same way as simpler messages.

Predictably, for some participants, the intensification was debilitating and impacted on the way they felt about their work. All of the teachers however strove to continue to practise a pedagogy of care that is in tension with the meritocratic principles that inform policy by challenging the objectification of students that it reifies. The extent to which they were able to achieve this was however mediated by the culture of each participant's workplace. In Subhan's case, the VIth Form College in which she was working was supportive of staff:

> I think that we've got a real culture of trust … We weren't told you've got to stick to timetable. We were just sort of trusted to do the best that we could do (Subhan)

In Subhan's college then, rather than being subject to a default managerialist ethic that has become characteristic of leadership and management in many further education providers (Smith and Duckworth 2022; O'Leary et al. 2019), teachers retained agency over how they organised their teaching. It seems like a statement of the obvious that a trusting environment might be conducive to good mental health and well-being but the assertion is important when the meritocratic perspective on mental health calls on individuals to be more 'resilient' in the face of crisis conditions (for a critique of 'resilience' see Traynor 2018; Lewis, Ormerod, and Ecclestone 2020).

Working from home and the blurring of boundaries

Working from home (WFH) might be supposed to have ameliorated participants' perception of intensification by providing some kind of respite from routine and commuting to work. The additional control over the physical working environment that WFH offered participants, might be thought to offer an enhanced sense of agency and personalisation in their work. However, participants experienced WFH as anything but emancipatory. For the managers in the sample, WFH made them more accessible and this in turn had an impact on the routines established prior to the pandemic:

> Being drawn into meetings later into the evening . . . It did blur delineation, I guess between you know, jumping in your car, driving home or whatever. However you get home, there would be that delineation . . . So what crept in a lot over the lockdown was people putting meetings into your diary and you know 5–6 o'clock at night type thing . . . particularly those on senior management as well. (Noel)

Here we can see the trip home from work as representing a *boundarying* between work and home life: a liminal space that was squeezed out of the working day by online working. WFH is seen here as extending work-time as the thickening of linear time allows the institution to colonise and repurpose the time it takes to travel home: physical presence/absence no longer presents a barrier to interaction. The suggestion here is that this buffering is a necessary ingredient for well-being as it provides time/space for mental transitioning.

Claudette also experienced the removal of a vital liminal space/time of transition between home and work while working from home. For her, entry into workspace was immediate and triggered by the simple act of opening her laptop:

> Laptop's open, you're now fighting fires. I even started to say: Right, I'm going to go for a walk at half of the day and whoever contacts me, it doesn't matter; that is my time . . . it was getting to the point where I was eating over my computer, which isn't ideal really.

This again suggests how the removal of spaces of transition between workplace and home was experienced as corrosive. When working from home, laptops made Claudette immediately available at all times and, having a young son, she had had to reduce her contract to four days per week as she wanted to spend time with him. Still, she was conscious of how the pandemic enabled a creeping colonisation of her non-work time:

> So it's building those breaks in: something else I had to learn to do because I work .8 . . . . Having to turn off notifications and having to be literally intentional about cutting off work and stopping the stream of contact. It's constant. . . Pretty much it feels like that at times. (Claudette)

The 'fire-fighting' Claudette refers to connects to her perceptions around her ability to address the increased pastoral aspects of her work. For Claudette and others, the immediate demands of meeting students' needs (often needs external but prerequisite to teaching and learning) were more difficult to address because of online working. The fire-fighting metaphor suggests unpredictable and unexpected challenges were likely to surface. This is examined in the final thematic section.

The erosion of pedagogical practice in online work

Salam, an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, spoke at length about the importance of the pastoral labour underpinning her teaching. Salam's interview was delayed by an hour and a half as she had to deal with the issues faced by a particular student at the end of an online session:

> today I was hoping to finish at 11:00 o'clock. Normal time I would have left at 11:00 o'clock. Physically could have left . . . . Before, I had more control in terms of when I could see students. Now I know that it's . . . less control. (Salam)

Salam explained that when interacting online with ESOL students, some of whom were refugees and some vulnerable, it was difficult or even impossible to read their body language. This made judgements about well-being difficult to gauge and sometimes resulted in miscommunication.

> I'm always worried that, uh ... when you haven't got face to face contact with them ... because I don't see that body language ... I just think that everything I can say or do might impact ...

This suggests that for Salam teaching and learning in further education has an embodied component and the removal of this negatively affected the mental well-being of herself and her students. Salam expresses anxiety here about the removal of a seam of 'care' that is fundamental to further and adult education pedagogy for many teachers. Participants' accounts provided a lot of evidence that during the pandemic this was an expanding aspect of their work but here Salam shows how teachers' ability to act and respond to need is effectively curtailed. As noted by Archer and Tritter 2001, neoliberalism effectively parasitises on the unmeasurable care labour expended by staff. Participants related this aspect of the work to the background of many students, coming from low-income households but also needing teachers' affirmation and support to maintain learning momentum and autonomy. However, online learning in these circumstances appeared to impact negatively both on staff and students as needs were unmet:

> There's poverty and a lot of students are carers and households have increased in size ... I'm frightened how little resource there is to help them. (Diana)

> Our students face a double whammy: lack of self-direction and digital poverty (Harry)

These passages reveal important insights into what we might call the de-centring of responsibility that is operationalised, legitimised and reified by a FAP apparatus. In these comments about the extending and deepening of the pedagogy of care, the pastoral work staff undertake as an integral feature of their work, we see also echoes of Ulrich Beck's critique of how, under neoliberalism, individuals are required to find 'biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' (1992: 137); in the case of further education staff this means the individualisation of responsibility for social and economic factors – produced by social policy over which they have no control. Disconnected from their usual pedagogical practices, the anxieties generated by contact with students intensified.

The mental health of participants in the sample was adversely affected by the general dramatic change in student well-being as a consequence of the pandemic. Disproportionate mortality rates following COVID-19 infection for people from ethnic minoritised communities (Vandrevala et al. 2022) is also relevant here as the West Midlands of England has a very diverse population. Subhan stated that, 'Some students suffered 2 or 3 bereavements in a few weeks'. Several participants spoke of an increased demand for pastoral work that was predictably complemented by administrative and institutional responses:

> There's been a massive decline in student well-being. (Salam)

> Safeguarding stuff has gone absolutely stratospheric (Annie)

> We developed like a suicide protocol (Claudette)

The introduction of new codified institutional practices and procedures captures how all staff activity even in the extreme circumstances of the pandemic is viewed through the panoptic lens of accountability, audit and objectification that dominate further education settings. Safeguarding is a technology of double-consciousness, prompting a reflex of care simultaneously with a back-covering impulse to produce an audit-trail of response. Even in circumstances in which students' family members are dying and students themselves are recognised as being suicidal, staff were individually accountable for continuing the practices and ways of thinking dictated by the FAP. The tension here is between the altruistic and pastoral demands of the work at a personal level and the objectifying neoliberal purpose of further education at the institutional. It is the teacher who, objectified by the same discourse, is stretched at the centre of these polarising forces, addressing the impact of exterior social factors within a meritocratic hegemony that would seek to blame individual students for their own plight. The care and professional love that underpinned these teachers' practice represents a dimension of further education pedagogy that stands in opposition to self-interest.

The eclipse of the informal

In the first year of the pandemic, participants indicated that lockdown, WFH and online interactions with students and other staff all took a toll on their mental well-being. A noted and unanticipated consequence of the move to online activity and a pattern of Outlook scheduled interactions via MS teams or Zoom was that the usual informal interactions with others ceased. The value of (embodied) encounters and conversations in informal space was recognised by participants in its absence:

> It became all linear. You know . . . There was always a meeting at 9:00 o'clock . . . it kind of just elongated the work working day because everything became so regimented. And it's the things at the margins which kind of. . . I don't know what it is, but like they're like the glue and got lost. (Noel)

Noel's comment here indicates how the everyday recolonised work during the pandemic through the requirement to work online. Significantly, the informal spaces that provide social cohesion were excised. The interstices that connect staff to their well-being were effectively squeezed out by the rigidity of the Microsoft Teams calendar grid.

Lefebvrian thinking suggests that even within the most regulated and alienating of environments, human beings still have the capacity to reappropriate and bring in their own meanings and creativity. This is perhaps best captured in his theory of moments (Lefebvre 2014, 634–52): the notion that the present moment contains within it the possibility of breaking free from existing abstract and repressive space (Lefebvre 2014, 638–9). In contrast, socially co-produced space that is collective and 'differential' enables dialogical interactions.

Our data shows that during the pandemic, staff's mental well-being was affected by the margins in their everyday work being squeezed as lunchtimes and the time between meetings and lessons were colonised. Participants noted that in the second academic year of the pandemic, staff became more proactive in (re)establishing opportunities for co-

producing informal space/time. For some participants this was unstructured and opportune but rewarding:

> We (departmental colleagues) have talked way more than we have for years (Harry)

> You don't realise you know, particularly at my level, how much you get done by just stopping somebody in a corridor and just having a 5 minute chat. (Noel)

For other participants, informal space/time was reconfigured and scheduled in ways that were sometimes a conscious rejection of the new linear institutional rhythms. Interestingly these were both virtual and embodied interventions:

> so through lockdown we've had our own Teams meetings with each other. Now we do every Friday after college and often have virtual coffee with each other. (Subhan)

> I had to go in and I made it a rhythm. I'm going in every Thursday. Just so I can have a chat with one of the other managers who's gone in. Going really well. We go so we can have a coffee. I didn't do any work. No, no. (Diana)

That said, the response of some SLTs to keep 'rolling on down the same path' illustrates the phenomenon of performativity, outlined by Ball (2003), as a response to the models of individual and institutional accountability that drive educational quasi-markets. At the institutional level, the mental health of staff and students was seen as an inconvenience to the routine operation of regulatory technologies. And while the pandemic resulted in a thickening of tasks for staff, at the same time staff experienced a thinning of their agency.

Concluding thoughts

The pandemic adversely affected the mental health and well-being of further education staff just as it did that of students. Typical of many (formerly) public sector careers, further education teaching and mental health nursing are roles that experience the tensions of government policies that are founded on the accountability of the individual and a centralised failure to recognise how social conditions have an important impact on human lives and/or 'outcomes'.

Our data shows that the pandemic disrupted further education as a space of unproblematic transit into employment but in many senses it reasserted the significance of social and environmental conditions in shaping pathways in ways that counter meritocratic perspectives. When teachers responded to their students' and their own mental health issues in a sympathetic way, they were working against the grain of instrumentalist rationality and the essentialist reading of selves that seeks to blame and pathologise the individual rather than interrogate the social and educational environment as playing a part in 'distress'.

The findings illustrate how further education staff are positioned as agents of an instrumentalist and objectifying discourse while simultaneously many attempt to tackle social inequality and realise purposes related to social justice. In many ways, this echoes the work of mental health nurses who offer a caring face for people experiencing difficulties while, on the other hand, acting as a force for normalisation and the

individualisation of 'failure'. What's interesting is that both sets of practitioners find themselves in an unproductive and inhumane *impasse* produced by policy discourses underpinned by a meritocratic values base.

We would conclude that mental health nursing cannot offer any answers for the pressures on the mental health and well-being of further education staff, instead it can only offer up a mirror to an area of public work in which staff experience similar tensions between the values informing their work and the policy, knowledge production and funding that govern it. As we have tentatively outlined, both disciplines, further education and mental health are under the influence of neoliberal and meritocratic paradigms that contradict the personal and professional discourses that constitute practitioners' roles as being related to care and non-essentialist judgements. What the pandemic has done is open up the prospect for re-evaluation – by throwing that contradiction into relief while placing staff under further stress. But it has also opened up the potential for Lefebvrian moments of recognition, reconnection and meaning-making. Furthermore, the Power Threat Meaning frame-work connects strongly with international pedagogies orientated around social justice that seek to counteract neoliberal attempts to make capitalism the new morality (Bloom 2017) and to affirm a purpose of further education that is more human and more compassionate.

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