The state of professional practice and policy in the English Further Education system: a view from below

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Abstract

This paper addresses a recurring theme regarding the UK's Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy in which Further Education (FE) and training are primarily driven by employer demand. It explores the tensions associated with this process on the everyday working practices of FE practitioners and institutions and its impact on FE's contribution to the wider processes of social and economic inclusion. At a time when Ofsted and employer-led organisations have cast doubt on the contribution of FE, we explore pedagogies of practice that are often unacknowledged by the current audit demands of officialdom. We argue that such practice provides a more enlightened view of the sector and the challenges it faces in addressing wider issues of social justice, employability and civic regeneration. At the same time, the irony of introducing *laissez-faire* initiatives designed to remove statutory qualifications for FE teachers ignores the progress made over the past decade in raising the professional profile and status of teachers and trainers in the sector. In addressing such issues, the paper explores the limits and possibilities of constructing professional and vocational knowledge from networks and communities of practice, schools, universities, business, employers and local authorities, in which FE already operates.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training (VET), Further Education (FE), professionalism, teacher identity, educational research.

Introduction

What constitutes professionalism in the FE sector, though high on the political and policy agenda often remains opaque and contested among those on the ground. This paper, which has parallels with wider areas of public sector experience (e.g. Gleeson and Knights 2006)), addresses the neglected field of FE as an arena of power and control, including its marginal status among statutory bodies and governmental agencies responsible for schools and FE provision. Drawing on case study material from a FE/HE partnership in the West Midlands region of the UK, this paper focuses on the interface between *agency* (teaching and learning) and *structure* (policy and politics), in ways that impact on FE pedagogy and professionalism at a local level. Rather than reporting specifically on the findings from a discrete research study, this is a position paper that draws on data from two different projects dealing with 'live' areas of practice that are highly topical and contested for the FE workforce (i.e. the use of lesson observations and vocational pedagogy), both of which serve as illustrative vignettes of some of the key themes and issues discussed throughout.

This position paper argues for more robust forms of educational research and ethnographies that keep alive and make public the way practitioners build pedagogic cultures in the prevailing conditions of their work (Apple and Bearne 2007; Ranson 2003). Following in this tradition, this position paper explores ways of reclaiming critical professionality in the processes of civic renewal and social justice that seek to move beyond the limits of market reform and call into question the so-called efficiency of marketisation. A key question turns on the way educational research critically engages with knowledge making practices, rather than reporting the news (Shore and Butler 2012; Back and Puwar 2013).

The research involves a multi-method approach, drawing on data from recent research projects. It focuses on two specific exemplars: 1) the use of lesson observation in the sector and 2) vocational pedagogy. The practices that these two

exemplars refer to initial findings illuminate both the limitations and possibilities of reconnecting education reform to the ethos, nature and purpose of FE's traditional focus on meeting the broad, social needs of the communities it serves as well as the skills/economy-driven demands. This includes the prospects of improving teacher education programmes through 'criticality'- incorporating the stories and narratives of the participants involved, sometimes in negative ways.

By criticality we refer to the ways in which FE practitioners and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) tutors find ways of creatively interrupting a monistic skills agenda that Shore and Butler (2012) call 'the mechanic metaphors' and assumptions (p. 204) that inhabit the lived experience (habitus) of FE practice. The dominance of a skills-driven agenda, ostensibly linked to improving employability, productivity and inclusion has, in reality, come to mirror systems failure associated with the UK's low-skill, low-wage economy (Keep and Mayhew 2010). The market pulleys and levers which maintain such interventions (i.e. funding, audit and inspection), are supported by pathways and curriculum (emphasis on basic skills, competencies, learning styles etc.) designed to keep teaching and learning in touch with a work ethic that is not working. Yet, despite the ever-shifting political sands of VET and FE reform, there is another parallel narrative that is perhaps more sanguine. Recent research centres, for example, on FE's increasingly important role in regional regeneration and capacity building at local level (Green 2012). Equally there is strong evidence of FE's engagement with the personal development of students. These originate in many stories and single moments that involve small, immeasurable and everyday incidents that help students change, gain confidence and grow (Evans et al 2013). This echoes recent research by BIS (2013) that indicates FE is more than a skills factory:

> Six in ten of all learners (60%) undertook training for 'non-economic' reasons: 45% of these learners said they did it to learn something new or gain new skills;

> 23% mentioned a personal interest in the course, while 16% of these learners indicated that they were undertaking the qualification in order to progress into a higher level of education and training (BIS 2013, 7).

This questions the often deficit-based assumptions of FE teachers and learners as being primarily concerned with remedial courses, as far too simplistic. It is a view that largely ignores the diverse range of learner needs, motivations and interests in FE, within and beyond work and employer-led reform, that recent officially commissioned reports seemed so fixated on (Lingfield Report 2012; CAVTL 2013; CGL1 2012). While an important aspect of FE's contribution focuses on student wellbeing and job prospects, its diverse community and lifelong learning practice goes beyond a single economic purpose. In addition to conventional academic, industrial, agricultural, trade, apprenticeships and commerce programmes, colleges offer a wide range of provision encompassing, for example, language and literacy, sport, leisure and recreation, offender learning, performing and creative arts, media and design, health and social care and childhood studies. Though the results often have positive economic outcomes, the measures of such success are invariably achieved through strong learning cultures rather than the imposition of prescribed skills or learning styles, for example (James and Biesta 2007; Coffield et al 2008).

Changing teacher professionalism

The nature of FE teacher professionalism, though the subject of much recent research, is often misunderstood in the wider context of mainstream education. This is partly explained by divergence in teacher education between sectors, including historical divisions between technical, vocational and academic provision. By far the greater challenge to professionals working within and across sectors has been the de-professionalising effect of market and audit reform on teachers' work. More recently, attempts to deregulate teacher education provision, with a move away from College and HE partnerships in favour of employer-led initiatives, has raised the spectre of

government and employer micromanagement of professionalism in the classroom and workplace.

Apart from a short period of mandatory teacher education reform (IFL 2001-2012), the ethos of FE teacher professionalism has traditionally been associated with occupational qualifications and prior work experience that historically eschews formal ITE processes, though this does not discount the existence of well-established ITE provision across a national network of HEIs. While credential drift, associated with a significant expansion of academic-related programmes, has altered the technical and vocational landscape of FE/HE, many practitioners entering the field come from established trade and commercial backgrounds. Construction, business, engineering, hairdressing, catering, media and the arts are just a few examples of the industries from which experienced professionals have entered and continue to enter the teaching profession. Such expertise involves considerable prior work expertise and qualifications that often include experience of working with young people and adults of different ages and abilities, in a variety of work and community settings (Venables 1968).

At the same time, significant numbers of the students they teach and mentor come from similar backgrounds to themselves, which impacts on teaching and learning cultures (vocational habitus) in both positive and sometimes negative ways. In this respect, FE teachers' occupational biographies and transition into FE are less linear than those entering school and HE, though not exclusively so. The nature of entry into teaching among FE practitioners has become associated with notions of 'dual identity' – a term denoting how teachers describe their vocational identity in order of priority i.e. they see themselves firstly as an engineer, hairdresser of caterer and secondly as a teacher (Venables 1968; Tipton 1973; Orr and Simmons 2010). While such duality still holds strong, career entry into FE teaching is less clear cut today and is influenced by multiple identities associated with changing labour markets,

programmes of study and cultural diversity, including life course transitions, redundancy, and new beginnings. As James and Biesta (2007) have noted, though new entrants into FE speak of their altruistic desire to put their expertise and experience back into the community, others talk of 'sliding' into FE through casual and zero hours contracts that, by default, have become unofficial apprenticeships into FE teaching (Crowley 2014). Though such routes into FE are not new, the complex proliferation of fast changing roles and job titles, characterised by the range of terms used such as lecturer, tutor, trainer, instructor and assessor, reflects the diversity of the FE labour process. These roles also find expression in a wide range of often disparate academic, technical and vocational programmes that include on and off-site work placements. While part-time and casual working practices offer some degree of flexibility for teachers and managers, they also reinforce deeper distinctions between core (full-time) and periphery (part-time) staff (Gleeson 2014).

Recent research evidence points to continued, deep seated differences between full-time and part-time staff by age, ethnicity, gender and disability, with men remaining over represented in senior and technical staff roles (LSIS 2011). Overall, the data from the LSIS Summary Workforce Report concludes that across FE, female staff are more likely to be working part-time than their male counterparts. It also provides wider evidence of homophobic bullying and under-representation of minorities in management and leadership positions, including the recent use of zero contracts.

Though exhaustive data relating to the FE workforce is not readily available, the picture remains one of a casualised and fractured cohort of the wider teaching profession, associated with restricted access both to ITE and CPD opportunities. Despite FE's reputation for open access, social inclusion and 'second chance' provision, its staff and students operate in highly segmented and market tested teaching and learning environments. It is puzzling, therefore, that three recent independent reports with a remit to improve the quality of teaching and learning in

the sector (Lingfield 2012; CAVTL 2013; CGLI 2012; Ofsted 2012), make little or no reference to the narrow effects of work force reform on teachers' work. A continuing feature of this process is that audit, inspection and funding-led regimes have become disconnected from the contested and often fragmented conditions – suggesting the official instruments of measurement are not fit for purpose.

In the sections which follow we explore the implications of this process by looking at the micro contexts in which teachers operate, resist and seek to reclaim a professional identity at work – though not always successfully. This is not an either/or process that can be readily understood in terms of restricted or expansive notions of professionalism (Lucas and Nasta 2010); it is also associated with identity around issues of resistance, power and contestation (Bernstein 1996), which we explore in the sections that follows.

Visible and invisible pedagogies of power: the case of lesson observation

One of the most hotly contested interventions to affect FE teachers in recent years is the use of graded lesson observations. Lesson observation has a longstanding role in the initial education, training and CPD of teachers, where it has been used formatively to provide feedback on performance or to model particular teaching approaches. It is only over the last decade and a half, however, that it has been increasingly appropriated as a policy tool with a new focus on teacher accountability and performativity (O'Leary 2012a). This focus cannot be de-contextualised from the wider proliferation of managerialism in FE as a whole, though the decision to hand over the remit for inspecting the sector to Ofsted and the subsequent introduction of the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) were significant milestones in crystallising this shift over the last decade. In this short space of time observation has come to be regarded as arguably the most important source of evidence, along with student achievement, on which judgements about the quality of teaching and learning are based both externally for agencies like Ofsted and internally for FE institutions, as

much of the performance data collected by them is invariably done with Ofsted in mind (O'Leary 2014).

Graded observations are summative assessments of a teacher's classroom competence and performance, typically undertaken on an annual basis and culminating in the award of a grade (1-4) based on Ofsted's CIF 4-point scale. These grades are then fed into institutions' quality management systems, where they are used in performance management as well as providing evidence for inspection purposes. Recent policy developments suggest that this reliance on observation looks set to be ratcheted up even further as teachers enter an era of heightened scrutiny and performativity with increasing demands for them to be observed more frequently (e.g. DfE 2010; Ofsted 2012). But what is the impact of this policy focus? Is it actually leading to an improvement in the quality and standards of teaching and learning in the sector? And what do FE practitioners think about how lesson observation is currently used? (See, for example, UCU 2013)

One of the key findings from a recent study carried out in the sector revealed how graded observations have become normalised as a performative tool of managerialist systems fixated with measuring teacher performance rather than actually improving it (O'Leary 2011). These quantitative performance indicators, or what is commonly referred to in the sector as the 'lesson observation grade profile' (i.e. a statistical data set of how many lessons were graded 1, 2, 3 or 4 in any given year within the institution), have quickly become an established feature of college performance management systems and are accepted as valid and reliable measurements to compare overall performance year on year, forming the basis for the college's self-assessment for inspection purposes. In the comment below, Graham, the director of quality at a large college, accentuated the importance given to gathering and scrutinising this quantitative data on graded observations, as he was responsible for providing monthly statistical updates to his SMT colleagues:

> On a monthly basis I report to the executive team on the current formal graded observation profile so the stats that they are looking for is the percentage of lessons observed that were good or better and then the percentage of lessons that were observed as inadequate and what we're doing about it.

Such practice is indicative of what Smith and O'Leary (2013) have labelled as 'managerialist positivism', where the complexity of the teaching and learning process is superficially reduced to the presentation of quantitative performance data. Yet Graham, a senior college manager, was highly sceptical of its value: 'At the end of the year in our self-assessment report, we will report on the number of ones, twos, threes and fours and I think it's basically worthless'. Nevertheless he conceded that: 'it's something that all colleges do at the moment because it's what Ofsted expects'.

One could argue that the hegemony of graded observations is perhaps a predictable consequence of successive neo-liberal intervention in teaching and learning over the last two decades and, in particular, the increasing influence of Ofsted. Since its involvement in FE, Ofsted's role has moved beyond that of inspecting standards to one of defining them, with the result that certain models of self-assessment are looked upon more favourably than others, as is the case with graded observations. Despite recent claims to the contrary that Ofsted does not prescribe a graded approach to self-assessment in the sector (Coffey 2013), Graham's remark that 'it's what Ofsted expects' strikes a familiar chord with many SMTs who are reluctant to veer away from current normalised models of observation for fear of standing out from the crowd and thereby leaving themselves more open to the critical scrutiny of Ofsted. The dominance of graded lesson observation is thus indicative of how Ofsted casts its 'normalizing gaze' (Foucault 1977, 184) over assessment practices in the sector and in so doing effects a form of panoptic control as the 'all-seeing' eye for 'standards' and 'quality'.

Normalisation can be defined as the adjustment of behaviour to fall into line with prescribed standards. Foucault (1977) asserted that 'the power of normalisation imposes homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another' (184). In the case of graded observation, the 'homogeneity' that Foucault refers to is imposed by the requirement for all teachers to demonstrate standardised notions of 'best practice' during graded observations. Those that are able to demonstrate this become accepted members of a homogenous community; those that fail to do so are identified through gaps in their assessed performance. The means by which such gaps are measured and levels determined is through a procedure that Foucault referred to as the *examination*, which 'combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgement' (Ibid). In this case Foucault's *examination* is embodied in the annual graded observations that all FE teaching staff are required to undergo.

This process of normalisation is not, however, restricted solely to the mode of assessment but permeates pedagogy too. Teachers are encouraged to tailor what they do in the classroom during their graded observations to ensure that they comply with prescribed notions of 'good' or 'outstanding' practice, notions that are largely determined though not explicitly defined by Ofsted. Terry, an engineering tutor with over 25 years' teaching experience, whose observed lessons had consistently been assessed as a grade one over the previous five years, described with a certain sense of cynicism how he knew 'what boxes to tick' in order to get a grade one:

> I knew I was going to get a grade one because I knew what boxes to tick … if I used Power Point, if I included a plenary, if I proved that I was checking learning, etc. I could rabbit them off and I just went straight through a list. I got a one and it proved nothing at the end of the day. Ok, so I was told I got a

one, but I just thought, "so what"! The way the system is now is that if you know the rules you could be a crap teacher for the 35 weeks of the year but if you're good on that day because you know the game then you've got the tick in the box.

Terry's comments were indicative of how many teachers were aware of the need to 'play the game', especially given the high-stakes nature of these assessments and the potential repercussions for individuals and institutions alike (O'Leary and Brooks 2013). This in turn led to teachers spending disproportionate amounts of time in planning and preparing for these one-off observations than they would do normally. Invariably the normalised models of 'best practice' that Terry and others like him were encouraged and indeed expected to adopt if they wanted to achieve a high grade were cascaded from SMTs. As is the case with the recent development of comparative international testing systems for school children such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the search for 'best practices' has become the 'mantra' for teacher assessment and development in England, with 'comparison not only possible but imperative' (Kamens 2013, 123). However, rather than bringing about authentic and enduring changes in practice, this performative-driven emphasis has given rise to the creation of the 'showcase lesson' or what Ball has described as the 'spectacle' of an 'enacted fantasy' (2003, 222).

Another consequence was the reluctance for experimentation in the classroom as teachers feared being given a low grade and what that implied for the individual and the institution. 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). The advantages of observation models that prioritise development over surveillance are well documented. As Wragg remarks (1999, 17), 'good classroom observation can lie at the heart of both understanding

professional practice and improving its quality'. Yet one of the biggest obstacles to the creation of such a climate in the sector at present would appear to be the issue of grading (O'Leary 2014).

Such is the level of significance attached to the annual graded observation nowadays that it has become an all-purpose mechanism that seems to have been adopted as the panacea of all matters relating to professional practice, and, in some instances, even replaced the appraisal process as Terry recounts at his college:

> **Terry:** … A few years ago with your appraisal, you had a yearly appraisal, of which lesson observation was only one part.
>
> **Researcher:** Right, so that just formed one part of a wider process?
>
> **Terry:** Yes, but the appraisal is now gone and we're just left with the animal that's called the lesson observation, which I don't think satisfies all the needs of the individual.

Terry's remark about the replacement of the appraisal interview 'with the animal that's called the lesson observation' not only draws attention to the increased importance of observation as a mechanism in the sector, but also epitomises what O'Leary (2012b) has referred to as the 'fetishisation' of the observed lesson insomuch as it has taken on the status of an all-encompassing tool with which to assess the current competence and performance of teachers, whilst simultaneously diagnosing their future CPD needs. A recurring theme to emerge from O'Leary's (2011) study and indeed a more recent large scale study (UCU 2013) was the perceived lack of benefit of graded observations to the CPD of teachers. Some said that college SMTs were the only beneficiaries while others referred to internal graded observations as a

‘tick-box’ exercise that was more concerned with satisfying Ofsted than their development needs.

Wragg (1999) argued over a decade ago that the *purpose* of observation should largely determine how it is used. This would seem a fairly straightforward and uncontroversial statement, yet the boundaries between different approaches to observation and their underlying purposes have become blurred and contested. At the heart of these contestations lies a conflict between ‘structure’ and ‘teacher agency’, and related notions of power and control that manifests itself in the sometimes paradoxical agendas of policy makers, the institution and its teaching staff. This conflict is epitomised by the way in which the developmental needs of staff and the requirements of performance management systems are forced to compete as they are often conflated into a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of observation, with the latter prioritised over the former.

Formative approaches to observation such as ungraded peer observation tend to operate under the radar of metric-driven activity in many FE providers with little evidence of the data generated from them being formally acknowledged or contributing to performance-related data. This does not mean to say, however, that they are any less valuable or have less of an impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning than those that seek to measure performance. Some would argue to the contrary, as indeed does Caroline, the vice principal of one of the largest colleges in England, who when asked whether she saw a particular model of observation as being more worthwhile than others replied:

> I don’t have any empirical evidence for my answer here, but I think if we could get a community of practitioners who actually valued the process of helping and supporting one another and would happily go in and out of each other's lessons and if we had daily conversations between teachers about what’s

> working and what's not and idea sharing happening on an informal basis, not a formal basis, we will have won the battle. And the more formal systems you put in place probably militates against all of that because people then see it as a management driven initiative so we're not there yet but that's where we should be. In my view that would be the best possible environment, community of professionals, self-reflecting, sharing, talking, creatively thinking together and talking about their experiences would be wonderful.

Caroline's vision of a 'community of professionals' collaborating and sharing knowledge and experience on an informal basis exemplifies what we refer to as those 'invisible pedagogies' that play a key role in the on-going development of practitioners and teaching and learning as a whole. In the case of lesson observation, such practice offers a credible alternative to current performative models of graded observation that currently dominate the sector. The extent to which such alternatives could or would sit comfortably alongside managerialist systems of audit and accountability that invariably value a metrics-driven approaches to performance management more highly than qualitative alternatives is questionable. Surely though, as Caroline suggests, the way forward in maximising the potential of observation as a tool for improving the quality and understanding of teaching and learning lies in the adoption of an enquiry-based approach where teachers are empowered to become active researchers of their classrooms. Until this is acknowledged by the relevant stakeholders, particularly policy makers, then the hegemony of graded observations, as an example, looks set to continue and with it an impoverished understanding of what makes for effective teaching and learning.

Vocational Pedagogy: the view from practitioners

As already mentioned, the recent Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL 2013) can be seen as contributing to a government reform agenda that pays little attention to important contextual issues that shape the lived

experience of practitioners – the lack of any critique of the impact of workforce reform as expressed in the Lingfield Report (BIS 2012) is an example. The foreword to the CAVTL report stresses the importance of the FE sector being able to "develop programmes that address skills needs and wider learning for the sector" (CAVTL 2013, 6). A central focus throughout is on the need to identify and promote "excellent" teaching and learning in vocational subjects and in attempting to do this, the writers identify four "characteristics" of excellent VET, eight "distinctive features", four "enabling factors" and make ten "recommendations". The work of the Commission proceeded through the commissioners visiting providers, observing teaching, listening to learners, teachers and trainers, and employers and trade unions (CAVTL 2013, 12).

While the findings of the report are insightful, CAVTL is an example of a centralised and prescriptive approach to knowledge production for the purposes of developing FE in response to employer demand. We would argue that as a policy response CAVTL has two inter-related short-comings. First, it potentially de-values the existing knowledge of FE practitioners by implicitly supporting an idea that there is a mysterious hidden principle behind effective VET that requires a group of people other than vocational teachers to descry, articulate and disseminate it. Secondly, in taking on this centralised role in knowledge production, it is filling a vacuum in a sector conditioned by managerialist cultures which have eroded the possibility of teachers engaging in their own relevant research to underpin necessary professional practice (Elliott 2006). To that extent, while seeking to promote 'dual professionalism', the Commission itself is premised on an on-going structural process of de-professionalising FE practitioners in which practitioner research is seen as incidental rather than fundamental to the identity of teachers in FE.

In the following vignette, we contrast the CAVTL *modus operandi* with that of a smaller scale, localised research project: *Building and sustaining partnership cultures in*

*vocational pedagogy - practice, theory, leadership and community***.** The ITE partnership from which this project grew sees itself as a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) – in this case, of teacher educators. This means that there is a conscious effort to blur the boundaries between FE and HE ITE provision. This 'blurring' is exemplified by the HE teachers all having a background of working in FE; by the use of sabbaticals for FE staff to work on the Pre-Service programme at the University and by a franchising arrangement that attracts new colleges to the partnership through a strong level of engagement and interaction. The project used the CAVTL Report (2013) among other recent publications on vocational pedagogy (Lucas *et al.* 2010, Lucas *et al*. 2012, Faraday *et al*. 2011, Skills Commission 2010) as a starting point for reflection and research with a group of FE vocational practitioners. This group was drawn from the colleges and institutions that belong to a HE /FE partnership delivering FE ITE in the West Midlands. The project had a number of key strands:

i) To improve the understanding throughout the Partnership about what good practice in different vocational areas looked like through setting up subject specialist communities of practice across college boundaries;

ii) To develop the existing ITE programmes delivered across the Partnership to reflect this improved understanding and enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the qualifications for vocational teachers;

iii) To offer CPD opportunities for the practitioners involved, in particular through offering them the possibility of teaching on the ITE programmes as subject specialists.

A final research strand that ran through the project centred on a multi-method approach to gathering data about vocational pedagogy through a series of five full and half day meetings in which participants took part in discussions around how they got into teaching, how they learn best, their own barriers to learning and their

current involvement with employers. They were also invited to reflect on the CAVTL recommendations and the theoretical models emerging from other literature.

The community of practice (CoP) concept was also used as a primary concept in the research project. The idea was to facilitate the establishment of a number of subject specialist communities of teachers from across colleges in the region. Nineteen FE practitioners from six subject areas took part, originating from eight FE colleges and four prisons. Participant involvement took the form of meeting together as subject specialist CoPs both at the University but also in their workplaces. The project established CoPs in STEM and Engineering, Construction, Offender Learning, Media Studies, Hair and Beauty and Health and Social Care.

The key findings that we share in this article connect with the idea that 'emotional labour' and pastoral work is a central, though unrecognised component of the FE teacher's role (Salisbury et al. 2006). When asked to generate a list of the features of an 'excellent' vocational teacher in their subject area, the notion of 'care' and 'caring' were major themes that resonated across all subjects. The first participant to mention 'care' (a Media Studies teacher) explained how she took a holistic view of students that often involved helping them with wider pastoral issues. One example she briefly outlined involved dealing with one student's housing, benefits and shopping needs and how other members of her department characterised this as her "mummying" the students. Rather than seeing this as a feature arising from an exploitative increase in the employment of women in the FE sector (Simmons 2008), we would instead view this as a response to funding driven courses and the choices that teachers are forced to make by the prevailing managerialist cultures in FE. The point to emphasise is that the caring aspect of the Media Studies teacher's work was openly criticised by other staff. She was too caring in a context in which courses were there to be delivered and students were viewed as a means of securing

funding. In that context, 'caring' was an untechnical approach. In this regard, we would argue that marketisation, managerialism and funding centredness have reduced caring in FE – or at the very least have marginalised the pastoral aspects of FE teaching to little more than technical 'effects' that can be captured through student satisfaction quality assurance tools.

Furthermore, participants were not complacent or uncritical in their expression of the need for care. They viewed care as necessary but devalued. Their approach was always in tension with a dominant view of students as funding fodder. Other participants recognised the negative aspects of this labelling and asserted the importance of the pastoral aspect of their work. This echoes Hyland's commentary (2006) on the place of 'caring' in FE. In affirming a view that continuing reforms to vocational qualifications and the negative impact of marketisation are impacting negatively on students' experience, he suggests:

> There has never been a more important time to reassert the traditional 'caring' functions of FE which emphasise the importance of all students learning within the framework of close links between colleges and their communities. (Hyland 2006, 8)

It is also important to distinguish what participants meant by 'care' from the 'therapeutic turn' that Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) have claimed is currently gripping education in England. This aspect of the work was not about conditioning students attitudinally for employment. Instead, the pastoral concerns here were a focus outside of any qualifications gained. Indeed, participants viewed the work as a neglected and devalued aspect of their work, being discounted by (some) other teachers and managers as it was time consuming but was not recognised in terms of college quality assurance or funding.

The centrality of this aspect of vocational teachers' work was echoed by an experienced prison educator working in Construction. He recounted dealing with a queue of heavily-muscled inmates standing outside his office at the beginning of the day, all keen to see him to ask for help with a range of issues ranging from decoding lawyers' letters to discussing strained relationships with partners on the outside. In both cases, the vocational teacher regarded this 'caring' aspect of their role as a pre-requisite to successful teaching and learning. This echoes findings in the literature around the fundamental importance of tutor-student relationships as 'the most important link in the whole process of further education' (TLRP 2008, 6). For these practitioners, 'care' was not viewed as a detachable aspect of their practice but regarded as the cornerstone on which the features of an 'excellent' vocational teacher needed to be built; furthermore, it was seen as something that was increasingly pushed to one side by administrative and funding concerns.

Echoing a point made in CAVTL that a key enabling factor is "a collaborative approach to accountability in order to empower VET professionals to maximise impact for employers and learners", participants expressed strong views on how managerialist systems of accountability failed to recognise effective VET where it connected to the 'growth' of students and abraded against self-generated models of professionalism. Amy stated:

> You are limited in what you can actually deliver and a lot of it can be down to (the college) because we are all so funding focused…. Programme Management Board is where people get told off for everything they've done. That's the best way of describing it. This colleague was defending a particular course. He'd lost three students off his course, fifteen weeks into the course and all hell broke loose: "Why did you lose these students?" In fact they had gone onto apprenticeships – one of them had gone into the trade and was still receiving training at the college. And to me, those individuals had gone on and "Well

> done. Fantastic!" But no the figures reflected negatively…. This is the stifling that happens at college level. Success should be measured by people going on to have a successful career.

This passage reveals that the student-orientated 'care' viewed by participants as central to their sense of excellence in VET is 'invisible' to existing quality assurance technologies in colleges. Furthermore, while teaching staff may maintain a 'clear line of sight to work' (CAVTL 2013, 9), where this cuts across college funding, cultures of accountability and blame have the effect of subordinating the interests of the student to those of the institution.

This theme of data-driven cultures in colleges as an obstacle to the flowering of effective VET and the sense of professional identity amongst VET teachers was a prominent theme running across data sets. Rick provided a further example:

> We had three learners who went into employment and because it was after the six week period, it had an overall effect on our success rates, and the overall effect of that was that we came in at 0.9% below the national average. So instead of saying 'Well done!" we were put in… "intensive care" – that's the term they use.

Rick's example demonstrates that the newly established 'Learning Programme' approach to funding – that privileges student retention over qualification completions – is as blunt an instrument as previous incarnations of the FE funding methodology (see Smith and O'Leary 2013 for examples).

Overall, the data provided from the project offered a very different perspective from that represented in existing literature (Claxton et al 2010, CAVTL 2013) in that contextual factors were signalled as presenting significant obstacles to effective VET.

Perhaps the most important contribution was the perspective of practitioners that skills development cannot be divorced from the life world contexts of students and that effective VET teachers strive to address educational goals within a localised setting while embracing the broader FE aims of social inclusion. It is perhaps unsurprising that this locally produced knowledge should provide a richer and more nuanced picture than the decontextualised and abstract version of VET that seems to be promoted by centralised discourses. This might best be explained through reference to two phenomena that have increasingly characterised FE over the last two decades. The first is the over-emphasis on quantitative data as a consequence of funding that has had the effect of engendering and then sustaining cultures of managerialism and performativity in colleges. This has resulted in the systematised privileging of quantitative over qualitative data and has had the effect of tearing away the contextual frame that is needed to understand college data (Smith and O'Leary 2013, Lee 2012). When complemented by the fabrication of data that managerialist cultures give rise to, the risk of reliability being compromised is magnified.

The second contributory factor is the maelstrom of policy that afflicts the sector – to the extent that no reform is allowed to bed down. The turmoil generated by annual changes to funding and curriculum prompted the 157 group to write an open letter to the incoming Minister of Skills in August 2014, pleading for respite:

> To do more at this point runs the risk of setting all this previous 'doing' up to fail. People… can only cope with so much change at once. Many of the reforms to date have received strong support from colleges, but time is needed to embed them. We hope that your arrival gives us a valuable opportunity for some much-needed breathing space to ensure the best success for learners. (Sedgmore 2014)

The welter of policy is fed by data while at the same time generating more data in a sterile cycle. It is not difficult to understand how 'care' falls outside education when it is viewed, in this way, as a technical delivery system.

What is concerning is that a defining feature of the terrain as identified in the project is barely mentioned in most policy literature. We would argue that by failing to highlight these phenomena while engaging with a 'best practice' agenda for workforce development, CAVTL may serve to impede rather than facilitate the enhancement of VET in FE.

Pedagogy, social justice and employability

If one effect of market and neo-liberal reform has been to separate FE off from its core business and values, as an 'alternative route' of 'second chance provision', another is the appropriation that successive governments have made in controlling recession and collapsed labour markets through the so-called 'skills agenda'. Since FE incorporation, recurring patterns of VET policy and practice have essentially tracked rather than challenged the UK's low-skill, low-wage economy (Keep and Mayhew 2010). The subsequent plethora of VET initiatives both promotes and reflects recurring crises generated by market, policy and system failure. Recent OECD research (Green 2012) points to a 'tsunami' of policy initiatives over the past two decades that has restricted the ambitions of colleges, communities and local employers, in building infrastructural growth in the contexts and cultures in which they operate. Recurring themes from cognate research projects (e.g. ESRC: TLRP/SCOPE/LLAKES) identify five areas that have contributed to systemic policy failure that has impacted on FE, including:

- The use made of colleges as a substitute for employment and an extension of post-compulsory education.

- The restriction of college, community and employer partnerships, due to competition and the removal of regional tiers of strategic local government and economic planning.
- The increased reliance on outsourcing FE provision to private providers, getting students into work without checks and balances, on a payments-by-results basis.
- The dominance of corporate employer voice, demanding subsidies and tax breaks for participating at the selective end of the VET system and disadvantaging Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).
- The persistence of skills over pedagogy at levels 1 and 2, maintaining a low skills ceiling that reduces learner progression.

While colleges and their staff are well-practised in mediating the vagaries of the market, their energy and resources have been channelled in diverse directions that have reduced pedagogy and professional development to second order priority. The continuing effects of youth unemployment and weak labour markets have, according to Green (2012), dominated a skills agenda which, in terms of its learners, ''… is only part of the mix and not the fix'' (59). If one consequence of this is to place limits on critical pedagogy and teacher development, another is the way it restricts colleges' potential as regional learning hubs, in the wider process of social and economic renewal. At the same time Green's case study data portrays FE colleges as significant 'bridging institutions' that address 'real world challenges,' raising both the ambitions of employers and learners in the community:

> They provide bridges between employers and individuals….in fostering bottom up innovation which focuses on the capacity of workers and companies to innovate and move up the value chain …(and)… can help provide the life skills for navigating not only the labour market but life in general (Green 2012, 60)

Alongside such findings parallel research questions the prevailing view that the returns to public investment in FE are too low to warrant large scale infrastructural funding and investment. Recent ESRC research indicates that under growing conditions of social polarisation, exclusion and uncertainty, FE has a protective effect in keeping young people and adults close to changing and volatile labour markets (Evans, Schoon and Weales 2013). This role also involves the largely ignored process that supports productive adult transitions and turning points associated with learners and the life course, operating largely under the radar of inspection regimes. The problem with audit and inspection cultures is, however, less to do with their existence than the way they misrecognise the conditions in which really useful knowledge is produced and how this also challenges systems failure and rescues lives (Gane 2012). As Rustin (2013, 15) has noted:

> Audit and inspection are commonly seen as engines of standardisation and one dimensionality……but need they be? Could forms of public accountability not be developed which are inclusive and democratic, and which were attentive to human qualities of service, rather than to their conformity to rules, procedures and outputs?

Reflecting on this critique, Apple maintains that 'public story telling 'through research and practice has an important function in keeping alive the possibility of making public the successes of individuals and institutions contesting market controls over policies, curriculum and pedagogy (Apple 2009). While alone such interventions may not be sufficient, Apple argues that a critical ethnographic dimension to educational research provides professionals with concrete policies and practices that will enable them to act practically in their own institutions, against prevailing models of surveillance and de-professionalisation. In support of this approach, both Elliott (2009) and Ranson (2003) argue that research-based teaching is becoming increasingly more compelling. It involves making public teachers' stories

of building curriculum and pedagogy that embody Ranson's view of a reconstituted public sphere, based on difference, participation, dissent and social justice. This may or may not always relate directly to the acquisition of employable skills but certainly should involve interaction with students at a level that demands their engagement as thinking individuals.

While it would be inaccurate to say that mainstream educational research does not challenge or criticise the status quo, the findings of research are often overtaken by policy change and fashion or disappear through the ether of ministerial disappointment with answers they did not expect (Back and Puwar 2012). If really useful educational research is to transcend the immediacy of spot social knowledge generated by social media, it needs to engage with 'live research methods' that capture the different ways educational knowledge is constructed in the contested contexts in which stories are told. This relates back to the marketisation of the sector and the proliferation of knowledge production practices that are shaped by performativity (Ball 2003). The official discourse around FE that informs policy-making draws heavily on the largely unreliable data generated by managerialist / positivist cultures within colleges (Smith & O'Leary 2013) and is supported it would seem by the culture of performative knowledge production that currently underpins UK political life. Educational research that is locally co-produced by practitioners and researchers closely allied to local contexts has the ability to act as an antidote to this in the short term. We would suggest that locally produced knowledge in the current climate is necessary to restore balance against detrimentally centralised knowledge production practices.

While welcoming the recent focus on vocational pedagogy in FE, we are concerned that the emphasis on 'how to teach', learning styles and skills, remains more closely tied to surface knowledge and inspection criteria, than engaging critically with building capability that supports the needs and expertise of learners and teachers on the ground. The current freedom of the employer to make decisions regarding who

to train, whether they are students or teachers, will undoubtedly lead to greater social injustices and failures in the VET system than exist at present. Reversing this trend through research and teacher education alone may not suffice. However, growing disbelief in the controlling effects of neo-liberalism in separating off pedagogy from its purpose and value is now raising pressing questions about what that connection should be, and for whom.

Concluding comments

While evidence from this paper indicates the nature and purpose of FE practice rests close to the surface of teacher identity, the tensions between practitioners being perceived as education workers or empowered professionals, remains highly contested. Looking to the future therefore, what can reasonably be expected of FE practitioners beyond the current contexts of their work? This question arguably turns on what not to do, given evidence of widespread systems failure in VET itself (Keep and Mayhew 2010; Coffield et al 2008).

Broader principles of social justice are also at stake. A starting point might be an appraisal of the role of employers in VET. A re-evaluation is called for. First, of employers' freedom to define the VET curriculum and the right to curtail the entitlement of adults and young people to professionally trained and qualified staff. And secondly, of their market rights to reduce the interactive and creative processes associated with the individual destiny of the learner, through standardised approaches that largely ignore the contexts and cultures in which VET learning takes place. And finally, of major employers' demands for tax breaks, subsidies and government grants to train adults and young people in predominantly low skill-low wage environments.

A major effect of employer involvement overall has been to restrict learning and social mobility, and effectively to reduce the funding of colleges and sector partners

who are largely responsible for such work. In both social and economic terms the private governance of public money not only endows employers with a voice without accountability, but also forms part of what Berg (1971) once aptly referred to as 'The Great Training Robbery'. While these considerations may not be the definitive answers to failings in the VET system, equally they explain the source of recurring disfunctionality associated with successive *laissez-faire* political regimes that continue to tinker with the system without improving it. Without engaging the wider participation of partners in the FE sector in the production of contextualised and embedded knowledge, then sustainable improvement for staff and students is likely to remain elusive.

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