

Two sides of the same coin: discourses of ‘skill’ in further education initial teacher education

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Abstract

Skill is ubiquitous with the English Further Education (FE) sector's policy discourse and discursive practices, yet it is used in different ways to mean different things within the sector. Within the context of a deregulated FE Initial Teacher Education (ITE) system, the discourse is underpinned by a set of standards and guidance expected of providers, many of whom are, or work alongside, a Higher Education Institution (HEI). This research sought to determine the role that those working in this system have in recontextualising skills policy discourse. Building on interdisciplinary perspectives of skill and using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research explored the skills discourse of 10 Teacher Educators (TEds) working within the English FE ITE sector. The discursive practices of TEds were found to be bound up with generic higher education notions of 'graduate skills' and 'graduate employability'. This complements a narrow and weak discursive frame which underpins the ITE curriculum, linked to atomised standards, whereby generic teaching practices are centred to the exclusion of strongly classified theoretical and subject specialist knowledge, contributing to a narrower skills discourse and marginalisation of subject specialisms. This work has implications for policy makers and those involved in curriculum development in FE ITE.

Keywords: skills; critical discourse analysis; further education; technical and vocational education and training; initial teacher education

Introduction

Notions of skill pervade the English Further Education (FE) sector's policy and practice and this is especially salient in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes which are principally undertaken by post-16 learners in FE colleges or through apprenticeships, rather than through A-levels or university. As suggested by Atkins (2013), the majority of young people undertaking TVET programmes are drawn from lower socio-economic groups, often with a history of low achievement in school alongside additional characteristics associated with social exclusion, such as learning difficulties and disabilities. Moreover, many of these programmes continue to be held in lower esteem and fail to provide educational advantage, with those that study them being marked out for lower-skilled and inferior status roles (Atkins and Flint 2015; Esmond and Atkins 2022).

The low status of FE in England is compounded by the low status of teachers within the sector which has remained overshadowed by that of teachers in the pre-16 school sector (Atkins and Tummons 2017; Burnell 2017). For example, while it has long been a statutory requirement for teachers in the school sector to gain qualified teacher status (QTS), the comparable professional status for those in the FE sector is voluntary (Orr and Simmons 2010). There has also been a long-standing issue with the regulation of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) within FE (Lucas, Nasta and Roberts 2012) with the current system seen as incoherent, consisting of diverse pathways and inconsistent requirements, limiting its effectiveness (Allison 2023). Despite this, many teachers in the sector continue to undertake FE ITE programmes, with approximately 10,000 individuals studying a level 5 or above teaching qualification annually (ETF 2018), and around a third of these are accredited by Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Although large numbers of those undertaking FE ITE are learning to teach in the English TVET system, Harkin, Cuff and Rees (2008, 15) found 'relatively few teacher educators with craft backgrounds' and that 'it is unlikely that the

curriculum areas represented by teacher educators reflect the composition of the FE workforce'. Indeed, Loo's (2020) work suggests that around 90% of teacher educators (TEds) are from non-TVET backgrounds, with the majority having bachelor's degrees or higher. This creates an interesting tension considering the TEds' educational experiences and transitions differ to those that they teach. Therefore, with discussions of skill in the context of the TVET system inherently involving discussions of disadvantage, this research sought to determine the role that TEds working within FE ITE play in recontextualising the skills policy discourse.

Policy Discourse

At the macro level, current globalised educational policy discourse reflects an unrelenting belief that skills will solve a nation's social and economic woes by enhancing the quality of its human capital, increasing labour market participation rates and boosting its international economic competitiveness (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney 2022). Investment in skills is seen as an investment in the individual as capital, where they are to benefit from training and development to 'upskill' (Brown, Lauder, and Cheung 2020). This perspective assumes that, if skills are not enhanced, the nation will falter and, consequently, globalisation and technological changes have led to capitalism advocates such as The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2021, 4) to issue 'a call to action for wide-scale upskilling'.

As Rikowski (2022, 418) asserts, 'from the perspective of capital, education becomes socially validated the greater it is reduced to labour-power production' and Esmond and Atkins (2022) argue there has been an increasing alignment between the discourses of education and the discourses of the economy since the birth of neoliberalism in England in the 1980s, which has inherently marginalised factions of the working class. Influenced by theories of human capital, this has led to a long history in the of trying to identify the skills,

qualities and attributes that are commonly deemed to be required to be successful at work and, with the rise of the neoliberal agenda came the idea of the ‘marketable individual’, with an increased emphasis on meeting employers’ needs (Wheelahan 2007). Inevitably, with such little homogeneity between the needs of employers, skills policy documents and representatives long recycled clusters of generic and transferable skills yet, despite various attempts at standardising a list of these skills, never has there been an agreed definitive list (Kelly 2001; Green 2016). Aside from creating ambiguous and conceptually incoherent notions of skill, this discourse commodified skills, removing them from the individual and their social contexts, and viewing them as items that can be bought and sold in the labour market (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney 2022), thus marginalising those with ‘less to sell’.

Whilst there was an evident shift in more recent policy discourse, with its emphasis on higher-level technical skills, this was largely focussed on the Conservative Government’s flagship Technical Level qualifications at level 3, with little policy attention given to other level 3 or lower-level vocational programmes (DfE/DBEIS 2016) whose curricula serve disproportionate numbers of learners from poorer backgrounds (Atkins 2013). Crucially, this created division in the discourse between those deemed to be technical elites, seen as more valuable assets to the economy, and those destined for low skilled - often welfare – work (Esmond and Atkins 2022). Policy attention in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic continued to emphasise higher technical skills aimed at meeting employers’ needs and the Skills for jobs (DfE 2021) white paper extended this to FE Initial Teacher Education in that, like other technical qualifications, ITE qualifications should be designed around employer-led occupational standards. This discourse aligns FE ITE more closely to the neoliberal policies that pervade the current skills discourse in TVET but, as discussed below, has the potential to narrow the FE ITE curriculum (Loo 2018; Rikowski 2022).

FE ITE Curriculum

Despite criticisms of being overly theoretical, given FE ITE's low status and positioning in England's educational policy discourse, Bernstein's (2000) theories of knowledge and the pedagogic device provides us with a useful theoretical lens through which to critique the fields of production, recontextualisation and reproduction of knowledge in FE ITE, particularly in relation to the skills discourse.

The Official Recontextualisation Field (ORF) responsible for the creation and regulation of the curricula (Bernstein 2000) in FE ITE currently resides with IfATE (2021), the body representing and owning the employer led-standard, the Education and Training Foundation (2024) who developed a framework for the structure of FE ITE qualifications, the DfE (2024a), who established a non-statutory set of expectations for the delivery of FE ITE, and Ofsted (2020), who regulate the sector through their ITE inspection framework. However, the empirical work in this study was undertaken prior to recent reforms to FE ITE with the ORF limited to Ofsted (2020), the ETF (2016) guidance on the teaching qualifications for FE, and Professional Standards (ETF 2014; 2022).

Due to such a wide array of subjects within the FE sector (Crawley 2005), and the long-standing issues with the regulation of FE ITE, curriculum guidance had been limited and largely unchanged since 2007 (LLUK 2007; ETF 2016). Loo (2018) contends, it is evident from the guidance that FE ITE qualifications are fundamentally designed to be generic in that they continue to be characterised by a lack of propositional knowledge. Rikowski's (2022) work suggests that it is the ejection of the social sciences from teacher training courses that has led to genericism and this genericism denotes a weakening of classification of knowledge boundaries, aiming for 'trainability' as opposed to specialisation (Wheelahan 2007). Moreover, the Professional Standards (ETF 2014; 2022) that pervaded FE

ITE since 2014 are generic modes of teaching that have been constructed from relations of similarity between elements of different practices which, according to Bernstein (2000), emanates in a socially empty curriculum due to the skills being decontextualised and cut off from the communities of practice. Given that many of the trainees studying in FE ITE are from craft or skills-based subjects rather than general or ‘academic’ subjects (ETF 2018), this narrowing of the intellectual base of FE ITE may appear more inclusive in that it is more accessible, though it, perhaps unintentionally, has the opposite effect, reducing teaching to atomised processes which marginalises teachers undertaking this training. However, Scott, Wilde and Bennett (2022) argue that TEds must create and safeguard an intellectual space where teachers can contest the ‘dangerous distortion of perceived reality and challenge the external powers that deprive of thinking and acting space’ (Allen 2002 cited in Scott, Wilde and Bennett 2022, 30). In other words, the study of critical social sciences allows trainee teachers to challenge the structures of capitalism that often marginalise them and the young people they are working with (Rikowski 2022).

The generic discourse emphasised in the FE ITE curriculum also serves to marginalise the occupational expertise of trainees, indeed, Husband (2015) found trainee TVET teachers were left wanting more practical and vocational coverage due to insufficient emphasis on vocational skills training in their FE ITE qualification. In the same way TVET mediates and reproduces social inequality through the exclusion of theoretical knowledge (Wheelahan 2015), the denial of access to knowledge that fosters participation in debates and controversies in society and occupational fields of practice within FE ITE may also serve to reproduce inequality. It is important to recognise that this may not only be a consequence of the curriculum, but may also be impacted by the backgrounds and identities of those teaching FE ITE for whom a large number come from academic, non-TVET backgrounds (Harkin, Cuff and Rees 2008; Loo 2020). Given the above complexities at the ORF, this research

sought to explore the role that the practices of TEds play in recontextualising the skills discourse at the Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (PRF).

Method

This research set out to analyse how discourses of skill in skills policy are recontextualised and understood by Teacher Educators (TEds), which therefore requires an analysis of how TEds deploy skills in practice. The study design was informed by Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (2000), engaging with Bernstein's (2000) theory of recontextualisation and pedagogic device. A Faircloughian approach foregrounds CDA in the methodology and can be seen as a variant of Bhaskar's 'explanatory critique' (Bhaskar 1998) with a critical realist ontology. A key feature of this dialectical approach is the combination of negative critique in the diagnosis of the problem and positive critique in identifying possibilities for solving the problem (Fairclough 2001).

The approach can be formulated in four 'stages' starting with 1: a focus upon a social wrong. Fairclough's (2001, 125) approach to CDA 'has emancipatory objectives and is focused upon the problems confronting what we can loosely refer to as the 'losers' within particular forms of social life', for example the poor, or oppressed groups. This approach is pertinent to this study, a study centred on TVET, a sector of education which disproportionately supports those from disadvantaged, marginalised groups (Atkins 2013). The tentative social wrong was perceived to be that discourses of skill in FE ITE contribute to the marginalisation of those studying in TVET and its teachers. The second stage 2: requires identification of obstacles to addressing the social wrong. This stage sought to ascertain what it is about the way in which social life is structured and organised that prevents the social wrong from being addressed (Fairclough 2001). In following a

Faircloughian CDA, I began by selecting appropriate texts and conducting textual analysis of the selected texts for the research question.

The selected texts for CDA were focus group interview transcripts with questions adopting a semi-structured format around three discussion topics. Discussion topic 1 sought to ascertain how TEds identified skills that they understood were developed by their own teaching practices. The purpose of this was to determine what they conceptualised as a skill, thus what underpinned their discourses. The second question sought to determine TEds' perspectives on what influences their conceptions of skill. They were asked where they got their ideas of skill from and what influences their understanding of skill. The final question asked TEds how they teach their trainee teachers the skills they discussed. This question was asked to determine how discourses of skill are recontextualised and operationalised in practice.

Formal ethical approval was granted, with a purposeful sampling method selected for the research, where subjects are deliberately chosen due to the qualities and experiences they possess (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim 2016). Given the niche focus area of this research (FE ITE) this was deemed most appropriate to ensure sufficient availability of subjects and to obtain rich information and in-depth insight into the discursive practices of TEds. The inclusion criteria was for TEds to be current, active teachers in FE ITE with a minimum of 2-years' experience delivering these programmes to TVET teachers at, or above, level 5. It was felt that 2 years was sufficient to allow one to understand the full ITE programme. In total 10 TEds participated across two focus groups which took place between November 2020 and March 2021, lasting between 60 and 75 minutes.

Table 1 – Demographic of TEds

TEd Code	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Subject Specialism	Mode of ITE taught
A	30-39	Male	White British	Science	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – HEI.
B	40-49	Male	White British	Social Sciences	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) and Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) - HEI franchised.
C	40-49	Female	White British	Sport	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) - HEI franchised ;Level 3 Award in Education – Awarding Body
D	50-59	Female	White British	Education Studies	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – HEI.
E	30-39	Male	White British	Sport	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – HEI franchised; Level 5, Diploma in Education and Training (DET) - Awarding Body.
F	30-39	Male	White British	History and Politics	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed), Level 6, Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (ProfGCE) – HEI franchised.
G	20-29	Male	White British	English & ESOL	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE); Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) – HEI franchised.
H	30-39	Female	White British	English	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – HEI franchised. Level 5, Diploma in Education and Training (DET) - Awarding Body.
I	50-59	Female	White British	Sport	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – HEI.
J	30-39	Male	White British	Education Studies	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed), Level 6, Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (ProfGCE), Level 7, Post

					Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – HEI franchised.
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Coding themes stemmed from Fairclough's (2010) descriptive level analysis, whereby vocabulary is foregrounded and categorised drawing on Winch's (2010) conceptualisations of skill: practical and technical skills (T) are effectively those skills that are required to fulfil the requirements of the job, which are typically practical in nature. 'Basic skills' such as mental arithmetic or 'easily' transferable skills such as literacy and numeracy were coded as moderately inflated (MI). Any skills associated with being general and transferable i.e., general teaching skills or problem solving were coded as immoderately inflated 1 (II1). Social skills and similar i.e., communication and empathy were coded as immoderately inflated 2 (II2). Finally, other notions that fell beyond this conceptual framework but were conflated with skill such as values and attributes i.e., resilience were coded as immoderately inflated 3 (II3).

Transcriptions were then used to undertake a CDA to examine how TEds working with TVET teachers draw on skills discourses in their practice. The first stage of the analysis of data focussed on the vocabulary for discussion topic 1, examining the transcripts of the focus groups. Coding themes stemmed from Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) descriptive level analysis, whereby vocabulary is foregrounded and categorised drawing on Winch's (2010) conceptualisation and categorisation of skill. This approach was selected as it allowed for a clear distinction between the different ways in which the notion of skill can be adapted in the discourse. In addition, during the descriptive analysis, as the text is not a typical 'text', and the analysis centred on transcripts of conversation, it was also important to focus on the non-verbal utterances in the texts too (Fairclough 2010), including vocal and non-vocal pauses, prosodic features, and paralinguistic features (Bakhtin 1986).

Analysis of discussion topic 2 and 3 involved a manual inductive coding process, which involved reading and interpreting the focus group transcripts to identify themes associated with the discourse influence and how TEds recontextualised notions of skill for their trainee TVET teachers. This drew upon Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) descriptive level analysis to identify the language used in the production of and recontextualisation of the discourse. Given that discussion topics 2 and 3 focussed on more of a 'meso' level of analysis, consumption and production of the discourse, it allowed for greater interpretation of the discourse practices (Fairclough 2001; 2010). The descriptive and interpretive analysis provided three key themes to explore at the macro, societal level through which an explanatory analysis was conducted to depict the 'discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures' (Gowhary, Rahimi, Azizifara and Jamalinesari 2013, 138).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Both TEd focus groups indicated that much of the skills discourse, through which they described their own practice, was dominated by inflated notions of skill and, whilst this reflects previous policy discourse, it is at odds with the discourse in contemporary skills policy, where the focus centres on higher-level technical skills. Many of the concepts discussed by TEds focus on general teaching skills, which fall within the generic, transferable skills category (II1), such as questioning and classroom management. Arguably, this is expected on an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme, whereby the content is generic and crosses multiple disciplines. Generic, transferable skills such as critical thinking also pervades their discourse (II1). In addition, several other concepts are articulated which were categorised as immoderately inflated (II3) and this includes things such as resilience skills.

Significant in the initial responses to discussion topic 1 was the apparent conceptual confusion, which was evidenced by a lack of coherence, with many having not considered the skills they teach previously, for example:

I think it's difficult to define, isn't it, because...er... there's a lot of little skills, but what...er...people sort of think is one is probably quite difficult to pin down (TEd G).
Yeah... I kind of second that motion a little bit, so when I first decided to take part in this, I really had to kind of think about what we mean by skills (TEd F).

This lack of clarity, exacerbated by their intermittent pauses and utterances (e.g., 'kind of' and 'er'), arguably suggests that discussions of ways in which skill can be conceptualised are uncommon in FE Initial Teacher Education (ITE), which is ironic given that they are teaching trainee TVET teachers for whom 'skills' pervade the sector.

A Generic Skills Discourse: Graduate Skills

When unpacking the skills that TEds teach their trainees, there was a clear emphasis on more inflated notions of skill:

I looked through what we deliver on the programme and there's kind of five key areas that we refer to, I refer to as competencies. And I think these are the skills that we are embedding in our curriculum. A lot of the things listed are kind of all interconnected with each other: critical thinking, creativity... (TEd F).
...Creativity, I don't know if that's a skill or if it's just something bigger than that, but I consider that skill, yes. And we do some problem-solving type of activities. I don't know if that's a skill as such? I think the whole thing is about building skill, isn't it, in different ways? (TEd E).

When one is uncertain about something, they usually express this with the term 'not' preceding a mental process verb (Naigles 2000). This was evident in the 'I don't know if that's a skill' or 'I'm not quite sure.' This lack of clarity is also demonstrable through frequent use of rhetorical questions, suggesting confusion and a lack of confidence with the response. One could argue that more abstract notions (immoderately inflated) of skill are difficult to define compared to concrete practical/technical skills, though the data suggests that the TEds'

hesitancy, vagueness and, in almost all cases, lack of prior thought about skills in the responses to the first discussion topic arguably demonstrates a weak discursive practice.

Interestingly, TVET policy was not alluded to by the TEds' during discussion topic 2 (influence on perspectives of skill), rather a HE graduate skills discourse was inherent in the responses. Many of the TEds in the focus groups alluded to the impact of Higher Education (HE) on their conceptions of skill as a result of either: teaching programme specifications from a Higher Education Institution (HEI) or having recently completed a postgraduate qualification via a HEI. TEd B, for example, felt that their understanding of skills was influenced by 'the things we need to embed higher, at higher education level, such as critical thinking', implying that the programme design requirements are influential in shaping their discourse. TEd A felt that their learning experiences in academia have informed their perspectives:

We get taught constantly that critical thinking is a... is an essential skill for... for an academic or someone doing a degree or undergraduate degree, master's degree or Ph.D. I think creative thinking is probably an extension of that, so to some degree, I think that probably that's where they've come from, they've been kind of driven into me through the time I've spent in education myself (TEd A).

Using the verb 'driven' implies that certain notions of skill pervade HE and are deemed essential to supporting students to succeed in this setting. According to Radice (2013), and the OfS (2018), employers increasingly demand that HE qualifications shift from approaches typically associated with knowledge acquisition to the development of the skills needed for employment. The prevailing skills discourse in HE is therefore centred on general skills such as critical thinking, logic, and creativity (Davies 2011), also referred to as graduate employability skills. Interestingly, there are deep, underlying tensions in HEIs adopting this discourse as many within HEIs reject the view that the primary aims of the university should be to serve the economy and profitability of employers (Atkins 1999).

Despite this, the data suggests that a graduate skills discourse has crept into the skills discourse of FE ITE qualifications which are validated by HEIs. This discourse creates a source of tension given the nature of these professional ITE programmes are partially academic and partially rooted in practice:

The course that I teach on was reapproved last year by the university and in that process, we had to kind of justify what the core components and I guess you could call it competencies or skills were (TEd F).

Here we see that approval of qualifications are contingent on certain skills from the dominant discourse being included and, whilst the broader dominant neoliberal policy discourse of employability remains consistent between skills policy and FE ITE curricula, there is a gap in the discourse in that contemporary skills policy centres on higher level technical skills. On the contrary, generic, transferable (immoderately inflated [Winch 2010]) skills are foregrounded in TEds' discourses, demonstrating a disconnect in the relationship between policy and practice.

Seldom are TEds from technical or vocational backgrounds (Loo 2018) and, consequently, most have experienced the dominant discourse in HE and, arguably, have rarely been exposed to the discourses of technical/vocational employment. As Lim (2012) notes, political and class biases are (re)produced in the forms of skill that are valued in the classroom and, contrary to current skills policy, it is apparent that technical notions of skill are not valued by TEds and, instead, immoderately inflated notions of skill are accepted as naturalised conventions as TEds attempt to inculcate a discourse of generic, transferable skills associated with HE graduate skills into their trainees.

Academic skills ... I suppose we demonstrate a high standard to our students, and they then pass that on and have that high standard with their students. Again, I suppose that's something they could take away take away from the classroom and actually model with their own students (TEd J).

There is an assumption that the inherent development of academic skills will also transcend the trainees' practice and pass on to their students in a similar manner, with adjectives such as 'trickle down' used:

critical thinking, creativity, reflection... developing those key skills means it can trickle down to the students (TEd F).

Discourse conventions embody ideology and, as much as conventions become naturalised and commonsensical (Fairclough 2010; Lim 2012), so too do ideological presuppositions. For example, the convention for TEds to talk about graduate employability skills seems to be an unthinking acceptance, a normalisation of the language which has arguably become imbued as a result of skills discourse in policy being centred on individualism and meeting employers' needs and, it is this ideology that arguable masks inequality. On the other hand, one might argue that the TEds' discourse is centred on neoliberal perspectives of past governments, whereby broader, generic, transferable skills were promoted through policy and curricula (Tomlinson 2004; QCA 2008). This is likely to have been the skills policy discourse under which the TEds themselves trained to teach and taught in the FES sector.

A Generic Skills Discourse: General Teaching Skills

As Loo (2014) asserts, FE ITE programmes are fundamentally designed to be generic, where there are attempts, through a set of professional standards, to atomise skills and competencies over rich conceptions of knowledge, understanding and vocational practice (Hyland 2006; Loo 2014). Professional standards, born out of the increased regulation under neoliberalism in the '90s, meant that teachers were given less agency and more prescribed ways of acting, thus it is understandable that the generic nature of teaching was regarded more highly. However, a generic teaching curriculum values generic techniques over subject-

specific pedagogical approaches required by TVET teachers (Loo 2020). The data collected from TVET TEds corroborates that the ITE curriculum is generic and therefore, conceptually empty, that is, it centres more on general teaching skills than on specific concepts of skill, or ways of teaching skills in particular disciplines and this lack of concern for the notion of skill is alarming given the sector that they are training the teachers in (TVET).

I don't think I make it explicit what skills they are learning; we might have a bit of a chat about what skills and qualities they think make a good teacher, and that will be very different based on their experiences as well. Um, so it's not something that I make explicit (TEd C).

According to Loughran and Berry (2005), the instructional role of a teacher educator is composed of two distinct, complex aspects: to teach their students about teaching through the curriculum, and to model effective teaching practices. In respect to Bernstein's (2000) recontextualising principle, we can see multiple levels of activity in the way in which the TEds might interpret and enact their practice or, indeed, deploy their ideas of skill at the Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (PRF). However, the regulative function of TEds' operationalisation of skills was primarily 'hidden' behind a rhetoric of 'modelling' teaching practice whereby the trainee teachers are the main agents in their learning, yet the responses are devoid of the contextualised practice element. For example, TEd D felt that 'modelling well is really important. And that's kind of how I think I teach the skills that they need for teaching, such as questioning'. Similarly, TEd G explained that 'modelling things is the best way of developing classroom management and instructional skills' (TEd G). This progressive pedagogical approach is what Bernstein (2000) would refer to as invisible pedagogical practice, which offers the students more freedom to create their individualised criteria for evaluation, with the teacher acting in a more facilitative than transmissive manner.

Further, when we examine the response to discussion topic 3, there is a clear sense that TEds do not really discuss typologies of skills in their taught sessions and, where any reference is made, seldom is this to technical skills that the trainees teach. This highlights the

diffuse nature of the ITE curriculum and the lack of coherence from TEds about the way they teach skills – an expectation that modelling generic, transferable skills will automatically be learnt and applied in the TVET trainees’ respective context:

If we demonstrate empathy or we demonstrate resilience, then they might and that's transferable to their students... Same communication skills, same with presentation skills (TEd H).

The generic focus in the operationalisation of skills discourse in teacher training aligns with the idea of ‘trainability’, as opposed to specialisation (Bernstein 2000; Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney 2022) which, according to Wheelahan (2005), puts a socially empty concept at the heart of education, premised on the hope of a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances. Aside from being conceptually empty, a skills discourse with trainability at its core is also socially empty, in that broader, generic skills are decontextualised, and consequently they cut the holder off from communities of practice. This arguably devalues TVET subject specialist teachers who, unlike many of the general (school-based) subject teachers, do not undertake subject-specific ITE qualifications.

While it may seem a logical (and often the only viable) process to bring together multiple subject backgrounds in FE ITE, it exacerbates the reification of generic teaching practices at the expense of rich knowledge and understanding (Hyland 2006), and this potentially hinders the learning and excludes trainee TVET teachers. It is clear that the generic Professional Standards (ETF 2014; 2022) that underpin much of the design of FE ITE qualifications impact the pedagogy within this field. The genericism, akin to Bernstein’s (2000) generic modes, denotes a weakness in the classification of knowledge and, evidently, the skill is disentangled from the context and the trainee is not supported to understand and develop the skill within their subject specialism (Hanley and Thompson 2021). Indeed, TEds

tended to focus on the theoretical and classroom-based practices that support the development of different teaching skills, for example:

We've not talked a lot today about subjects, especially specialisms, have we? But I suppose we don't when we do teacher training, we don't get involved in the subject too much, do we? So, I think there's a bit of an assumption there that the... I mean, maybe that's something that subject Specialist Mentors need to do, rather than the teacher training tutor, um, to talk about what skills are needed in that sector and how they can be embedded into the lessons. Does that make sense? (TEd A).

What is interesting in this statement is the use of questions, as if the TEd is seeking approval or consensus from their peers, though they may well be meant, or interpreted, as rhetorical but there were no disagreements with the sentiment. This suggests that the FE ITE curriculum is socially empty, in that there was little reference to the practice element of the training when talking about the teaching of skills, demonstrating a division between the theory and the practice, with ITE qualifications being taught in a very academic, scholastic manner, as evidenced by the other aspect of the discourse identified above, generic graduate skills.

Summary of Findings

TEds' discourse of skills is recontextualised from two fields of production and subsequent Official Recontextualisation Fields (ORF) (Bernstein 2000), one of the TVET Initial Teacher Education programme guidance (ETF 2016) and accompanying Professional Standards (ETF 2014; 2022), which centres on general teaching skills, and the other the HE graduate employability skills discourse (Radice 2013). Consequently, one might assert that we see a weakened Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (PRF), with orientation towards a discourse of genericism.

Bernstein's (2000) theory provides us with the opportunity to see how the TEds' focus on generic, transferable skills disconnects occupational knowledge from the vertical

discourse in which it is classified and relocates it towards the horizontal discourse, weakening its classification. The data arguably demonstrates that the discourse of generic teaching skills and general academic skills transcend a broad range of subjects and consequently have an integrated code (weak classification and weak framing) with ‘less specialised discourses, less specialised identities, [and] less specialised voices’ (Bernstein 1996, 21). As mentioned, this may result in invisible pedagogic practices, which are more progressive in nature compared to visible pedagogical practices which are more aligned with sacred knowledge (strong classification and framing) (Bernstein 1977; Sadovnik 1991).

This operationalisation may be a consequence of an unthinking acceptance of the dominant HE skills discourse, whereby ideas of the ‘model worker’ are projected onto the education system (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney 2022), or an alternative argument could be that TEds feel obliged to operationalise the graduate skills discourse to emphasise the legitimacy of the ITE curricula and their own position (Esmond and Wood 2017). Both serve to marginalise trainee TVET teachers.

A Way Forward?

Once analysis of the texts had been completed, Fairclough’s (2010) CDA Stages 3 and 4 asks does the social order ‘need’ the social wrong and what are the possible ways past the obstacles, respectively.

Beck and Young (2005, 188) argued that a professional education requires the ‘creation of a professional habitus’, where a common moral and ethical code, and the development of a strong professional identity are determined by socialisation into one’s subject loyalty or singular (Bernstein 2000). In a professional habitus, Wenger (1998) proposes that members are bound together by a collectively developed understanding of their community, and through this joint enterprise, each member holds the other accountable. It is

evident from the CDA that TEds, whilst gatekeepers to the teaching profession, are arguably denied a professional habitus. This is because of weak, genericism which underpins the FE ITE curriculum (ORF) which is recontextualised and operationalised into invisible pedagogic practices at the PRF (Sadovnik 1991; Bernstein 2000). While pervasive generic modes can be found in the TEds' skills discourse, one should take caution in criticising the TEds, who are not helped by the system and its structures. For TEds, they are arguably propagating a discourse which, for some, might appear aspirational (i.e., gaining HE graduate skills) but is merely a consequence of the barriers to entry for teaching FE ITE, the generic nature of the programmes, and the influence of HE discourses on their development, all of which leads to a curriculum that lacks authenticity and relevance to the education of TVET teachers.

To overcome this issue, one might argue that FE ITE be removed from HEIs and, instead, be situated in the workplace to make it more authentic. Indeed, this lean towards workplace learning is evident in the recent changes to FE ITE by way of prescribed employer-led occupational standards and increased placement time (DfE 2021). However, removal of HEIs has the potential to further water down the space in FE ITE for the critical examination of capitalism through deep learning of philosophy and the social sciences (Wheelahan 2015; Rikowski 2022). If these discussions are marginalised from FE ITE, then TVET practitioners are unlikely to engage in these in their own practices, limiting the extent to which they can support their own learners' critical examination of capitalism (Wheelahan 2015). Therefore, rather than weakening the academic aspirations for trainee TVET teachers by thinning the FE ITE curriculum, drawing on Wheelahan's (2015) and Rikowski's (2022) ideas, I argue that HEIs should do more to integrate explicit philosophy and sociology into FE ITE. This integration may equip trainee TVET teachers with the tools to understand their role and position in capitalist society, and empower them to and participate in debates in society and in their occupational field of practice.

To compound the above, the discourse of generic teaching practices inherently marginalises the occupational knowledge and professional identities of trainee TVET teachers (Bernstein 2000; Beck and Young 2005) and it is argued that, to mitigate against this, FE ITE should inherently be more subject specialist and provide more opportunities for those from TVET backgrounds to contribute to the development and delivery of FE ITE. While some have criticised the notion of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) for reifying subject specialist pedagogy and for taking an objectivist view of knowledge deemed less appropriate for vocational education (Lucas 2007; Nasta 2007), Hanley and Thompson (2021) argue for a fluid conception of PCK in which knowledge about the structure of the subject/vocational area and most effective pedagogy is understood, thus moving beyond generic pedagogy which neglects teacher agency to a more agentic conception, which is arguably crucial to effective teaching in TVET. HEI providers of FE ITE therefore must collaborate with the TVET sector to develop more meaningful notions of TVET pedagogy in FE ITE curricula, which not only foregrounds occupational experiences, but builds on this to include strongly classified knowledge of the TVET subject and its teaching practices.

Limitations

This Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) began with a tentative social wrong that was perceived to be that discourses of skill in FE ITE contribute to the marginalisation of those studying in TVET and its teachers. A Faircloughian CDA adopts a ‘dialectical-relational’ approach which is transdisciplinary in nature, meaning the analysis brought together different disciplines and theories to address the research issues and the findings were analysed in dialogue with a theoretical framework which engaged with Bernstein’s recontextualisation principles. While often seen as a highly politicised methodological approach due to its focus on language and the way in which this language is used to maintain and reinforce social and

political power dynamics, Fairclough's CDA was borne out of neoliberalism and so, for as long as neoliberalism is in place, his CDA methodology served as a useful tool to analyse dialectical relations between TVET and FE ITE policy and practice. Drawing on Bernstein's (2000) recontextualisation principles allowed for theorisation of the findings from the CDA. However, with Bernstein's work ensconced in the school sector and highly abstract, it was challenging on an empirical level. My theorisations, therefore, carefully selected aspects of the theory I deemed to be most relevant to FE ITE to present a coherent argument for mechanisms that contribute to inequality within TVET and FE ITE.

While diverse in age, sex, and mode of ITE taught, all subjects were White British. It is important to recognise the potential for researcher subjectivity and bias in choosing the subjects for the study, which may have narrowed the sample and thus impede the inferences made in the CDA (Etikan Musa and Alkassim 2016). However, a purposeful sampling technique has value when there is limited subject availability, and the subject sample in this research may reflect a lack of ethnic diversity within the FE ITE sector, particularly when considering the broader FE workforce is only 17% non-white (DfE 2024b).

Conclusion

Data revealed a discursive gap between the skills discourses employed in UK education policy - which emphasises a neoliberal, human capital perspective of skill increasingly focussed on higher-level technical skills - and the discursive practice of TEds. In this context, the CDA found that the discourse of TEds is bound up with generic higher education notions of 'graduate skills' and 'graduate employability'. This complements a narrow and weak discursive frame which underpins the FE ITE curriculum, linked to atomised Professional Standards, whereby generic teaching practices are centred to the exclusion of strongly classified theoretical and subject specialist knowledge. This generic and

weak discursive framing highlights a disconnect, which contributes to a narrower skills discourse and consequently, marginalisation of disciplines in this sector. This discourse limits the extent of FE ITE and reflects the stratification of the education system to view TVET teachers and their learners as inferior. This work has implications for policy makers and those involved in curriculum development in FE ITE, with the current skills discourse proving incoherent in the context of this sector.

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