What's in a word? An Interdisciplinary Critical Discourse Analysis of 'Skill' in Technical and Vocational Education and Training in England.

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ABSTRACT

Notions of skill pervade the UK further education sector's policy and practices but, despite its ubiquity, skill has been used in different ways to mean different things to different stakeholders within the sector, specifically in relation to technical and vocational education and training. Influenced by theories of human capital, policy documents and representatives have long recycled clusters of generic and transferable skill. Concurrently, qualification design incorporates a wide range of skills from technical to broader notions which creates ambiguous and incoherent notions of skill for teachers working within the sector.

Building on interdisciplinary perspectives of skill, including philosophical and sociological conceptualisations, and using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on insights from Critical Realism (Fairclough, 2010), this thesis explored the relationship and implications of the skills discourse and its recontextualisation from policy to practice, building on a literature that problematises the skills discourse to highlight the marginalisation of fractions of the working class in education and employment. Two CDAs were carried out to examine the relationship between the educational and societal role of 'skills' discourses in UK governments' skills policies and how trainee teachers and teacher educators working in the technical and vocational education sector draw on skills discourses in their practice. At the macro level, CDA 1 analysed contemporary UK skills policy texts between 2016-2021 and, at the micro level, CDA 2 analysed the discourse of 18 subjects, across four focus groups of trainee teachers and teacher educators.

The CDAs revealed a relationship between the skills discourses employed in UK education policy - which emphasises a neoliberal, human capital perspective of skill wedded to capitalist interests, focussed increasingly on higher-level technical skills - and the discursive practice of teacher educators and trainee teachers. In this context, CDA 2 presented the trainee teachers as having a deep understanding of the technical and broader skills required in their occupations and, coupled with their strong occupational identities, their discourse accommodates the policy and its employer-led occupational standards, enabling them to operate as gatekeepers to their occupations, whilst enhancing their own standing. Simultaneously, CDA 2 found that the discourse of teacher educators 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 initial teacher education 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. These discourses, shared by technical teachers unwittingly transmitting policy discourse, and TEds whose generic discourse does not challenge this, act in concert both to marginalise TVET and limit the extent of its ITE.

This work has implications for policy makers and those involved in curriculum development in education and training, with the current political skills discourse proving unsustainable and incoherent in the context of teacher education for this sector.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis: a critical theory approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice.

DBEIS – Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: a ministerial department from 2016-2023 responsible for economic growth.

DfE – Department for Education: a ministerial department responsible for child services and protection and all education sectors.

ETF – Education and Training Foundation: charitable workforce development body for the FE sector, custodians of Professional Standards and advisory body for ITE.

FE – Further Education: the broad sector that covers all post-16 qualifications below degree level.

HCT – Human Capital Theory: a theory which posits that human beings can increase their productive capacity through greater education and skills training.

HEI – Higher Education Institutions: includes universities and colleges that offer degree level and above qualifications.

IFA(TE) – Institute for Apprenticeships (later addition of Technical Education): a non-governmental department that oversees the development, approval and publication of occupational standards.

II1 – Immoderately Inflated 1: refers to notions of skill conceptualised as generic and transferable.

II2 – Immoderately Inflated 2: refers to notions of skill conceptualised as social.

IPTE – Independent Panel for Technical Education: established in 2015 to advise ministers on actions to improve the quality of technical education in England.

ITE – Initial Teacher Education: programmes of study for teachers which can be undertaken pre-service or in-service.

MI – Moderate Inflation: refers to notions of skill conceptualised as inflated beyond paradigmatic conceptions, but whose conception is benign.

OECD – Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development: an intergovernmental organisation focused on economic progression and world trade.

ORF – Official Recontextualization Field: where the government operates at a generative level to produce the official curriculum to be taught.

PRF – Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field: the way in which teachers interpret and develop the curriculum (regions) through their pedagogic practices.

TEds – Teacher Educators: those responsible for the delivery of ITE programmes.

TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training: refers to the education and training of knowledge and skills for employment.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is concerned with critically exploring contemporary discourses of skill in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) policy and how they are enacted by TVET practitioners in England. This work is a qualitative study that compares policy discourses and the voices of a sample of trainee TVET practitioners and a sample of TVET teacher educators to broader understandings of skill drawn from multiple disciplinary fields.

The thesis is grounded in empirical work which was carried out in England during major reforms to the TVET landscape - a sector which is chronically underfunded and undervalued (Orr, 2020) - including changes to Apprenticeships and the advent of a new flagship qualification, T-Levels, both anchored to the Post-Brexit Industrial Strategy (HM Government, 2017) which sought to boost UK productivity with investment in skills, industries and infrastructure. The study progressed under the cloud of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crash and, as such, a renewed - if not greater - focus of government prioritisation for the skills system with their 'Build Back Better' White Paper (HM Treasury, 2021).

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the backdrop to this thesis by outlining my professional background and how I identified what I perceived to be a growing misuse of the term skill. I build on this by providing a rationale for why the ubiquitous and inconsistent use of skill is a problem in England's TVET sector, before explaining why I adopted a CDA as an instrument to examine the way in which the different discourses of skill contribute to issues of disadvantage.

1.2 My Positionality and Professional Background

It is important when conducting any research to begin with an identification of my position, dispositions, experience and knowledge in the field of study. This reflexive process is important to acknowledge as personal bias could impact interpretation of the discourse (Etherington, 2004).

I have always found the term ‘skill’ a fascinating concept. I have coached sport from the age of 15 and, through my experiences and the various coaching qualifications undertaken, I conceptualised skill as the application of a learned technique. For example, in basketball, the technique of a ‘layup shot’ applied to a game scenario where it was impacted by other variables (e.g. defenders) is where it became a ‘skill’. By definition, therefore, a skill was application of a technique to different scenarios, thus a skill involved successful execution of a technique and decision making (to do it in the right place and at the right time). This conceptualisation helped me in my coaching as I could break the technique into its subcomponents to teach it in small steps and then gradually introduce variables which enabled the players to implement the skill.

Later, in my undergraduate Sports Science degree, when studying skill acquisition, I came across the work of Knapp (1963), a sports psychologist, who states that skill is ‘the learned ability to bring about pre-determined results with maximum certainty; often with the minimum outlay of time, energy or both’. This definition itself does not explicitly refer to skill being practical but corroborates my initial thinking around the concept that a skill is the successful application of something learned. Indeed, this definition built upon my initial conceptions with an element of efficiency or measure of ability, which I could relate to, for example, the way in which a lay-up shot is performed might be done less or more efficiently (less or more skilfully).

I started my ‘formal’ teaching career in the Further Education (FE) sector in 2008, where I began by teaching BTEC Sport (now recognised as an Applied General qualification) and industry recognised fitness qualifications (TVET qualifications). I found myself comfortable teaching and assessing the practical requirements of both programmes,

which centred more on teaching and assessing learners to demonstrate how to perform a particular technique. I could clearly see how the classroom was where the theoretical input for the qualifications happened and the gymnasium or sports hall where we applied this in a practical context. Then came my involvement in the development of the 14-19 Sport and Active Leisure Diploma and it was here that I worked with employers and other education providers to design the level 2 and 3 programme around the principles of the Diplomas: to bridge the academic and vocational divide. However, central to these qualifications was the development of learners' broader Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS). These included: independent enquirers, creative thinkers, reflective learners, team workers, self-managers and effective participants, all in the name of preparing learners for the 21st Century. However, aside from providing learning tasks that allowed the learners to be independent, or be creative, or reflect afterwards, I struggled to comprehend how I would develop these skills, at least in the same way I could with something like a practical skill. Another point of contention was how I was to measure these skills in the name of assessing learners' progress towards them. They just seemed rather nebulous to me and, as such, became more of a meaningless tick box exercise rather than meaningful learning experience. Perhaps it was just me?

In 2014, I progressed to a Teaching and Learning Coach position in a different general FE college. This provided me with an opportunity to see a broader range of practices across a range of academic and vocational subjects. What was striking at that time was a clear agenda from the college to develop, in their learners, a broad range of 'employability skills'. This was driven by a 16-point employability framework which included things such as confidence, resilience and adaptability to name a few. All teachers and trainers at the institution were required to embed these into their lessons and illustrate this in planning documentation. This was a flashback to PLTS and while I could understand the basic premise of supporting learners to develop their attributes for employment, I struggled to understand why some of these things were coined 'skills', or indeed how the teachers were supposed to embed them into learning. I vividly recall avoiding any talk of the framework as I did not feel confident in my own knowledge of how to develop or, indeed, assess these 'skills', thus did not feel that I could support others to

do the same. How could I break down confidence and teach it in the same way I could a practical skill? Surely one's confidence is based on the context in which it is being discussed and not something that could be shifted from setting to setting? As I progressed in this role, I began to realise that skill was a term that had been adapted, so began to seek out the reasons for this. I read Christodoulou's (2014) work, which assured me that I was not alone in my thinking, though this did not really provide a conceptualisation that was helpful for me, working in a general FE institute.

As I joined the University of Derby as a lecturer, my interest in the area developed further, having started to explore some of the literature in writing my initial proposal for the PhD. I started out quite dogmatic in that I strongly believed that the notion of 'skill' should be fixed and reserved for technical and practical knowledge, with the broader conceptions being erroneous and aligned more to one's abilities, values and character. While I am more open minded having explored a range of skill typologies and philosophical and sociological perspectives, which are discussed at length in later chapters, I still vehemently believe that the notion has been adapted far beyond its original intentions and that this has resulted in conceptual confusion, which is not by accident but by design. With the term more often attached to the FE sector, which supports some of the most disadvantaged in society, it begs the question as to whether this is part of a bigger social equity problem. As an individual from a single parent, working class background, and as someone who is a product of the FE system, I have an awareness of the barriers faced by others like me and seek to explore whether ambiguous and inconsistent notions of skill are part of a social wrong. In identifying this as my starting position, I recognise my positionality and outlook are shaped by these experiences but argue that any critical theory starts by seeking to understand an issue, not to prove its existence.

1.3 Background and Rationale for the Study

With the above starting point in mind, my initial research led me to begin to explore the bigger picture in an attempt to understand why my practice was confused by different ideas of skill and where these ideas were coming from, which I outline below.

According to Esmond and Atkins (2022), despite education always being entwined with wider social and economic interests, there has been increasing alignment between the discourses of education and the discourses of the economy since Thatcherism and the birth of neoliberalism. Discourse is a concept used in many disciplines and simply put, it can be defined as 'all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 7). Howarth (2000) suggests that, according to discourse theory, all objects and actions are meaningful, guided by specific systems and rules. Therefore, it seeks to inquire into the way in which 'social practices construct and contest the discourses that constitute social reality' (Howarth, 2000: 8) and, in the case of this study, discourses of skill are arguably generated at a macro level (i.e. global and national political actors) and transcend the discourse practices at the micro level (i.e. practitioner level), which I endeavour to unpick a little more in the following sections.

1.3.1 Skills in Policy and the Labour Market

In current globalised educational policy discourse, there is an unrelenting belief that skills will solve a nation's social and economic woes by enhancing the quality of its human capital, increase labour market participation rates and boost its international economic competitiveness (Stobart, 2008; World Bank, 2008; Bercovich, 2018; Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). When it comes to skills, it is evident that, for a country to prosper, the general agreement is that there should be investment in skills. This investment is seen as an investment in the individual as capital, where they are to benefit from training and development to 'upskill' (Becker, 1964; Jones and Moore 1993; Brown, Lauder, and Cheung 2020; Wheelahan et al, 2022). 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'.

At the employer level, the acquisition and retention of skills is suggested to increase profitability and at the individual level, better skills mean better jobs and better pay (Anderson, 2017; Wheelahan et al, 2022). Yet, in spite of the proposed benefits of upskilling to the economy, employer and employee, there is a suggestion from both employers and young people that education is not adequately preparing young people for work, or teaching them the skills needed in the workplace, with Youth Employment UK (2017: 2) finding that:

> young people as a group are four times more likely to be unemployed than older groups, with many struggling with the transition between education and employment. Employers regularly voice concerns over the lack of work readiness and young people … [have said] … that the gaps between education and employment are daunting.

Indeed, Anderson (2017: 82) asserts that 'England's education system still falls short in delivering a wide range of vital competencies needed to prepare young people for future work and study'. This is backed by data from the British Chambers of Commerce (2014) who found that 88% of companies felt that school leavers were unprepared for work and 54% felt the same about graduates. This was attributed to a lack of work experience and soft, transferable skills, such as communication, teamwork and resilience. Moreover, in a survey by Ernst and Young (2017), over 50% of employers were found to believe that young people do not have the core, non-technical skills they need for entry level jobs when they leave education. They also were said to lack knowledge about the job market and the diversity of routes into work, all of which undermined their ambition.

Kashefpakdel and Percy (2016) support this with their assertion that changes in the education system and labour market over recent decades have created a complex world for young people, with Mann, Kashefpakdel, Rehill and Huddleston (2017) highlighting that young people are more qualified and have more years of education behind them than their predecessors, yet face unprecedented struggles to succeed in the labour market. This, according to Mann and Huddleston (2016), is due to the growing complexity of the labour market, increased competition for entry level employment and changing requirements of employers, who increasingly seek employees to be effective in applying knowledge and skills in changing situations.

Green, Hogarth, Barnes, Gambin, Owen and Sofroniou (2016), on behalf of the Government Office for Science, also suggests that there is a skills mismatch between those needed in the economy and those available in the labour pool, with some technical areas being saturated with skilled workers (e.g. bioscience) and others where the pool is sparse (e.g. engineering). This mismatch is also said to include the fact that some areas have sufficient 'skill pools' for the technical aspect but employers expect graduates to have 'softer', generic employability skills, which are lacking. However, whilst employers may blame education for skill shortages, one must also consider other factors that may influence this perception. There are factors beyond the control of education institutions with respect to the individuals it serves, for example, their motivations and background. Additionally, there are factors influenced by employers, for example, unrealistic expectations of young, inexperienced individuals, the job quality and wages offered and/or recruitment processes used. It is also important to note that employers are not homogenous and that there are many factors (e.g. sector, company size, job role) that could impact their demands (Green et al, 2016; Youth Employment UK, 2017).

It is evident that there is a growing demand from employers for a supply of non-technical skills, coined in different ways e.g., 'transferable/ soft/ generic' skills, that allow for flexibility in an increasingly uncertain labour market (British Chambers of Commerce, 2014; Anderson, 2017; Ernest Young, 2017; Youth Employment UK, 2017). However, this is nothing new; there is a long history in the UK of trying to identify the skills, qualities and attributes that are commonly deemed to be required to be successful at work, as I show in chapter 2. Since the rise of the neoliberal agenda of the 'marketable individual' in the 1980s, there has been an increased emphasis on employability skills required by employers, which includes many of the concepts associated with non-technical skills (CBI, 1989; Wheelahan, 2007). However, this idea has inherent problems and despite various attempts at standardising a list of these skills in the National Standards for Key Skills (1993), Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) 11-19 framework (QCA, 2006) and Employability Skills defined by UKCES (2009), to name a few, in spite of some common themes, never has there been an agreed definitive list. Green (2016) argues that there is no full consensus among perspectives of what does and does not constitute

a skill. Indeed, throughout chapter 3, readers will see that I have grappled with this conceptualisation, viewing skills through multiple philosophical and sociological lenses in an attempt to provide a foundation from which to analyse skills in policy and practice.

1.3.2 The TVET Sector

The ambiguities and inconsistencies in policy have not been helped by the fact that England's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system, the sector deemed by the government to be a supplier to the labour market (Department for Education/Department for Business, Energy, Innovation and Skills [DfE/DBEIS], 2016), has had 28 major pieces of legislation and more than 30 Secretaries of State over the past 30 years (Wolf, 2017). In order to understand the impact of this, it is important to clarify what does and does not constitute TVET and whom it supports. TVET is explained by UNESCO (2015) as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods. In England, TVET sits within the broader further education (FE) sector, a wide-ranging and diverse section of the education system with a range of provider types and education and training opportunities, including academic, vocational and recreational courses (Association of Colleges, 2018).

However, despite being used interchangeably in current policy discourse (DfE/DBEIS, 2016), there is no new widely accepted definition for the terms 'technical' and 'vocational', with a lack of consensus in the international research due to the different formations of education systems globally (Rauner and Maclean, 2008), whilst contemporary research in the UK tends not to distinguish between the subtleties of the two terms (Avis, 2018b; Esmond, 2019; Misselke, 2022). Gleeson and Mardle (1980) previously described technical education (TE) as the mastery of a body of practical knowledge and skills, distinguishing it from more recent definitions of vocational education and training (VET) which focus on preparation for employment (Wolf, 2011), associated with broader skill development (Atkins, 2013). However, TE has recently been revived in UK policy discourse having had somewhat of a hiatus for the last few decades in favour of VET. It is suggested that this revival is linked to reforms to the sector, with a focus on fewer, more

specialised, higher level technical qualifications, which arguably leaves the language of vocationalism to be associated with failure (Esmond and Atkins, 2020/2022). Despite the differences, TVET, therefore, generally refers to education that supports entry to the labour market and does not align with traditional general education, or 'academic' study (Esmond and Atkins, 2022).

Thus far, I have located the TVET sector as the main provider of skills for meeting employers' needs and policy directives for increasing human capital and economic prosperity. It is important to understand who this affects, and OECD (2016) figures show that, across developed countries, on average, around half of young people follow vocational routes through upper secondary education. In England, TVET programmes are usually perceived as those taken in FE colleges or through apprenticeships rather than through A-levels or university and, as suggested by Atkins (2013), the majority of young people undertaking (T)VET 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, as noted by Aronowitz (2002: 113), TVET pathways disproportionately cater for 'young people whose patterns of speech or behaviour position them outside of the norms of the middle class and have marked them out for low skilled and low status roles'. Conversely, Thompson (2009b) suggests that that the composition of the sector is constructed as much from middle-class failure as from working-class disadvantage when considering prior attainment, with TVET, and the broader FE sector, perceived to be second-chance institutions. Notwithstanding this, a wealth of research shows that young people's aspirations and career choices are influenced by their social class, gender and ethnicity (Francis, 2000, Archer, DeWitt, Osborne, Dillon, Willis and Wong, 2010; Hutchinson, 2011), which are heavily influenced by their experiences at home and school (Blenkinsop, McCrone, Wade and Morris, 2006) and whether their language uses elaborated or restricted codes (Bernstein, 1964; 1975). Only 36% of young people from a disadvantaged background (free school meal eligible (FSM)) who enter education post-16, progress to a level 3 qualification by the time they are 19, compared to 60% non-FSM students (Allen, Parameshwaran and Thomson, 2016; Lenon, 2018).

Furthermore, according to Wolf (2011), as many as 20% of key stage 4 completers are not able to start a level 2 course, with 17% of school leavers at 16 functionally illiterate and 22% functionally innumerate.

The system, Atkins (2013) goes on to argue, inherently adopts a deficit view of the young people it serves which is evidenced in the language used to describe these young people such as 'disaffected', 'disadvantaged' and 'non-academic', with 'low aspirations'. Furthermore, not only is the TVET system 'classed', it is also widely understood to be 'gendered' (Marope, Chakroun and Holmes, 2015; Hegna, 2017) in that most young people engaging with TVET do so with programmes related to gendered occupations i.e. hair and beauty (typically females) and construction trades (typically males). Given that the focus of this thesis is on skills and that skills policy is largely focussed on the TVET sector, for the purpose of this thesis, I draw a distinction between general education (namely, those subjects that are taken at Advanced Level and allow a clear path to university) and technical options (often called vocational courses that tend to facilitate entry into a specific occupation more so than entry into university). This fits with Fairclough's (2010) suggestion that the historical association of the skills discourse is with crafts and trades, whilst discourses of knowledge are associated with education and, as such, considering the disproportionate number of disadvantaged young people that are served by the TVET sector, discourses of skill arguably play a role in perpetuating their disadvantage. Recontextualising and enacting the skills discourse in TVET are a range of practitioners whose discursive practices directly impact those studying TVET programmes and it is important to distinguish between these practitioners.

1.3.3 TVET Practitioners

The English TVET system demands its practitioners are 'dual professionals' whereby the teachers (or trainers) combine occupational expertise with excellent teaching and learning practices (CAVTL, 2013). Yet, in spite of this complementary approach to professionalism, the status of TVET practitioners has remained overshadowed by that of teachers in general education (Misra, 2011; Moodie and Wheelahan, 2012; ETF, 2016) and, consequently, there has been a long-standing issue with respect to the mandating

of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualifications in the sector. In 2012, the Further Education Teachers' (England) Regulations (2007) were revoked meaning teaching qualifications were no longer mandated in the post-school sector, consequently, many TVET institutions could employ directly from industry, without the requirement of a teaching qualification. However, with dual professionalism in mind, commonplace across the sector is still the requirement to obtain a teaching qualification within a certain time period (usually within 2-years of being employed) and many teachers in the sector have continued to undertake Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, with approximately 70% of those working in the sector having a level 5 or above teaching qualification (ETF, 2020). Consequently, over 10,000 individuals study a level 5 or above teaching qualification annually (ETF, 2018) and around a third of these study Higher Education Institution (HEI) awarded provision, with just under half of this being for those studying 'in-service'. Whereas in-service provision is training that trainee teachers undertake while employed in FE, pre-service provision is ITE provision for trainee teachers before they enter employment. Around two thirds of colleges that offer HEI franchised provision offer their programmes as in-service and, typically, those studying initial teacher education programmes as 'in-service' tend to be employed directly from industry for their occupational expertise and, as a result, these individuals tend to be from craft or skills-based subjects rather than academic, or knowledge-based subjects (ETF, 2018).

According to the latest figures, around 218 providers deliver the level 5 or above FE teaching qualification, with 15% of these being offered by HEIs and 75% offered by FE Colleges, a large portion of whom deliver HEI accredited programmes in a variety of modes (part-time pre-service, part-time in-service, full-time pre-service) (Education and Training Foundation, 2020). Whilst research in terms of the characteristics of TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) is generally sparse, with the most comprehensive accounts being NRDC's (2004) study of 25 literacy, numeracy and ESOL teacher educators, Noel's (2006) publication which centred on 78 TEds within a single HEI consortium, and Harkin et al's (2008) work on behalf of LLUK, which surveyed 97 TEds but was never formally published, each of these are quite dated. More contemporary accounts by Springbett (2018) and Loo (2020) examined much lower numbers, with 11 and 32 TEds participating

respectively. Nonetheless, anecdotally (and logically) providers of HEI teacher training qualifications above level 5 require the teacher, and therefore assessor, to have a qualification at or above the level that they are teaching. For this reason, TEds generally have bachelor's degrees or higher. Whilst I acknowledge above that some general education qualifications might be seen as technical and vice versa (Gicheva and Petrie, 2018), seldom do TVET TEds come from a 'traditional' TVET background (e.g. construction trades and hair and beauty) as these occupations do not require these higher-level qualifications. Harkin, Cuff and Rees (2008:15) found 'relatively few teacher educators with craft backgrounds or with maths and science 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 TEds are from non-TVET backgrounds. Certainly, in my experience, the majority have taken what many would argue as an academic route in their career, for example, the sciences, social sciences, English, education etc. Given that TEds can be a relay for policy directives, this makes for an interesting exploration of the discourses of skill.

To summarise this section, I began by locating the TVET sector as the main provider of skills and the discourse suggests that skill is seen as human capital required to meet employers' needs and subsequently to promote economic growth. However, it is apparent that over the last few decades TVET policy has been in a constant flux and employer demands appear to have shifted the skills discourse towards more flexible and transferable notions of skill, resulting in ambiguity. Correspondingly, the TVET sector was also identified as a form of education that disproportionately serves those from disadvantaged backgrounds, therefore, it is important to recognise that policy discourse is enacted by practitioners involved in TVET (whether consciously or unconsciously) and, given the above, I suggest that the problem of the skills discourse lies in its potential to further disadvantage young people. This leads me to the following research questions for the thesis.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1 - What is the educational and societal role of 'skills' discourses in UK governments' further education policies?

RQ2 - What role do the practices of Teacher Educators play in recontextualising the policy discourse?

RQ3 - How do the practices of trainee TVET teachers draw on 'skills' discourses, educational understandings and on their occupational expertise?

1.5 The Approach

As I have shown thus far, my interest in the area of skills stems from the way they are talked about in the English TVET (and broader FE) system, and I want to better understand why this is the case.

As I justify in chapter 4, this thesis is grounded in a Critical Realist philosophy, with a realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1975), which is epistemologically orientated around a modified critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 2002; 2010) whereby discourse (an observable event) is analysed in an attempt to theorise about the unobservable truths through the observable events they cause (Bhaskar, 1975). In other words, to theorise the discourses at both the macro and micro levels of society and, using a Faircloughian analysis of texts (verbal and written), I attempt to uncover power relations, highlight inequalities in society and reveal injustice (Corson, 2000; Fairclough, 1992; 2002; 2010). This, I feel, aligns well with my desire to critically explore the way that different notions of skill are understood and enacted within a classed education system (Atkins, 2013). A CDA starts with the identification of a social wrong (Fairclough, 2010) and by critically analysing the skill discourses at both a macro (policy) and micro (practice) level using Bernstein's (2000) theory of recontextualisation, I intend to theorise how notions of skill contained within TVET policy and practitioners' discourses perpetuate the inequality of marginalised groups in society (Goodwin, 2011), not by accident but by design.

The modified CDA methodology (Fairclough's (1992; 2002; 2010) employed in this study adopted a three-levelled approach to textual analysis, to examine a range of texts,

including: policy, speeches and focus group transcripts. In support of RQ1, at the macro, political level, texts were selected based on their prominence and currency in the sector. At the time of undertaking the empirical work, policy texts chosen included the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016) and the Independent Panel for Technical Education (IPTE, 2016) report. A later addition of an AOC conference speech by the then Education Secretary (Nadim Zahawi, 2021) following the Covid-19 pandemic was also analysed. This study also examined contemporary skills discourses in practice, and I felt it important that the texts selected for analysis centred on the voices of different practitioners in TVET. Firstly, in support of RQ3, I selected TVET trainee teachers who have recently entered the TVET system from, in the main, their respective industries, as they would arguably be following the latest skills policy and thus have discourses potentially shaped by both their recent occupational experience and TVET policy. With such a large volume of new teachers to Further Education (specifically TVET) undertaking a teaching qualification, this indicates the potential impact that the TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) may have, and this influence may also extend to their discourses of skill and how these are operationalised in practice to influence the trainees, thus it was also deemed necessary to examine the discourses of TVET TEds in support of RQ2.

This empirical data collection and CDA centred on skills discourses is unique to this thesis and allowed me to theorise and contribute new knowledge to the growing body of work that critiques the classed nature of the TVET sector (Ainley, 1993; Atkins, 2009, 2013; Avis, 2018; Avis, Orr and Warmington, 2018; Wheelahan et al, 2022), where notions of skill are adapted to serve different interests in society.

1.6 The Structure of the Thesis

Following this introduction, chapter 2 provides a chronology of UK skills policy and illuminates the evolution of the skills discourse therein, before examining the way in which skills policy is influenced and formed. A chronology of TVET Initial Teacher Education also exposes the way in which the sector has undergone frequent change, consequently its curricula are largely built on generic principles and standards.

Chapter 3 draws on the seminal literature concerned with the philosophical conceptualisation of skill (Ryle, 1949; Winch, 2010). I use this to develop a conceptual frame for the categorisation of skills in the discourse. Moreover, I examine sociological perspectives of skill and draw on a range of literature, largely informed by Marxist perspectives, to supplement my conceptual frame. Finally, I build a theoretical frame for the thesis based on Bernstein's (2000) recontextualisation principles.

Chapter 4 justifies a Critical Realist ontology for this research, alongside a comprehensive overview of how I modified Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as a method to respond to the research questions. In doing so, I justify my choice of texts and how the CDAs were enacted to determine the discourse and analysed using my conceptual and theoretical framework.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed summary of the key findings from CDA 1 of policy. This includes textual analysis at three levels for recent policy texts, including the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016), the review from the Independent Panel for Technical Education (ITPE, 2016) and Nadim Zahawi's skills speech at the Association of Colleges conference (2021). This comprehensive CDA enables me to draw conclusions from the data to support RQ1. In a similar vein to CDA 1, chapter 6 shares how I used a three levelled textual analysis for CDA 2 of focus group interview texts for TVET TEds and trainee TVET teachers. Here, I identify common themes in the discourse to articulate a response to RQ 2 and 3.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to a discussion of my findings. This is structured using stages 2, 3 and 4 of Fairclough's CDA, each connected to the research questions. I take the reader through some of the key findings in detail, using my conceptual and theoretical framework as a lens for the combined analysis. This supports several theorisations and enables me to articulate a clear contribution to knowledge. Moreover, I discuss limitations of the work and areas for further study, before my closing remarks.

CHAPTER 2

TVET Policy

2.1 Introduction to the Evolution of Skill in English TVET Policy

The Further Education and Skills (FES) sector has arguably witnessed more radical change and development than any other sphere of educational provision (Hyland and Merrill, 2003; Keep, 2014; Wolf, 2017; Winch, 2018) and, in this chapter, I aim to highlight the evolution of skills policy over the last 50 years through outlining the key changes that have occurred in relation to government and society and the subsequent impact on conceptions of 'skill'. Within the chapter, I refer to Marxist formulations of 'ideology', a structural perspective, to illuminate the struggles between forces of production (i.e., the government) and relations of production (i.e. the labour market and young people's skills) (Glynos, 2001). I then proceed to outline the impact of the policy churn in FE/TVET and consider how the Initial Teacher Education of the teachers working in the sector has evolved alongside this.

According to Kelly (2001), skills education in Britain has a long-standing low status compared to European counterparts such as France and Germany. This, in part, is due to distinct separations that have existed between technical and general education, stemming from the tripartite education system first proposed in the 1944 Education Act (Crowther, 1959; Kelly, 2001), which resulted in a lack of parity of esteem between the different types of institution. The low status of skills education in Britain during the 50s and 60s was a legacy of government ideology at the time which reduced it to 'narrow vocational training, where usefulness was gauged only in terms of the competence it produced in the workforce' (Kelly, 2001: 23), a mark of a liberal individualist model of education (Kelly, 2001). As shown in the following discussion, over the last 50-years, there have been competing ideologies and 'mostly short-lived and inept tinkerings … which have all failed to solve the central problems of [this] provision' (Hyland, 2014: 1). These competing ideas about the purpose of the sector, and subsequent government and stakeholder policies that have been produced, reveals ambiguity and adaptation in understandings of skill. Consequently, we see skills education - and the broader Further Education (FE) sector that it sits within - continue to be positioned as a second-choice option concerned with vocational or remedial academic courses, whose common feature

is their lower status compared with those offered by more prestigious institutions (Hyland, 2002; Avis, 2006; Thompson, 2009b).

2.1.1 Labour Ministries: 1974-1979

Following the Conservative Employment and Training Act (1973), and rising unemployment, the Labour government established a multi-service commission to coordinate employment and training in the UK to increase employment and economic productivity (Manpower Services Commission (MSC), 1974). The MSC was heralded as a major national body for modernising employment and training prospects yet, despite the given remit, the MSC became increasingly focused on short-term, remedial measures to address escalating youth unemployment rather than developing a skilled workforce e.g. the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) and Training Opportunities Programme (TOP) (Stanton and Bailey, 2004). As a consequence of post-Fordism and the youth labour market collapse, skills education was no longer only about preparing young people for industry, but also to prepare them for a constructive place in society (Moore and Hickox, 1994). This dual purpose of education resulted in the 'embedding of 'the world of work' within broader educational programmes' (Moore and Hickox, 1994: 285), where essential tools such as basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together, and respect for others and the individual were foreground (Kelly, 2001) (interestingly, these 'tools' were not identified as 'skills' at the time). Here we see a shift in ideology from a liberal individualist model of education designed to increase economic competitiveness, to one which attempts to bridge this principle with social interventionism which serves both society and the individual (Moore and Hickox, 1994; Kelly, 2001). However, it could be argued that this ideology was simply more akin to 'warehousing' unemployed young people. Indeed, this modified ideology arguably led to an adaptation to the skills discourse too, with the MSC developing an 'occupational skills inventory' in an attempt to 'represent skills actually required in industry and necessary to the performance of specific jobs' (Moore, 1985: 5). This was arguably necessitated by the demands of organising TVET with such a vast number of occupations and, by identifying and clustering these skills into occupational training families, recognised by employers, it was suggested that individual ownership of such transferable skills would increase labour

mobility (Ainley, 1993). While focussed on employability, there was an interesting tension playing out, whereby specific occupational skills were diluted to promote skills that could be transferred within a cluster and promote general 'trainability' (Moore and Hickox, 1994). This was heavily criticised, not least because there was no empirical basis for expecting greater transfer within and between the occupational training families, i.e. learning a transferable skill within one family was no more transferable within that family than across all families (Ainley, 1993).

Around the same time, according to Silver (1988), traditional FE was being characterised as inflexible, irrelevant and unresponsive to the needs of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and this marked a shift in the sector from predominantly vocational and technical institutions towards broader general education and training providers (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). This resulted in emerging low-level skills offer aptly coined 'New Vocationalism'. However, whilst appearing more inclusive, this came to be perceived as counter-productive to rather than promoting the 'needs of industry' (Moore, 1987) and it soon came under a new Conservative government, whose priority was to reconstruct the purpose of education in terms of preparing young people for working life, not to adopt policies from their predecessors that attempted to compensate for class inequalities (Hyland and Merrill, 2003).

2.1.2 Conservative Ministries: 1979-1997

The new government's ideology of preparation for employment began in earnest, with the development of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) for learners aged 14 plus in full-time education, which aimed to support vocational skill development within general education for those that were doing/had done least well at school (Hodgson and Spours, 2002; Hyland and Merrill, 2003). This was complemented by a Further Education Unit (FEU, 1981) initiative, 'A Basis for Choice', which developed a core skills curriculum for vocational study and, in contrast to the agenda at the time, marked what Pring (1994, cited in Stanton and Bailey 2004: 20) states were the 'seeds of a defensible education philosophy which bridges the academic/vocational divide'. Then in 1982, the FEU published its 'Basic Skills' document in which the two guiding principles of genericness

and transferability were outlined (Seale, 1984) and, subsequently, on behalf of Government, and alongside the MSC, they developed a nationally recognised framework for pre-employment for those over 16 years - the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) - a core skills curriculum for vocational study (Payne, 2000; Kelly, 2001). The scheme was aimed at unemployed school leavers, giving them government subsidised job-related training and part-time further education (Thompson, 1995). A deficit view of the individual was taken by the MSC (1984, in Ainley 1993: 12) whereby they asserted that most take basic skills (e.g. timekeeping, discipline and maintaining relationships with others) for granted but 'many people lack them'. The YTS, therefore, was seen by many as 'remedial education' (Hodgson and Spours 2002: 30), including five core skills: numeracy, communication, problem-solving, information technology and manipulative dexterity (Seale, 1984). However, according to Seale (1984), there were competing philosophical differences between FEU and MSC with the former accused of rearguard action on behalf of colleges and delivery of what was seen as less-relevant life and social skills, whilst the FEU criticised the MSC for a narrow focus on core skills. Indeed, in the MSC's requirements for YTS courses there is no explicit mention of life or social skills (Seale, 1984). Unfortunately, despite the YTS programme attracting a positive response from employers, it did not attract the number of young people that the MSC had originally forecast (NAO, 1985).

What both the TVEI and YTS had in common was that there was an emphasis on innovative learning programmes which aimed at reaching the more reluctant and disadvantaged learners and reducing the number of unemployed young people by giving them broad and general training to support progression to employment. However, as Avis (2006) notes, this created experiences for learners that helped to reproduce class-based orientations towards waged labour, whereby the lower-status programmes resulted in lower-skilled employment. Indeed, at this time, around half of 16-year-olds were leaving full time education altogether after the age of 16 with no qualifications (Machin and Vignoles, 2006) and it was reported that only 40% of the workforce in the United Kingdom held qualifications relevant to their jobs, compared with 85% in Germany (Thompson, 1995). Core skills training for disadvantaged learners, therefore, was not having the

desired effect in the labour market, thus revealing a tension in ideology, policy and outcomes.

Throughout the mid-to-late 1980s, as part of the economic renewal following the increase in global inflation and subsequent national debt, a neoliberal ideology driven by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), led to the development of new understandings of skill and of the 'market individual' in policy (Jones and Moore 1993; Brown et al, 2020; Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). Consequently, qualification reform was rife, for example, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established in 1985 to act as a single focus for action on vocational qualifications and the establishment of a system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) based on 'a statement of standards clearly relevant to work and assessment of skills to specified standards' (Thompson, 1995: 9). The conception of NVQs was seen as a means for filling the qualification gap and they were intended as competence-based qualifications that were designed to certify existing occupational knowledge and skills (Stanton and Bailey, 2004). The explicit purpose of these competency-based curricula, according to Wheelahan et al (2022), was to tie education directly to workplace requirements, aligning education back to a liberal individualist model of education, concerned with the ability to perform with little attention given to conceptual understanding (Kelly, 2001). Notions of skill, therefore, became narrow and atomised (Moore, 1987). Alongside this, however, there was still policy attention directed to supporting effective transitions from school to work via a pre-vocational education programme, with the creation of a new curriculum pathway for those between the ages of 14 and 18 for whom the traditional academic curriculum was unsuitable (Chitty, 1989). BTEC (the Business and Technician Education Council) and CGLI (City and Guilds of London Institute) jointly contributed to providing this curriculum and the YTS core skills were resurrected, with a list that was largely the same (only manual dexterity removed in favour of managing self, working with others and design and creativity). These changes, coupled with the recently reformed GCSEs - from a system that rationed the number of O level passes in a given year to one where, at least in principle, everyone could pass a GCSE (Machin and Vignoles, 2006) - meant that there was now supposedly a credential for everyone. Bates, Bloomer, Hodkinson and Yeomans

(1998: 113), explain that ‘whereas the old vocationalism was about preparing trainees for specific jobs, the new vocationalism aimed at preparation for work in general.’ However, there would remain questions over the value of these credentials, particularly those aimed at disadvantaged students, which arguably perpetuate inequalities e.g. ascribing low-skilled work for individuals of a low socioeconomic status (Avis, 2006).

Despite the above-mentioned interventions, there continued to be concerns about a lack of skills being an obstacle to employment growth. This, to a large extent, was due to concerns about the imminent fall in the number of young people in the workforce (James and Biesta, 2007). As a result of a changing labour market, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 1989) set out to review the nation's vocational education and training effort and make recommendations to improve its effectiveness. It was found that there were a number of criticisms of NVQs, with an alarming number of individuals failing to progress onto post-compulsory education (Hyland and Johnson, 1998). According to the CBI (1989: 17), ‘the prospect of more young people entering the labour market directly at age 16 or receiving narrow foundation training is simply unacceptable’. Consequently, the greatest need was to support transition from education to employment, acknowledging the changing needs and expectations of employers, who now wanted employees to use their abilities, ideas and skills to achieve corporate objectives; rather than a narrow technical understanding of the job, they want competence in the broader work context (CBI, 1989). This perspective was in stark contrast to the narrow technical, atomised skills in NVQ qualifications. This need, then, necessitated the education and training providers to address any gaps, with the desirable skills delivered by vocational education suggested to be: communication; applying numeracy; applying technology; problem-solving; values and integrity; understanding work; personal skills; dealing with change. These common core skills still maintained some of the core skills first put forward by the FEU in the earlier part of the decade but added more values-based notions of skill at the wish of employers. It is here we begin to see adaptations of skill in policy, initiated by the government White Paper entitled Further Education: A New Strategy (Baker, 1989), which made three proposals that have defined and pervaded the skills debate ever since. Firstly, that six core skills be integrated into established programmes (communication, numeracy,

personal relationships, familiarity with technology, familiarity with systems, familiarity with change), secondly, that levels be assigned to these core skills through formal assessment, and thirdly, that core skills should form the basis of a credit transfer system between academic and vocational awards (Kelly, 2001). It is apparent that Baker assumed that core skills were the vehicle to successfully bridging the academic-vocational divide which is the first time that the idea of generic transferable skills for everyone and not just those on a TVET pathway is raised in political discourse. This was significant, highlighting the government's ideology of education for employment and being led by employers' needs. As Turner (2007: 111) puts it, 'such a coalescence of opinion among organisations was, perhaps, quite unprecedented'.

In response to the review and White Paper, the government introduced General National Vocational Qualifications (Thompson, 1995), which were underpinned by core skills and chimed with Baker's proposal to bridge the academic-vocational divide and create 'equal esteem'. However, one could argue that this was simply the government's way of pressing ahead with the CBI's (1989) recommendation for the development of 'generic' competences and to broaden NVQs in an attempt to increase progression to the labour market. GNVQs were designed as largely classroom-based taught vocational qualifications with prescribed sets of units of core skills - communication, application of number, information technology, problem solving, improving own learning and performance, working with others, and vocational competence. The industry/employer-led curriculum was in full effect as part of the Conservative government's belief that marketisation and managerialism of the FE sector was a suitable solution to increase economic growth. Alongside the curriculum reforms (and changes to skills required for employment) were a number of market mechanisms, including the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which resulted in two funding councils (one for FE and one for HE) being established and this, consequently, led to free-market capitalism (a neoliberal ideology) (Ainley, 1998). The intent was to make colleges responsive to business needs and increase efficiency of the sector to reduce public spending, suggests Hammond (2001). This neoliberal ideology rests on the idea that in an ever-changing world, in order to be successful, individuals should seek to learn and continually invest in their own

human capital through education and training programmes, with their capital evidenced by a portfolio of knowledge and skills which are 'transferable' in varied and flexible careers (Ainley, 1998). However, as Wheelahan (2005) suggests, these skills put a socially empty concept at the heart of education, premised on the hope of a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances (Bernstein, 2000).

This ideology not only pervaded FE policy but also moved into the Higher Education (HE) sphere following the OECD's (2006) 'Lifelong Learning for All' report, which emphasised the notion of lifelong learning. Field (2001: 10) suggests that this was 'justified by reference to global competitive pressures and the changes wrought by science and the new technologies', thus holding neoliberal and human capital perspectives that learning must be purposeful for the labour market. Shortly after this, a government rhetoric of the 'learning society' began with 'A Vision for Higher Education (HE) in a Learning Society' - The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Whilst focussed on HE, the report asserts that, in the next century, the economically successful nations will be those which become learning societies: where all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning. Kelly (2001: 32) asserts that the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) 'signalled a shift in the economic and social aspirations of the education system – from vocational training for a job, to lifelong learning for employability'. This is arguably an impact of globalisation on the UK's education policies, whereby, technological advancements and rapid growth of service industries significantly changed the labour market (Keep, 2014) and, subsequently, the development of flexible skills were deemed more necessary for a world in which futures are said to be increasingly unpredictable (Beck, 2002; Beck and Young, 2005). Indeed, a key feature of Dearing's report was the recognition for HE to do more to develop a range of key skills in students, in addition to the cognitive capabilities traditionally associated with HE; this was an overwhelming feature in the evidence provided to them by employers. For example, the CBI expressed concerns that students attending pre-1992 universities 'may not have their generic skills adequately developed' (NCIHE, 1997: 34). One of the key recommendations from Dearing was that all 'programmes will need to give students the opportunities and skills to work across disciplines and to develop generic or transferable skills which are valuable in many

contexts' (NCIHE, 1997: 59). What is interesting here is that these same skills are those included within preceding GNVQs, led by employers' needs (e.g., CBI, 1989; Baker, 1989) and aligned to a marketised system focused on economic growth.

2.1.3 New Labour Ministries: 1997-2010

In 1997, under the New Labour Ministry, the Further Education Funding Council commissioned the 'Kennedy Report' (FEFC, 1997), which sought to address concerns about the 'business like' approach that FE providers were adopting following incorporation, for example, the selective recruitment of learners onto programmes and what was seen as a rationalised qualification offer at institutions. Unlike policy texts under the previous Conservative ministries, this report marked a shift in ideology, with a commitment to social inclusion by investing in lifelong learning: 'a dramatic shift in policy is required to widen participation in post-16 learning and to create a self-perpetuating learning society' (FEFC 1997: 15). Despite attempting to shift FE towards an instrument of social formation, the focus on skill formation for meeting employer's needs continued under the rhetoric of lifelong learning. For example, the New Labour government's cross-departmental skills strategy '21st Century Skills Realising Our Potential' (DfES, 2003) maintained a focus on meeting the demand of employers and developing skills that offer flexibility to meet shifts in demand. Moreover, the later green paper 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 2008) sought to ensure that the country was prepared for the twenty-first century whilst ensuring that a range of stakeholder needs were being met (individual, society and business), not too dissimilar to some of the ideas mooted by Dearing in their earlier report. Whilst wider stakeholder needs were alluded to, the review focused far more on equipping learners with the skills for a labour market which was predicted to change significantly, and the idea of generic, transferable skills continued to be seen as a solution. For example, the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 1998), in preparation for 'Curriculum 2000' (one of Labour's responses to their Green Paper), put it that:

> for continued success in employment and lifelong learning, young people and adults need to build on … [basic skills with] … key skills. Key skills are not about putting right a basic skills deficit. They are about putting basic skills to work in new contexts to support the changes and transitions that are part of everyone's experience. People with a solid grounding in the key skills – and the ability to update them throughout life – will have a head start in the workplace and beyond.

As can be seen, despite a new government, notions of the neoliberal ideology were still at the core, with a continued emphasis on transferability of skills to support the twenty-first century labour market. Although not all of Dearing's (NCIHE, 1997) proposals were taken on board, Curriculum 2000 was the formal implementation of six key skills (communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning and performance and problem solving) to post-16 learners as a compulsory element of all courses (Turner, 2007). Advanced Level qualifications had remained unchanged since their inception in 1951 (Hodgson and Spours, 2002) but the integration of key skills, which were once focussed on marginalised learners, were now for everyone (Atkins, 2013). Perhaps ironically, Hodgson and Spours (2005) discovered that those on an Advanced Level programme found their expanded programmes onerous, due in part to the nature of key skills and in part to the context of their implementation. Moreover, a review of recruitment to HE institutions revealed that, despite support for a broader curriculum, this was not reflected in the offers made to candidates, particularly from pre-1992 universities (Hodgson, Spours and Waring, 2005).

In a similar vein to the work of Dearing and Kennedy, and in the spirit of a Labour-led government, the Tomlinson Review (DfES, 2004) advised on the reform of curriculum and assessment arrangements for 14- to 19-year-olds with a focus on providing all young people with the skills, knowledge and attributes necessary to participate fully and effectively in adult life. This strikes a strong resemblance to the 'Learning Age' Green Paper written only 8 years earlier, but in it we see a stronger move to bridge the academic and vocational divide. This is primarily via the proposal to abolish GCSEs and Advanced Levels in favour of Diplomas. Furthermore, perhaps by way of necessity, there is a name-change of 'key skills', to one which encompasses a broader remit: common knowledge, skills and attributes (CKSA) e.g. personal awareness, problem solving, creativity, team-work and moral and ethical awareness (Tomlinson, 2004). This certainly moves closer to the list that the CBI outlined in 1989 with the element of 'values'. English, maths and ICT skills were separated from CKSA but were offered in a different guise (Functional Skills).

As a result of the Tomlinson Review, and the various challenges that faced the government at the time: low participation among 16–19-year-olds compared to international standards and a 14-19 education system that was deemed unfit for future demands, the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005) was produced. This set forth the raising of the participation age to 18, an emphasis on ensuring that all young people were equipped with level 2 in functional skills (English and maths), and the implementation of 14 lines of learning which bridged the vocational and academic divide into single programmes of study (Kelly, 2005). The reforms were said to be vital for the economy as they were to equip young people with the skills employers need and also vital to social justice, giving individuals the opportunity to continue their learning until 18. Permeating each 'line of learning' (subject pathway) were personal skills are those which, according to Kelly (2005: 42):

> give young people the ability to manage themselves and to develop effective social and working relationships. Thinking and learning skills mean knowing how to learn independently and adapt to a range of circumstances. Together these skills are essential for raising standards, further learning, employment and dealing with a range of real world problems. ... building on the notion of Common Knowledge Skills and Attributes (CKSA) developed by the Working Group on 14-19 Reform, and on existing National Curriculum guidance, these skills and attitudes ... are fundamental to improving young people's employability as well as their learning.

This statement of intent led to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2008) developing a framework for 'personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS)' which comprised of six groups of skills under the following headings: independent enquirers, creative thinkers, reflective learners, team workers, self-managers, and effective participators. According to the QCA (2008: 1), PLTS were 'essential to achieving the aims of the Diploma and the wider curriculum in enabling young people to become successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve' and they would also support young people to become 'confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society' (QCA 2008: 1). These PLTS are similar to Tomlinson's (2004) suggested CKSA but the focus on moral/ethical attributes appears to be missing. In fact, there is arguably a closer comparison to their predecessor 'key skills'.

During the mid-2000s, following the 14-19 White Paper and due to a fairly unrestricted qualification market, there were significant increases in low-level 'employability' programmes being established: seen as fundamental to widening participation and improving young people's employability (Atkins, 2013). Arguably, the intent here is positive but, following the financial crash in 2008 and a change of government in 2010, human capital theory became even more prescriptive, with its advocates (government) asserting that post-school education should be restricted to qualifications that have the greatest economic benefit (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021) and, consequently, this led to Wolf's (DfE, 2011) review of vocational education being commissioned.

2.1.4 Coalition Ministry: 2010-2015

Wolf (DfE, 2011) found that many of England's 14–19-year-olds did not progress successfully into secure employment or higher-level education and training, with many of them leaving education without the skills that would enable them to progress at a later date. The value of the generic employability programmes outlined above actually had little value in the labour market and only served to disadvantage the disadvantaged i.e. those that were more likely to follow broad, low-level vocational qualifications were not seen to be sufficiently equipped for entry to the labour market or could only access low-skilled work (DfE, 2011; Atkins, 2013). Consequently, Wolf (DfE, 2011) recommended the following: that young people stay in education and training to 18 due to a restricted labour market, an increase in apprenticeship and work-based experience, as employers valued this over credentials, rationalising of low-value qualifications, and a focus on English, maths and general skills. Regarding the 14-19 Diploma, Wolf's Review did not explore individual qualifications so had no direct involvement in its demise but, following the new government's decision to withdraw its funding and awarding body withdrawal in 2011, the qualification whose initial inception sought to bridge the academic and vocational divide now ceased to exist (Issacs, 2013).

As a result of Wolf's proposals, the DfE (2012) responded with an outline of 16-19 study programmes for implementation from 2013: 'All 16- to 19-year-olds will be offered high quality study programmes aimed at giving them the best opportunity to move into higher

education or secure skilled employment.' Fundamental and, somewhat, controversial suggestions were for students who did not have a GCSE in English and maths at 16 would continue to study these subjects after 16 and students who were unable to study a qualification would take a programme of work experience focusing on developing their employability skills, along with work to develop numeracy, literacy and other core education skills. We begin to see a move away from core skills for all to them being positioned as a study pathway for those that are less academically inclined, very much like the pre-Baker (1989) era. Indeed, the newly termed 'employability skills' are tied to learning that is situated in the workplace and, unlike many prior programmes, not tied to the qualification: 'Substantial, regular time in the workplace gaining vocational knowledge and/or employability skills'... [and] ...'The aim of non-qualification activity is to improve student employability skills' (DfE 2012: 11). This is a shift from the days of GNVQ and Diploma, where core skills were seen as necessary for everyone and integral to those programmes.

2.1.5 Conservative Ministries: 2015-2021

In 2015, building on a review of Apprenticeships (Richard, 2012), the Conservative government initiated a review of Technical Education (TE). An independent panel (IPTE, 2016) was established to advise ministers on actions to improve TE (the Sainsbury Review), alongside the government's Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). In the IPTE report (2016: 8), it is claimed that 'there are serious problems with the existing [TE] system. In particular, it is over complex and fails to provide the skills most needed for the 21st century'. It was predicted that by 2020, the UK would fall to 28th out of 33 OECD countries in terms of developing intermediate skills, with low-level skills predicted to remain unchanged (UKCES, 2015). Questions were raised as to how this would affect productivity compared to competitors like Germany and France, particularly given that, at the time, the raising of the participation age (RoPA) had only recently been implemented and over 400,000 16–24-year-olds remained unemployed (IPTE, 2016). Furthermore, the low status of FE remained unchanged from the previous century, with evidence to show that, at 16, disadvantaged students were more likely to enter further education than school sixth forms, with those from better off backgrounds around 80% more likely to gain

employment in a professional occupation compared to their peers from working class backgrounds (SMC, 2019). In spite of the government identifying some progress that had been made since the Wolf Report, with growing investment in apprenticeships, they acknowledged that TE remained the poor relation of academic education (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). A refocus on employer needs and what Kelly (2001) refers to as the liberal individualist model of education starts to become clear:

> The economic case for further reform of the skills system is compelling. Bringing training for young people and adults in line with the needs of business and industry will drive up productivity, which has lagged behind in this country even as economic growth and employment have improved (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 5).

In fact, the neoliberal ideology remains intact yet, while employers remain at the heart of policy, with a clear emphasis on them taking the lead in setting standards for high quality technical education options, unlike the previous New Labour and Conservative Ministries, there is a marked shift in the skills employers supposedly need. In both the IPTE report (2016) and Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016), seldom is there mention of core skills, or similar flexible skills required by employers. Instead, we see high-level technical skills being emphasised. Alongside this, we see new language emerging, with proposed qualifications giving 'young people the right opportunities to gain the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed for the world of work' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 10). Whilst this policy documentation only focuses on one segment of the broader FE sector, this shift away from 'core, key, employability' skills to one of 'behaviours' is in stark contrast to the focus of historical policy.

The Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016) led to the creation of a suite of technical qualifications (T-Levels) which were designed to co-exist with Apprenticeships and Advanced Levels. The intention to design these with employers to give young people the skills that industry needs ensures that they include contemporary and specific technical knowledge and skills, maths, English and digital skills, and a lengthy industry placement. As mentioned, unlike previous iterations of these qualifications, there is no other mandatory 'generic, transferable skill' component. This appears to represent a significant shift to learning in the workplace, which some would argue supports effective transition to the labour market (Nilsson, 2010), with learners acquiring new skills which are situated in context. However, one might also argue that this may simply be a reframing of the generic, transferable skills

discourse into workplace behaviours. The more recent FE White Paper, 'Skills for Jobs' (DfE, 2021), appears to build on the IPTE report and Skills Plan, identifying FE as a place where people can be given the technical skills they need to improve job prospects and the UK's productivity. As with the Skills Plan, there is a large emphasis on higher technical skills driven by employer-led occupational standards consisting of knowledge, skills and behaviour statements (KSBs) with no explicit reference to broader general, transferable skills. This lack of explicit reference to generic skills is notable, but they are arguably sat within those behaviours identified by the employers which are either a) less prominent in the discourse, or b) hidden under the guise of 'employer needs'.

There has been a longstanding appeal from government to employers to engage in the education system in the UK, particularly with the development of technical and vocational qualifications (Huddleston and Laczik, 2019) and, as the labour market evolved due to increased technologisation and interconnectivity, and subsequent automation (Popkova, Ragulina and Bogoviz, 2019) so too did the required skills evolve to match the pace of change (Nolan, 2017). These changes have resulted in many conceptualisations of skill in policy (Hyland and Merrill, 2003), providing an unstable ground from which those defining the skills (employers) start and thus, those 'delivering' the skills (teachers/trainers) are working with. Coupled with these changing notions of skills needed for the labour market have been tensions in the ideology which determine the purpose of the FE sector. Throughout the chapter, it is evident that the FE sector has largely been used as an instrument of skill formation for economic growth and, in more recent history, as a consequence of neoliberal ideology (Fairclough, 2010; Radice, 2013), the alignment to labour market needs and the marketisation of the individual has become more prominent. At times there have been attempts to develop the FE system as a social intervention alongside meeting employers' needs, and to bridge the academic and vocational divide, but these competing ideologies have resulted in tensions, arguably rendering the social intervention attempts as disingenuous.

At the conceptual level, the adaptation of the purpose of FE cascades the whole configuration of the sector and, consequently, as these perspectives have evolved (and

become distorted), so too has the notion of 'skill' in education policy discourse (Payne, 2000). The term has arguably shifted from manual 'know-how,' with emphasis on its connections with physicality and practice, driven by employment focused on manufacturing (Hyland and Johnson, 1998), to a post-Fordist liberal-individualist model which focused on core, transferable skills, driven by increased unemployment and a labour market increasing in service-sector jobs (Kelly, 2001). Atkins (2013: 30) asserts that there has been 'consistent failure of policy in [FE]' and, it could be argued that this may be a result of changing understandings of skill and its purpose. Indeed, Winch (2008) thinks that the major problem holding back skills development in England is a failure to understand the ambiguities of skill and its superfluous use in many cases, including the conflation of task/skill, ambiguity of skill/ability, and even meaninglessness of personal and social skills. We can see in the past 60 years of policy where the terms associated with generic, transferable skills are used rather loosely and often interchangeably. There are strong criticisms about the different notions of skill, particularly the idea of transferability as being untenable and lacking empirical evidence to support the idea of context-independent or generally applicable skills (Hyland and Johnson, 1998), which I shall explore further in chapter 3. Yet, it is perhaps of greater importance to understand why policy formation in the English skills system is subject to such change and the impact of this on the young people it serves, as explored in the next section.

2.2 The Impact of Policy Churn

Skills policies affect millions of people in the UK and getting these policies wrong disadvantages the individuals and groups, they are targeting before they even begin their learning (City and Guilds, 2019). There have been long-standing arguments that education and training policies serve to reinforce the class divide by enabling the privileged to be better educated and have more prestigious qualifications (Ainley, 1993; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). As can be seen from the above section, there has been ongoing and, often, significant 'political tinkering' in the Further Education (TVET) system (Winch, 2018) with 28 major pieces of legislation and 30 secretaries of state over the past 30 years (Wolf, 2017), which disproportionately affects those from marginalised groups, serving to propagate divisions in the working class (Archer et al, 2010; Hutchinson, 2011).

It is suggested that policies can be conceived as rational ways of allocating resources or as exercises of power and control (De Clercq, 1997) and there are conceivably a variety of external factors, such as economic trends, technological changes (Popkova, et al, 2019) and international developments that have influenced skills policy formation in England. Indeed, Ball and Exley (2010) argue that contemporary policy is developed within a firm paradigm of economic competitiveness and with competitive advantage as its primary objective and, for Hordern (2021), the hegemony of this discourse holds that educational outcomes are at the heart of economic prosperity, which is evident in contemporary skills policy.

According to Jones and Moore (1993) policy formation tends to have two distinct processes: selection and incorporation. Selection is a process of recontextualisation of ideas that are taken and reassembled into an instructional discourse. The second process, incorporation, suggested by Jones and Moore (1993) is the way the discourse incorporates the direction of travel in relation to the primary concerns of the government. For Fairclough (2010), the embracing of neoliberal ideology (the selection) from both the left and the right of mainstream British politics has actually supported the restructuring and rescaling of social relations in accordance with demands of global capitalism. Due to a shift in relations between the global economy, the expansion of education and the nature of labour markets, Holborow (2012) proposes that education is influenced by global actors such as the IMF and the World Bank. Social practices like TVET are not impermeable, isolated entities, they exist in networks of practices in a social order (Fairclough, 2010), so increasingly, UK policy is influenced by globalisation which, according to Held (1999, cited in Fairclough, 2010: 454), is:

> a process which embodies transformation in the spatial organisation of social relations and transactions… generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interactions and the exercise of power.

Pervaded by neoliberal economics, which remains the dominant ideology, particularly in capitalist countries participating in the global economy, (Davies and Bansal, 2007; Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012; Radice, 2013; Springer, Birch and MacLeavy, 2016), there are a wide range of voices in this flow of interaction. These include national governments, agencies, academic research, and international governance, including the

International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) who are said to serve as ‘guardians of global capitalism’ (Peet, 2009; Springer et al, 2016). Not only does this limit the UK to how much control it has over its own governance of skills policy, it also arguably results in simplified and homogenised approaches to skill developments, with a need to reify and measure, thus a lean towards Human Capital Theory (Becker, 2002; Carneiro, Dearden and Vignoles, 2010).

We can see this take shape in the manner in which skills policy in England is typified by a human capital perspective, with qualifications and credentials seen as proxies for skills. This views education as an investment to make individuals more productive and, consequently, more employable (Becker, 1975; Allais, 2007; Carneiro et al, 2010). The higher the qualification, the higher the value and because higher level skills are seen as necessary for the functioning of the economy and, accordingly, they yield greater returns on investment. Consequently, in focusing on return to investment a ladder is created, where those deemed to offer little return on investment are marginalised, which sustains inequality (Morris, 2023).

According to Ball and Exley (2010: 17), policy is either ‘clear, abstract and fixed’ or ‘awkward, incomplete, incoherent and unstable’. Where compromises are made between competing interests in the development of policy, it is reflected by way of the latter (Bertram, 2012). The previous chronology of skills policy highlights that competing interests of society and meeting labour market demands have often resulted in compromise. From the 00s where policy shifted from economic to social focus and in doing so we saw the integration of key skills in all study programmes, to more contemporary policy, under a Conservative government, where one might argue that economic interests are being prioritised over social welfare, with a market for training created in order to improve the degree to which the skills people acquire are matched to those needed by employers (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016). This alignment to employability is what Jones and Moore (1993) would refer to as incorporation due to a clear direction of travel in relation to the primary concerns of the government. Contemporary policy, therefore, frames TVET as an instrument of skill formation for economic competition as

opposed to being an instrument of social policy. This is supported by Keep (2014), who argues that where previous iterations of skills policy through the 1990s and early 2000s placed a lot of weight and influence on the training providers, contemporary policy places employers at the centre of the skills system - a clear signal of intent that employability is prioritised as a means to economic success. This marks what Esmond and Wood (2017) and Esmond (2018) argue is a widespread turn towards learning in the workplace and policy makers believe that affording employers the opportunity to influence the design and structure of qualifications, will support the response to skill demand (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). Qualifications are seen as the interface between education and work, and policy makers therefore assume that qualification reform can change the economy, but there is little evidence to support this (Allais, 2007) and, in spite of this, in less than a decade, there have been three independent reports into FE and Skills (Wolf, 2011; Richard, 2012; DfE/DBEIS, 2016) due to concerns about its ability to meet employers' needs. Moreover, the responsibility for skills has sat in different Government departments, moving from Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to the Department for Education's (DfE) remit (Winch, 2017). Nonetheless, employer engagement is seen to be key to ensuring the training market is fit-for-purpose and it is suggested that employers are more likely to invest in training and development where it is geared more towards their needs (DBIS, 2010). Owing to the fact that the apprenticeship levy now requires employers to contribute to the cost of training, it marks another incentive for their involvement (Richard, 2012) yet, as the government implements its latest set of reforms through T-Levels, it is a concern that some policy proposals have not had the time to take effect in practice before they are subjected to further revisions, raising questions over value for money, political agenda, and whether there is a systemic failure (City and Guilds, 2019). There are deep-rooted problems with employers informing policy with their skills needs, however, for example, skills mismatches are inherently difficult to measure (OECD, 2017) and there are several challenges to identifying employers' needs. Firstly, according to BIS (2016: 20) 'employers who report basic literacy and/or numeracy deficits are more likely to be part of a larger organisation', which, to a large extent, is due to them having HR systems in place to conduct skills and training needs analysis. This, then, poses a problem when trying to attend to the 'skills that employers need' rhetoric in skills policy when there is

heterogeneity in employers and smaller organisations have insufficient capacity to identify skills needs. Due to the dominance of larger organisations reporting skills gaps, the BIS (2016) report suggests that the prevalence of skills deficits in England may be understated and, there may be a 'narrow understanding' (BIS, 2016: 20). However, it is important to note that much of their analysis was based on a mere twenty employer case studies with companies in the engineering, construction and IT sectors, hardly representative of the broader body of employers.

It is fair to say that historical and contemporary TVET policy in England is incomplete, incoherent and unstable (Ball and Exley, 2006; Bertram, 2012) and this arguably contributes to inequality. Inherent in the neoliberal discourse, which pervades contemporary education policy (Davies and Bansal, 2007; Fairclough, 2010; Radice, 2013; Springer et al, 2016; Wheelahan et al, 2022), is the framing of education as 'us' and 'them'. The 'us' being the successful achievers who attend academic institutions, typically from the middle class, whilst 'them' generally referring to the working class who are likely to follow TVET routes (Gewirtz, 2001; Lenon, 2018). This division caused by stratification of the education system is further exacerbated by constant flux of TVET policy, where there have been ongoing tensions for TVET being used as an instrument for social policy and for economic prosperity. With economic prosperity as the current agenda, the education system has thus evolved to model itself on a quasi-market and to deliver qualifications that have immediate purchase in the labour market (Young, 2005), with employment viewed as the primary measure of equality (Esmond and Atkins, 2020). However, this competition for employment results in further division due to a figurative ladder of value (Morris, 2023) created between TVET disciplines, where those that are in the formation of new 'technical elites' valued more highly resulting in further marginalisation of others (Esmond and Atkins, 2020; 2022).

2.3 Evolution of TVET Initial Teacher Education Policy

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England's TVET sector has been offered part-time in colleges since before the war and full-time at polytechnics (now universities) since the

1940s (Cantor and Roberts 1972; Orr and Simmons, 2010; Esmond and Wood 2017). However, as noted by Young, Lucas, Sharp and Cunningham (1995), the sector has suffered from benign neglect, mirroring the marginalisation of FE and low status of VET in England. This neglect has, I argue, continued through the last 25 years and, where there have been attempts in policy to support its development, little time has been afforded before it falls down the pecking order again.

Historically, FE ITE has been fraught with tensions to establishing a professional workforce, as described by Cantor and Roberts (1972: 185):

> The teacher in a local technical college tends not to regard himself primarily as a teacher of a specific subject like mathematics or technical drawing, but rather identifies with his former profession and considers himself an engineer or draughtsman who happens to be teaching.

The rapid expansion in FE during the 1970s led to the recommendations of the James Report (1972) being accepted that all teachers in FE should receive initial teacher training and complete a Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE). Providing teachers with the opportunity to develop elevated levels of pedagogical expertise is arguably the first attempt at 'dual professionalism' and at raising the quality of the sector, however, this created tensions for those balancing their occupational expertise with teaching expertise. As noted earlier, the reforms in FE during the 1980s led to significant changes in the qualifications to support young people's transitions. A more progressive and inclusive FE system resulted in, what Fisher and Webb (2007) suggest was, a shift in the identity of teaching practitioners, whereby subject specialist instruction was replaced by student-centred facilitation. This not only marked a shift in identity but also one in the workforce, with many leaving the profession perturbed by the lack of value placed on subject expertise (Fisher and Webb, 2007).

Following the establishment of the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) in the early 90s, whose primary aim was to develop a set of standards for assessors and verifiers to support NVQs (Further Education Unit, 1992), there was a lean towards competence-based approaches in ITE too (Lucas, 2002). Indeed, around two thirds of universities developed their own competency-based programmes where some of the units of the TDLB awards were integrated into university initial teacher training

programmes for FE college teachers (Lucas, 2002). In spite of a set of standards that could be used in FE ITE, the wide range of providers offering training whereby there was considerable autonomy over the design of curricula, with minimal interference from regulators, resulted in considerable variability in the application of standards (Lawy and Tedder, 2009).

Following this initial attempt at implementing standards into FE ITE curricula, under a Labour-led ministry, and off the back of the Green Paper The Learning Age (DfEE, 1998), an official set of professional standards were launched in 1999 (FENTO, 1999), with the decision to make professional qualifications for teachers in the sector compulsory and based on the new professional standards shortly after; the first attempt of the government at professionalising FE in ITE (Tummons, 2016). Esmond and Wood (2017) note that the New Labour governments' approach was heavily influenced by Human Capital Theory and underlying this policy model was that the standards should be developed first to specify what is to be learnt, the qualifications are then developed to incorporate the standards, and regulators (i.e. Ofsted) monitor that standards are embedded and that trainee teachers experience/learn what was intended (Nasta, 2007). Lawy and Tedder (2009: 53) note this paradigm shift in FE teacher education, stating that:

> The formal (written) curriculum…[was]...factorised to a set of standards and constructed as a programme of strictly controlled and managed teacher training, with an emphasis on assessment, measurement and accountability.

However, as a result of high variability in the interpretation and implementation of the standards by universities and awarding organisations (Ofsted, 2003), and following the Leitch (2006) review, mandatory ITE qualifications for the FE sector were introduced underpinned by detailed a set of revised standards, to be more prescriptive and open to less interpretation (LLUK, 2007). This was reinforced by compulsory membership of the Institute for Learning (IfL) - a professional membership body for the sector. While it might seem a logical process to narrow and prescribe standards, it arguably exacerbates the reification of teaching practices at the expense of rich knowledge and understanding (Hyland, 2006).

Indeed, the LLUK standards were criticised for their restricted and technicist discourse of professionals (Lucas and Nasta 2010). Moreover, it could be asserted that this approach takes away the agency of the individuals, arguably contradicting the notion of professionalism. Here we see an attempt to strengthen the classification of the curriculum with more prescription. However, in spite of the acknowledgement that 'an essential aim of the training is that teachers should have the skills of teaching in their own specialist or curriculum area' (LLUK, 2007: 8), the curriculum was pervaded by generic teaching practices which focussed on the underlying features deemed necessary to perform tasks, rather than structured, hierarchical, and well-insulated knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). One could argue that with up to 200 subject specialisms (Crawley, 2005) in any one college, it is understandable that there was a lean towards more generic pedagogy in FE ITE. Mentoring was, therefore, seen as the route to development of subject specialist pedagogy skills, though this was fraught with its own issues around subject availability and funding to support mentor capacity (Fisher and Webb, 2007).

Mandated teacher training did not last long in the sector, however, with the Lingfield Interim Report (2012) proposing the revocation of the 2007 regulations with employers given discretion over the qualifications deemed appropriate for their teaching staff. This was perhaps more of a consequence of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, coinciding with several changes to FE ITE and wider workforce development, with the demise of LLUK and the Lingfield Report (2012) holding that teaching qualifications were a matter for local decision-making and individual responsibility which, Esmond and Wood (2017: 7) argue effectively re-assigned 'teaching expertise from a regulatory requirement to a function of local labour markets'. The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) subsequently redeveloped ITE qualifications (AET, CET and DET) which, incidentally, remained much the same as their predecessor qualifications, before the organisation lost its funding and collapsed. A new FE Guild was proposed to support workforce development, later known as the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) (Tummons, 2014; 2016). In 2014, the ETF released, under their guardianship, the third set of FE professional standards in less than twenty years (ETF, 2016; Tummons, 2016), a rationalised and less prescriptive set of standards than LLUK and, due to being released

post-qualification reform, not as firmly embedded into ITE programmes as their predecessor standards.

Today, it is, perhaps hyperbolically, suggested that initial teacher education for FE is as diverse as the sector itself (Hanley and Thompson, 2021). However, there are a series of FE ITE qualifications ranging from level 3-5 and, in Higher Education provision, up to level 7 (ETF, 2016). Despite the statutory requirements for prescribed teaching qualifications in the sector being revoked in 2013 (Lingfield, 2012) and providers having full autonomy to appoint those who they believe are best suited to the role, regardless of teaching qualification, many institutions continue to request that new teachers either have or commit to gaining a level 5 teaching qualification within a certain time period (ETF, 2016). A level 5 teaching qualification is also the approved qualification for progression to professional formation (leading to QTLS - the sector's professional status) (ETF, 2016), with around 10,000 trainee teachers undertaking one annually (ETF, 2018) and, for this reason, for the purpose of this thesis, as I begin to explore the skills taught in FE ITE, I only intend to focus on those FE ITE qualifications at level 5 and above.

As mentioned above, the latest inception of the professional standards is not as pervasive in the current teaching qualifications in the sector perhaps because, unlike previous iterations of the standards, they came after the development of the ITE qualifications. In terms of a curricula then, in 2016, the Education and Training Foundation (2016) developed, in partnership with a number of accredited awarding organisations and the Universities Council for Educating Teachers (UCET), a framework for teacher education programmes in the education and training sector (FE sector). According to the guidance, awarding organisations are obliged to follow a structure of mandatory and optional units equating to a minimum number of credits, with HEI provision 'required to 'base their qualifications' on the mandatory and optional units (ETF, 2016). It is important to note that this framework was not significantly different to the predecessor qualifications, and, in spite of consultation, the current curriculum was largely driven by the 2007 qualification design.

However, in the current qualification guidance, the ETF (2016: 11) suggests that the increase in technical education programmes centred on apprenticeship and T-levels with an emphasis on employment/employability 'implies a greater need to develop dual professionals who can combine teaching and occupational expertise… [and the qualifications] …offer the professional development and accreditation necessary to achieve this'. In spite of this, as Loo (2018) contends, it is evident from the guidance that the qualifications are fundamentally designed to be generic in that they continue to be characterised by a lack of propositional knowledge. While there are several options for subject specialist qualifications limited to Mathematics numeracy, English literacy, English ESOL and Teaching learners with Special Educational Needs and Disability, the curricula and standards arguably position mentoring as the process through which subject-specialist pedagogic development is embedded within the teacher training qualification (Tummons, 2016). Hanley and Thompson (2021: 2) go on to assert that, as a result of external pressures from policymakers and Ofsted, who have 'underplayed the differences between 'subjects' in FE and those encountered in school', FE ITE is often seen as deficient due to its lack of subject pedagogy and generic, rather than subject-centred teaching. This harks back to the same debates identified by Cantor and Roberts (1972) and highlights the tension with non-specialist ITE.

Current FE ITE largely consists of generic programmes designed to support teachers across a broad range of discipline areas, against a set of standards which are more accessible and less onerous than previous iterations, but too ambitious and difficult to integrate into everyday practice, according to interviewees in Tummons' research (2016). It should be noted that this research did not include trainee teachers and was not necessarily reflective of the sector given only 24 participants were involved, however, the fact that there are only 20 professional standards - a far cry from the 138 in the LLUK standards - there is little wonder that participants found the ETF standards more accessible. Yet, for participants who found it difficult to integrate the ETF standards into practice, it is understandable given that the ETF (2014) themselves quote that 'organisations and individuals can interpret the standards for themselves'.

It is worth noting that, at this stage, change is afoot with both professional standards and the integration of new occupational standards in initial teacher education qualifications in FE. The recent Skills for Jobs white paper (DfE, 2021) and subsequent Skills Act 2022, set out a clear directive to re-regulate teacher education and for all trainee teachers to work towards a set of employer-led occupational standards consisting of over 50 knowledge, skills and behaviours to meet (IfATE, 2021), thus having greater prescription than the current standards - a recentring of neoliberal policy directed towards the market in the same manner as the intent behind the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). Moreover, both the apprenticeship and the ITE qualifications/curricula are to be designed around these standards, still under the custodianship of the ETF beginning in 2024. The current ETF standards are to be updated too in light of developments prompted by changes to working practices and digital learning and the emerging sustainability and wellbeing challenges in society (ETF, 2022). However, these standards will become post-qualification standards following the inception of the forthcoming ITE qualifications. What is more, recent Ofsted ITE inspection data and DfE (2023) expectations for the delivery of FE ITE highlights a growing demand for subject specialisation, suggesting providers do more than simply assign a subject specialist mentor for the subject development.

However, in a research monograph exploring 32 further education teacher educators in England, Loo (2020) found that 85% of subjects had first degrees or equivalent, the vast majority of whom were concentrated in subjects such as Education, Humanities and Languages. All 25 FE TEds in the NRDC (2004) study were graduates, with subject specialisms clustered around English, Languages or Maths, and Education/Social Sciences. Noel's (2006) sample of teacher educators were concentrated in Business and Management Studies and Social Science and Humanities, with over half having master's degrees and a number with doctorates. Finally, in their study of TEd characteristics, Harkin et al (2008) found very few teacher educators with craft backgrounds or with maths/science backgrounds, stating that 'it is unlikely that the curriculum areas represented by teacher educators reflect the composition of the FE workforce (Harkin et al, 2008: 16). While there are numerous typologies and ways of categorising subject disciplines (Becher, 1994) it is evident from the above, that those subjects typically

associated with TVET (e.g. Hair and Beauty, Engineering, Motor Vehicle, Plumbing, Construction) are seldom the discipline backgrounds of TEds.

2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided me with an opportunity to understand how skills policy has evolved over the last 60-years and the reasons for such changes. I have considered the implications of skills policy on the FE/TVET sector and identified a number of issues with the way in which the skills discourse is adapted to serve diverse needs and interests. Moreover, this chapter has allowed me to determine how FE ITE has evolved alongside the TVET sector and it is clear that, while there has been some alignment, the FE ITE sector has remained largely unchanged for the last twenty years, with a focus on genericism through the standards and curriculum design. It is evident that skills discourse is pervaded by different meanings and purposes to these different interests and, it is important therefore, that I am able to identify a conceptual framework that can be used to critically analyse this discourse in order to understand the relationship and impact of policy and discursive practices of those working in TVET and FE ITE, which I endeavour to do in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

3. Introduction to the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This chapter plays an essential role in the thesis, providing both a conceptual and theoretical frame to answer the research questions. Whilst conceptual and theoretical frameworks differ in purpose, they are closely related elements that help to define the scope of the research being undertaken (Atkins and Wallace, 2012; Cresswell and Cresswell, 2023). For instance, conceptual analysis is useful in exposing key concepts, their definitions, and relationships between them (Griffiths, 1987; Cresswell and Cresswell, 2023). Given that the ubiquitous and ambiguous use of skill in educational political discourse and practice which, for Griffiths (1987: 204), 'carries a miasma of political and educational connotations as well as a variety of more ordinary language ones', and in accordance with the research questions for this study which intend to analyse discourses of skill in policy and practice, it is imperative that I have a clear vision for how I might conceptualise and categorise different notions of skill. I therefore begin the chapter by attempting to establish what is and is not a skill, and how skill might be designated by its characteristics. By leaning on the works of Ryle (1949) and Winch (2010), I illuminate paradigmatic and adapted conceptions of skill to understand their relationships to one another and to establish a framework to enable me to identify how skill might emerge in the different discourses.

In addressing RQ1, I conceptualise skills in terms of their purpose drawing on sociological perspectives of skill. It is here that I tease out how Marxist theory enters the skills discourse and the way in which skills discourses may serve to perpetuate disadvantage for sections of the working class. I explore how skills policy, which is geared towards the labour market and at maximising economic growth, creates a fetishisation of skill (Wheelahan et al, 2022) and alienates sections of the working class from their skills. I also explore how this may be further exacerbated by a division in the working class, whereby the upper and favoured stratum who benefit from relative advantages, as part of a technical elite (Esmond and Atkins, 2022), inadvertently support capitalism's interests to marginalise lower skilled and lower-valued members of society.

My theoretical framework, on the other hand, involves critical analysis and synthesis of relevant theories, models, and key concepts from the existing literature in the field (Atkins and Wallace, 2012; Cresswell and Cresswell, 2023). Here, I draw on Bernstein's (2000) types of knowledge and recontextualisation principles to respond to RQ2 and RQ3. Bernstein's work is discussed as a strong - and reputable - theoretical framework through which to theorise the way in which discourses of skill are established and recontextualised in practice to marginalise sections of the working class.

3.1 Building a Conceptual Framework for Skill: A Philosophical Inquiry

Philosophers have long sought to understand and define knowledge and, consequently, despite its ubiquitous use, the topic of skill has been marginalised (Pavese, 2015). According to Winch (2010), discussions of skill are fraught with conceptual conflation, inflation and deflation of the term, and below I begin with Ryle's ordinary language philosophy to further my own conceptualisation of skill in an attempt to establish a framework to enable me to identify how skill might emerge in the different discourses within TVET policy and practice.

3.1.1 Distinguishing skill from knowledge

I begin to build my framework by distinguishing between knowledge and skill and Ryle's (1949) seminal work, 'The Concept of Mind', provides a useful starting point to begin this. Ryle's use of ordinary language philosophy allows him to develop his central argument that propositional truths, or what he calls 'knowing that' (KT) something is the case, and their operations, or as he calls it, 'knowing how' (KH) to do things, should be differentiated. While it is suggested that there are certain 'parallelisms' between the two: learning, forgetting, finding - for example, we can learn to play the trumpet (an operation - KH) and we can learn that the capital of Iran is Tehran (a propositional truth - KT), and we can forget how to cross stitch (KH) and forget that Ryle's first name is Gilbert (KT) - a significant difference between KT and KH is that descriptions of people 'knowing how' refer to intentional performance of operations correctly or efficiently, such as an ability to bake a cake or throw a ball. Their performances are judged against how well they meet certain standards or criteria e.g., throwing a ball with power and precision. Ryle's (1949)

claim is that evaluative concepts can be applied to propositions for KH to indicate degrees of expertise, though they cannot be applied to propositions that express one's factual knowledge (KT). For example, Kathryn knows *how* to weld a joint with *accuracy*, whereas Kathryn may know *that* there are features of welding a joint with accuracy but for KT, she either knows them or she does not; she does not '*know* the features with great accuracy'. Though Ryle does not explicitly equate KH with skill, he uses the terms 'KH' and 'skill' interchangeably which implies his view of KH is the same for skill. For example, we are told that 'skilful is an action that manifests know how' (Ryle, 1949: 29). Thus, an action can only be skilful if it manifests a skill. The application of evaluative concepts to KH is an interesting consideration in the building of a conceptual framework, as these help to provide a clear distinction between propositional knowledge and skills.

However, Fodor (1981) and White (1982) are critics of Ryle's evaluative concepts, suggesting that they are primitive and blur the lines between doing something and doing it well, arguing that there are two classes of know-how, that is: to know how to do something and to know how to do something well. This assertion is made based on language analysis that 'traits give rise to adverbs, competences to verbs: we exhibit our competences in our activities and our traits in our style' (Foder, 1981: 72). For instance, Kathryn may know how to weld a joint and that does not mean that the evaluative concept of accuracy is automatically ascribed. Indeed, Kathryn may know how to weld a joint with poor/ satisfactory/ good/ great accuracy. However, Ryle does not suggest that *all* actions of KH require an evaluative concept to be applied, but unlike KT, they *can* be applied to characterise the degree of expertise for KH. This does however raise the question that if not all instances of KH require an evaluative concept, then how does one distinguish between KH and KT where evaluative concepts are not applied. Bengson and Moffett's (2007) work helps here, as their critique of Ryle makes the claim that there is a distinction between knowing how to F and ability to F. For instance, one may know how to perform a half turn pike dive but be unable to perform it. However, for me, this confuses KT and KH. They may know *that* (KT) a half turn pike involves a twist, bend action etc but, as Winch (2010) attests, when it comes to skill, if one says that they know how to do something, it usually implies that they can do it (i.e. ability to F). For example, if one were

to go to a garage with a car fault and the mechanic said that they knew how to fix the fault with the car, the customer would infer that they could fix the car (subject to them having the correct tools). For Hyland (2006), the lack of focus on propositional knowledge impoverishes learning. However, this view assumes that KT is required for one to be skilled, which is somewhat contrary to Ryle's philosophy, as it suggests that the mind and body are separate (Cartesian Dualism) which, Ryle argues, leads to an infinite regress. Though Ryle (1949) does not exclude 'knowledge that' from 'know how', he states that KH cannot be reduced to KT, and therefore, the requirement for propositional knowledge may be a misnomer.

3.1.2 Philosophical Concepts of Skill: A Paradigmatic Definition

In defining skill, Winch (2010: 43) asserts that 'paradigmatically, skills are activities that involve dexterity and sensorimotor coordination' such as sawing a piece of wood or kneading bread. They are 'an ability, usually learned, to act in certain ways in relation to tasks' (ibid). These notions of skill build upon Ryle in that they demonstrate know-how; the same cannot be said for propositional knowledge. Moreover, they align with my own perspectives and positionality, as outlined in chapter 1. Like Ryle, Winch goes on to explain that the possession of a 'skill' is subject to normative appraisal, in that the skill can be appraised based on how skilfully it was performed. For example, the wood was sawn with precision, or the bread was kneaded with efficiency. Winch also suggests that a skill is usually performed with intention; one has intention to carry out a task and the exercise of an appropriate skill is the means of doing it. In this sense, the exercise of a skill is the activation of an agent's disposition (Winch, 2013). Though closer to conceptualising skill, there is still a vagueness about what constitutes a learned sensorimotor ability that is applied with intention and can be normatively appraised, and this paradigmatic conceptualisation seems to omit many of the things that policy makers and practitioners refer to as a skill.

While paradigmatically conceptualised as a sensorimotor ability, it would be naive to think that skill is solely physical. It could be argued, that if one can perform actions (not necessarily observable) that can be described using evaluative concepts, that there must

be mental skills too (not to be conflated with KT), and this is what Winch (2010) refers to as moderate inflation, whereby 'mental skills' such as arithmetic and 'transferable skills' such as literacy and numeracy, both of which are subject to normative appraisal and enacted with intentionality, are considered as skills (Winch, 2010). While considered 'benign' in that they do not lead to conceptual incoherence, one must be careful as to how far these ideas extend, which is where, I feel, Winch's work falls short. Very few skills are only applicable to one type of task and in this sense, most skills have some degree of transferability. For example, one can use the basic mental arithmetic to calculate VAT on the cost of repairing a car in the same manner that they might calculate the discount on parts to fix the car. However, the suggestion of transfer is problematic as it relies on there being an appropriate similarity between subjects. For example, a physical skill such as using a tool to remove a wheel from a car will have appropriate similarity to using a tool to remove a wheel from a motorcycle. However, using a tool to remove a wheel from a train car is not an appropriately similar skill as it requires different tools and know-how. On the other hand, Sennett (2008: 107), who views skills through a lens of craft, maintains that skills are not a 'laundry list of procedures' but, instead, form culture around the actions and, therefore, he does not believe in the transferability of skills. Central to this is learning in the workplace, or on the job, where habits, routines, standards and ways of being are key to the development of skills, with different settings having different norms and conventions (Billett, 2020). There are two aspects of this worth unpicking. The first, that skills form culture suggests that transfer is difficult, and this presents an issue for the TVET curriculum, particularly when situated outside of the workplace. The second, that habits, routines and ways of being are key to the development of skills, which reminds me of Polanyi's (1958) work whereby 'tacit knowledge', which is loosely defined as the things we know how to do but cannot always explain, is often associated with and rooted in expert practice. Eraut (2000; 2004) suggests that tacit knowledge is expressed in three ways which demonstrate such expertise: routines, understanding of people and situations, and intuitive decision making. For example, as you do a job, you begin to develop routines and habits which are influenced by the social context and these become embodied in the expert, unable to be captured by language and only seen by its action (Polanyi, 1958). This tacit knowledge may be in the form of physical or mental skills but

are essentially unteachable and cannot be assessed explicitly. However, as noted in chapter 2, the way in which skill appears to be used in policy has evolved over recent decades to encompass broader conceptions and, given my own positionality in the study, where I recognise the contention of the disparate use of the term, it could be argued, that many of the 'skills' that fall outside of Winch's paradigmatic and benign concepts of skill (problem solving or communication), may in fact be as a result of attempts to identify and atomise and reify the tacit knowledge of an expert for teaching novices within TVET. Below I identify two ways that this may occur and the associated problems with doing so.

In England, this atomisation of skill into discrete actions has resulted in an 'obsession with the specification of task-related behaviours as 'learning outcomes' related to narrowly specified occupational standards' (Winch, 2014: 165). For example, in much of the NVQ development of the 90's (Jessup, 1991), there was significant underestimation of the notion of skill. It was *conceptually deflated* to think of skill as simply techniques, habits and overt performances which were reduced to practical activities in 'relatively simple and mindless' checklists (Griffiths, 1987; Winch, 2010). For example, the many discrete skills required to operate a forklift truck (i.e. turning it on, operating the pedals, directing the truck, ensuring the fork placement is accurate, operating the lift button at an appropriate speed), taken independently and out of a real-world context does not necessarily constitute 'skilled' practice. Whilst it could be said that some of the discrete skills can be subject to normative appraisal and thus could be performed well, the overall combination of these skills may be poorly performed. This atomisation also ignores the element of agency in the exercising of a skill and it is the ability to combine discrete skills into effective combinations and respond to the environment and social conditions (e.g. working with and alongside colleagues, spatial awareness, timing etc) which is what makes for a skilled performance (Winch, 2010). For example, 'the forklift was operated safely and with precision to fulfil the requirements of the task.' If one can determine mastery of a procedure (discrete skills) but not necessarily combine the skills in a manner which responds to the environment and social conditions, then it would be incorrect to suggest that the individual has successfully acquired and can enact the skill. However, given the

nature of much TVET learning which takes place in educational institutions, policy makers and practitioners are invariably likely to speak of discrete skills.

3.1.3 Philosophical Concepts of Skill: Generic, Transferable Skills

This atomisation of skill has implications for broader conceptions of the term too. Barrow (1987: 192) describes 'the most insidious use of the word 'skill'-namely, to pick out alleged generic intellectual abilities' (e.g. problem solving, critical thinking). This is an interesting claim given the types of skill that pervaded skills policy (chapter 2). Dunne (1997) makes the point that the notion of generic, transferable skills meets Adorno's criterion of an unfulfilled concept: something which is not sufficiently coherent in the abstract to be fully realisable in practice. For the existence of generic, transferable skills to be acknowledged, Winch (2010: 51) suggests that they would need to meet certain conditions. 'Firstly, that they are immediately applicable to a range of tasks and secondly, that they can be applied to new tasks without significant knowledge or additional skills'. Taking his first point, without being immediately applicable to a task, they cannot be characterised as general or generic. For example, having a general skill of problem solving would mean that the mechanic who can diagnose and fix an issue with a car's gearbox would be able to transfer this skill to diagnose and repair a fault on a personal computer. The skill of problem solving is not a codified process and therefore, the two distinctly different circumstances require one to follow a different process of problem solving. This is supported in the empirical work by Jones (2009), whereby 37 academics were interviewed across various discipline areas and found that 'generic attributes are highly context-dependent and are shaped by the disciplinary epistemology in which they are conceptualised and taught' (Jones 2009, 85). In her data, Jones found distinct differences between problem solving in economics, which used specific tools and models, compared to medicine, where clinical reasoning and therapeutic skills were used. For Servant (2019), problem solving strategies involve analogies, forward search and other cognitive strategies, all of which are bound by their context and thus cannot be generic or transferable. Moreover, Kirschner and Hendrick (2020) suggest that problem solving requires both the declarative and procedural knowledge of the subject area to develop cognitive schemata, thus corroborating Winch's second point, that if generic skills require

additional knowledge and skills, then they are incomplete. The mechanic undoubtedly requires a different body of knowledge to be able to solve problems with a computer. Similarly, there may be a completely distinct set of skills needed to solve each problem. Whilst the discrete skills of replacing a part might be quite similar (i.e. using a hand tool), arguably the generic skill is then a physical skill, rather than the mental skill of problem solving.

Johnson and Siegal (2010) are more supportive of the idea of generic, transferable skills, however, suggesting that an individual with the skill of multiplication can multiply across a variety of domains. However, as mentioned above, this particular example of conceptual inflation is benign. There is also the idea that if one were to be labelled, for example, a 'good problem solver' in that they have the skill of problem solving. This is where the idea of reification applies to general thinking skills when considering the properly adverbial or adjectival to the improperly substantive. For example, if X can do Y skilfully, it is assumed that there must be a skill of Y'ing and that X has it (Johnson and Siegal, 2010):

> We are tempted to believe that there is a "skill" to be identified, isolated and trained for. Thus there is in effect a jump from talk of performing an action well or successfully to the existence of some specific, discrete skill or skills possessed by and exercised by the performer (Johnson and Siegal, 2010: 20).

This idea of reification is evident in chapter 2, where policy outlines a range of generic, transferable skills that are to be included within TVET programmes in order to provide young people with the ability to apply themselves to the variety of situations they might meet in the future labour market (Harrop, 1992). Mehralizadeh, Salehi and Marashi (2008) argue that these skills are entirely illusory, being so vague in their conception, that they can mean almost anything to anyone. This is not to say that thinking skills such as problem solving are not abilities that can be contextualised in practice as tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), merely that conceptualising them as general, transferable skills is problematic. Indeed, the idea of genericism appears to be taken one step further under the auspices of '21st Century Skills' (21C) (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2015), which are seen as the skills that young people need to be equipped with for a perpetually changing future (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022). In addition to moderately inflated notions of skill such as literacy, numeracy, and generic, transferable skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, these 21C skills also include character qualities

such as persistence, grit, resilience, and adaptability. This broad perspective of skill is premised on social, emotional and self-management skills, inflating skill to colonise 'all aspects of our lives, including who we are, our inner selves, what we believe and how we behave' (Wheelahan et al, 2022: 483), which arguably has more sinister undertones, as I shall discuss in chapter 3.2. Philosophically, however, these so-called skills rest on a flawed premise as, by the very nature of managing emotions and the self, it denotes a dualist position which rests on the idea that knowledge that must precede knowledge how, thus falling into the infinite regress (Ryle, 1949).

3.1.4 Philosophical Concepts of Skill: Social Skills

These broader notions of skill are challenged by Hyland (2006) who argues that they view skill as detached from the person and that this devalues the importance of a person's ethics, values and agency. According to Winch (2010), in exercising a skill, one arguably demonstrates technique, perceptual ability, moral qualities, habits and propositional knowledge. Skill, therefore, in the possession of an individual, is complex with different integrated and interrelated aspects. Therefore, it is understandable that it is sometimes confused, and this is when misleading conceptual inflation arises conflating skill with personal attributes, often cited as 'social, soft or interpersonal skills'.

There is no doubt that a person's character is implicated in the way a skill is exercised, though, according to Winch (2010), the concept of skill is inappropriate in its application to dealing with others. The definition of skill that it applies 'paradigmatically to a task' and performed with intentionality indicates that it has a purpose and is goal oriented, thus success is dependent on the extent to which a task is completed. As such, using this perspective of skill when dealing with people is erroneous as it removes agency from individuals and subsumes people into categories that one would use for objects. Objects of skills have instrumental value, whereas the human has moral worth (intrinsic value) (Zagzebski, 1996). Barrow's (1987) perspective on individuals who are said to have personal and intellectual 'skills' is that it is not that they have been trained to perform particular behaviours or formal cognitive operations, but that they have a certain character which is steeped in various areas of understanding. In general, being sociable, pleasant,

etc. is arguably a matter of being a certain kind of person and having an understanding of particular people and situations (Barrow, 1987). Barrow qualifies this with examples of individuals that may be said to possess ‘soft skills’ inasmuch as they listen well, show concern, greet or shake hands with others. He suggests that these are more social conventions than skills and that the skill is actually the ability to exercise these conventions at appropriate times i.e. in the right way for the present context.

Skills are identifiable actions directed at the achievement of an aim that one has, regardless of the moral value of those aims. They can be exercised skilfully or without skilfulness and, at the same time, be virtuous or with a lack of virtue (Winch, 2010). Viewing ‘social skills’ as a skill therefore begins to conflate skill with things that may be considered virtues (immoderate inflation of skill). For example, a hairdresser may perform the skill of cutting one’s hair and do so skilfully. At the same time, they may demonstrate virtue by being compassionate, respectful and kind to their client. Conversely, they may follow social convention (per Barrow) but not act in a particularly virtuous way and, yet still perform the haircut skilfully. It is argued that skill and virtue are analogous (Stichter, 2015; Annas 1995). Indeed, there is a compelling case for making this comparison, particularly when using Winch’s definition of skill. Virtues are enacted with intentionality (with ‘the good’ in mind), they can be executed in relation to tasks, and they are subject to normative appraisal. For example, whilst kindness is arguably a subjective tenet, one could feasibly consider a number of examples of what it would be like to observe an act of kindness and the degree to which someone was kind. However, not all of the so-called ‘soft skills’ may be labelled a virtue. For example, the ability to communicate with clarity to an individual. There may be occasions where this is a legitimate application of the concept of the skill; knowing when to listen and to explain in different ways to aid the completion of a task is (akin to Barrow’s suggestion). However, characterising all communications with people as a ‘skill’ not only distorts the moral orientation towards other people; rather than respecting agency, they are seen as objects to be overcome (Winch, 2010), but also suggests that there is a ‘generalisability’ of the skill (problems of which were discussed above). Consequently, social skills are conceptually problematic.

3.1.5 Philosophical Concepts of Skill: Transversal Abilities

In spite of conceptual problems with some of the perspectives of skill discussed above, Winch (2010) suggests that there are important competencies/abilities such as planning, communicating, coordinating, controlling and evaluating but that should be distinguished from skills; viewed as higher order abilities. In recent work, these higher abilities are coined 'second order transversal abilities' (Winch, 2013; 2015). Whilst exercising such second order transversal abilities presupposes the exercise of skill, they are not to be identified with skills. For example, the ability to plan may involve the ability to produce a sequence of instructions or a draw diagram, but this in itself is not the skill of planning as the individual can do such things without being capable of planning. As alluded to in previous sections, these abilities are often conflated with skills in education discourse and distinguishing them in this manner is important. If one knows how to do something, it means that they are not only capable of engaging in an activity which is governed by norms, and to reliably meet those norms in one's performances, but it also requires that one's performances are guided by the norms of the activity/task. When Ryle writes that to exercise a skill is 'not merely to satisfy criteria, but to apply them; to regulate one's actions and not merely to be well-regulated' (Ryle 1949: 29), he is referring to meeting normative demands (Kremer, 2017). Being guided by the norms governing an activity requires a specific relation to those norms; to know how to F must mean that one has an understanding of F-ing. Therefore, to know how to F means that one has an understanding of 1) what it means to do F well and 2) how to enact F. Most transversal abilities on the other hand involve finding a way, not knowing a way. For example, if one were to coordinate an activity, this does not mean that they have to know a way of coordinating. Ryle's regress arises when one thinks that coordinating involves knowing how to coordinate and that this, in turn, involves knowing that F is a way to coordinate (Winch, 2013). Transversal competencies such as planning, coordinating and evaluating, therefore, arguably have a teleological focus relating to the purpose they serve rather than of the cause by which they arise. They are acts that are done with a foregone purpose in mind, for example, the hairdresser wanting to provide a service which meets the client's needs and will result in them returning. It is not just exercising a skill; it involves a much greater focus on the bigger picture. It is this teleological focus (i.e. focussing on

the end), rather than a focus on the norms of the task (the means), that distinguishes them from skills (Winch, 2015).

3.1.6 Summary of Philosophical Inquiry

To summarise section 3.1, it is clear that skill is highly contested in the philosophical realm. My starting point for this study is to accept Winch's (2010) conceptual typology for skill, which stems from a Rylean ordinary language philosophy (Ryle, 1949). As discussed above, this provides a strong logic for differentiating between knowledge and skill, providing a paradigmatic definition for know-how (skill). Fundamentally, therefore, skill is: 'an ability, usually learned, to act in certain ways in relation to tasks (2010:43)', 'the ability that is usually subject to normative appraisal (2010: 41) and finally, 'is the property of an individual and the individual can be appraised in terms of their possession or exercise of a skill' (2010: 43). This, alongside the categorisation of inflated notions of skill provides a useful frame from which to distinguish between notions of skill in the discourses, thus supporting me to answer the research questions for the thesis. While the philosophical analysis of skill provided a sound basis for conceptualising skill for this thesis, it falls short in providing reasons for why these notions of skill arise in TVET. Skill is also an important concept to sociologists, but a sociological lens may help to theorise the roles that the skills discourse plays in TVET policy and practice.

3.2 Building a Conceptual Framework: A Sociological Inquiry

Sociologists find skill a slippery concept too, for example, Attewall (1990) argues that like many concepts that appear to be common sense, skill proves to be an ambiguous and nebulous term, and Ainley (1993: 4) articulates skill as 'essentially indefinable but widely used as if it was fully understood'. When one considers the many sociological theorisations and the manner in which they locate the origin of skills, value them, and understand how they are constructed, it becomes clear why it is problematic to have an agreed understanding of the term (Spenner, 1990). For example, Ainley (1993) suggests that there are two distinct perspectives when it comes to skill and that these competing understandings of skill are irreconcilable. On one hand, skills are seen as innate within the human mind, enabling them to be measured in performance. Wheelahan (2007)

argues that more positivist perspectives of skill are inherently flawed in that they separate skills from the social context in which they are exercised, and from the bodies of people who must use them, which reifies skill and results in atomised, additive approaches in education. On the other hand, skill is seen as being outside of an individual, recognised as developed as part of a culture through apprenticeship and tradition (Ainley, 1993). However, this is arguably less appealing to skills policy makers for whom skills training must demonstrate some form of economic return to their investment in human capital, thus some form of measurement is required. It could be argued, therefore, that positivist perspectives of skill, which stem from the field of psychology where learning and development of skills and their transfer are studied through isolated and narrow experimentation (Singley and Anderson, 1989), are more likely to dominate the discourse in policy and practice. The previously discussed philosophical conceptions of skill (Winch, 2010) lean towards these more positivist perspectives but neither offer much more than helping one to distinguish between the way in which skills might be categorised in the discourse. Skill is a socially and politically constructed phenomenon, suggests Allais (2011) and, given that my research questions also seek to understand the role that different skills discourses play in policy and practice it leads me to draw on a on aspects of sociological theory that may help to explain how and why the discourses manifest and are reproduced. To conceptualise skill from a sociological perspective, I draw upon what I perceive to be pertinent aspects of Neo-Weberianism and Marxist theory to provide a lens through which the analysis of skills discourses may reveal the role the discourse in TVET policy and practice plays in society.

3.2.1 Conceptualising Skill: Aspects of NeoWeberianism

Tilly (1988: 452) asserts that ‘skill lies not in characteristics of individual workers, but in relations between workers and employers; a skilled worker is one who is hard to replace or do without, an unskilled worker one who is easily substitutable or dispensable’. This idea of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ resonates with the work of Weber (2013), who suggests that the structure of society rests on political, economic, legal, and religious spheres, with consent and authority giving form to what he termed as the ‘class situation’ of those who had ownership of property and those who did not (Pandey, 1989; Aziz, 2016). Weber

(1978: 302) asserts that 'a class situation is one in which there is a shared typical probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction'. In essence, he suggests that members of the same class share common life chances. In the absence of property ownership, human capital credentials (e.g. technical qualifications) could be exchanged in the market for income and improvements in life chances (Weber 1971; 2013). Weber's (1971) theory, therefore, attempts to articulate how and why some occupations are deemed more or less skilled than others and thus command their level of status in society (Weber, 1971; 2013). It is suggested that this status is the outcome of social struggles rather than reflections of the complexity of skill involved in the occupation (Moore, 1987; Weber, 2013) and, according to Weber (1971), occupations compete for power and prestige by restricting entry to those without certain qualifications/experience, or through strict codes of conduct that may result in members being disciplined/ejected from the occupation. Ainley (1993: 19) supports Weber's theory, contending that the notion of skill is often used as 'a defensive means of control'. For instance, given the restless nature of contemporary industry (WEF, 2021), there are demands for adaptability and flexibility with the skills needed, whether that be in the technical base of production, or the process of labour, or the developing technology/machinery that serves to deskill or replace workers, occupations form to defend their skills. According to Collins (1979: 132-33):

> A strong profession requires a real technical skill that produces demonstrable results and can be taught. Only thus can the skill be monopolized by controlling who will be trained. The skills must be difficult enough to require training and reliable enough to produce results. But it cannot be too reliable, for the outsiders can judge work by its results and control its practitioners by their judgements. The ideal profession has a skill that occupies a mid-point in a continuum between complete predictability and complete unpredictability of results.

This quote emphasises the manner in which professions rally to protect themselves when under threat. Weber also suggests that the language used in these occupations can act as a tool to strengthen the perception that an occupation is more skilled than another, e.g., doctors who opt to use Latin to describe symptoms, and consequently 'shut out' particular groups. Arguably those professions with a stronger habitus possess distinct bodies of knowledge which underpin their claim to being a profession (Bourdieu, 1998; Beck and Young, 2005; O'Conner, 2007). Only through socialisation into this subject/occupation can one truly understand the knowledge and skills. This presents an

argument for ‘gatekeeping’, which helps to maintain the monopoly of skills. In fact, Esmond and Wood (2017) found in their study on workplace learning, that some professions had highly skilled individuals that acted as gatekeepers to the profession, and they controlled what apprentices could learn at work. One might argue that the stronger the profession, the more they can protect their skills, thus these skills are likely to have greater value in society and, as such, these professions command greater terms and conditions of employment. This idea of gatekeeping has direct relevance to the discourse of TVET practitioners who, as former (or indeed current) professionals in an occupation, may control the learning and development of skills through their discourse and its operationalisation. However, whilst this helps to maintain some professions, it is arguably also very divisive, marginalising others and cutting off large portions of the population from learning certain skills, for example, those on lower-level, broad vocational, classroom-based programmes of study who are restricted from entry to these higher level programmes - a class issue (Atkins, 2009; 2013). Indeed, in addition to being classed, Burton (1987) and Blackmore (1997) also argue that skills are gendered and racialised. For example, employers will have different representations of an individual’s skills, and that what is taken as evidence of skills depends on who the worker is and what the circumstances are (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Morley’s (2001) research, for instance, suggests that women described as having excellent communication skills may find themselves less employable if they use these skills to challenge workplace discrimination or harassment. Therefore, the value of skills is determined by those with power and some of these aspects of Neo-Weberianism outlined above may contribute to the conceptual framework for understanding the role discourse plays in TVET policy and practice (i.e. what is deemed to have a higher or lower skill status and the impact of this on individuals).

3.2.2 Conceptualising Skill: Aspects of Marxist Theory

Although Marxism does not have a well-articulated theory of skill, Attewall (1990) suggests that the issue of skill enters Marxist theory in several ways and, not wanting to create a catalogue of Marxist theory, this section will examine key themes which have relevance to the research questions: the Labour Theory of Value, Labour Aristocracy and

Commodity Fetishism. This allows me to elucidate the role that skills discourses play in TVET policy and practice to contribute not only to capital accumulation but, more importantly, social injustice.

3.2.2.1 The Labour Theory of Value and Human Capital Theory

Capitalist economies, by their very nature, require continuous growth and, suggest Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), where growth is not adequate, it is regarded as a crisis; the assumption that growth is necessary in society is beyond question and treated as common sense. However, Gartman (1983) suggests that Marx's theory of capitalist production is more of a dialectical interaction of class structure and class struggle and, according to Burawoy (2018), to overcome this struggle, capitalists seek innovative ways to generate surplus value and are reduced to surreptitious exploitation of the working class by changing the labour process through coercion and consent. This may be through the intensification of work, deskilling, or advancements in technology. Consequently, there is increased polarisation between the rich and poor, resulting in intensified class struggles (Burawoy, 2018).

Rikowski (2022: 2) states that 'labour-power is the capacity to labour, which resides in human bodies as sets of skills, competences, knowledges, attitudes and physical and social attributes'. It could be asserted then, that the value of labour power centres on the ability to create surplus value in the production process, not in market exchange (Attewall, 1990). The way forms of production are organised in contemporary society has led to labour being increasingly seen as something external to workers, not as part of their self-definition, meaning that labour becomes discussed as if it were a marketable item. To create skilled labour, there is an increased cost (wages) because there is an increased cost to educate and create those skills (Attewall, 1990; Rikowski, 2022). As a result, Schultz (1961; 1975) states that the working class 'have become capitalists not from a diffusion of the ownership of corporation stocks … but from the acquisition of knowledge and skill that have economic value' (Schultz, 1961: 3) and this need to sell human labour under capitalism is an 'activity of alienation', according to Marx (1971: 72). This loss of autonomy in the labour process is no more evident than when a capitalist economy

struggles, where high levels of unemployment in the labour market is not a result of lack of jobs but rather is blamed on low levels of skill and, consequently with the intention of generating surplus value, new policy shines a light on the 'skills needs' and 'skill development' (Allais, 2011). As Winch (2013) suggests, this results in a shift in power from educational institutions to the labour market, where skills needs are prioritised over broader social development. In the UK, we see this forming now, with the recent 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper (DfE, 2021) and preceding policy developments with T-Levels (DfE/DBIS, 2016) and Apprenticeships (Richard, 2012), arguably as a result of the financial crash and impacted jobs market a decade ago.

For Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Burawoy (2018), education is not neutral, and it serves two functions in a unique economic and ideological role. Education serves to slot these individuals into the labour market according to their credentials (Burawoy, 2018) but, for Avis (1992), these predetermined trajectories which individuals are locked into as a result of their predispositions or circumstances reflects a class issue, concealing the determinants of educational outcomes (Burawoy, 2018). Firstly, a technical function of diverting individuals towards the labour market and, secondly, a social function of concealing class determinants of educational outcomes. The technical function adopts a linear view of skill development where education, work, productivity and earnings correlate. The more educated acquire the embodied productivity (the portable human capital i.e. skills) used by employers and, consequently, earnings follow (Marginson, 2019). Atkins (2013) argues that individuals who are destined for low-paid, low-skilled and precarious occupations might be described as marginalised, often with intersecting minority identities (Avis, 1992; Ainley, 1993; Atkins, 2013). Bathmaker (2001: 90) suggests that this technical function of education is a form of socialisation that results in 'pre-ordained positioning' in the labour market as opposed to facilitating young people to develop a 'critical understanding of the nature of work'. There is an abundance of evidence that shows that young people's aspirations and career choices are influenced by their social class, gender and ethnicity (Francis, 2000, Archer et al, 2010; Hutchinson, 2011), which are heavily influenced by their experiences at home and school (Blenkinsop et al, 2006). For those that face structural inequalities, the choices they have on leaving

school can be limited and thus affect life chances (Duckworth 2014) with poorer children twice as likely to drop out of education at 16 and are more than half as likely to study A-levels that could get them into a top university (Allen et al, 2016). Indeed, only 36% of young people from a disadvantaged background (free school meal eligible (FSM)) who enter education post-16, progress to a level 3 qualification by the time they are 19, compared to 60% non-FSM students (Allen et al, 2016; Lenon, 2018). Furthermore, according to Wolf (2011), as many as 20% of key stage 4 completers are not able to start a level 2 course, with 17% of school leavers at 16 functionally illiterate and 22% functionally innumerate. It could be argued that education, therefore, is perpetuating inequality by placing children on an educational path based on the class-bound origins of their parents (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Ainley, 1993; Bathmaker, 2001), with a mission to reinforce class divisions by enabling privileged children to be educated in a better class of schools and colleges and studying more prestigious qualifications (Ainley, 1993), leading to more highly skilled, better paid jobs.

As I have shown, the labour theory of value (LTV) subsumes skill, whereby qualifications and credentials are seen as proxies for skills, which chimes with the premise of Human Capital Theory (HCT) (Allais, 2007). Becker's (1964; 2002) Human Capital Theory (HTC) proposes that individual growth aggregates to support social and national growth. The OECD (2016) suggests that skills have become the global currency of 21st-century economies and there is evidence to suggest that increased investments in skills improves productivity, innovation, wages and the design and delivery of higher quality goods and services that allow for growth in a global economy (Sianei and van Reenan, 2003; Keep, 2006; Holland et al 2013; van Reenen 2013; Vandenberghe et al, 2017). Intuitively, HCT is plausible - invest more in training and individuals become 'market ready' and able to enact a 'market performance' (Brown et al, 2020) - indeed, policymakers appear to accept this notion unquestionably (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). However, Bowles and Gintis' (1976) criticise HCT for being too uni-dimensional owing to its lack of consideration for broader conceptualisations of skill and Green (2016: 5) agrees, implying that by broadening our conceptions of skill (i.e. making the notion vaguer), we can ensure greater consistency with our understanding of the term:

> To ensure consistency, it is best to define skill in a broad sense to refer to any personal characteristic which is productive of value and which can be augmented through some form of investment.

Under this perspective, skills are viewed as an independent variable where changing skill is thought to subsequently change society; a crude ideology which suggests that education, work, productivity and earnings are seen as linear with the more educated acquiring the embodied productivity (the portable human capital i.e. skills) used by employers and, consequently, earnings follow (Marginson, 2019; Allais, 2022). Whilst this HCT perspective of skill may seem reasonable for contemporary neoliberal skills policy, the lean towards simple forms of human capital cloaks the way that politics affects education, skills and work (Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Brown et al, 2020).

Allais (2015) suggests that to maximise labour market flexibility, global TVET policy has an 'employability agenda' which is grounded in individualism and personal qualities, with poor performance explained because of the individual rather than the state and structural factors (Allais, 2022). This perspective places the individual as requiring skills (or qualifications by proxy) to compete successfully in society (Lynch, 2010). It is important for us to understand the self-serving interests here, as the intention is to maximise value from workers and this infers that the role of pedagogical institutions is to condition human capital to the demands of the capitalist society i.e., make young people more employable. Allais (2015: 298) notes that, as well as the 'serious conceptual deficiencies' in what is defined as human capital, there are also 'severe difficulties in actually measuring the capital obtained through education and the rates of return obtained, or obtainable'. Nonetheless, this theory is naturalised in policy as common sense. Readings (1996 cited in Beck, 2002) contends that notions of employability are a paradigm instance of 'dereferentialization'. Essentially, Readings suggests that the use of terms such as employability has no intrinsic meaning but is something that can be easily mobilised to legitimise the priorities that markets require, thus the vagaries of focusing on anything that adds value through investment is erroneous. This is compounded by Harvey (2001) and Harvey, Locke and Morey (2002), who assert that employability is a range of experiences and attributes developed through higher-level learning, rather than a set of skills and, as such, employability is not a product but a process of learning. As Bowles

and Gintis (1975: 74) highlight, ‘peak level performance by workers benefits the capitalist rather than the worker’. Therefore, this clouding of skill in education policy (as seen in chapter 2), I argue, offers little to the individual, rather it is simply a way of exploiting surplus value from the individual.

A HCT perspective of skills in policy is not a new phenomenon and is arguably flawed because, ‘despite having the most educated population in history, there is still a skills deficit’ (Wheelahan et al, 2022: 479). Lloyd and Payne (2016) argue that the last couple of decades have seen skills mismatches and put this down to the rising graduate populations and the pressure for individuals to acquire more credentials. Skills policy and the assumption on which it is based (HCT) has arguably seen educational institutions ‘transformed into drivers of capital accumulation in a new form of exchange where learning equals earning’ (Brown et al, 2020: 1). Consequently, there are concerns that the output of the education system is moving too fast for the capacity of national economies. HCT also falls short of acknowledging that investments in knowledge have led to changes to the means of production which has ultimately impacted the embodied knowledge and skills of some of the workers. For example, advancements in technology have led to the deskilling of labour in manufacturing occupations (Mehralizadeh et al, 2008), reducing the value of the human capital embodied by the individual workers. These advancements in technology have changed the labour market in Britain across a broad range of occupations, with increasing numbers of self-service supermarkets, ticket machines and fully automated call centres to name but a few (Shields, 2014). Indeed, Lloyd, Mason, and Mayhew (2008) and Holmes and Mayhew (2012) highlight the increasing polarisation of employment patterns between the skilled and unskilled (based on credentials) which is contributing to the ‘hourglass’ labour market, where intermediate skills are in short supply to the labour market and there is a ‘missing middle’ of routine jobs such as process operatives in manufacturing which are limiting productivity and driving growth in wage inequality (Holmes and Mayhew, 2012).

For Esmond and Atkins (2022), this also contributes to a division in TVET where those able to access higher-level technical qualifications are viewed as part of the 'technical elite' - a privileged and valued group who, due to their higher level skills, have more perceived value to the economy (Esmond and Atkins, 2022; Morris, 2023), whereas others in the TVET system - those deemed less valuable and disproportionately from working class backgrounds - engage with weak, broad vocational, classroom based programmes of study which have little to no exchange in the labour market (Atkins, 2009; 2013; Avis and Atkins, 2016). For many minority groups then, learning does not always equal earning (Brown et al, 2020).

Despite its complexities and notwithstanding significant changes in society, Marginson (2019) suggests that the core premise of the 1960s' HCT proposition remains intact, functioning as a form of default explanation. However, we have witnessed an evolution of HCT in skills policy (as identified earlier in chapter 2.1), with Wheelahan et al (2022: 488) stating that HCT has:

> moved from being a descriptive theory in the 1970s (education leads to jobs) to a normative one in the 1980s and 1990s (education should be about jobs) and then to a prescriptive one in the 2000s (education must be about jobs).

Given that the empirical work for this thesis seeks to analyse discourses of skill in contemporary policy, HCT - and the prescriptive nature of it in policy - is a useful lens through which to discern the educational and societal role of 'skills' discourses in UK governments' further education policies and their alignment to the labour market.

3.2.2.2 Labour Aristocracy and The Middle Class

Attewall (1990) suggests that a more complete theorisation of skill can be found in the Marxist debate over labour aristocracy. As discussed previously, social class, in Marxian studies, is a level of critical analysis that reveals how individuals are selected and sorted in anticipation for their future employment (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Lakes, 1997). Harvey (2005) argues that policy objectives are contested between class interests, and that systemic changes within capitalism are primarily undertaken to mitigate or counter threats to the hegemony of capitalists. Ainley (1993) describes how the original inception of a classed system, the Proletariat and Bourgeoise, has become further stratified with the

growth of fractions within the working class which stand between the worker and capitalist and this, it is suggested, is to mitigate threats to capitalists. The Labour Aristocracy has been debated in the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin which centres on those that have 'relative affluence' (Attewall, 1990), or what Moorhouse (1978: 61) refers to as the 'upper and favoured stratum of the manual working class'. While it arguably simplifies the working class, the notion of the Labour Aristocracy refers to the skilled workers who benefit from the exploitation of lower-paid and lower-skilled workers, with better wages and working conditions. This prevents the development of a working-class consciousness and solidarity between the different groups as they are more likely to identify with middle class values, and be prone to conservatism (Marx, 1990; Ainley, 1993; Kerswell 2019). According to Savage (2000), the aristocracy of labour constitutes around a third of the working class in the UK, consisting of skilled workers, including occupations such as electricians and fitters. However, the concept is heavily contested, lacking a comprehensive evidence base concerning its size and significance, both as a class, and of its wealth (Kerswell, 2019). What is known is that there is a group of individuals who engage in selling labour-power as opposed to being a leisure class who benefit from the surplus of labour (Kerswell, 2019), and we see this in contemporary globalised society, an act described as an international division of labour, whereby surplus value is extracted from underdeveloped countries to maximise value (Fine and Saad-Filo, 2012). According to Aziz (2016: 234), the relaxing of global trade laws further damaged the UK labour market as it:

> opened global labor markets for the Bourgeoisie to export their proletariat problem abroad, making workers in the British labour market more susceptible as well as making the transfer of labor abroad to countries such as Thailand, Bangladesh, and India easier for large-scale organizations to continue to mobilize the embodied human capital of workers to expropriate greater surplus value for substantially less of what Marx termed as "socially necessary labour time" as well as less pay.

The result of this is that the working class in the UK benefit from higher pay and better working conditions due to the exploitation of those in developing world countries. However, for Ainley (1993), regardless of where one is positioned on the class continuum, there will always be precarity based on the capitalist class's interests (Ainley, 1993) and market changes which are controlled by the dominant class (Gartman, 1983) who wish to prevent uprising from the dominated class.

As noted earlier, research suggests that the TVET sector disproportionately serves individuals from lower socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds (Ainley, 1993; Lenon, 2018; Esmond and Atkins, 2022), or the subordinate class. However, Thompson's (2009b) analysis of the Youth Cohort Study of England found that, contrary to the popular perception that FE colleges are places of education for the working class, middle-class students are well represented. However, this does not denote that FE is an institution of choice and Thompson suggests that the composition of FE is constructed as much from middle-class failure as from working-class disadvantage when considering prior attainment, where FE is perceived to be a second-chance institution to provide 'an opportunity to climb back onto the ladder of progression to further or higher education' (Thompson, 2009b: 39), but one must ask at what cost does this have to the working class. I think part of the answer to this can be found in Esmond and Atkins' (2022) thesis, as outlined below.

Esmond and Atkins (2022) set out their argument by highlighting labour market polarisation - the growth of high and low skill jobs at the expense of medium skill jobs - as a result of technological advances that have led to the deskilling of labour in many occupations. These labour-saving revolutions have created opportunities within the labour market which favour more highly skilled workers (Siegal, 1999; Wheelahan et al, 2022), subsequently polarising skills (Avis, 2007; Holmes and Mayhew, 2014; Sparreboom and Tarvid, 2016) and, they argue, creating polarisation in the working class. Consequently, in TVET, there are those identified as the 'technical elite', who benefit from programmes of study which are strengthened by employer engagement and workplace learning experiences. The skills they develop on these programmes are thus considered more valuable to the economy and consequently command greater pay and conditions. On the other hand, there are those that study welfare vocationalism programmes, usually subject to poor educational experiences (Atkins, 2009; 2013) and, rather than secure work, are destined for careers in the service and caring occupations, careers which do not give rise to the profits of those in tradable sectors (Wren, 2013). These occupations are characterised by lower pay and precarity and, subsequently, have lower value (Atkins, 2009; Simmons and Thompson, 2011). Those destined to become technical elites

arguably act as the labour aristocracy by legitimising and stabilising capitalism through the promotion of neoliberal notions of meritocracy, that if you work hard enough you can progress in life (Ainley, 1993; Savage, 2000; Kerswell 2019). Whilst some might argue that this is an admirable aspiration, DiAngelo (2010) argues that it obscures the systemic inequalities that exist in society and, by valuing certain skills more than others (or qualifications by proxy), it can arguably create a 'class-hierarchy', with those who have access to skills training perceived to be more valuable, while others are excluded from such opportunities (Wheelahan et al, 2022), thus perpetuating class divisions and class identities. While Esmond and Atkins' (2022) position is that of polarisation in the working class, based on Thompson's (2009b) work, I suggest that, due to large numbers of the middle class using FE as a second-chance, fractions of the working class may be further marginalised by those in the middle-class occupying positions as technical elites.

The strong socialising function of education has the power to make dominant ideas the accepted currency and, when it comes to skills policy, there has been a longstanding promotion of generic skills under the guise of preparation for future employment (see chapter 2), particularly for those on lower level, second-chance vocational programmes, which are pervaded by genericism (Atkins, 2009; 2013). Ironically, while these programmes are designed to cover a broad range of generic, transferable skills to support transition to the workplace, they make it difficult for young people to change track, or even move to different forms of occupational training (Esmond and Atkins, 2022). While these broader qualifications offer little value in the labour market, they may help to prepare those learners for progression to the Level 3 programmes. However, Atkins (2013) also notes that, were one to start at a level 1 programme of study, it would take a minimum of 4 years to progress to and complete a level 3 programme. Many of the learners that find themselves in this position are often characterised by several forms of expulsion and seldom are they in a position where the support is available to them to permit this length of study. Consequently, many become NEET or enter the labour market in low-paid and low-skilled work, thus limiting their own life opportunities and that of their children.

Compared to their more affluent peers who, according to Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) and Avis (2018), can marshal valued capitals to secure positional advantage i.e., attending particular educational institutions, sections of the working class are destined for welfare vocationalism and, from a HCT perspective, this represents failure as these individuals are not enabled to fulfil their potential (Esmond and Akins, 2022). If this is the case though, one might ask what the dominant idea is when it comes to skills policy and, it could be argued, that it is to create compliant, well-behaved, model workers who can exploited to generate surplus value, rather than valuing and privileging their existing behaviours, skills and capitals (Woßmann, 2008). Avis (2018) supports this, suggesting that skills, such as taking responsibility, communicating and showing empathy come down to a class issue, aimed at training people to adapt to the norms and values of the middle class - the middle-class habitus - under the guise of desirable work behaviours (Gooptu, 2023; Avis et al, 2018; Avis, 2018). Avis et al (2018) for example, conceive that the use of 'affective dispositions' is an attempt to construct a particular type of person or to attribute specific dispositional traits to members of the working class. They argue that these carry real material consequences, for example, the way in which middle-class people are often employed in customer facing service work due to the perception that they have the underlying qualities, dispositions and 'soft skills' for such work (Timming, 2017; Quach et al, 2017, cited in Avis, 2018). This perspective alienates the working class from such labour and, arguably, they are seen as having a deficit in their learning.

3.2.2.3 Alienation, Technological Change and Deskilling

Skills are considered a global currency in modern economies but, as with any currency, this can depreciate as labour markets evolve and skills are lost through lack of use, a prime example of which are the industrial revolutions in the UK where technical skills became increasingly redundant due to the decline in skills embodied in manufacturing and agricultural labour and an increase in service sector employment (Ainley, 1993; Alias, 2011; Esmond and Atkins, 2022). As early as 1993, Ainley noted the consequence of a blurred division between mental and manual labour and what it meant to be skilled in occupations. Education and training policies, which claim to create a workforce needed for contemporary society are, according to Ainley (1993) attempts by capitalists to hold

on to familiar categories and maintain divisions in society, and this is borne out of alienating sections of the working class. Perhaps this is the reason for the distortion of skills (Winch, 2010) in policy where, increasingly, the intention is to prepare individuals for an unknown future. The catalyst of the fundamental changes in the labour market is said to be new technology which has transformed at pace and has subsequently led to the 4th industrial revolution which is driven by 'automation and intangible value creation' (WEF, 2020: 5). For Marx, alienation refers to the disintegration of the relationships between individuals and the products of their labour and the technological change that has led to increased use of machines in the production process has acted as a double-edged sword for the labour market (Marx, 1971; 1990). In one breath, as machines increasingly take over the complex tasks, workers may begin to feel disconnected (or alienated) from the work they do as the worker is seen as a means to an end rather than the end in themselves, leading to a feeling of powerlessness or estrangement from the work that they do. For example, simply pushing a button to bore a hole in wood as opposed to the craft of measuring, marking and boring the hole manually. On the other hand, Marx saw potential in utilising new technologies as a way to overcome alienation as it facilitates better working conditions and may empower individuals to develop new skills. Some fractions of the working class then may benefit from the higher productivity of new technologies, yet others - arguably those with lower-valued skills - may be displaced (Esmond and Atkins, 2020; 2022). Indeed, it could be argued that the aforementioned technical elite (see labour aristocracy) may be created by technological imperatives, with the stronger professions with better developed professional habitus, as discussed, more able to protect their skills from technological changes, holding their value to society (Beck and Young, 2005; O'Conner, 2007).

Braverman (1974) argued that the division of labour in modern capitalism and the rationalisation of work processes, or the breaking down of tasks into smaller, simpler, and more standardised units, leads to the deskilling of workers (Braverman, 1974). Braverman (1974) and Form (1987) argue that this is a deliberate strategy of capitalist employers to simplify skills and in order to generate surplus value by reducing labour costs through the replacement of skilled workers with deskilled workers who could be paid less, thus

increasing efficiency and profits. Deskilling occurs when workers are given tasks that are narrow, repetitive, and do not require a high level of skill or knowledge. Deskilled workers are often subject to strict rules and regulations that dictate how they should perform their tasks, and they have little control over the work process. As a result, deskilled workers are often seen as interchangeable and disposable (Braverman, 1974). Consequently, as argued by Gartman (1983), this also serves to undermine any bargaining power of the skilled workers in the class struggle, thus increasing their consent (Gartman, 1983). This is important for this study as I seek to understand why notions of skill have changed in policy and practice though, according to Braverman (1974), to understand deskilling requires a formal definition of skill. For him, skill was equated with 'craft mastery' and consisting of technical components which can be observed and assessed. Should one identify skills through this lens, akin to positivist perspectives of skill (Attewall, 1990), then the notion of deskilling is arguably a sound concept though, as can be seen throughout this chapter, multiple perspectives of skill render this theory problematic. With contemporary skills discourse, the many inflated conceptualisations of skill, make Braverman's theory difficult to apply. Fundamentally he asserts that capitalism continues to degrade and deskill work, creating an ever more unskilled proletariat (Braverman, 1974), and that this rationalisation of work processes is driven by the profit motive of capitalist employers, who seek to reduce labour costs and increase efficiency, reasserting their dominance in society (Moorhouse, 1978). On a conceptual level, we can see in the generic, transferable skills discourse that has proliferated throughout the last 40 years, that deskilling has arguably occurred in the teaching of TVET. For Cohen (1984) and Mehralizadeh et al (2008), they argue that generic, transferable skills were introduced post-Fordism by employers who were seeking to redeploy workers as a consequence of their 'deskilling' and that this deskilling was brought about by the technology revolution. Wheelahan's (2007) analysis of competency-based training in Australian VET asserts that the working class and other disadvantaged groups are now excluded from powerful knowledge due to the denial of disciplinary knowledge. In fact, Violas (1978: 125) first linked Marx's deskilling debate with social reproduction in TVET, explaining that 'the labour force now required workers with habits, values, and personality patterns conducive to assembly line techniques'. He went on to suggest that 'such learning would develop in

the future industrial worker psychic structures that would increase his productivity and diminish his alienation' (Violas 1978: 125). This is further evidence for the evolution, or arguably distortion, of the skills discourse (Winch, 2010), whereby there is a significant shift from its paradigmatic conceptualisation to accommodate much broader and nebulous notions of skill. So why is there such a fetish with broader notions of skill?

3.2.2.4 Commodity Fetishism

Wheelahan et al (2022) also draw upon Marx in their critique of the 21st century skills fetish and, using the concept of commodity fetishism, they argue that skills have become a fetish through which they are bought and sold to the labour market. However, it is argued that this approach is premised on false assumptions. Firstly, the idea that the only thing that matters in the workplace being skills omits (or arguably is conflated with) other factors that are crucial to labour market productivity, including social networking and individuals' motivation to work. Leaning on Marx, Wheelahan et al (2022) assert that commodity fetishism is a useful analogy in understanding this phenomenon due to commodities - the products of labour - taking on a life of their own. Here, skills are obscured by capitalists to be seen as existing independent of individuals and the social contexts in which they are situated, entering relationships of exchange with each other (i.e., bought and sold). However, this perspective neglects that these skills are nevertheless also embodied within the individual, notwithstanding the significance of context, and therefore fails to acknowledge the normative appraisal aspect of skill (i.e., that they can be carried out more or less skilfully) (Winch, 2010). It is important to understand how and why this commodity fetishism arose and Moore (1987) suggests that it began with the idea of 'New Vocationalism' in the 80s, which was significantly impacted by free market, neoliberal economic ideology, whereby ideas of the 'model worker' were projected onto the education system. This resulted in a restructuring of educational discourse and practice from liberal education to one that leaned towards meeting the needs of the labour market and economy (Moore, 1987), modelling itself on a quasi-market to deliver qualifications that have immediate purchase in the labour market (Young, 2005). When it came to skills, the accommodation of work within education, Moore (1987) argues, restructured the boundary relations between the education system

and the sites of knowledge and material, thus curricula were derived from needs of industry involving the reduction of education to behavioural objectives that measure competency, or ‘what counts as satisfactory work performance and what general person attributes are required for effective performance’ (Gamble, 2016, p.17), and denying access to ‘elaborating knowledge’ (Moore, 1987). This shift towards behavioural objectives began with occupational skills inventories which atomised skills by deconstructing jobs into their constituent components. Collections of these skills were placed into occupational training families, identifying commonalities and potential transferability. Technical and broader ‘life skills’ were then identified through the production of objectives and assessment matrices to provide a framework for the model worker. In essence, this shift towards behavioural objectives involved the construction of a curriculum with a particular ideological representation of industry needs, which was then translated into teaching practice but, as Gleeson (1986) points out, this representation actually had little reality with the world of work. Instead, it restricted the individual learner ‘to that of a 'consumer' of work whose purchasing power reflects the value of the skills 'owned' within a free market for labour’ (Moore, 1987: 232). Moore (1987) argues that this approach to skills may support the individual to be upwardly mobile in the labour market, but it reduces the power of trade unions and workers who ‘have won in their attempts to restrict managerial power over the labour process’. They lose their ownership of customs and traditions in their practices and this, it could be argued, leads to alienation and deskilling (Braverman, 1974). Moore’s (1987) arguments are still significant in contemporary education policy, where skills have been atomised and collated into families of 15 pathways led by employers’ needs which are represented as occupational standards (behavioural objectives) consisting of knowledge, skills and behaviours (DfE/DBIS, 2016).

Wheelahan et al (2022) also argue that the fetish with 21st Century skills serves to separate them from the social context that they are exercised in, reducing the agency of others in the process of skilled work, in a similar vein to immoderately inflated notions of skill discussed previously (Winch, 2010). Avis (1992), argues that these (generic, transferable (core) skills, which were intended to prepare learners for a changing labour

market, are actually based on technicised ideas of skill. He suggests that this discourse locates skill as a 'readily transferable capability' that can 'be operationalised in a variety of contexts' (Avis, 1992: 363). To my mind, this idea of technicisation is much like all notions of skill identified in the philosophical conceptualisation (Winch, 2010), indeed notions of skill with a positivist lens (Attewall, 1990), as all of these view skill as belonging to the individual and not situated in a social context. This view of the portable 'technicised' perspective of skill also aligns with human capital perspectives, with TVET (the main 'supplier' of skills) seen as an instrument of skill formation for economic competition as opposed to being an instrument of social policy (Morris, 2023). These skills are reified and separated from the individual and social contexts in which they are used, with credentials being seen as skills-by-proxy and this, according to Wheelahan et al (2022: 476) is 'underpinned by nominalism, empiricism and methodological individualism', essentially making it easier for stakeholders to measure 'skill development' through behavioural objectives. Where individuals are not at a particular level, e.g., having a level 3 qualification, a deficit view of the individual is adopted where they are deemed to be the ones that are lacking and in need of training to perform at a higher level. Immediately, this creates a ladder and validates notions of skill 'that secures a middle-class hegemony predicated on the atomistic individual' (Avis, 1992: 363). The result of this perspective, and in line with the idea of the 'neoliberal individual', is that individuals become owners of skills with those who have the most value to society reaping the greatest reward. However, Wheelahan et al (2022: 488) highlight the perpetual and inherent inequity with treating skills in this manner: 'the naturalising of the individual as proprietor of him or herself disguises and naturalises inequalities that both exist in market society and result from it'. In essence, this suggests that those that own more will gain more at the expense of others and, despite what meritocracy espouses, it is likely that those from more privileged backgrounds will have greater ownership of 'skills' as a consequence of their educational journey (Avis, 1992; Atkins, 2013). Moreover, these forms of skills discourse, as suggested by Atkins (2013), can act as highly effective instruments of domination as they blame the individual for their circumstances and divert 'attention and critical consideration from government responsibility for macroeconomic policy' (Atkins, 2013: 31), thus denying critique associated with inequality i.e., that those with intersecting

minority backgrounds have more barriers to learning skills than those from more privileged backgrounds.

Another consequence of the fetish with skills, suggest Wheelahan et al (2022), is that despite a focus on immediate skills needed, most skills are subject to change, as discussed in 3.2.4.5. The government priority of TVET being an instrument for economic competition and subsequently, skills being seen as a commodity has led to high-level policy seeking to equip individuals 'for a perpetually changing future and thus constantly be[ing] able to 'upskill' (Wheelahan et al (2022: 482). This resulted in genericism being seen as the solution to helping people to 'upskill' and, as such, this dominated skills policy for decades (as seen in chapter 2.1). As a result, vocational curricula were built on generic principles where reified portable, generic, inflated notions of skill (Winch, 2010) were prioritised at the expense of more focussed specific skills and knowledge. Whilst I accept Wheelahan's argument that generic, 21st century skills are a fetish here, contemporary UK skills policy (DfE/DBIS, 2016) does seem to have shifted somewhat from prioritising generic skills, in favour of more specific, higher-level skills. However, this also corresponds to commodity fetishism by way of attempting to address the short-term need for higher level skills in the economy. It is worth noting that this focus on higher level skills does appear to be at the expense of lower and intermediate skills, where the curricula appear to still be heavily influenced by precedent policy (i.e., a focus on the generic).

3.2.3 Summary of Sociological Perspectives of Skill

To summarise this section, it is evident that positivist perspectives of skill pervade policy with skills being seen as 'measurable' by way of behavioural objectives and associated credentials. Elements of Marxist theory have been used in the field of TVET to understand how capitalists maintain their dominance over sections of the working class, some of which are overt, such as the division within the education system, where the most marginalised groups in society are ushered along one path of education, with others from more privileged groups along another (Avis, 1992; Atkins, 2013). Other ways of maintaining their dominance are more surreptitious, for example, the way in which the working class are divided through their value to the economy (Esmond and Atkins, 2022),

and a labour aristocracy formed to prevent solidarity and a class consciousness. Moreover, the way in which skill is seen as a commodity, as argued by Wheelahan et al (2022), and the inherent inequalities that stem from the buying and selling of skills. These conceptions of skill provide a useful lens for this study, particularly considering the research questions, whereby I attempt to reveal discourses of skill and the potential impact of these on those studying TVET curricula. Whilst this may help to provide the 'what' and 'why' for the analysis of skills discourses, it is also imperative to understand 'how' these discourses manifest and are recontextualised from policy to practice. To support this, I draw upon Bernstein's theory of knowledge and recontextualisation principles which may help to elucidate how the dominant discourse transcends society.

3.3 Building a Theoretical Framework: Bernstein's Theory of Knowledge

In this section, I seek to set out a justification for using Bernstein's work as a theoretical framework to complement the conceptual framework to discern the relationship in the skills discourse between TVET policy and practice.

While the theoretical nature of Bernstein's work lacks detail on a practical or empirical level, and with much of the theory centred on the school environment (King, 1981; Hordern, 2017), according to Hordern (2017), it is testament to his work that it is still frequently used as a theoretical framework to underpin contemporary ideas about education. Given the conceptual framework set out above, it serves as a useful theoretical lens for analysing how discourses of skill are relayed in society, particularly given that much of Bernstein's (2000) work is underpinned by the fundamental notions of power and control (Chouliaraki, 1998; Bernstein, 2000; Haavelstrud, 2001; Wheelahan, 2005) which centre on theories of cultural reproduction and messages which favour the dominant group. He suggests that the talk, values and processes that are communicated in education institutions are distorted to bias the dominant group and this, I believe, is ideal for exposing the previously identified social wrong that the different notions of skill contained within TVET policy and practice perpetuate the inequality of marginalised groups in society (Goodwin, 2011), not by accident but by design.

3.3.1 The Transmission of Power and Control (Classification and Framing)

The theorisation of classification and framing are, according to Haavelstrud (2001), a means to analyse and understand how power and control are transmitted in society. Classification describes the means by which power relations are transformed into specialised discourses (Bernstein, 1996). One might describe classification as a measure of the extent to which categories, for example, curriculum subjects, are structurally distinct (Robertson, 2003). Conversely, framing refers to the way in which the principles of control are transformed into interactional discursive practices which attempt to relay power (Bernstein, 1996). This, then, according to Robertson (2003), is a measure of the extent to which the transmitter of a message maintains control over the communicative information. Stronger classifications have strong insulation between categories, with their own rules, voice and internal relations (strong boundaries). Weaker classifications, on the other hand, have less specialised discourses, rules and voices (weak or contested boundaries) (Bernstein, 1975; 1996). In respect of this, if we take, for example, the discipline of mathematics, the discourse can only be a mathematical discourse; it has a strong classification as the rules are well-established and insulated from other discipline areas. Health and Social Care as a subject discipline, on the other hand, has a much weaker classification, for it is made up of multiple disciplines with weak boundaries between itself and these. Framing, on the other hand, refers to 'controls on communications in local, interactional pedagogic relations' e.g. between parents and children and teachers and pupils (Bernstein, 2000: 12). Where a frame is strong, there are sharp boundaries between what may and what may not be transmitted and the degree of control that a teacher has over the selection, organisation and pacing of the knowledge transmitted is limited. Weaker framing is more blurred, with more teacher autonomy and control over what is transmitted (Bernstein, 1975; 2006).

It is worth, at this point, exploring the Bernsteinian perspective of knowledge. Bernstein (2000) delineated vertical and horizontal discourse, within which different forms of knowledge are realised. Bernstein (2000: 160) explains that knowledge structured in the vertical discourse is esoteric, consisting of 'specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge' and acquisition of this vertical discourse requires induction into this strongly

classified and insulated body of knowledge (Wheelahan, 2007). Bernstein (2000:157) writes that vertical discourse has 'strong distributive rules regulating access, regulating transmission and regulating evaluation'. In other words, classification and framing are strong. This, therefore, reinforces power relations between groups. In a typical classroom, these power relations are appropriated by teachers adopting higher (more authoritative) positions to their students, the choice of discourses (more highly insulated) and the institutional contexts (Singh, 2002). One might argue therefore, that the stronger the grammar, the greater the power. It is this form of knowledge that, according to Bernstein (2000), has the potential to challenge the social distribution of power and, for this reason, esoteric knowledge has power and status which some, but not others, are provided access to (Bernstein, 2000). This has the effect of marginalising groups, with significance for the way social relations play out within TVET. While vertical discourse is 'context-independent knowledge conserved through intricate social formations' (Hordern, 2017:193), horizontal discourse is always context-specific and circulated through 'unsystematic social processes' (Bernstein, 2000: 160). This form of knowledge is likely to be specific and tacit and, because of this, it is segmented and has weak distributive rules (Bernstein, 2000). Where vertical discourse is ordered, horizontal is perhaps best described as messy and situated. Thinking back to the previously discussed work of Ryle and Winch, given this differentiation of knowledge, the notion of 'know how' or skills arguably best fits that of the horizontal discourse. However, Muller (2014) suggests that aspects of procedural and inferential know-how may be considered knowledge of the vertical discourse. Nonetheless, the idea that 'skill' or know-how fits the vertical discourse presents us with a dualist perspective of skill (the idea that knowledge-that precedes knowledge-how), thus failing when considering the infinite regress. Therefore, in attempting to align these differing philosophical and sociological perspectives, it seems appropriate to view skill on the horizontal discourse.

3.3.2 Singulars, Regions and Generics

Bernstein (2000) suggests that there are different socio-epistemic entities that represent knowledge structures. Singulars are seen as intellectual, specialised and discrete discourses much akin to many academic subjects that one might study at school

(chemistry, biology, physics, history, economics). They have strong boundaries and hierarchies within the subject and are therefore forms of knowledge that exist within the vertical discourse (Bernstein, 2000; 2006). Regions, on the other hand, operate between the intellectual field and the field of 'external practice' by recontextualising singulars into larger units (Bernstein, 2000: 52). The TVET sector has many subjects that may be considered regions, for example, engineering, which merges the more structured disciplines of physics with more contemporary fields such as management to represent a new area of practice (Beck and Young, 2005). It is understood that the boundaries are much weaker than singulars because the principle of selection and translation of knowledge is the field of practice and not the structure of knowledge itself (Wheelahan, 2005). Generics, on the other hand, sit in stark contrast to singular and regional knowledge structures, in that they focus on the underlying features deemed necessary to perform a task and do not have structured, hierarchical, well-insulated boundaries (Bernstein, 2000). Under neoliberalism, knowledge is oriented outwards to markets and this, Bernstein (2000) argues, is severing the link between the regions and disciplines. Generic modes are 'constructed and distributed outside, and independently of, pedagogic recontextualising fields' (Bernstein, 2000: 53). It is proposed that they are 'driven by logics that seek the maximisation of labour productivity' (Hordern, 2017:196), which is Wheelahan et al's (2022) central argument for the fetishisation of 21st century skills, as discussed above. The promotion of particular pedagogic identities is, according to Bernstein (2000), a bias or focus which is: 'projected' by the state with the intention that it should become embodied in teachers and students, constructing 'a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices' (Bernstein, 2000: 65). We can see this projection with the origin of generic skills in FE in the 80s, following the collapse of youth unemployment and demise of industry (Thompson, 2009b). The 'new vocationalism' of the 1970s and 80s was founded on the idea that broad-based training interventions which were relocated from the workplace to education establishments would help to ameliorate youth unemployment (Bates, 1989). However, this had a profound effect on valued forms of knowledge and subsequently, as Bernstein (2000:55) points out, generic modes were 'constructed and distributed outside,

and independently of, pedagogic recontextualising fields', with organisations such as the MSC contributing to this:

> Organisations such as the Manpower Services Commission were explicitly directed towards experiences of work and life - essentially constituting an education for (re-)employability and directly linked to instrumentalities of the market.

For Bernstein (2000), generic 'skills-talk', which he coined 'generic modes', denotes a weakening of classification of knowledge boundaries, which aims at 'trainability' as opposed to specialisation. Wheelahan et al (2022) argue that the pervasive notion of generic, employability skills in TVET are based on Bernstein's (2000) principle of genericism and that 'trainability' has been elevated to become a fundamental pedagogic objective which, she argues, is putting a socially empty concept at the heart of education (Wheelahan, 2005). 'Trainability', according to Bernstein (2000: 59), is premised on:

> a new concept of 'work' and 'life' … where a skill, task, area of work, undergoes continuous development, disappearance or replacement; where life experience cannot be based on stable expectations of the future and one's location in it.

'Trainability' is the ability to profit from a continual engagement in 'the acquisition of generic modes which it is hoped will realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances' (Bernstein, 2000: 59). These lines of thinking arguably follow the idea that education must equip individuals for a changing future with the ability to be able to upskill. Beck (2002) and later Young (2008), noted the initial emergence of generic modes in FE (TVET), which was later followed by all areas of education, as expressed in notions of key and core skills, thinking skills and teamwork, and the promotion of the generic mode implicit in government policy since the early 1990s. Globalisation, technological advancements and rapid growth of service industries therefore led to a change in the labour market (Keep, 2014) and, subsequently, the skills discourse, where education became functionalised and the development of flexible employability skills were deemed more necessary for a world in which futures are said to be increasingly unpredictable and where the ability to respond to changing market demands is at a premium (Beck, 2002; Beck and Young, 2005).

However, despite their prevalence in the skills discourse, Bernstein suggests that generic modes are empty in two forms: firstly, conceptually empty, that is, without content; and secondly, socially empty in that the generic skills are decontextualized, which cuts the

holder off from communities of practice. This view has parallels to the philosophical conceptualisation of immoderately inflated notions of skill (Winch, 2010) (chapter 4) in that they require additional knowledge to have utility and that they negate the agency of others. For Mounier (2001) and Wheelahan (2005), this discourse, which is firmly embedded in TVET, commodifies the emotions, characteristics, ethics and trust of individuals, by expressing them as behavioural competencies through the discourse of employability skills, as opposed to traditionally understood knowledge and skills. Beck (2002) puts forward that this conceptual emptiness is desired by those in power as the whole point is to foster a receptiveness to the next set of objectives and content that are imposed.

Thompson (2009a) argues that generic modes employ horizontal knowledge structures, with specialised languages being used to describe abstracted practices from specific fields of study on the basis of similarity. While some of these languages may have a stronger grammar than others (e.g. numeracy), Thompson (2009a: 48) asserts that the poorly defined nature of the majority of generic practices mean that weak grammars and tacit transmission roots generic modes on the horizontal discourse. Constructing generic modes from relations of similarity between elements of different practices removes the social context, thereby silencing the cultural basis and, consequently, this produces and reproduces 'imaginary concepts of work and life which abstract such experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions and negate the possibilities of understanding and criticism' (Bernstein, 2000: 59). However, one might argue that the lean towards generic modes, which focuses primarily on pedagogic transmissions, may speak more to the changes in occupations and the complex relationships between professions and real-world practice (Beck and Young, 2005) and, therefore, unlike singulars and regions, where there is a hierarchy of truth on which professional authority rests (Moore and Muller, 1999), linked strongly to universities, this new kind of professionalism has stronger links to the real-world (Beck and Young, 2005). Conversely, one could argue that a truly professional education requires the ‘creation of a professional habitus’ (Beck and Young, 2005: 188), 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). This results in members being 'bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about' (Wenger, 2000: 229).

3.3.3 Generic Modes in Initial Teacher Education in TVET/FE

In chapter 2.3, I discussed the FE ITE curriculum which, using Bernstein's (2000) theory of classification, the maintenance of boundaries between categories, highlights that the discourse is well regulated, with a weak classification. Aside from frequent changes, a lack of propositional knowledge results in an ITE curriculum that is pervaded by generic modes, expressed as behavioural competencies. This genericism denotes a weakening of classification of knowledge boundaries, aiming for 'trainability' as opposed to specialisation (Moore, 1987; Wheelahan, 2007). The standards that pervade FE ITE are generic modes 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 decontextualized and cut off from the communities of practice. For Muller (2009: 214), in the fields of generic modes:

> the profession itself is generally more diffuse, fluid and less organised, and consequently sends out more ambiguous, frequently contradictory signals about professional requirements to the academy.

This is conspicuous in FE ITE whereby professional requirements have shifted in and out of regulation and, with this, the standards for the profession have displaced between broad and generic and narrow and atomised, with a distinct lack of identity, or what Beck and Young (2005) refer to as, professional habitus. This genericism in ITE is perceived as an issue for TVET trainee teachers who, Husband (2015) found, were left wanting more practical and vocational coverage due to insufficient emphasis on vocational skills training in their ITE qualification. This, I argue, may not only be a consequence of the curriculum but may also be impacted by the backgrounds and identities of those teaching FE ITE - the TEds.

3.3.4 Where is the Vertical Knowledge in TVET?

Wheelahan (2010) argues that theoretical knowledge has been displaced in (T)VET by too much of an emphasis on the vocational. Using a modified Bernsteinian analysis, Wheelahan (2007) suggests that the move to competency-based training (CBT) in

Australian (T)VET in the early part of the century reinforced class divisions, largely on the basis that sacred, esoteric knowledge was inaccessible to the working class and this, she argues, means that: 'knowledge is not under their control. This simultaneously denies them epistemic access to the structures of knowledge relevant in their field and social access to the 'unthinkable'. Though TVET in the UK does not have the same narrow CBT as was in the 80s and early 90s, with the NVQ model narrowing skill to atomised tasks (Jessop, 1990), it is still arguably underpinned by a progressive model of education, where the curriculum and pedagogy deprioritises disciplinary knowledge in favour of exposing students to real-world, work-based situations. This is particularly evident in Labour Ministry skills policies of the 90s and 00s (see section 2.1.3) where - what Winch (2010) would refer to as Immoderately Inflated - generic transferable skills were centred by policy. These skills, according to Wheelahan (2010), 'disavow content' and, leaning on Bernstein (2000), she argues that this denies students access to the knowledge they need to participate in society; to think the 'not-yet-thought' and to imagine alternative futures. Indeed, though contemporary TVET policy appears to have re-shifted the emphasis from the generic to higher level technical skills, it seems this only applies to those qualifications at level 3 and above, with any qualification below level 3 still broad, generic vocational (Atkins, 2013). Regardless, despite the shifting emphasis, theoretical knowledge is still displaced from the centre of the curriculum (Wheelahan, 2010), as learning is largely situated in practice as a result of a greater lean towards learning in the workplace (Esmond, 2020). Wheelahan (2010: 2) asserts that denying learners access to theoretical knowledge may hinder their contribution to society, stating that:

> Access to theoretical knowledge is important because it provides access to society's conversation about itself. This conversation includes debates about how society should respond to perceived threats such as global warming, but also debates about society's values, norms and mores and questions such as whether banks need more regulation, whether the nation should participate in war, or how refugees should be treated when they land on foreign shores seeking asylum.

This knowledge that Wheelahan refers to moves beyond the typical domain-specific knowledge required in occupations to knowledge which gives sociological insight and helps to explain why certain classes are privileged and why certain group's outcomes in education are not because of deficiency but of their access to knowledge that restricts their mobility. Fundamentally, contemporary skills policy directs the purpose of TVET as

preparation for work (DBIS, 2016)), though Wheelahan (2015: 760) argues that (T)VET pedagogy should 'enable students to participate in debates and controversies in society and in their occupational field of practice as the basis for their participation in a democratic society'. This arguably broadens their role beyond 'skills' to include knowledge, or capital that supports the students to become good citizens as well as employees and this would serve to shift TVET to be an instrument of social change (Kelly, 2001) rather than simply an instrument for economic prosperity.

3.3.5 The Pedagogic Device

Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic discourse provides us with a sociologically theorised context to study how the communication within a classroom is linked to institutional power relations (Chouliaraki, 1998), which is an important feature of this thesis when thinking about practitioner discourses. For Bernstein (1990: 183-4), the pedagogic discourse 'is a principle for appropriating other discourse and bringing them into a special relation with each other for the purposes of their selective transmission and acquisition'. While much sociological research is aimed at examining cultural reproductions relayed by education, Bernstein's major focus was to explicate the inner logic of pedagogic discourse (Bertram, 2012). Unlike classification and framing, which refer to the way knowledge is relayed, the pedagogic device (PD) focuses on the relay itself. 'As a symbolic ruler of consciousness, the pedagogic device provides the intrinsic grammar of pedagogic discourse' (Bernstein, 2000: 28). Like Chomsky's language device, the PD consists of formal rules of acquisition and interaction. However, unlike the Chomskyan language device, which is said to be independent of culture, Bernstein (2000) argues, with support from Halliday (1978), that rules of the language device are not ideologically free and, as such, neither are those of the PD. Thus, meaning potential (i.e. the discourse available to be 'pedagogised' (Bernstein, 2000: 27) created by dominant groups serves to reinforce the views of these groups. Those that 'own the device own the means of perpetuating their power through discursive means and establishing, or attempting to establish, their own ideological representations' (Bernstein, 1996: 117). The available discourse, or as Singh (2002) describes it, expert knowledge is, therefore, ideological and the PD allows for one to understand how this is converted into classroom

talk and curricula (Bernstein, 2000; Singh, 2002). However, it is suggested that, whilst sites for appropriation, conflict and control, the intrinsic rules of the device are ideologically free and remain ‘relatively stable’ (Bernstein, 2000). In other words, those that teach are simply unaware of the messages that they may be relaying.

3.3.6 Distributive and Recontextualisation Rules

Singh (2002) informs us that the distributive rules of the pedagogic device produce three main fields which are involved in the production of pedagogic discourse: 1) the field of production, 2) the field of recontextualisation, and 3) the field of reproduction. Bertram (2012) describes it as a method to understand the substance and nature of the ways in which the policy message is re-fashioned, recontextualised and re-interpreted as it moves through various levels of the education system. The field of production, according to Singh (2002), is the process by which new knowledge, discourses and ideas are created and modified, usually by university academics. The transformation of the original discourse into curriculum knowledge is regulated by a process of recontextualisation which is where knowledge is selected from the field and agreed as curriculum content by stakeholders (the state, the professional bodies and the individual teachers) (Singh, 2002). According to Moore (2004), recontextualisation is key to the pedagogic device as it is the notion that knowledge produced at one site (e.g. university) is transferred to sites of reproduction (e.g. college). Recontextualisation is the process by which knowledge is ‘de-located’ from the original field of production (singulars) and then ‘re-located’ to a professional knowledge base, and then curricula (regions) (Bernstein, 2000; Hordern, 2017). This process 'presupposes intermediations and produces dilemmas' (Lamnias, 2002:35) and, consequently, the original discourse undergoes ideological transformation (Bertram, 2012).

According to Bernstein (2000: 32), ‘every time a discourse moves from one position to another there is a space in which ideology can play’. For Neves and Morais (2001), in education, the recontextualising principle is active at several points in the social strata (Bhaskar, 2016), from the macro-level political decisions to the micro level, TVET classroom. The official recontextualising field (ORF) is where the government operates

at a generative level to legitimise official pedagogic discourse i.e. produce the official curriculum to be taught. Following this, at the point where policy is interpreted and implemented by teachers, there is further recontextualisation through the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) (Bernstein, 1996; Bertram, 2012). This essentially refers to the way in which teachers interpret and develop the curriculum (regions) through their pedagogic practices and it is here that they reproduce the content and thereby legitimise the pedagogic discourse, thus reinforcing it (Singh, 2002). Their subject knowledges are recontextualised into pedagogic knowledges and this 'circulation and appropriation of discourses in pedagogic discourse is a systematic process, which occurs in the course of classroom communications' (Chouliakari,1998: 7-8).

Bernstein (1977) expands on this concept by identifying two forms of pedagogic practice, the visible and the invisible. Visible pedagogic practices are associated with traditional forms of pedagogy, where the teacher has the role of a transmitter, with explicit hierarchical sequencing and instructional rules which are exemplified in strongly classified and framed curricula. It is suggested that this form of pedagogy stratifies students (Sadovnik, 1991) within institutions and as groups within society. What is more, given that 'the 'word' and the 'text' are the sacred fixtures in this type of pedagogic practice' (Sadovnik, 1991: 55), it is suggested that the middle-class are more likely to master the rules better, which marginalises fractions of the working class. Invisible pedagogic practices, on the other hand, are more progressive forms due to implicit rules regarding the hierarchy and weak classification, framing and sequencing, with the student given more freedom in their learning and the teacher assuming the role of facilitator. While one might argue that this form of pedagogic practice is more inclusive, Sadovnik, (1991: 55) argues that these actually 'advantage segments of the middle class far more than they do the working class and the poor' due to its roots originating in the new middle-class family structures and processes (Bernstein, 1990). Both modalities are therefore considered opposing 'modalities of control', especially in the reproduction of power (Bernstein, 1990: 73).

3.3.7 Vocational Pedagogy and the Teaching of 'Skills'

As identified previously, TVET is increasingly seen by policy makers as an instrument for economic growth, aligned towards the labour market (Winch, 2013; Esmond and Wood, 2017), consequently, the system's primary goal is to prepare people for their working lives. Lucas, Claxton and Spencer's (2012: 21) theory of vocational pedagogy suggests that teaching in the sector is 'shaped by the decisions which are taken by teachers – both high-level strategies, and day-to-day 'in-the-moment' ones – and the values which inform all interactions with students.' Whilst the guidance on teaching qualifications offers a disparate approach to teaching in the sector, there is a general agreement, therefore, that TVET teachers in England ought to maintain 'dual professionalism' (Lucas, Spencer and Claxton, 2012; ETF, 2014; Esmond and Wood, 2017). In essence, this refers to TVET teachers being both an expert in their respective industry or discipline and in their teaching practice. As Winch (2013) suggests, those who possess expertise in an occupation are able to guide others because of the breadth and depth of practical knowledge they have acquired within their professions. Therefore, it is understandable that there is demand for TVET teachers to balance this dual expertise. Winch (2013) also draws attention to the benefits of workplace learning as a means to secure high-quality (T)VET and, consequently, a key facet of vocational pedagogy is its integration with the workplace, which offers a different and more complex dynamic compared to other education sectors (Wheelahan, 2010; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011; CAVTL, 2013). As Hordern (2021), drawing on Bernstein notes, in recontextualising regions whose disciplines lean towards external fields of practice, typically TVET subjects, there is increasing demand to close the gap between the imaginary of the pedagogic discourse and the real discourse of work practice, on the grounds that students are being prepared for entry to the labour market. For these TVET subjects that are more technical, positioned most closely to workplace practice, the education and training model typically combines classroom-based teaching, where fundamental concepts are introduced, and technical knowledge, where occupational and craft skills are practised in workshops that simulate workplace environments (Esmond and Wood, 2017).

Rather than referring to sector-specific teaching practices as ‘vocational pedagogy’, Loo (2018) prefers the term 'occupational pedagogy' to distinguish from the socio-cultural norms of education in institutional settings. His work on occupational pedagogy echoes Lucas et al’s (2012), providing a more developed framework which leans on Bernstein’s (2000) recontextualisation principle to emphasise how TVET teachers integrate their work-related knowledge and experiences with their pedagogic knowledge to recontextualise occupational experiences. Loo’s (2018) framework allows teachers and trainers to choose the relevant teaching approaches to a specific vocational lesson based upon an understanding of the sources, types and applications of teaching and occupational know-how, though this arguably results in more invisible pedagogic practices (Bernstein, 1977; Sadovnik, 1991). An example of this can be found in Bernstein’s (2000) work, where he shares the example of the relation between carpentry and woodwork to illustrate recontextualisation in the context of the pedagogic device. Carpentry is what he calls ‘outside pedagogy,’ a real discourse which exists independent of the educational institution with clear objectives and techniques. Woodwork, on the other hand, he refers to as ‘inside pedagogy,’ an imaginary discourse which ‘selectively appropriates’ aspects of carpentry so that it is suitable for pedagogic practice in the educational institution.

When it comes to TVET, given that the primary aim of the system is to support transition to the workplace, one could argue that the gap between the outside and inside pedagogy should therefore be narrower, though this relies on teachers being able to draw on their occupational expertise to selectively appropriate relevant aspects of the occupation and, of course, this may result in increasingly invisible pedagogic practices. That said, when it comes to the inside pedagogy, the alignment to prescribed behavioural objectives (atomised skills) as a result of the ORF has major implications for teachers, as ‘their practice comes to resemble that of a technician rather than an educator’ (Moore, 1987: 236). In other words, the teaching of these skills in isolation, and towards pre-defined objectives, reduces the autonomy of the teacher and consequently dilutes their subject-based identity, though it may result in visible pedagogic practice (Sadovnik, 1991). With this in mind, while useful to consider when analysing empirical data, I am not convinced

that Loo's (2018) occupational pedagogy framework holds up as far as pedagogy is so heavily constrained by the curriculum (ORF). Nonetheless, these pedagogical frameworks may complement Bernstein's (2000) theory of the pedagogic device when analysing practitioners' discourses of skill and operationalisation of these.

3.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a comprehensive theoretical and conceptual frame for the thesis. Conceptually, I critically examined the philosophy of Ryle (1949) and Winch (2010) to formulate a way in which skills might be categorised in the discourse of policy and practice. Using a paradigmatic concept of skill and the numerous ways in which it can be inflated (both moderately and immoderately), it provides a clear conceptual framework to enable me to identify the ways in which skill might emerge in the discourse. The role the discourse plays is also central to the research questions, and it was important that my conceptual and theoretical framework could provide a lens through which to understand how and why the discourse manifests and is recontextualised from policy to practice. Whilst research suggests that policy-level skills discourses perpetuate inequality, there is little research into the inequalities around TVET that brings together philosophical investigations into concepts of skill, the significance of TVET policy and the theorisation of how multiple dimensions of skill are recontextualised in pedagogic practice. Using Bernstein's (2000) types of knowledge and recontextualisation principles as a theoretical frame to complement the conceptual lens provides a strong foundation for empirical investigation in this area.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

4. Introduction

The role of this chapter in the thesis is to explain the way in which I have carried out empirical research through which to deepen my understanding of how skills discourses play out in the sector. I begin by setting out the ontological and epistemological position in which the empirical work is situated, before outlining the method used to garner and analyse data in support of the research questions. I begin by arguing why Critical Realism (CR) is the preferred ontological position and how a complementary Critical Discourse Analysis acts as a theory, method and epistemology in seeking to answer the research questions. I then provide a detailed justification and overview of the methods used.

4.1 Critical Realism

It is the chosen research 'paradigm' which influences the way knowledge is studied and interpreted and this helps to clarify the intent, motivation and expectations for the research (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Thus, without clearly identifying the research paradigm from the outset, there is no basis for subsequent choices regarding the methodology. However, there are ongoing philosophical debates in the social sciences between researchers whose beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology) and the way in which we create knowledge about the world (epistemology) conflict (Nudzor, 2009). For this reason, it is imperative to examine a range of perspectives in line with one's own beliefs and research focus to form a strong and clear line of sight for a methodology.

Finding a framework that I was comfortable with for this study proved to be a challenge and it was only after my initial pilot study that I began to find clarity. Being a graduate in Applied Sports Science, I naturally find myself leaning towards a positivist lens. This research is 'systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation of natural phenomena [is] guided by theory and hypotheses about the presumed relations among such phenomena' (Kerlinger, 1986: 101). The ontology here is that there is an 'objective reality' waiting to be discovered and that this reality exists independently of whether or not one has knowledge of it, or yet discovered its existence (Nudzor, 2009). I relate to this in many aspects of life, however, attempting to apply a natural science model of research to the investigation of social phenomena (skills discourses and their impact) is based on

the belief that there is an order to events in the social world which lends itself to discovery and analysis, just as in the natural world (Denscombe, 2002) and this claim to certainty, Crotty (2003) claims, is a flaw of positivism following a number of historical ‘truths’ changing after further research (Denscombe, 2002; Fox, 2008).

Whereas positivism rejects non-observable sources of knowledge as unscientific, the contrasting interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is subjective and socially constructed, differing from person to person (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Its central endeavour is to understand the subjective world of human experience and advocates posit that we can only experience the world through our personal perceptions which are coloured by our preconceptions and beliefs (Cohen et al, 2000). Reeves and Hedberg (2003: 32) note that the ‘interpretivist’ paradigm stresses the need to put analysis in context and Delamont (2012) suggests that interpretivism attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. This perspective, therefore, exemplifies the belief that interpretivist methods can provide a 'deeper' and more 'meaningful' understanding of social phenomena than that which is obtained from scientific data. However, according to Silverman (2003) there are such a large number of ‘-isms’ that dominate interpretivist methods, that there is no agreed underlying doctrine for qualitative social research methods. Furthermore, due to its inherent subjectivity, interpretivism is also criticised for producing findings that lack reliability (Nudzor, 2009). For this reason, I struggle to relate and if all things can be interpreted in any way the research sees fit then, arguably, all research is constrained by the researcher’s lens at that moment in time. Ontologically, this is something that does not sit well with me, and I believe that there is causation for the way in which perspectives of skill are formulated and discussed. Indeed, leaning on the previous chapter, one could argue that the numerous conceptualisations of skill discussed, along with Bernstein’s (2000) theoretical lens, suggests that there is cause and effect in the way discourse manifests and is relayed to reproduce structural inequalities.

As an ontological perspective then, post-positivism - a view that also rejects the central tenets of positivism - recognises that there are objective truths, but the principle of

verification must be replaced by the principle of falsification (Popper, 1959; Ruslin, 2019). In other words, theories should be tested against empirical data with the intention of their falsification and, consequently, replacement with improved theory to contribute a closer and closer approximation to the truth of how phenomena work. This approach also positions itself against interpretivist, or relativist, perspectives as, whilst no amount of empirical data can verify or confirm theory, the aspirational pursuit of absolute truth remains an aim of enquiry (Fox, 2008). For post-positivists, however, the role of the researcher as interpreter of data, and associated bias, is acknowledged, as is the importance of reflexivity in research practice (Fox, 2008). This, to me, seemed to be a more appropriate form of research, acknowledging epistemological limitations but aspiring to determine truths. Smith (2009), however, asserts that there is no such thing as a post-positivist approach, only post-positivist approaches and one of the most common forms of post-positivism, according to Trochim (2008), is the philosophy of Critical Realism (CR).

CR sets out a much more distinctive alternative to positivist and interpretivist approaches, in favour of a philosophical approach that combines a realist ontological perspective with a relativist epistemology (Issac, 1990). According to Craib (1997) and Schmidt (2001) CR is critical of radical forms of relativism that focus on the socially constructed nature of scientific practice and detach scientific discourse from what is real. CR is, therefore, between positivism and interpretivism, with the ontological perspective that there is a reality independent of our thinking about it and that science can study it, however, it is acknowledged that all observation is fallible, and that all theory is revisable (Archer, Decoteau, Gorski, Little, Porpora, Rutzou, Smith, Steinmetz and Vandenberghe, 2016; Bhaskar, 2016). The epistemological perspective of a CR is that our knowledge about that reality is always historically, socially, and culturally situated. Thus, our knowledge is articulated from a range of positions according to various influences and interests (Ruslin, 2019). In other words, the critical realist is critical of our ability to know reality with certainty; they believe that the goal of science is to hold true to the goal of getting it right about reality, although we may never achieve that goal (Trochim, 2008). This combination of a realist ontology and relativist epistemology chimes well with the research questions

for this study, whereby I seek to determine the cause and effect of skills discourses and it is Bhaskar's (1978, 1986, 1989) CR philosophy that features several elements that support this inquiry. Firstly, he asserts that there are generative mechanisms in the natural world that influence the social world. Bhaskar (1986: 11) was able to reconcile ontological realism and epistemological relativism with CR, claiming that 'social practices are concept-dependent; but … are not exhausted by their conceptual aspect. They always have a material dimension'. This gives rise to a relationship (albeit complex) between material structures and our everyday experiences and discourses, proposing a causal mechanism which is defined by Demetriou (2009: 444) as 'that aspect of the inner and environmental structure of a thing by virtue of which the thing has a certain power'. Porpora (1993: 222) also adds that the mechanism is 'anything that has an ontologically objective and socially consequential existence, whether or not any actors are aware of them', and this may be a real entity such as an institution or a discourse, according to Wight (2004). Bhaskar (1989) also argues that, as reality is deeply layered, so too are the structures that lie beneath appearances that act as mechanisms in the generation of events: domains of real, actual, and empirical, with a dialectical interplay between these social structures and human agency. The real domain includes mechanisms that generate actual events (e.g. government policy). The actual domain contains the actual events that have been generated by said mechanisms (e.g. teaching practice) and the empirical domain includes observable experiences (e.g. what is seen, heard etc) (Bhaskar, 1998). The aim of sociological theorising, according to Hedström and Ylikoski (2010) and Vandenberghe (2015) is to open a metaphorical black box to uncover and make visible the social mechanisms that impact practices which then allows one to develop middle-range theories which explicate the social mechanisms that produce the observed relationships between different phenomena (Hedström and Swedberg, 1996). CR, therefore, allows one to examine this interplay to critique the prevailing social order (Bhaskar, 1998), presenting an opportunity to theorise the causation of macro-level political decisions (i.e., skills policy) on the TVET classroom (i.e., TVET practitioners' skills discourses). Bhaskar's suggestion that actors are potentially unaware of their discourses, how they manifest and then proceed to be recontextualised, aligns well to the conceptual

and theoretical framework (chapter 3), where skill is potentially used as a tool which has a socially consequential existence in the form of inequity.

However, like Bernsteinian theory, CR is complex, and critics have cited a lack of unitary framework as limiting (Banta, 2012; Flatschart, 2016). Indeed, CR has been criticised for explaining very little as it is not an empirical programme or methodology, rather it concerns itself with providing a philosophically informed account of social science which can inform empirical investigations (Archer et al, 2016). However, as Wodak and Meyer (2001) suggest, in spite of differing concepts of ideology, critical theory intends to create awareness of how individuals are deceived about their own interests. This, I suggest, creates a useful lens through which to explore my research questions as, whilst skill is contested, skills discourses are mobilised through skills policy and it is important to understand what is said and what is not said about skill at the macro, political level to understand how this may impact the conceptions of skill that are employed in the TVET classroom (the micro level), and the consequence of these on already marginalised young people.

Unlike positivist and interpretivist methodological approaches, typically involving deductive and inductive processes respectively, critical realism uses a retroductive approach of reasoning about why things happen, including why the data appears the way it does (Olson, 2007). According to Olson (2007: 2), with retroduction, ‘you keep your assumptions weak, and you strengthen your field methods to improve your knowledge of the object of research’. This perspective aligns well with the intentions and research questions for this thesis as I intend to build and strengthen an argument based on my initial, weak, assumptions that discourses of skill serve to propagate social injustice. However, many discursive approaches to research tend to take a relativist/interpretivist epistemology (Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig, 2007), with DA not often at the forefront of CR concerns (Flatschart, 2016). Despite this, Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer’s (2003) central argument for a CR approach to discourse analysis (DA) is that reasons can be causes. This is augmented by the belief that reasons are mediated by meaning, which makes semiosis (the intersubjective production of meaning, synonymous with discourse)

significant and, in light of the ontological and epistemological perspective of this work, a structuralist discourse approach (discourse as priori) is deemed more appropriate than post-structuralist discourse analysis (discourse as becoming) (Torfing, 2005; Anderson and Holloway, 2020) as I seek to strengthen my assumptions about the social wrong. This approach to discourse analysis is based on the idea that language has a fixed stable structure that reflects the structure of the world, emphasising the importance of identifying and analysing the underlying patterns and structures of language use to understand how meaning is constructed and communicated (Newman, 2020).

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis: A Transdisciplinary Approach

Fairclough (1992) suggests that developed capitalist countries exercise power predominantly through the generation of consent rather than coercion and through ideology rather than physical force. Language plays a significant role in this exercise of power. For example, it is discourse that leads to consent, and it is discourse that helps to transmit ideology. As seen in chapter 2, the use of skill in policy, along with my own experiences in practice, suggest that the term has evolved and is used in different ways to mean different things to different actors. A key facet of CDA is that what we write and say are purposeful, whether or not these choices are conscious ones; they are not arbitrary (Sheyholislami, 2001). CDA centres on 'how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge' (Rogers et al 2005: 367). Further, many of the problems that are addressed in our globalised world are affected by power and inequality and it is CDA that can provide us with tools to address the complexity of movement across educational sites, practices, and systems in a world where inequalities are global in scope (O'Regan, 2010).

Fairclough's approach to CDA is commensurate with CR in that both claim 'a real world ontological intransitive physical domain of objects, events, structures and causal powers which affect discourse, knowledge and human activity in the epistemological transitive discursive domain' (Fairclough, 2002; 2010; O'Regan, 2010). However, a dialectical approach to CDA recognises that inquiry into meaning making is always also an exploration into power. According to Rogers (2011), educational practices are considered

communicative events and, as a result, one could argue that a dialectical approach to CDA is a useful approach to analyse the ways in which the texts, talk, and other semiotic interactions are constructed and mobilised to reinforce power relations. This study, therefore, and the starting assumptions of power, fit this model. Methodologically, this approach entails working in a 'transdisciplinary' way through dialogue with other disciplines and theories which are addressing contemporary processes of social change (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010: 1218) promote a:

> relational-dialectic conception of discourse [which] understands context in deliberately contingent and broad terms, as articulations of language with other 'moments' of social practice, and defends a purposefully porous and integrationist orientation to research methodology that privileges trans-disciplinarity over rigour. It is this conception of discourse, we believe, that renders CDA a powerful critical theoretical and methodological tool in the social sciences.

This seems apt given the diverse nature of theory/philosophy discussed in the conceptual and theoretical framework (chapter 3), whereby the relations between these conceptions and their alignment to the research questions, reflect the transdisciplinary nature being referred to.

For Meyer (2001: 23), 'CDA must not be understood as a single method but rather as an approach, which constitutes itself at different levels and at each level a number of selections have to be made' and, according to Fairclough (2001) CDA attempts to unite, and understand the relationship between, three levels of discourse: the actual text (the presentation of facts/beliefs); the discursive practices (i.e. the rules and norms of socially acceptable behaviour to produce, receive and interpret the message (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, and Hinson, 1977)); and the larger social context that impacts the text and the discursive practices (e.g. the classroom or workshop, each with their own conventions) (Fairclough, 2001). These levels of analysis chime with the levels of social strata suggested by Bhaskar (1998). Whilst CR provides the lens through which to view reality, CDA provides the analytical tools that allow us to uncover and understand causal mechanisms that have led to current skills discourses, therefore providing a pragmatic approach to being both realist and critical in examining the research objectives for this thesis.

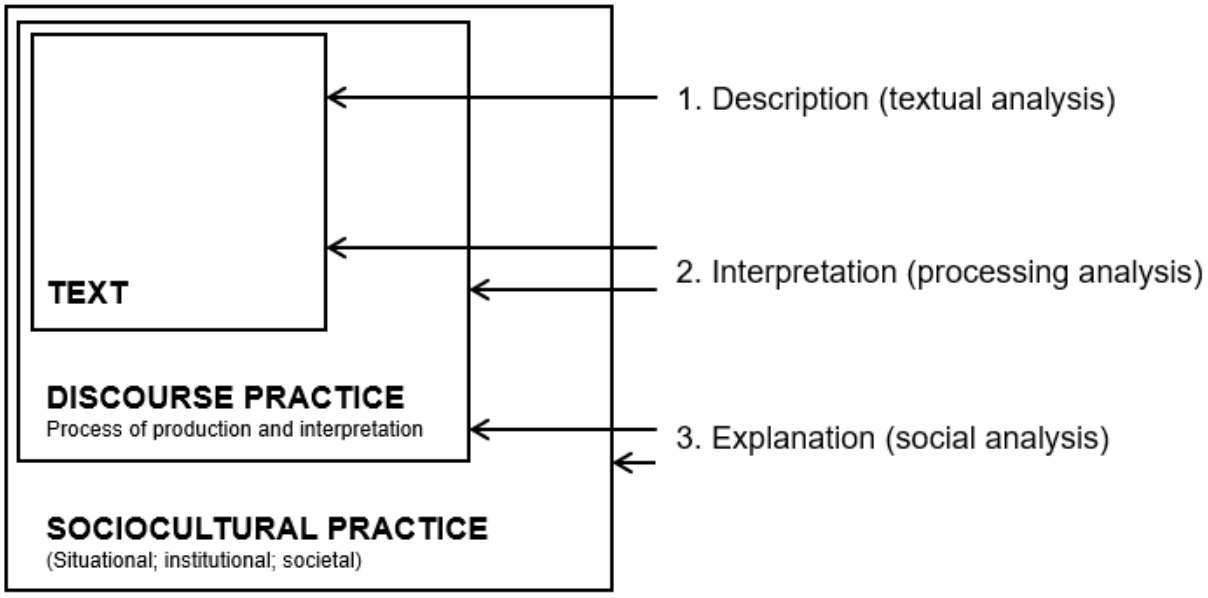
However, Flatschart (2016) suggests that CDA lacks metatheoretical clarity as its parameters have been set more by a research agenda borne out of the birth of neoliberalism, rather than a common theory or methodology. It is suggested that this is implicitly at odds with the ontological questions of CR. Yet, this dispute is largely on the grounds that Fairclough's approach to CDA has strong links with other CDA discourse approaches such as the work of Laclau and Mouffe, or of Foucault, that compete with materialist and CR perspectives. However, while Fairclough's early work was underpinned by post-structuralist discourse theory (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), he evolved the process to be more realist as a result of its engagement with the dialectical process of CR (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Fairclough, 2001; 2010). Banta (2012: 381) argues that a CR influenced view of discourse may provide new and substantive insights by opening discourse analysis to researchers who 'want to view it as a causal part of their broader explanation'.

4.3 A Faircloughian Approach to CDA

A Faircloughian approach foregrounds CDA in the methodology and can be seen as a variant of Bhaskar's 'explanatory critique' (Bhaskar 1986, Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; O'Brien, 2010). 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' that can be further elaborated as: **1: focus upon a social wrong, in its semiotic aspects.** 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. **2: identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong.** This stage approaches the aforementioned social wrong indirectly by seeking 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). Because of this, Fairclough (1992: 86) notes that both micro and macro analysis utilised through the CDA framework 'mediate[s] the

relationship between the dimension of social practice and text: it is the nature of the social practice that determines the macro-processes of discursive practice, and is the micro-processes that shape the text'. Fairclough's (2013) approach is to carry out analysis of the texts at the three levels of discourse (text, discourse practice and socio-cultural practice) each directly correspond to three stages of discourse analysis (description, interpretation, and explanation).

Figure 1: Fairclough's three-dimensional model (based on Fairclough, 1995: 98)



At the descriptive level, a text is analysed according to the visual and verbal signs (Gowhary, Rahimi, Azizifara and Jamalinesari, 2015). Fairclough splits the descriptive level into three subsections (vocabulary used, grammar features and text structures), each part with sub-questions which guide the researcher to describe the textual features, for example: What relational values do words have? Are sentences active or passive? What interactional conventions are used? While it is difficult to draw conclusions from such basic, descriptive-level analysis, this provides a starting point through which to interpret the text, which is Fairclough's second dimension involving 'analysis of the process of production, interpretation, distribution, and consumption. This aspect is concerned with how people interpret and reproduce or transform texts' (Rogers, Berkes, Mosley, Hui, and Josep, 2005: 371). Finally, the explanatory analysis, the third dimension

which, according to Fairclough (2001), concerns itself with the relationship between the interaction and the social context. The purpose of this is to 'depict a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures, and what reproduction effects discourses can in all have on those structures sustaining them' (Gowhary et al, 2015: 138). As mentioned previously, Fairclough's approach entails working in a 'transdisciplinary' way through dialogue with other disciplines and theories which are addressing contemporary processes of social change (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). For this reason, any analysis will lean extensively on the conceptual and theoretical framework (chapter 3) to draw out themes which will support responses to the research questions and, ultimately, theorise how skill plays a role in sustaining inequality in TVET.

Following analysis of the text, the next stage of a Faircloughian CDA seeks to answer **3: does the social order 'need' the social wrong?** Fairclough (2008) argues that if a social order can be shown to give rise to major social wrongs, then it ought to be changed. In this thesis, I seek to ask whether those that serve to benefit most (i.e. maintain dominance and power) from the current structure of TVET education and discourses within it have a vested interest in the problem being unresolved, before addressing the final stage of a Faircloughian CDA to **4: identify possible ways past the obstacles**. Fairclough (2008; 2013), states this stage is crucial to complement the analysis of obstacles (stage 2) as it seeks to identify unrealised possibilities in the way society is structured and organised. This stage falls outside of Bhaskar's explanatory critique, but it offers an opportunity for the analyst to reflect on their position (socially and ideologically). Indeed, this offers the opportunity to highlight both strengths and limitations of the research and to illuminate areas for further study in support of overcoming the obstacles presented.

4.4 Summary of Ontological and Epistemological Approach

Having considered some of the key paradigms that one can use in research, I found myself leaning towards Critical Realism as an ontological perspective. Briefly, CR, a philosophical lens of the world, seeks to understand the nature of reality and how it is constructed and experienced by individuals. In the context of this research project, it

provides a useful lens for examining how social structures and power dynamics shape the skills and opportunities available to individuals, and how these structures and dynamics can be challenged and potentially transformed. Furthermore, by examining the ways in which different groups of people use language to communicate and interact, a complementary methodology of a CDA allows us to uncover the underlying patterns and structures that shape our social world. A CDA of skills focuses on the language and discourse that are used to construct and reproduce different types of skills and expertise, and how these constructions impact the opportunities and experiences of individuals and perpetuate disadvantage. In summary, the perspectives chosen for this thesis complement the conceptual and theoretical framework which offer valuable insights into the complex relationships between power, knowledge, and social structures.

4.5 Background and Development of Methods

Methodology, according to Thomson and Gunter (2007), is the theory and thinking that supports the research and locates it within a particular methodological tradition or paradigm, as discussed previously. Methods, on the other hand, are the details of what was done, and this section seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the methods adopted in this study to provide a robust process which enabled me to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 - What is the educational and societal role of 'skills' discourses in UK governments' further education policies?

RQ2 - What role do the practices of Teacher Educators play in recontextualising the policy discourse?

RQ3 - How do the practices of trainee TVET teachers draw on 'skills' discourses, educational understandings and on their occupational expertise?

4.6 Study Design: A Modified CDA

This thesis essentially sets out to analyse how skills discourses are mobilised in policy and understood by TVET practitioners, which therefore requires an analysis of policy documentation at the macro level and analysis of how practitioners deploy skills in practice. The study design was informed by Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis. It is

important to note that Fairclough's approach to CDA evolved quite considerably from the early 90's to present day but there are underpinning principles which I have taken and adapted to meet my own study's needs. A Faircloughian approach to CDA is unapologetically vague in what does and does not constitute a CDA. For example, Fairclough (2000) identifies the following: 1) that it includes transdisciplinary analysis of the relations between discourse and other elements of social practice; 2) that it is not just a general commentary on discourse; it provides systematic analysis of texts and 3) that it is normative as well as descriptive in that it attempts to address social wrongs and ways of overcoming them. The above can be interpreted in many ways and take any form though, as discussed above (4.3), the approach is informed by four 'stages' that can be further elaborated as 'steps'. While Fairclough identifies these 'stages' and 'steps' he does advise that these are not interpreted in a mechanical way but, instead, form essential parts of the methodology. Though there was room to modify the approach to suit the chosen texts and research questions, for me, it was important that I honoured the validated approach, by not deviating too significantly and following both the stages and steps to support any future replication of research I do in the field. The modified CDA, therefore, consisted of the following:

4.6.1 CDA Stage 1 (Focus on a social wrong)

Following the earlier chapters, which illustrate the evolution and reform of UK skills policy, considerations of rising inequality and falling social mobility (Goldthorpe, 2012; 2016; Wójcik, 2018) require us to interrogate the policy narrative of these reforms and to raise questions about whose interests are served by changing policies and practices. The identified social wrong in this thesis rests on multiple theories that can be used as an 'entry' to the CDA (Fairclough, 2013), notably leaning on aspects of Marxist theory that enter discussions of skill (see chapter 3.2) and Bernstein's theories of recontextualisation (see chapter 3.3). Based on the literature, therefore, it is suggested that the 'social wrong' in this study is that discourses of skill invariably affect those that are unlikely to follow a traditional academic route of study, and the starting (weak) assumption is that different skills discourses are part of a capitalist conspiracy to benefit the dominant group in society.

4.6.2 CDA Stage 2 (Identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong)

This stage approached the above-mentioned social wrong indirectly by seeking 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 RQ1, before exploring, selecting and analysing the most appropriate texts for RQ2 and RQ3, as detailed below.

4.6.2.1 CDA Stage 2 (RQ1)

Fairclough (1992:9) notes that 'one has to be selective, i.e. to make judgments about which 'mix' of available resources yields the most fruitful theorisation of the research topic. I began my study by selecting texts appropriate to RQ1 (policy level texts). Stasz and Wright (2007) assert that policy is always developed and delivered in a wider power-saturated environment which is shaped by ideology, interest groups and powerful individuals, therefore, a CDA should endeavour to make these power relationships explicit (Janks, 1997; Meyer, 2001). Fairclough (2013: 244-245) also states that texts are 'formed, disseminated and legitimised within complex chains and networks of events (committee meetings, reports, parliamentary debates, press statements etc.)' It was important, therefore, that contemporary skills policy alongside other related texts were selected and, at the time of conducting the empirical work for this thesis. In selecting the texts, I liaised with various researchers and senior stakeholders in the TVET sector to determine what they saw as the most significant policy texts and associated documents in relation to skills in recent times. It was clear from the outset that the government's Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016) and contemporaneously released Independent Panel for Technical Education report (IPTE, 2016), chaired by Lord Sainsbury, were significant policy documents that had a notable impact on UK skills education and training, specifically in the TVET sector in England. However, as these papers were developed in 2016 and as the thesis evolved, alongside unpredictable national and global events such as Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, a further policy text was sought to supplement the earlier texts. For this, I selected a speech by the then Education Secretary of State (Nadim Zahawi) to delegates at the Association of Colleges National Conference in November 2021, presented in the

backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent Skills Bill (2021) legislation and Skills for Jobs White Paper (2021) as part of its 'levelling up' agenda. I deemed this pertinent to the study due to the significant impact on employment and health post-pandemic.

As mentioned, Fairclough (1992) proposes that CDA of a text should proceed through three stages of analysis: description, interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction, and explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context. However, when analysing policy texts, Huckin (1997) suggests reading them first without bias, being uncritical and undiscerning. This is to get an understanding of the text content and it was helpful to familiarise myself with each text by doing this, though I am aware that my prior reading and role in this field already disposes me to particular understandings regardless. Following this, Huckin proposes identification of the framing of the text, i.e. the perspective being presented (ideology, angle). Fairclough (2010; 2013) asserts that discourse is shaped primarily by power relations in society, and that despite discourse shaping social relations, it is also shaped by them. Thus, he argues that language serves to construct particular political positions, which entail unequal relations of power. Once established, the analyst can then progress to the minute levels of analysis by looking at the lexical structure and words used which relay these discourses.

While not distinctly a Faircloughian approach, I began the descriptive stage of analysis by employing NVivo 12 Pro software, a qualitative data analysis tool, to measure high frequency words. I then used many of the questions suggested by Fairclough (2000) in the descriptive analysis, including a focus on vocabulary used, grammar features and text structures which I found it useful in identifying key themes in the discourse and sharpening the focus and for the next stage of analysis, the interpretive level. Here, I used Fairclough's suggestion of exploring the situational context, intertextual context, surface utterances, meaning of utterances, local coherence and text structure and point to identify the relationship between the discourse, its production and the consumption. The findings in chapter 5 suggest that the discourse promotes a new form of technical education in the wake of a recently formed government and the focus on economic growth. Finally, the

explanatory analysis, the third dimension which, according to Fairclough (2001), concerns itself with the relationship between the interaction and the social context. Here, I explored the texts through the lens of the conceptual and theoretical framework to examine how and why the skills discourse is produced and recontextualised to reproduce inequality.

Janks (1997) suggests that analysis should intricately move backwards and forwards between the three stages of analysis (descriptive, interpretive, and explanatory) and while I agree with this sentiment and did move between the different stages, I felt that the components were best separated in my analysis to ensure that I was undertaking each stage in its own right. Furthermore, I did not wish to fall into the trap of potentially manipulating the various stages for clarity, i.e. moving back to the descriptive level to 'find' something to support analysis in the interpretive or explanatory stage.

4.6.2.2 CDA Stage 2 (RQ2 and RQ3)

In determining the texts appropriate for the research questions, it was important to identify whose discourse I would seek to analyse i.e., who the practitioners would be, and how I would gather the text data i.e., the method employed. I set out to understand how skill is conceptualised and operationalised by trainee teachers working in the English TVET sector. Firstly, I wanted to analyse the discursive practices of trainee teachers since they were being trained to teach for the contemporary skills system and, secondly, in spite of UK Skills policy driving T-Levels, these only exist in the English TVET system due to devolved powers to other parliaments. There was also, therefore, a compelling case for examining the TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) too, given that they are the ones teaching the trainees. Despite the Further Education Teachers' (England) Regulations (2007) being revoked in 2012, meaning teaching qualifications are no longer mandated, many teachers in the sector undertake initial teacher education programmes, with circa 70% of those working in the sector having a level 5 or above teaching qualification (ETF, 2020). This indicates the potential impact that TEds have on teaching practitioners and this influence may also extend to their skill discourses and how these are operationalised in practice.

It should be noted at this point that I am actively choosing not to refer to those participating in the focus group as 'participants' and instead refer to them as 'subjects'. Fairclough's (2010) approach to CDA prefers the term subject instead of participant as it emphasises how they are inherently subjected to and constrained by institutional frames. In the case of this study, the subjects' workplaces (universities and colleges). Moreover, the use of subject highlights the way in which 'discourse makes the people, and the people make the discourse' (Fairclough, 2010: 41). For example, to be seen as a teacher, one must 'master the discursive and ideological norms' which the institution attaches to that position i.e., gaining a teaching qualification to teach. Using the term 'participant', on the other hand, denotes someone who participates in institutional interaction without their individuality being shaped or modified, and therefore someone removed from the discourse.

4.6.2.2.1 Rationale for Focus Groups

The recognition that focus groups can help achieve a significant data set over a short time period (Fern, 1982; Rabiee, 2004) was an early incentive for me to use this form of data collection to generate the texts, over the semi-structured interviews as trialled in an earlier pilot study, as I wanted to provide sufficient time to engage in the CDA process. Whilst Fern (1982) suggests that focus group subjects produce 60% to 70% as many ideas as they would have in an individual interview, individual interviews dislocate the subject from their social context, whereas focus group discussions create a social space for individuals to interact with each other and generate data and insights that may not otherwise be accessible to the researcher (Patton, 2002; Duggleby, 2005; Morgan, 2010). It was the propensity to provide a deeper understanding combined with the capacity to precipitate new insights to practitioners' skills discourses which was particularly compelling to generate texts that could support analysis in line with the research questions. However, I was aware that focus groups have their limitations, namely around subjects' willingness to contribute views which may differ from those expressed privately or in a non-research setting (Smithson, 2007). To mitigate against this, it is suggested to create a safe and trusting environment (Rabiee, 2004), which I endeavoured to do. However, this was further impeded by the challenges posed by Covid-19, thus requiring the focus groups to

be carried out remotely, online using MS Teams, a web2.0 tool which, through the researcher's experience, seemed to be a stable, online video conferencing tool which had accurate transcription and one that they and, anecdotally, most subjects were familiar with. Despite technology making it possible to link people across very broad geographic locations, opening up the number of subjects involved in the study (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017), and a body of research indicating that online focus groups perform as well as face-to-face focus groups with respect to eliciting information from subjects (Underhill and Olmsted 2003; Reid and Reid 2005; Hoffman, Novak, and Stein, 2012; Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017), there were challenges with using online focus groups in the generation of texts for this study. When thinking about how I would manage the online environment, I noted the challenges highlighted by Stewart and Shamdasani (2017) such as reduced spontaneity and nonverbal communication, and the difficulties of developing relationships conducive to maximising contributions. I heeded Krueger's (1998b) advice by presenting ground rules and warm-up exercises to generate 'small talk', which proved to be an important catalyst for increasing interaction. Given it was an online environment, I also gave autonomy to subjects in determining the etiquette for an online environment (e.g. microphones off, cameras on).

4.6.2.2.1.1 Focus Group Format

Whilst there are many types of focus groups/interviews that one might select, it was important to identify the type that meets the research questions in terms of the degree of structure needed: whether they are exploratory or hypothesis testing, whether they seek description or interpretation or whether they focus on cognitive or emotional aspects (Kvale, 1996). A structured approach to focus group interviews offers the advantage of achieving greater uniformity or measurement (Kerlinger, 1970), however, they have the potential to irritate subjects with restricted responses and not reveal lived experiences or the discourse practices. Open focus group interviews, on the other hand, offer greater flexibility and enable subjects to offer unlimited knowledge and experiences. However, the more open the interview, the more difficult it becomes for the researcher to discern commonality between subjects' responses (Kerlinger, 1970). A semi-structured format, which aligns with other researchers in the broader field who use CDA as a method (Burns

and Waugh, 2018; Fjørtoft, Oksholm, Delmar, Førland and Alvsvåg, 2020), was therefore selected, as it allowed for some divergence from the question to enable exploration of any themes brought up by the subjects, whilst at the same time having a degree of structure to provide some standardisation in the initial questions asked and support more reliable data analysis and subsequent theorisation.

4.6.2.2.1.2 Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Once the type of interview has been selected, one should consider operationalising the objectives into interview questions (Morgan, 1996; Krueger, 1998a). In terms of the specific questions used in the semi-structured focus groups, these were shaped by the overarching research questions and, using Krueger's (1998a) categories of questions as a guide, I developed three key questions which were trialled in a pilot study before refining them for the focus groups. Krzyzanowski (2008) asserts that questions must be informed by the overall theoretical and practical design of the research. In doing this, it felt prudent to share with subjects the purpose of the investigation to examine discourses of skill, but I kept from them my initial assumptions about the 'social wrong' (Fairclough, 2000). Next, Krzyzanowski (2008) suggests that the second framing of focus group questions should focus on specific areas of inquiry. Based on the domains of real, actual, and empirical, as identified by Bhaskar (1989; 1998) (see 4.1), whereby real mechanisms (e.g., policy) are suggested to generate actual events (e.g., discourse practice), it was important for me to attempt to elicit responses that might reveal a relationship between these domains (Bhaskar, 1986; Porpora, 1993; Wight, 2004), whilst leaning on the theoretical framework (Bernstein, 2000). Therefore, the key questions for the semi-structured focus group interviews were as follows:

1. Tell me about what 'skills' you teach… (allowing for analysis of the discourse practices)
2. Where do you get your ideas about skill? (allowing for analysis of awareness of the generative mechanisms and recontextualisation of the discourse)
3. How do learners develop the skills that you have mentioned? (allowing for analysis of the pedagogic recontextualisation and operationalisation of the discourse)

Oppenheim (1992) suggests that there should be a degree of standardisation of the stimulus equivalence in that every subject should understand the question in the same way, rather than the researcher replicating the questions word for word. However, it could be argued that by altering the wording of questions, one is, in effect, asking different questions. For this reason, Morrison (1993) suggests having prompts for each question to enable the moderator to clarify topics/questions, whilst also ensuring that there are probes to enable the moderator to ask subjects to elaborate or add to their responses. For this study, key questions were supplemented with the subject handout (appendix E) which was used to support subjects with prompts and probes to ensure that all subjects had a parity of experience with lines of inquiry and that there was a level of consistency within and between focus group interviews.

4.6.2.2.2 Ethics

Formal ethical approval was granted by the University of Derby Ethics Committee on 18th February 2020. In gaining approval, a thorough justification for study, along with a Subject Information Sheet, informed consent form and subject debrief (appendices B-D). Furthermore, consideration of GDPR (2018) and data management was supplied. Anonymity was achieved via the omission of subject names (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006), with each subject ascribed a letter (A, B, C etc). To further allay the possibility of subject identification, the institution at which they work is also anonymised; necessary to safeguard the institution from association with the outcomes of the research (Crow and Wiles, 2008).

4.6.2.2.3 The Sample

Morgan (1996) suggests that most research projects using a focus group methodology consists of four to six groups. The typical justification for this range is that the data becomes saturated and little new information emerges after the first few groups (Zeller, 1993; Morgan, 1996). Additionally, while large numbers of subjects elicit a wider range of responses, fewer subjects provides time and space for more developed responses, which may yield better data (Morgan, 1996). Given the research questions for the thesis whereby the subjects were limited to those actively working as TVET TEds or trainee

TVET teachers in England, thus narrowing the potential subject group, I made the decision to have four focus groups consisting of between 4 and 8 subjects - two for TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) and two for trainee TVET teachers.

When limited by resources, time and workforce (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016), it is generally agreed among qualitative researchers that purposeful sample selection is an effective strategy to obtain rich information and in-depth insight into the subject of study (Freeman, DeMarrais and Preissle, 2007; Patton, 2002). I began with clear inclusion criteria for both TVET TEds and trainee TVET teachers. For TEds, inclusion criteria were for them to be current, active TVET TEds with a minimum of 2-years' experience delivering Initial Teacher Education programmes in the sector at, or above, level 5. It was felt that 2 years was sufficient to allow one to understand the full ITE programme. Trainee TVET teacher focus group key inclusion criteria was for them to be currently employed as teachers within an FE college in England, with an active teaching commitment in a TVET subject specialism, at either level 2 or 3. This was important as they were working with specific TVET curricula and were therefore active agents in the UK skills policy discourse. Another selection criteria was for them to be studying their in-service level 5 or above teaching qualification. Level 5 is recognised as a 'full' teaching qualification in the sector (ETF, 2016) and despite there being lower levels of qualification, given that the aspiration of most institutions is for their teachers to work towards a level 5, and that this is recognised as 'fully qualified' in the sector, this was deemed appropriate for selection as it may reveal any corroboration or tensions in the skills discourse. I also sought a diversity of subjects from different backgrounds and with different levels of experience but did not see this as a limiting factor for inclusion in the research.

Table 1: Teacher Educator (TEd) Subject Profiles

Subject 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.

Table 2: Trainee TVET Teacher Subject Profiles

Subject Code	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Subject Specialism	TVET Qualification Level(s)	Mode of ITE Study
A	40-49	Female	White British	Hair and Beauty	2 and 3	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) – HEI franchise
B	40-49	Female	White British	Hair and Beauty	2 and 3	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) – HEI franchise
C	30-39	Female	White British	Education and Childcare	3	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) - HEI franchise
D	30-39	Male	White British	Engineering	2 and 3	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) - HEI franchise
E	40-49	Female	White British	Digital Skills	2 and 3	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) - HEI franchise
F	20-29	Female	British Caribbean	Engineering	2 and 3	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) - HEI franchise
G	30-39	Male	White British	Digital Skills	2 and 3	Level 5, Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) - HEI franchise
H	20-29	Female	White British	Performing Arts	3	Level 7, Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) - HEI franchise

In the first instance, contact was made to identify and source potential subjects via a partnership newsletter to those teaching on or studying in-service programmes via the researcher's institution. In addition to this, a Twitter 'call out' using a popular FE hashtag helped to promote the research to interested parties. The initial interest revealed 10 potential subjects for the TEd focus groups and 5 for trainee teacher focus groups. All were then emailed (appendix B) with an attached Participation Information Sheet (appendix C) which detailed the purpose of the research and the activities that each subject was expected to undertake as a subject in the research project. 8 TEds and 4 trainee teachers responded initially. The potential subjects were then emailed to complete an informed consent (appendix D) and provided with several options for a FG date. 7 of the 8 TEds were able to attend the first TEd focus group date on 2nd November 2020 and 4 of the 4 trainee teachers could attend the first trainee teacher focus group date on 18th November 2020.

This number of subjects was not deemed sufficient to obtain rich insights from the data and upon attempting to further recruit for the focus groups, which proved to be challenging, it soon became apparent that increased flexibility would be needed due to a lack of interest from suitable candidates and thus, convenience sampling was used. The main objective of convenience sampling is to collect information from subjects who are easily accessible to the researcher, though they should not necessarily be considered representative of the population (Etikan et al, 2016). Accordingly, I directly approached 3 TEds whom I knew through my local network and arranged to conduct the second TEd focus group on 10th February 2021. Additionally, via their tutor, I approached 4 trainee teachers who were studying an in-service programme at the institution and organised a second trainee teacher focus group on 12th March 2021.

4.6.2.2.4 Conducting the Focus Groups

Focus Groups took place between November 2020 and March 2021, all lasting between 60 and 75 minutes. In total 10 subjects participated in the TEd focus groups and 8 in the trainee TVET teacher focus groups. As suggested by Thomas (2011), despite having previous sight of the Subject Information Sheet, subjects were fully briefed prior to

undertaking the interview. This involved a recap of the information sheet, along with making the subjects feel comfortable and at ease with the MS Teams recording.

The questions for the focus groups adopted a semi-structured approach around three discussion topics to generate the texts for the CDAs. The first discussion topic sought to ascertain how TEds and trainee teachers identified skills that they understood were developed by their own teaching practices. Subjects were asked to tell me about the skills that they teach. The purpose of this question was to determine what subjects conceptualised as a skill, thus what underpinned their discourses. The second question sought to determine subjects' perspectives on what influences their conceptions of skill. Subjects were asked where they got their ideas of skill from and what influences their understanding of skill. The final question asked subjects how they teach their learners the skills they discussed. This question was asked to determine how discourses of skill are recontextualised and operationalised in practice. Operationalisation is the process whereby abstract concepts are turned into measurable observations (discourse practices) and, as Fairclough (2010) suggests, it is a dialectical process which has three aspects to it: enacting, which focuses on ideas being put into practice, inculcating, which refers to instilling the idea into someone's mind, and materialising, which refers to making the ideas real. It is more challenging to discern the operationalisation of the subjects' discourses in the trainee TVET teachers focus groups without observing the discourse practices of their learners, however, ideas may be drawn from the TEds' discourse. This, alongside Bernstein's recontextualisation principles at the PRF, allows one to consider how the discourses may be reproduced.

I decided to adopt the use of stimulus material throughout each focus group to provide a common external reference point (Liamputtong, 2011), and to provide a key focus for the discussion (Denscombe, 2002). The stimulus material provided can be found in appendix E. During the interviews, the main stem question was used as a lead into all questions, with prompts being used where there may have been misunderstanding. Further to this, the prompt sheet provided subjects with examples of the topics they may wish to mention. I had a key role to play in moderating, directing attention to pertinent issues, drawing

people in who were on the periphery and probing subjects to explore their understanding, whilst not leading them in any way (Morrison, 1993). According to Litoselliti (2003) the moderator role is more than just asking the right questions at the right time, it involves them creating a sociable environment for the issues to be discussed. For this reason, I adopted a light-hearted approach, where I attempted to make the interviews feel less formal and regimented. I tried to remain open, welcome to a diversity of views, and without judgement, which enabled me to create optimal conditions for yielding useful data.

A written and verbal debrief was provided to all subjects upon completion of the interview to thank them for their participation in the research and provide them with an opportunity to ask any questions. Subjects were informed that a final written debrief would be provided once analysis of all data had taken place. Although this has the disadvantage of delaying the final briefing (VanderStoep and Johnson, 2009), it ensures that more detailed and definite information can be provided to the subjects on overall research findings, thus allowing for more accurate results summaries to be provided (Sharpe, 2008). All the subjects expressed an interest in being involved in future research in the area, were it deemed appropriate.

4.6.2.2.5 My Position as an Actor in the Focus Group

As expressed previously, a CR ontology acknowledges that all research is fallible in search of truth (Bhaskar, 2008). An important aspect of this, as a researcher, is to acknowledge the potential bias towards the above-mentioned questions and I must explore these to mitigate against them influencing the subjects. In terms of the focus group question 1, I expected subjects to list a range of skills which are predominantly centred on the notion of generic, transferable category. I do not feel that the question led subjects down a particular path and where opportunities arose to discuss different notions of skill, I attempted to probe these. There were also many examples of different types of skill used as prompts on the handout, which I purposely kept broad. I do need to be mindful that this could have served to lead the subjects. For question 2, I expected subjects might be more explicitly influenced by government or institutional policy and this was largely due to my own experiences as a teacher in the sector. As it happens, subjects

had different influences. In a similar vein to the above, I provided some examples of potential influences on the handout. For question 3, where subjects focus on generic skills, I expected them to talk about collaborative learning activities, without eliciting how the actual skills are learnt. For technical skills, I anticipated discussions about explicit instruction, demonstrations and practice. Data appears to corroborate this.

4.6.2.2.6 Focus Group CDA

Prior to analysis, the MS Teams transcriptions were checked alongside the video recordings for accuracy. This provided the texts for the adapted CDA which were analysed at the micro 'textual' level before developing a macro analysis to show how language, power and society are intertwined (Fairclough, 2001).

The first stage of the analysis of data focussed on vocabulary, examining the transcripts of the four focus groups. Coding themes stemmed from Fairclough's (2013) descriptive level analysis, whereby vocabulary is foregrounded and categorised using Winch's conceptualisation of skill (as discussed in chapter 3) (Winch, 2010). Unlike my CDA of policy, I opted not to use NVivo 12 Pro software to identify themes and nodes in the focus group data for this discussion point. This decision was made for several reasons: while it was a useful exercise to identify word frequency for a CDA of policy (a fixed text), the conversational nature of a focus group and the manner in which subjects drew upon one another's points rendered this exercise, for this sort of text, unnecessary. Moreover, there was significant time and challenge when using NVivo to refine the themes and codes that were generated by the auto coding process. I anticipated this would be even more challenging with conversational data, compared to a manually driven coding process with a clear deductive coding process whereby 'skills' were categorised. Therefore, I manually went through the transcripts to highlight any mention of 'skills'. I then went through each highlighted point and coded the category of skill for each individual subject based on the earlier conceptualisation of skill (Winch, 2010): 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., 'thinking skills' or problem solving

were coded as immoderately inflated 1 (II1). Social skills and similar i.e., dealing with people, empathy etc was coded as immoderately inflated 2 (II2). Finally, other notions that fell beyond the conceptual framework but were conflated with skill such as values and attributes were coded as immoderately inflated 3 (II3). I chose this approach as it allowed for a clear distinction between the different ways in which skills can be categorised, demonstrating the many ways in which the term can be adapted in the discourse. Having a consistent approach to the conceptualisation of skill in both the policy and focus group CDAs allowed me to determine where similarities and differences lie in the discourses between policy and practice, affording the opportunity to understand how discourse is recontextualised from the Official Recontextualisation Field (ORF) to the Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (PRF) (Bernstein, 2000).

Unlike discussion topic 1, my 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 practitioners recontextualised skills for their learners. I then drew the most common themes together across the focus groups for both TEds and then trainee teachers before considering Fairclough's (2013) descriptive level analysis to identify the language used in the production of and recontextualisation of 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). An utterance is the smallest unit of speech and 'any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of other utterances' (Bakhtin, 1986: 69). This might include vocal and non-vocal pauses e.g., 'erm' or fillers e.g., 'like' to indicate thinking. There are also prosodic features e.g., change of pitch and paralinguistic features e.g., facial expressions that ought to be considered in the utterances of subjects (Bakhtin, 1986). To include aspects of the utterance in the analysis allowed me to glean an appreciation of extra verbal tones and affective elements e.g. confidence in responses and consensus, or otherwise, between subjects (Voloshinov, 1976; Haye and Larrain, 2011). To achieve this, I watched the focus group back alongside my coded transcriptions

to identify points at which an utterance was perceived to be significant to the message being relayed by the subject and made a note of this on the transcripts.

The adapted CDA of the skills discourse aimed to explore and articulate how language, power and ideology are related to social practices as broader social and historical contexts. 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). A descriptive and interpretive analysis provided three core problems/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). 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 (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) and in chapter 6, I analysed the findings in dialogue with my conceptual and theoretical framework to support the theorisation that there are competing skills discourses in TVET policy, teaching and teacher training, with conflicting operationalisation of the discourses, and this contributes to marginalisation of fractions of the working class.

4.6.3 CDA Stage 3 and 4 (Does the social order 'need' the social wrong and what are the possible ways past the obstacles?)

According to Fairclough (2013), these stages of analysis consider whether the social order (network of practices) 'needs' the problem and identifies possible ways to move beyond the obstacles presented in the discourse. To support this, in my discussion chapter (7), I revisited the key findings from both CDA 1 (policy) and CDA 2 (focus groups) to examine how the discourse is recontextualised through my theoretical framework and to establish the obstacles in the skills discourse that I theorise lead to the social wrong (competing and disparate discourses of skill invariably affect those unlikely to follow traditional academic routes of study which contributes to the reproduction of class divisions).

Fairclough (2008) argues that if a social order can be shown to give rise to major social wrongs, then it ought to be changed. Throughout the discussion, leaning on the conceptual and theoretical framework (chapter 3), I sought to ask whether those that serve to benefit most from the current structure of TVET and the skills discourses therein, have a vested interest in the problem being unresolved. Building on this analysis, I then attend to Fairclough's stage 4 by offering suggestions to mitigate and move beyond the obstacles presented by the competing discourses.

4.6.4 Limitations of CDA as a Method

As with any research methodology, the use of CDA has its limitations, and it is important for me to acknowledge these and explain how I attempted to mitigate against them by design and in practice.

As mentioned, CDA is a highly subjective and interpretive methodology, which means that different researchers may arrive at different conclusions when analysing the same data (Janks, 1997). Consequently, it raises questions about the reliability and validity of CDA as a research tool due to the difficulty in comparing the findings of different studies and the ability for one to theorise causation. I also found that there were many different approaches to CDA and, despite Fairclough (2013) suggesting that the CDA framework should be used fluidly, moving back and forth between descriptive, interpretive and explanatory analysis, I did find myself wedded to following the process in more of a linear fashion, so that I could be sure that I was analysing each phase. I stand by this approach as it was more comprehensive than would have been were I to flit between the different sections, though understand the criticism.

One of the biggest limitations to CDA is that it is often seen as a highly politicised methodological approach. Fairclough's CDA lifespan almost mirrors the lifespan of neoliberal capitalism. It is borne out of neoliberalism and so, for as long as neoliberalism is in place, his CDA methodology serves as a useful tool to analyse dialectical relations between policy and practice. Even so, its focus on language and the way in which this

language is used to maintain and reinforce social and political power dynamics, makes it challenging for the researcher to be objective and impartial. Afterall, one starts the process with what one perceives to be a social wrong, which immediately politicises the process. For this issue, I believe it is important not to shy away from it being politicised as it helps to uncover and shine a light on issues in society, regardless of the political party of the time, as these wrongs are often entrenched in decades of policy, shaped by different ideologies and perspectives. This is certainly the case with skills discourses.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This was an essential chapter in the thesis to explain the way in which I have carried out empirical research through which to deepen my understanding of how skills discourses play out in the sector. In this chapter, I explained how I arrived at a CR ontology and how this led me to a more structuralist approach to CDA. Using and adapting Fairclough's CDA as a method to analyse the discourse most pertinent to the thesis, I provided a thorough account of each stage of analysis for both policy texts and practitioner focus groups, demonstrating rigour and a strong rationale for decisions that were made in the data collection in support of the research questions. In the next chapters (5 and 6), I provide comprehensive CDAs of contemporary skills policy and the discursive practices of TVET practitioners respectively. I draw these together in the final chapter (7) to complete all stages of the CDA, in alignment with my conceptual and theoretical framework, allowing me to make significant contributions to knowledge in the field.

CHAPTER 5

CDA 1: Policy

5.1 Introduction

This chapter uses a modified Faircloughian CDA to analyse the skills discourse in contemporary UK skills policy. As noted by Fairclough (2000) a CDA of a text should proceed through three stages of analysis: description, interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction, and explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context. Drawing on a number of texts deemed pertinent to RQ1, as justified in chapter 4, I followed this process through the chapter finding key themes that may contribute to the perceived social wrong. This CDA, on its own, only provides analysis at a macro-level and is later combined with CDA 2 (chapter 6) in the discussion chapter (7) for a more comprehensive analysis using the conceptual and theoretical framework from chapter 3.

5.1.1 Overview of Selected Texts

In 2015, following its election, the Conservative government initiated a review of Technical Education (TE). Its purpose, they report, was to simplify the system and ensure the new system provides the skills most needed for the 21st century (IPTE, 2016). The report was significant in that it proposed that the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) be expanded to encompass technical education across levels 2-5, with a single framework of standards suggested which would be implemented for both apprenticeship (work-based) and college-based provision to strengthen the link between learning and employment. The IfA thus rebranded as the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE).

Alongside the recommendations of the IPTE Report, the government published their Post-16 Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016), described as an ‘ambitious framework to support young people and adults to secure a lifetime of sustained skilled employment and meet the needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy’ (2016: 7). This led to the development of a set of technical qualifications (T-Levels) with a renewed focus on the language of ‘technical education’ which has been omitted from policy for over half a century prior (Esmond and Atkins, 2022).

Whilst undertaking the empirical work for this thesis, the unprecedented impact of Covid-19 led to an increased focus on the TVET sector in addressing the skills gaps in the labour market in a post-pandemic economy. Nadhim Zahawi's AOC Conference Speech (November 2021) was delivered in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent Skills Bill (2021) and subsequent FE White Paper (DfE, 2021) making it significant as a means to reignite the government's pre-pandemic Skills Plan. The recently appointed Education Secretary, Nadim Zahawi addressed the Association of Colleges (AoC) - a powerful, non-for-profit membership organisation representing colleges and sixth forms in England - to set out how colleges could play a central role in transforming skills and the way people progress into the workplace. At the point of the speech, Zahawi had been in post a little under 2 months and there had yet to be a full cycle of the first T-Levels, with low levels of recruitment across the three pathways (less than 1500 in the first year). The speech was dominated by him outlining the ways in which colleges can support skills needs, setting the stall out for future reforms to programmes of study that were not considered as 'technical' routes (e.g., Applied General and BTEC qualifications) and, significantly, the government's climbdown on the maths and English entry requirements for T-Levels. Whilst I had already carried out my analysis of the earlier texts, it felt prudent to add this text to the analysis to discern whether the skills discourse in policy had changed significantly or not because of the pandemic.

5.2 Analysing the Discourse

I began this analysis by asking what the role of 'skills' discourses are in UK governments' further education policies? (RQ1).

As mentioned, the corpus for this CDA centred on the latest skills policy in the UK. I began by focusing my attention on the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). I also draw upon the simultaneously released report from the Independent Panel on Technical Education (IPTE, 2016). According to Fairclough (2015) a CDA not only allows texts to be analysed linguistically but it should also be noted that texts have a set of other texts and voices which have potential relevance and are potentially incorporated into them which can be

analysed too, something which Fairclough (1992) describes as intertextuality. Fairclough (1992: 84) calls the intertextuality of a text:

> The property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth.

In other words, the production of a texts is essentially the amalgamation of other texts to create new orders. A CDA allows one to unpick the text and the intertextual features to determine how the text is positioned in relation to, what Fairclough (1995) calls, the 'order of discourse', the totality of its discursive practices. For the purpose of this initial CDA, I began with an initial analysis of linguistic features, word frequency and relations between the two texts, with more emphasis on the Skills Plan. However, intertextuality is more pertinent later in the thesis where I explore how the discourses are recontextualised, drawing on my theoretical framework in the discussion chapter 7.

As suggested by (Janks, 1997), texts should be read before analysis to gain a general 'feel' for the language used and target audience. My initial feeling upon reading both the IPTE and Skills Plan was that both were aimed at a broad selection of readers, including politicians, education and training providers, employers and employer bodies, and, to a lesser extent, students. I felt that both centred on a problem-to-solution, with the main issue being to reform an overly complex skills system and whilst the IPTE was more comprehensive in providing a rationale for, and potential solutions to, the problem, the discourse in both texts appeared consistent.

5.2.1 Descriptive Level Analysis of the Skills Plan and IPTE

For the lexical analysis, I began by employing NVivo 12 Pro software, a qualitative data analysis tool, to measure high frequency words. Parameters were set for the ten most frequently used words of over four characters in length, along with synonyms of those terms. The results of this lexical analysis revealed a repetition of key words that provides the text with authority; a sense of legitimacy which is 'presented as a matter of factness' (Woodside-Jiron, 2014: 163). 'Education', 'employers', 'skills' and 'technical' appear in the top four most frequent words from both texts, with 'need' and 'levels' appearing in the top

6 (tables 1 and 2). Interestingly, both texts share nine of their top ten words, demonstrating a consistency in the language used in both policy texts.

Table 3: The Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016)

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)	Similar Words
education	9	406	3.03	civil, develop, developed, developer, developing, development, develops, education, educational, preparation, prepare, prepared, preparing, school, schooling, schools, teach, teaching, train, trained, training
employers	9	282	2.06	applied, applies, apply, applying, employ, employed, employer, employers, employers', employment, engage, engagement, used, useful, uses, using, work, worked, working, works
skills	6	233	1.88	acquired, attainment, expert, experts, good, practical, practice, science, skill, skilled, skills
technical	9	202	1.81	expert, experts, mechanic, mechanism, technical, technological, technology
need	4	229	1.47	asked, asking, demand, demands, inevitably, involve, involved, involving, need, needed, needing, needs, require, required, requirement, requirements, requires, take, takes, taking, want, wanting
levels	6	143	1.16	degree, degrees, equally, even, grade, grades, level, levels, point, points, stage, stages, story
route	5	117	1.07	paths, road, root, route, routes
apprenticeships	15	110	1.03	apprenticeship, apprenticeships, apprenticeships'
system	6	130	1.01	arrangements, order, organisation, organisations, organise, organisation, scheme, schemes, system, systematically, systemic, systems
government	10	147	0.99	administrative, administrator, authority, control, controller, establish, established, establishing, govern, governance, governed, governing, government, governments, order, organisation, organisations, organise, organisation, political, regulate, regulated, regulation, regulators, rules

Table 4: Report of Independent Panel on Technical Education (IPTE, 2016)

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)	Similar Words
education	9	1405	3.59	civil, derived, develop, developed, developer, developing, development, developments, develops, education, education', educational, instructions, pedagogical, preparation, prepare, prepared, prepares, preparing, school, schooling, schools, teach, teaching, train, trained, training
technical	9	716	2.17	expert, experts, mechanic, mechanism, mechanisms, proficiency, technical, technological, technology
work	4	1108	2.02	bring, bringing, employ, employability, employed, employer, employers, employers', employment, exercise, form, formed, forms, functional, functionality, functioning, functions, going, influences, make, makes, making, operate, operating, operation, operational, operations, operative, operatives, operators, plant, plants, play, playing, process, running, shape, solve, solving, studied, studies, study, studying, turn, work, work', worked, working, workplace, work placements, workplaces, works
skills	6	595	1.55	acquire, acquired, acquisition, attaining, attainment, expert, experts, good, practical, practically, practice, proficiency, science, sciences, skill, skilled, skills, skills'
levels	6	483	1.32	charged, degree, degrees, equal, equality, equally, even, evenings, grade, graded, grades, level, level', levels, levels', point, points, stage, stages, story
need	4	610	1.27	asked, asking, demand, demanding, demands, inevitably, involve, involved, involvement, involving, motivated, motivation, necessitates, necessitating, need, needed, needing, needs, require, required, requirement, requirements, requires, take, takes, taking, want, wanted, wanting, wants
routes	6	400	1.23	path, paths, road, root, route, routes
qualifications	14	395	1.04	make, makes, making, qualification, qualifications, reserved
apprenticeships	15	318	1.01	apprenticeship, apprenticeship', apprenticeships, apprenticeships'
system	6	373	1.00	arrangement, arrangements, order, organisation, organisations, organise, organised, organisation, scheme, schemes, system, systematic, systematically, systemic, systems

Following the initial analysis of lexical terms, given the research questions for this thesis, I focussed primarily on the texts' use of the term 'skills'. Using NVivo 12 Pro, I was first able to search for 'skill' and then used nodes to code each mention. Nodes allow one to categorise related material in order to identify emerging themes and patterns. Initially, I did this to determine the relational value of skill, as shown in table 5.

Table 5: Relational Values

Relational words		Skills Plan	IPTE	total
Skill/skills/ skilled	Shortage (s)	20	16	36
	Need (s)			
	Pressure (s)			
	Gap (s)			
	Weakness (es)			
	System	8	5	13
	Employment	21	23	44
	Occupations			
	Higher level	10	8	18
	Intermediate Level	3	2	5
	Low Level	1	3	4

The initial evidence indicated that the term was most closely aligned to employment and where the normative reference was used, these tended to be dominated by 'higher level' skills. Also prominent in the relational values was that of a skills 'need', which corroborates the initial analysis (tables 1-2), where 'need' is in the top 5 words for each text, thus, I sought to determine potential reasons for these needs – to whom, or what, the skills 'need' is directed? This is an important aspect of the relational values that a text has (Fairclough, 1999), therefore, I analysed the texts using themes associated with the individual, industry and the economy.

Table 6: Skills Need

Need	Skills Plan	IPTE	Total
Individual (learner)	4	6	10
Employers/industry	14	8	22
Economic (local, national and global)	2	2	4

The analysis revealed that the skills 'need' is more often expressed from the needs of employers or industry. There are occasional references to the individual, but it is noteworthy that the employer is used more frequently in the texts, particularly the Skills Plan (the policy paper), for example:

> Securing a step-change in technical education is vital for the productivity of this country; **employers** have specific training needs which the education system needs to serve (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 17).

Upon closer inspection, despite previous skills policy texts having a focus on meeting employers' needs the language presented in the Skills Plan uses metaphors to highlight their importance in the text, presenting their needs as a new concept: 'employers will sit at the **heart of the system** and take the lead in setting the standards' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 7). The use of metaphors like this is common in policy according to Semino (2008: 90) as they 'can provide ways of simplifying complexities and making abstractions accessible'. However, whilst this can help readers to understand the text, the metaphors also arguably serve to promote acceptance and consent of the ideology (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997), in this case, skills as a market with employers as the customer.

Fairclough (1989:120) informs us that 'when one wishes to represent textually some real or imaginary action, event, state of affairs or relationship, there is often a choice between different grammatical processes and subject types, and the selection made can be ideologically significant'. Indeed, this becomes evident in relation to the employers with use of the modal verb 'must' which presents an obligation to the employers: 'Firstly, and most importantly, **employers** must play **a leading role**… they must define the skills, knowledge and behaviours required for skilled employment' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 12). Where we may find ideological consent from most other readers of the text, it might be argued that statements like these are coercing employers to accept ideology.

Following this, I thought prudent to determine what the skills needs were specifically (i.e. skill type), so drew upon the philosophical conceptualisation of skill, as suggested by Winch (2010) (see chapter 3) (i.e. paradigmatic view, moderate inflation, immoderate inflation 1 and immoderate inflation 2), and coded the nodes to determine the discourses around 'skill type'.

Table 7: A List of Skills and their Conceptualisation

Conceptualisation of skill		Skills Plan	IPTE	Total
Paradigmatic (i.e. technical, practical skills).	"Practical skills"	6	17	29
	"Technical skills"	3	3	
Moderate (benign) inflation (i.e. literacy and numeracy).	"Basic Skills"	6	1	24
	"Literacy Skills"	1	0	
	"Numeracy"	2	2	
	"Digital Skills"	11	1	
Immoderate inflation 1 (i.e. general, transferable skills such as solving problems)	"Transferable skills"	1	0	3
	"Solving problems" or "problem solving"	1	1	
Immoderate inflation 2 (i.e. soft skills such as communicating)	"Working in a team" or "team working"	1	1	4
	"Communication" or "skills such as communicating"	1	1	

It is evident from the texts that the supposed 'needs' for employers are primarily technical and practical, alongside transferable skills such as literacy, numeracy and digital (coined 'common core' in the Skills Plan). Seldom do the texts mention those skills that are immoderately inflated beyond the paradigmatic conceptualisation.

Fairclough (1989) asserts that politicians use speech with the aim of 'manufacturing consent', that is to lift their image while tarnishing the image of their opponents. Chilton (2004: 47) defines this as 'legitimization of self and the delegitimization of the other'. Generally, the language used in the Skills Plan positions the government as 'saviours', with negative adjectives which are arguably used to discredit the current TE system: 'We

cannot continue to let so many work their way through a succession of often **low-level, low-value** qualifications that lead at best to **low-skilled, low-paid** employment' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 17). This is coupled with strong expressive values and, at times, metaphors for the journey to employment, to add impact to discrediting the current skills system, for example: 'Some qualifications which were previously badged as 'vocational' … became **some of the worst** examples of qualifications with **little or no value** in the labour market' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 11) and 'the system is complex and **difficult to navigate** for both young people and adults looking to retrain' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 11). Jones and Peccei (2004) suggest that to secure power, it makes sense to use language to convince people that what you want is good for them. It therefore follows that the 'saviour complex' position of the current government uses more positive and powerful adjectives to describe their actions to change the system, for instance where they claim an **'urgent** commitment to economic growth and social justice, we will **go further** and deliver lasting, ambitious, systemic reform' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 11).

One of the more significant aspects revealed in the lexical analysis reflects Fairclough's (1989:120) point that there is 'a choice between different grammatical process and subject types, and the selection made can be ideologically significant', and this relates to the way in which the pronouns and their relational values used in the texts serve to include and exclude different groups. In political discourse, one's responsibilities are, in part, negotiated through the deictic system (Chilton, 2004) – a word which identifies the identity or location from the perspective of the speaker/writer, or reader/hearer in a given context (Mulderrig, 2012).

It is apparent that in the Skills Plan alone, the pronoun 'we' is used 263 times, 'our' 65 times, 'us' is used 9 times, and 'you' is used 3 times. 'We', in this case, seems to refer to the UK (government and population collectively) as opposed to its economic competitors, which arguably demonstrates an attempt to make the policy appear inclusive. 'Our' can be used to both include and exclude, for example, 'our' can be used to establish solidarity and social bonding as demonstrated in the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 5): 'Getting it right is crucial to our future prosperity, and to the life chances of millions of people'.

Equally, ‘our’ can be used to exclude, as demonstrated where the responsibilities are located with closer proximation to government themselves using it as a possessive adjective (2016:5): ‘This Skills Plan describes our vision for the system’. However, despite its largely inclusive tone, the Skills Plan, as shown in table 6, centres more on employers’ needs rather than the individual. This is evidenced further with the proposed qualifications only open to those studying level 2 and 3 which, given that around a quarter of 16–19-year-olds are undertaking qualifications below these levels, excludes a large population of students (Lenon, 2018).

While there is acknowledgement of this group, along with mention of those with special educational needs (SEND) (n=3), those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) (n=1), those in care (n=1) and those in alternative provision settings (n=1), the policy appears to conflate these very different groups with the answer to supporting these individuals being a ‘transition year’. The Skills Plan devotes just three short paragraphs to the transition year through which students who lack entry qualifications can progress onto T-Levels, with vague information as to how this will support the wide-ranging groups to progress:

> Individuals who are not ready to access a technical education route at age 16 (or older if their education has been delayed) should be offered a ‘transition year’ to help them to prepare for further study or employment. The transition year should be flexible and tailored to the student’s prior attainment and aspirations (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 52).

What is interesting here is the skills discourse, where ‘basic skills’ is mentioned for the first and only time in the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016, 50): ‘the key objective for the year remains to provide tailored provision that has a sharp focus on basic skills and on progression’. It is not clear what this discourse entails specifically but there is an acute change in the language, perhaps to distinguish between the proposed T-Levels and the transition programme. Interestingly, according to an FE Week article, in 2021 around 40% of the 9000 individuals studying a T-Level or the transition programme were on the latter programme. Given that such a large group is only considered in such a brief and vague manner, it raises concerns about the priorities of the government in terms of their target audience for skills development. It is important, however, to recognise that initial policy implementation is not without its problems, therefore, as this thesis developed alongside

the implementation of T-Levels, it was prudent to examine more contemporary policy texts.

5.2.2 Descriptive Analysis of Education Secretary, Nadim Zahawi's speech

Following BREXIT and the Covid-19 pandemic, where, according to the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) (2021), there has been increased disadvantage, with an increased number of children living in poverty, a widening gap in attainment, increased unemployment (particularly in the younger population), and skills deterioration, there was a need to examine more contemporary skills texts. Following the same process as above, I conducted a descriptive analysis of Zahawi's speech to delegates at the AOC conference in November 2021. Similar to the previous policy texts, and unsurprisingly, the speech shared the most frequent lexical terms.

Table 8: Word Frequency in the Text

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)	Similar Words
skills	6	31	1.55	acquired, attainment, expert, experts, good, practical, practice, science, skill, skilled, skills
education	9	24	1.20	civil, develop, developed, developer, developing, development, develops, education, educational, preparation, prepare, prepared, preparing, school, schooling, schools, teach, teaching, train, trained, training
need	4	20	1.00	asked, asking, demand, demands, inevitably, involve, involved, involving, need, needed, needing, needs, require, required, requirement, requirements, requires, take, takes, taking, want, wanting
employers	9	20	1.00	applied, applies, apply, applying, employ, employed, employer, employers, employers', employment, engage, engagement, used, useful, uses, using, work, worked, working, works
levels	6	16	1.16	degree, degrees, equally, even, grade, grades, level, levels, point, points, stage, stages, story

As with the CDA of the policy texts above, following the initial analysis of lexical terms, I then sought to focus on 'skills'. Using NVivo 12 Pro, I was first able to search for 'skill'

and use nodes to code each mention. Initially, I did this to determine the relational value of skill, as shown in table 9.

Table 9: Relational Values in the Text

Relational words		total
Skill/skills/skilled	Shortage (s)	9
	Need (s)	
	Pressure (s)	
	Gap (s)	
	Weakness (es)	
	System / Economy	6
	Employment	6
	Occupations	
	Higher level	1
	Intermediate Level	0
	Low Level	0

The descriptive analysis identified that, like the Skills Plan and IPTE report, skills needed for employment are high on the agenda. In Zahawi's speech we see a new term being used, the 'skills economy' which, whilst not being defined or elaborated on by Zahawi, indicates an emphasis on the broader economic benefits of skills. Thus, I repeated the lexical analysis of the speech by examining the themes to whom these needs were for (table 10) and there was no mention of the individual, rather the economy has become a more pressing priority to the government, perhaps as a consequence of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 10: Skills Need

Need	Total
Individual (learner)	0
Employers/industry	5
Economic (local, national and global)	4

Again, in the same manner I approached the CDA of earlier policy texts, I sought to determine what the skills need was specifically (i.e. skill type, per Winch's (2010) philosophical conceptualisation). However, I was aware that the speech had far fewer references to skill than the other policy texts, largely due to its length and, as can be seen in table 9, the reference to skills was far broader, with little reference to level or type of skill. Unlike the other policy texts, there were only a few specific references to 'skills' in a manner that provided sufficient information to conceptualise the meaning. The first related to digital skills, a moderate and benign inflation of the term. The other skills, which are not mentioned in the Skills Plan or IPTE report, was that of 'green skills'. It is difficult to discern what is meant by this from the text, yet again we see the onus is placed on employers 'to identify what green skills needs exist in order for businesses to grow in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way'. Unlike the Skills Plan which insisted that employers be responsible for 'transferable workplace skills', employers are now issued with the responsibility to identify green skills. Cedefop (2012) identifies these skills as 'the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society'. If accepted, this definition firmly places green skills into the category of 'immoderately inflated' conceptions of skill (Winch, 2010).

Unlike the tone of the policy texts above, whereby there was critique of the previous skills system as being overly complicated without a 'clear line of sight to the world of work' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 11), Zahawi's (2021) speech adopts a different tack with a personalised story to share the complexities of education: 'like your students, I am living proof that there is no such thing as a linear education journey' he says, and later he goes on to say 'that there is no one, single route to a great career or a dream job'. This is one of the more ambiguous statements by Zahawi as, in one breath, he argues that 'the current qualifications landscape is tricky to navigate' and that 'students deserve to know that every course they take is one that employers value and that leads to a good, skilled job', and in the other, he celebrates that there is no such thing as a linear education journey.

Later in his speech, Zahawi also congratulates those in attendance with further reference to his personal journey: ‘what you do, what your members continually do…with such success is to open doors for those like me who may have taken a path less travelled’. The personalisation of his message through the use of second person pronouns ‘you/your’ and the apparent gratitude to those in attendance is a political strategy that is arguably a form of branding. Scammell (2007) suggests that branding covers the underlying strategic concerns to build and maintain loyalty amongst the voting public, particularly when it provokes an emotional connection. We see this again where he shares his success as a vaccine minister and suggests that this approach can be transferred to the skills system. This arguably demonstrates a form of coercive persuasion (Holland and Aaronson, 2014) as the victims (audience) do not recognise, or realise, that they are being manipulated because the manipulative discourse camouflages its real intention (Árvay, 2004); the audience is being led to believe that the skills system is now in safe hands because of previous successes of the minister. There is further evidence of this branding and subsequent coercion through the use of language devices such as the rule of three’ and metaphors to emphasise the policy directive, however, there is a shift from simply meeting employer needs to one of a more significant change, a social revolution:

> What we have here is a great deal to build on for the future and I’m not just talking about recovering from a pandemic.
> What we have is nothing less than the **fuel** that’s going to help **turbocharge** skills development in this country, and that means opening up opportunities for far more people and far more areas.
> What we have, ladies and gentlemen, is nothing short of a social revolution driven by skills.
> (Zahawi, 2021)

As with the previous texts, inclusive language is used though the first-person plural of ‘our’ and ‘we’, signifying the collective responsibility that the government wishes to portray: ‘and when I say **we**, I do not just mean government. I mean **you** too because I regard this as a team effort. **We** are all in this together’ (Zahawi, 2021). Moreover, ‘**our** economic recovery will depend on getting people with the right skills into jobs and this in turn will depend on employers telling **us** what those skills needs are’ (Zahawi, 2021). This inclusive language oscillates between describing the collective (i.e. the UK population) and the Conservative government and when referring to themselves, there are arguably

attempts to continue the branding and coercion through self-congratulation, for example, ‘our apprenticeship reforms have already put employers at the heart of the skills system, and colleges and training providers have responded’.

We can also see from the above quotes that, in a slightly different vein to the Skills Plan and IPTE report, the Zahawi speech focuses more on improving the economy, perhaps as an outcome of recent events (Brexit and Covid-19): ‘education and the economy are inseparable’, he says (Zahawi, 2021). This increasing alignment between the discourses of education and the discourses of the economy (Esmond and Atkins, 2022) is part of a neoliberal ideology and it is further exemplified where Zahawi makes a point which chimes with the notion of Human Capital Theory: ‘we are in the business of dealing with the most valuable asset in the country – our people’ (Zahawi, 2021). However, in spite of this focus on the people, the emphasis of Zahawi’s speech remains on employers determining the skills needs, with no mention of the employees or those outside of the workforce influencing these skill demands. Indeed, in his proposal for pilot studies, those outside of the workforce (e.g. colleges) are actually seen as the delivery mechanism for employers rather than key players in determining the skills: ‘we will see pilots working with local businesses to find out exactly what skills are needed in key sectors. In this way colleges can help learners and employers’. This, in itself, is an interesting comment as it assumes that colleges will know how and be able to supply the skills that are determined by the employers, suggesting that there is an assumption that skills discourse amongst TVET practitioners aligns with the discourse of employers. In other words, the assumption that there is no gap in the relationship between policy and practice.

Unlike the previous texts, and in spite of a continued rhetoric of meeting employer’s skills needs, the Zahawi speech attempts to be more inclusive of those that may not have been able to access the T-Levels by performing a U-turn on English and maths entry requirements for the T-level, suggesting that it was ‘an unfair requirement … that could have barred some young people from good, rewarding technical careers’. As mentioned earlier, the considerable number of students studying a transition programme perhaps wasn’t anticipated by the government in their policy, given such little reference to it in the

Skills Plan. In Zahawi's speech, the acknowledgement of an 'unfair requirement' may provide opportunities for more learners to progress directly to T-Levels, but there is still an omission of support for those that are not ready for level 3 study. Indeed, the reference to reforming post-16 qualifications by way of taking 'a more nuanced approach to BTECs' highlights further exclusion of those that may have greater success on those routes.

In summary, the descriptive analysis of the policy texts demonstrates a number of foci from the government. Firstly, that the economy needs skills to prosper in a capitalist society - a human capital theory lens - and that the broader social purpose of learning is not a priority, instead, it is evident that skills policy is being used as an instrument of skill formation for economic growth and that these skills should be determined by, and meet, employers' needs, with the assumption that there is no gap in the skills discourse between employers and TVET practitioners. Secondly, that the government values higher-level technical skills as essential to achieving their goals and intermediate and low-level skills are of lesser concern. I now intend to explore these through an interpretive analysis to situate and find meaning for the textual analysis.

5.2.3 Interpretive Analysis

Based on the above themes from the descriptive analysis, this section will demonstrate how the language used in the Skills Plan both reflects and constructs social reality as part of interpretive analysis. Fairclough (1989) highlights six dimensions of what constitutes the processes of interpretation. These dimensions are situational context, intertextual context, surface utterances, meaning of utterances, local coherence and text structure and point. The most important part for this analysis of skills discourses is the situational context as this is deemed most pertinent to policy discourse and pertains to the immediate context under which the discourse takes place.

5.2.3.1 TVET as an Instrument for Economic Growth with Employers at the Heart

As Haliday (1978) and Fairclough (2000) suggest, language is a social semiotic and therefore, policy texts do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they have 'a complex, historically changing and mutually constitutive relationship with their social context' (Mulderrig, 2012).

Allais (2011) presents the idea that when a wealthy, capitalist economy struggles, it is often blamed on low levels of skills, and consequently, new policy shines a light on the idea of 'skills development'. For Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), where growth is not adequate, it is regarded as a crisis; the assumption that growth is necessary in society is beyond question and treated as common sense. We see this rhetoric forming in the Skills Plan and IPTE report, but Zahawi's frame of language is much more overt, with the dominant discourse of skills in the text being that greater levels of skill leads to greater economic prosperity which, when considering the situational context of post-Brexit and post-pandemic recovery, it provides a rationale for this being more prominent. However, this rhetoric is not a new phenomenon, and this neoliberal ideal has been reflected in government policies for decades, for example, the Leitch Review (2006) and later the Wolf Report (2011) which made explicit the connection between economic prosperity and skills, envisaging qualifications as key indicators of enhanced skill levels (Tomlinson, 2019). This discourse is akin to Human Capital Theory (HCT) (as discussed in chapter 2 and 3), suggesting that the TVET sector is an instrument for economic growth.

As mentioned, explicit in the language used in all policy texts in this CDA is the foregrounding of employers' needs. However, despite the Skills Plan seeking to 'reform' technical education (DfE/DBEIS, 2016), like the skills for economic growth rhetoric, the drive to meet employers' needs is nothing new either. Hyland (2006) notes that employers in the UK have never seemingly been satisfied with education and training, yet there has been a longstanding appeal from government to employers to engage in the education system in the UK, particularly with the development of technical and vocational qualifications (Huddleston and Laczik, 2019). Indeed, as discussed in chapter 2, 'new vocationalism' began in the 1980's with the government introducing a range of initiatives to strengthen the relationship between education and the needs of industry (Lea, 2003) due to the supposed 'skills crisis' which saw 'skills shortages strangling industrial development' (Ainley and Corbett, 1994: 93). This led to significant changes in vocational education (as discussed in chapter 2) to address the needs of employers. As the labour market evolved due to increased technologisation and interconnectivity, and subsequent automation (Popkova, Ragulina and Bogoviz, 2019), it was suggested that so too did the

skills needed to evolve to match the pace of change (Nolan, 2017). Consequently, policy texts have consistently been couched in terms such as those that we see in the Skills Plan that 'employers will sit at the heart of the system' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 7). However, if the issue has never left the skills policy, it raises the question as to why skills gaps have never been addressed and, in the knowledge that we have the most educated (and skilled) population ever, why employers' skills needs remain unmet. Wheelahan and Moodie (2011) argue that (T)VET will always be criticised because it will 'be found wanting as the demands of work change', yet for Ainley (1993), the notion of skill shortages has been based on a false and ideological premise, since many of the long-term unemployed are in fact skilled to a high degree. Moreover, it is not always clear that reported skills needs are related to undersupply (i.e. too few individuals with the skills) or whether it is due to underutilisation (too few individuals wanting to actually do the job) (Kernohan, 2022). Conversely, Green et al (2016) assert that employers and those that represent them may have a vested interest in reporting skills needs to the government largely due to not being prepared to pay the wage for the job, relying on government intervention to improve the supply of skills and thus lower demand. Perhaps then, the emphasis of aligning skills policy to narrow employer demands and not to the needs of the majority to develop themselves and their skills to benefit society actually veils the overarching aim of increasing global competitiveness, with the employers' needs rhetoric a tool to coerce them to 'buy-in' and accept government ideology (Gartman, 1983; Holland and Aaronson, 2014; Huddleston and Laczik, 2019), thus mitigating against threats to the hegemony of capitalists. Evident in the Skills Plan is what Fairclough (2003: 100) refers to as:

> The neoliberal discourse of economic change which represents "globalisation" as a fact which demands "adjustments" and "reforms" to enhance "efficiency and adaptability" in order to compete.

This was demonstrated in the foreword for the Skills Plan by the Minister of State for Skills (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 5): 'our international competitors realised what it takes to ensure there is access to high-quality technical education – and have moved even further ahead of us as a result.' This increased competition, we are informed, coupled with technological change, puts many jobs at risk and is a demonstration of globalisation 'as fact' and the need to 'reform.' It is interesting however, that, at the time of the Skills Plan's release, UK skills shortages as a percentage of employment were low compared to its economic

competitors (Green et al, 2016). This suggests that the skills supply was keeping pace with demand at the time of the Skills Plan and IPTE report.

Zahawi's speech also places significant responsibility on employers to identify skills needs, for example, the 'skills revolution… will depend on employers telling us what those skills needs are.' However, as Keep (2015) and Laczik and White (2009) contend, such commitment to employer involvement presents several issues. Firstly, employers are asked to engage on a largely voluntary basis. Employers are tasked with a number of obligations in the Skills Plan, IPTE report and Zahawi's speech. The Skills Plan identifies employer involvement in identifying skills needs through the contribution to 'employer-designed standards [that] must be put at its heart to ensure it works in the marketplace' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 46). Presenting employers with the opportunity to engage in setting national standards has proven challenging in the past. For example, researching employer engagement in the previous iteration of a government flagship qualification, the 14-19 Diplomas, Laczik and White (2009) explain that employers felt distant from the final qualifications as they lost much of the essence of the content that employers wanted. The irony here is that while employers are given the opportunity to contribute to the technical skills, they are told explicitly what to include in the common core: 'each programme will include a 'common core', which applies to all individuals studying that route … (including English and maths requirements, and digital skills)' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 24). As Huddleston and Laczik (2019: 11) suggest, 'as long as the two main goals of qualifications are confused/conflated, that is, labour market currency and broader educational aims, then employers will always be disappointed'. This suggests that the competing skills discourse in policy might compromise the intended outcomes.

Employers are also tasked with working with the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) to 'articulate a common set of transferable workplace skills which could apply across all of the routes' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 24) and more recently, the Zahawi speech outlined the goal to identify 'what green skills needs exist in order for businesses to grow in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way.' This discourse of skills follows previous iterations of generic, transferable skills, as discussed in chapter 2, which align with

Winch's (2010) conceptualisation of immoderately inflated notions of skill. These skills are supposedly required for a changing labour market (Popkova, Ragulina and Bogoviz, 2019), indeed the OECD Skills Outlook (2017) highlights 'softer skills' such as communication, teamwork, and self-management as highly essential for meeting employers' needs. It is unsurprising that employers are further asked to contribute to the design of these by way of 'transferable workplace skills… 'such as communicating, working in a team and solving problems' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 24). Despite some employers lauding 'soft' or 'generic' skills, to achieve the policy aim and realistically establish a common set of transferable skills from such a heterogenous group, displayed by their characters, vested interests and ways of working, it arguably presents a huge challenge, not least because of the difficulty in then being able to capture these within, and across, qualifications and within a valid and reliable assessment framework (Huddleston and Laczik, 2019; Ahmed, 2015, Keep, 2015).

Again, while employers' may or may not need these skills, the imperative for employers to articulate these skills arguably highlights my previous point that there is an overarching desire for global competitiveness. By firmly placing responsibility with employers to articulate what these immoderately inflated skills are, it creates a demand which aligns to globalised perspectives (Fairclough, 2003).The global body, OECD (2017) suggest that with work experience/work-based training, people acquire these non-cognitive, 'transferable' skills (OECD, 2017), so it is little wonder that the Skills Plan articulates the need for employers to also offer longer work placements with:

> a radical shift in emphasis from short-duration work experience to structured work placements lasting much longer and with an employer in an industry relevant to the student's study programme (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 50).

From a 'skills development' perspective, the government are arguably correct in suggesting a longer, more structured work placement, as learning in the workplace is a crucial component of effective TVET (Wheelahan, 2010; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011; CAVTL, 2013; Esmond and Wood, 2017). Here, the learning is situated and involves the whole person taking place as part of their active, lived participation in a Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Whilst one might argue that a longer placement is unlikely to foster strong, lived participation in the CoP, this learning

in situ is key, as attempting to develop knowledge and skills in discrete and isolated environments such as the classroom is problematic (Gutman and Schoon, 2013). Having said this, a recent evaluation by The Institute for Employment Studies (IES, 2018) of the longer T-Level placements revealed that employers struggled to find appropriate level tasks, often due to industry restrictions (e.g. health and safety) and, consequently, there tended to be a greater emphasis on soft skills, as opposed to technical skills, which does not align well with the purpose of the T-Level qualifications. The longer placement also presents logistical issues too given that employers are such a heterogeneous group, with different views, ideas and levels of contribution to the process (Laczik and White, 2009). Indeed, with no regulatory framework for the engagement of employers (Keep, 2015), it raises questions regarding consistency of experience and the competency of employers to a) advise on and design skills curricula and b) deliver on the training (Laczik and White, 2009; Keep, 2015; Esmond, 2018; IES, 2018).

Thus far, I have articulated the range of demands placed on employers in contemporary skills policy which not only is problematic in theory but also its application. Duckworth (2014) argues that giving employers the dominant literacy gives them the position of power to influence others' actions, behaviours and attitudes, yet, given that there have been employers at the heart of the TVET development for over thirty years, it begs the question as to why there are still skill deficits, indeed, why employers continue to bemoan the lack of skills that young people have. In section 5.2.4, I shall explore this theme as I determine whether employers really are at the heart of skill formation in UK policy, or whether this rhetoric is part of a larger social structure to sustain and reproduce inequity in TVET.

5.2.3.2 Higher Level Skills and Expulsion

In this section, I discuss the theme of a higher-level skills discourse that dominates contemporary skills policy and highlight the subsequent expulsion of those not able to access these skills. While the Skills Plan is dominated by a discourse of skills which are needed by employers, in unpacking these skills in the descriptive analysis, it became apparent that these were predominantly focussed at a higher-level, paradigmatic

(practical and technical skills) notions of skill (Winch, 2010), for example, ‘forecasts suggest greater demand for higher-level technical and specialist skills in the future’...[and there is a]... pressing need for more highly skilled people’ (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 10). Huddleston and Laczik (2019) suggest, educational institutions are often enacted as key sites of labour market reproduction to be invested in for an increasingly market-driven and globalised environment, therefore, one might argue that higher-level skills in the skills plan are associated with higher skilled jobs in the labour market. However, the focus on getting more people into more highly skilled jobs over the last few decades has led to unintended consequences due to the ‘hourglass’ labour market (Holmes and Mayhew, 2014), whereby there are an abundance of high and low-skilled jobs, but significantly less at the intermediate level. Indeed, a UK labour market survey (UKCES, 2014) found that jobs with intermediate skilled roles e.g. manufacturing, construction and retail have serious skills shortages. Not only is this a consequence of skills policy focus, but technological advancements have also resulted in a decline in intermediate level jobs due to these being most vulnerable to replacement by technology, along with the impact of globalisation (Glyn, 2007; Keep, 2014).

The skills policy texts in this CDA make brief reference to the different levels of the labour market to set out the problem that the UK faces, yet seldom is there reference to intermediate skills in the solutions outlined in policy texts and lower-level skills even less so. Higher-level skills, on the other hand, dominate the discourse with: ‘we propose that technical education at higher skill levels must still follow national standards’ (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 26). Qualifications and standards are seen as proxies for these higher-level skills, therefore, one might argue that this government investment in TVET is seen as an investment to make individuals more productive and, consequently, more employable (Becker, 1975; Allais, 2007; Carneiro, Dearden and Vignoles, 2010). However, given that the job market for low-level to intermediate skills is so vast, and the graduate market tends to dominate the higher-level jobs (Lenon, 2018), it raises questions about the inclusivity of the plan. A focus on higher level skills by way of human capital frames TVET as instrument of skill formation for economic competition as opposed to being an instrument of social policy, whereby higher-level technical skills are valued because they are seen

as necessary for the functioning of the economy and yield greater returns on investment (Morris, 2023), to the detriment of those with lower levels of skills. Moreover, the 'occupational polarisation' of the labour market in the UK and lack of focus on intermediate and low-level skills in contemporary skills policy highlights Esmond and Atkins' (2020) argument that social distinctions may be reinforced by some being positioned for labour market transition into more elite-level - and others more precarious - employment (see chapter 3).

As discussed in chapter 3, there is an abundance of evidence that shows that young people's aspirations and career choices are influenced by their social class, gender, and ethnicity (Francis, 2000, Archer et al, 2010; Hutchinson, 2011; Duckworth 2014; Allen et al, 2016; Lenon, 2018). For those who inherit from the family milieu and for other disadvantaged groups, the Skills Plan does offer the transition year. However, given that 25% of the 16-19 student population are currently not studying a level 2 or above qualification (something they should have achieved in 2-years of secondary education), a single transition year not only appears ambitious, but also gets very little, and quite vague, coverage in the plan. When thinking about skills discourses, here we see 'basic skills' used for the first and only time in the Skills Plan (DfE/DBEIS, 2016, 50): 'the key objective for the year remains to provide tailored provision that has a sharp focus on basic skills and on progression'. Whilst this phrase commonly refers to English and maths skills which are paramount to support learning and progression (Lenon, 2018), it is easy to see how this notion of 'basic skills may be inflated to include broader perspectives of skill, particularly when considering those that the transition programme is aimed at, the majority of whom are more likely to go into lower-skilled work:

> While many young people with SEND have the potential to achieve good results, a significant proportion are unlikely to be able to access the routes because of low prior attainment. The 'transition year' will be crucial for these students (DfE/DBEIS, 2016, 31).

The language here is interesting as it acknowledges that those with SEND may achieve the technical aspects but are limited by prior qualifications, most probably their GCSE results. Zahawi (2021) makes a move to include more of said individuals in the T-Level qualifications by removing the English and maths requirement, which is arguably a forward and inclusive step, however, this is probably largely in part due to the vast

numbers that entered the transition programme, resulting in the flagship T-Level numbers being lower than anticipated. Furthermore, there is no reference to those that still need to access the transition programme by Zahawi, highlighting the lack of focus in contemporary policy for those that fall beyond the flagship T-Level programmes.

5.2.4 Explanatory Analysis of Social Contexts

This section introduces the explanatory analysis of CDA 1. In chapter 7, I draw on this, alongside the explanatory analysis of CDA 2 to examine the relationships between the discourse in policy and practice. The goal of this stage is to 'depict a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures, and what reproduction effects discourses can in all have on those structures sustaining them' (Gowhary et al, 2015: 138). Fairclough (1995) highlights three aspects to the sociocultural context: economic, political (i.e. power and ideology), and cultural (i.e. issues of values). He goes on to suggest that one does not have to analyse at all levels but any level that might 'be relevant to understanding the particular event' (1995: 62). For the purpose of this CDA, a political context is more pertinent and provides us with what Bernstein (2000) refers to as the field of production, which is the process by which new knowledge, discourses and ideas are created and modified (Singh, 2002; Bertram, 2012). Drawing on my theoretical and conceptual framework, I intend to analyse the key themes identified in the aforementioned interpretive analysis above to theorise how the policy skills discourse may be determined by social structure. This will allow me to later examine CDA 1 of skills policy discourse and its relationship to CDA 2 of TVET practitioners' discursive practices to understand the recontextualisation of the skills discourse. The later work of Fairclough (2013) also proposes that this stage of the analysis should consider whether the social order (network of practices) 'needs' the problem. Essentially, do those that serve to benefit most from the current structure have a vested interest in the problem being unresolved and, in the case of this study, I intend to explore whether contemporary skills discourses help to reproduce existing forms of inequity. While I touch on this aspect of the CDA in the below explanatory analysis, it is in the discussion chapter 7 where I explore this in greater depth considering the findings, and relationship between, CDA 1 and CDA 2.

5.2.4.1 Globalisation - The Social Structure Depicting the Skills Discourse

Thus far, I have identified two themes from the skills discourse in policy. Firstly, the theme of meeting employers' needs by aligning skills policy to narrow employer demands and not to the needs of the majority to develop themselves and their skills to benefit society, which I suggested may be a veil for shifting responsibility and accountability from the government's actual agenda of increased globalisation and economic competitiveness. The second theme follows, with policy framing TVET as an instrument of skill formation for economic competition as opposed to being an instrument of social policy, valuing higher level technical skills because they are seen as necessary for the functioning of the economy and yield greater returns on investment (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018). However, I argue that, in focusing on return to investment there is a ladder created, where there is little care for those that offer lower returns and, critically, this sustains inequality (Morris, 2023). This general finding of the skills discourse being used to promote economic competitiveness highlights the systemic issues surrounding globalisation, as UK policy formation is inherently intertwined with broader European and global policy. Globalisation, according to Held (1999, cited in Fairclough, 2010: 454), is:

> a process which embodies transformation in the spatial organisation of social relations and transactions… generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interactions and the exercise of power.

There are a wide range of voices in the flow of interaction of UK skills policy formation, such as government, agencies, academic research, and international governance (e.g. United Nations, World Bank and the IMF) and this social structure presents a major obstacle to addressing the social wrong, particularly where discourses of skill are produced and recontextualised through these flows (Bernstein, 2000). This is nowhere more evident than in the Skills Plan where one of the key challenges outlined emphasises global interactions and exercises of power: 'weaknesses in the UK's skills base have contributed to its long-standing productivity gap with France, Germany, and the United States' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 10). With global skills discourse holding educational outcomes at the heart of economic prosperity (Hordern, 2021), UK skills policies are therefore influenced by global capitalist bodies such as the World Bank who, themselves, have historically assumed a human capital perspective of skills (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018; Klassen, 2024). In order to compete on a national scale, the recontextualisation of

policy (the field of production) to qualification design (official recontextualisation field (ORF) (Bernstein, 2000) must have some sort of parity with international counterparts and, consequently, global organisations use standardised measurements for skills to enable measurement of return on investment (Morris, 2023) and to provide data and knowledge in TVET research (Klassen, 2024). However, in doing so, this not only assumes homogeneity in the skills and skills needs of highly diverse economic environments but also views qualifications as skills-by-proxy (as discussed in chapter 3, in Human Capital Theory). This perspective 'conceptualizes workers as embodying a set of skills which can be 'rented out' to employers' (Ehrenberg and Smith, 1997: 290) and reflects the way in which the education system models itself on a quasi-market to deliver qualifications that have immediate purchase in the labour market (Young, 2005). Skills, therefore, become a commodity (Wheelahan et al, 2022) and, in line with the idea of the 'neoliberal individual', individuals become owners of skills with those who have the most value to society reaping the greatest reward, thus becoming essential in maintaining a capitalist society (Allais, 2011). The way TVET is structured both globally and in the UK and the discourse of skills therein, therefore, creates obstacles to addressing the social wrong and are part of a capitalist conspiracy to benefit the dominant group in society. There are two ways, I argue, that the discourse sustains this. The first is by competing policy objectives which avert attention and critique of government neoliberal ideology which inherently and disproportionality excludes marginalised groups, and the second by placing employers at the centre of policy, it deflects critical attention from government and macro-economic policy.

5.2.4.2 A Competing Discourse to Cloak and Sustain Social Structures

In spite of quite inclusive language in the texts, with frequent use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' and strong statements which emphasise the significance of the policy, e.g., 'getting it right is crucial to our future prosperity, and to the life chances of millions of people' (DfE/DBIS, 2016: 5) and the 'urgent commitment to economic growth and social justice' (DfE/DBIS, 2016: 11), I argue that these discourses in policy are competing and irreconcilable. As Harvey (2005) asserts, policy objectives are contested between class interests, and systemic changes within capitalism are primarily undertaken to mitigate or

counter threats to the hegemony of capitalists. Despite there being an argument that the production of skills moves society forward (Sianei and van Reenan, 2003; Gambin and Hogarth, 2016), it is constrained by existing forms of capitalist society and the way it is reproduced and, in unpacking the contemporary political skills discourse above, I have shown how, rather than being an instrument of social policy (which previous skills policy attempted, as discussed in chapter 2), its primary aim is economic prosperity. This alignment of UK policy discourse to global, human capital perspectives grounds the discourse in individualism and personal qualities, with poor performance explained because of the individual rather than the state and structural factors (Allais, 2022). This places the individual as requiring skills (or qualifications by proxy) to compete successfully in the labour market (Lynch, 2010), espousing meritocracy rather than education for the common good (Sandel, 2020). For example, 'skilled employment leads to prosperity and security for individuals, while unskilled employment often means the opposite' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). Despite skills policy claiming to seek equality, as Gewirtz (2001) argues, the meritocracy in a market-driven society will always create winners and losers and the notion of, 'us' and 'them' is inherent in the neoliberal discourse, with 'us' being the successful achievers, typically from the middle class, whilst 'them' generally referring to the working class. The 'us' are clearly those in 'skilled employment' with the others considered 'them,' demonstrating expulsion of certain groups. This expulsion is further exacerbated in the prioritisation of higher-level skills in the discourse which inherently creates an additional separation between higher and lower attaining youth.

Esmond and Atkins' (2022) theory that a division created between those subjects deemed of higher value, has resulted in a strand of the working class considered the 'technical elites'. As is evident in the policy discourse, this division is perpetuated by a focus on higher level technical skills at the detriment to lower level or intermediate skills which are not always accessible by those most disadvantaged (Atkins, 2013). This attention on higher level skills is justified in the skills plan by referring to the 'many more people …recognised as having the skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary for skilled employment in their chosen field' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 12). However, as discussed in chapter 3, there is inherent inequality with treating skills in this manner, as those that own

more will gain more at the expense of others and, despite what meritocracy espouses, it is likely that those from more privileged backgrounds will have greater ownership of 'skills' as a consequence of their educational journey (Avis, 1992; Atkins, 2013; Wheelahan et al, 2022). These individuals gain more compared to those from less privileged backgrounds (Wheelahan et al, 2022) and, as such, they arguably form part of a labour aristocracy (Ainley, 1993; Kerswell 2019), or what Esmond and Atkins (2022) theorise as a technical elite, with relatively more advantages and consequently they command greater pay and conditions when progressing to the labour market (Esmond and Atkins, 2022). This only serves to legitimise meritocratic ideology and the subsequent ladder of value, which contributes to the reproduction of class divisions (Morris, 2023). In this case, anyone unable to access level 3 qualifications, destined for service roles in the welfare state, whereby lower-level skills are required and, subsequently, these individuals are deemed of lower value to the economy, and are therefore marginalised (Atkins, 2009; 2013; Esmond and Atkins, 2022).

Contemporary UK skills policy, therefore, arguably acts as an instrument of domination, legitimising and stabilising capitalism through the promotion of neoliberal notions of meritocracy, that if you work hard enough you can progress in life (Ainley, 1993; Savage, 2000; Kerswell 2019). This can be seen in the Skills Plan where reference is made to those with SEND who are said to 'have the potential to achieve good results, [yet] a significant proportion are unlikely to be able to access the routes because of low prior attainment' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 31). This, I suggest, reaffirms Atkins (2013) suggestion that this form of skills discourse acts as a highly effective instrument of domination, blaming the individual for their circumstances and diverting 'attention and critical consideration from government responsibility for macroeconomic policy' (Atkins, 2013: 31), thus denying critique associated with inequality i.e., that those with intersecting minority backgrounds have more barriers to learning skills than those from more privileged backgrounds. Indeed, in spite of the recognition that previous 'low-level, low-value qualifications lead at best to low-skilled, low-paid employment' (DfE/DBIS, 2016: 17), the texts in this CDA are almost devoid of any mention of those with lower prior attainment who are unable to enter a level 3 programme of study, with only a very brief

reference to a ‘transition year’, demonstrating their value (or lack of). It is in this section of policy that we first see broader, immoderately inflated notions of skill in the discourse (Winch, 2010), which are those skills most often associated with weak vocational programmes of study (Atkins, 2009; 2013). Whilst these skills were prevalent in previous iterations of skills policy (as shown in chapter 2) due to their perceived utility in a perpetually-changing labour market (BIS, 2016; WEF, 2020), it is suggested that these qualifications had no value in this market other than to help the individual to ‘fit’ into the business (Esmond and Atkins, 2022), therefore, the change in the discourse in contemporary skills policy to focus on higher level skills, suggests that these general, transferable skills may actually yield lower returns on investment, thus are deprioritised.

Skills policy suggests that the transition year should be offered to help ‘to prepare for further study or employment’ (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). With the suggestion that this will be much like its precedent vocational qualifications, devoid of technical skills and a strongly classified body of occupational knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Atkins,2013; Esmond and Atkins, 2022), it may therefore do little to help progression to high-skilled employment. However, one might argue that they may support progression to further study, yet, as Atkins (2013) notes, were one to start at a level 1 programme of study, it would take a minimum of 4-years to progress to and complete a level 3 programme. As mentioned, many of the learners that find themselves in this position are often ‘characterised by multiple forms of expulsion’ and seldom are they in a position where the support is available to them to permit this length of study. Consequently, many become NEET or enter the labour market in low-paid and low-skilled work, thus limiting their own life opportunities and that of their children. It could be asserted then, that policy discourse serves to conceal the ways that sections of the working class are disadvantaged, whose ownership of capital in the form of ‘skill’ begins lower and their programmes of study consisting of weak, generic content (Bernstein, 2000) which prevent meaningful progression to the workplace (Atkins, 2009; 2013) contribute to what Avis (1992) and Bathmaker (2001: 9) refer to as ‘pre-ordained positioning’ in the labour market, whereby individuals are set on predetermined paths that they are locked into as a result of their circumstances.

As discussed, I have shown in this section how global capitalist organisations contribute to the field of production (Bernstein, 2000) when it comes to skills discourses, and it is evident that these discourses are underpinned by a human capital perspective of skill. These are recontextualised into UK skills policy and into qualification design (ORF) and despite suggestions of using TVET as an instrument for social policy, this is arguably a way of concealing and legitimising the dominant discourse of meritocracy and individualism and, for those that offer little value to economic growth and prosperity, they are arguably disregarded and locked into paths towards lower-skilled employment. This is compounded by the focus on employers' needs, which Esmond and Atkins (2022) suggest is a very narrow way to think of preparing young people for working life as it omits any notion of preparing them for adulthood and, by prescribing skills based on globalised, capitalist perspectives, it prises away 'any grip working people ever gained over their daily lives, including their own definition and control of skill formation' (Esmond and Atkins, 2022: 25).

5.2.4.3 Meeting employers' needs discourse - sustaining the social structures.

In this section, I hope to articulate how the social structure is sustained by a rhetoric of meeting employers' needs in the political skills discourse by deflecting attention and critique from the government and macro-economic policy. With current skills discourses, we see the apparent striving for economic prosperity and upskilling of individuals to meet employers' needs, however this, I argue, is merely propagating the values of the dominant class. The skills discourse is such that, on the surface, it may appear commonsensical but this, I suggest, has become a naturalised convention (Fairclough, 2010), and instead the discourse is being used to deflect attention from government ideology.

Of course, there is the obvious, superficial 'human capital' argument that these are the ones that offer jobs and, accordingly, there is a need to ensure that those entering the labour market are suitably equipped to complete the work satisfactorily, and so consensus on the required skill set is necessary. However, as mentioned, not all employers are aware of their skills needs, indeed, even if they were, a perceived need does not

necessarily mean that it is an actual need. For example, it is not clear if the skills needed are linked to undersupply (i.e. not many people having them) or underutilisation (i.e. not many people wanting to do those jobs). Literature suggests that many employers do not actually know what skills they need, for example, according to the Department for Education's Employer Skills Survey (DfE, 2020), only 5% of employers reported that they had skill-shortage vacancies (those that are hard to fill due to a lack of the required skills, qualifications or experience), with 13% of employers reporting skills gaps. It is likely that employers who report skill deficits are more likely to be part of a larger organisation (BIS, 2016: 20), with a higher proportion being multi-site organisations with more employees and, this is largely due to them having HR systems in place to conduct skills and training needs analysis. Those smaller and medium sized enterprises who, incidentally, collectively employ significantly more individuals than the larger organisations (Ainley, 1993) may not have the capacity to identify their skills needs and therefore, the reporting of skills gaps/needs may well be understated. Another issue with employer-led skills policy lies in the fact that different employers, even those in the same industry, have different needs and attempting to determine what employers need, particularly smaller and medium-sized organisations who are not homogeneous groups, becomes a challenge for the government. Moreover, the BIS (2016) research found no meaningful relationship between basic skill deficiencies and firm level productivity, suggesting that the 'skills need' is unnecessary rhetoric. This is what Fairclough (2010) would call a 'naturalised convention', whereby conventions or particular relationships become naturalised and commonsensical and so too are the ideological presuppositions. Consequently, these act as mechanisms for sustaining and reproducing the dominant discourse.

If we consider the dominant group in society - those that seek to maintain their position at the expense of marginalised groups - it is arguably the large employers who are part of this and thus want to maintain their dominant position. These larger organisations operate on a global level, thus are bound up with international as well as national skills agendas. Therefore, their identified needs and interests in skills shortages only serves to strengthen their position and marginalise the small and medium enterprises, where much

of the workforce are based. A recent report by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2022) found that:

> The DfE is staking its success on a more employer-led system but, from the evidence we have seen, it is unclear whether the conditions are in place for this to be implemented successfully, in particular whether employers are ready to engage to the extent that will be needed to achieve a step-change in performance. As a result, there is a risk that, despite government's greater activity and good intent, its approach may be no more successful than previous interventions in supporting workforce skills development.

Allais (2022) also problematises basing skills policy on employers' needs as employers often appear to have a short-term approach to skills and with them challenged to identify current needs, it is unlikely they will be able to identify future, longer-term needs. These are damaging findings for the government given their policy places employers front and centre of skills policy and, as Hodgson and Spours (2002) suggest, these policy texts arguably go beyond purely economic goals to broader social control and cohesion. As Fairclough (2005) argues, power relations are produced, exercised, and reproduced through discourse. In terms of the skills discourse, placing responsibility and accountability on the employers shifts accountability away from the government policy and onto the employer. In this case, the idea that employers 'need' certain skills actually veils the government's agenda of economic growth in alignment with global ideology. This is a particularly easy task when it is larger employers (those benefiting most from a capitalist society) who have the means to 'identify' skills gaps. Having employers buy-in to the notion of contributing to policy, knowing that these skills discourses are already shaped by globalised perspectives is a way of coercing employers into accepting the government ideology. This rhetoric of meeting employers' needs is, I argue, simply a capitalist conspiracy to a) divert attention from government, b) maintain strong links to global networks through keeping large multinational employers 'on-side', and c) to alienate those that offer little value to economic prosperity.

5.3 Chapter Summary

This Faircloughian CDA allowed me to carry out a comprehensive analysis of contemporary texts related to UK skills policy. I started out with the intention to answer RQ1, what is the educational and societal role of 'skills' discourses in UK governments' further education policies?

As I have articulated above, in response to RQ1, there is a strong argument that the role of the skills discourses in UK skills policy helps to support a division between those that can access higher level skills, a favoured and upper stratum of the working class, and those that cannot, typically from marginalised groups, often with a history of low achievement in school, alongside additional characteristics associated with social exclusion, such as learning difficulties and disabilities (Atkins, 2013). The competing policy goals outlined in policy texts used in CDA 1, are arguably irreconcilable as a focus on economic growth sustains inequality and this can be viewed through multiple optics, as discussed above. It is evident that government use a rhetoric of meeting employers' needs to deflect critical attention from them and macroeconomic policy through coercion and naturalised conventions (Fairclough, 2000). It is important to examine how this discourse transcends practice and below, I shall now turn my attention to responding to RQ2 and 3 and, in doing so, drawing on Bernstein (my theoretical framework), alongside various complementary conceptual lenses, I analyse how the skills discourse is recontextualised to trainee TVET teachers' discourse.

CHAPTER 6

CDA 2: Focus Groups

6.1 Introduction

This chapter centres on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of empirical work exploring the skill discourses of TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) and trainee TVET teachers. This plays a key role in the thesis, building upon the policy CDA in chapter 5 to examine the skills discourse at the micro level (practitioners' discourse).

The work begins with an overview of how a modified Faircloughian CDA approach was used to enable me to draw sufficient data to answer research questions 2 and 3. I then divide the chapter into key themes which are discussed through the three stages of text analysis: descriptive, interpretive and explanatory, and the corresponding levels of practice. I then conclude the chapter with an overview of key findings in relation to key findings that are amalgamated with CDA 1 in the discussion chapter 7.

6.2 A Modified Faircloughian CDA

Understanding and identifying the influences of skills policy on discourses of skill is complex, demanding an exploration of the wider social practice and the situational aspects (Fairclough, 1995). For Fairclough (1992: 66):

> The discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people's heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures.

In the case of this study, the real, material social structures originate in norms that exist either in the form of written codes such as skills policy, qualification documents, and occupational standards, or those that are directly observable such as the structure of an institution and its practices. For this reason, this analysis explores the social practices of both TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) and trainee TVET teachers to discern how ideology transcends discursive practices. It is suggested (Fairclough, 1992; 2010) that, at the social practice level, discourses serve the construction and reconstruction of ideology and if we consider this in relation to the notion of skill, one could argue that skill may become distorted as it is recontextualised (Bernstein, 2000). In using CDA, therefore, my intention is also to reveal and question the power at play in the relay of the skills discourse. As Fairclough (1995) notes, the world is not simply text, thus, in exploring this, the emphasis

will be on identifying the links between the social practice and the text and discursive practice operating within TVET TEd and trainee TVET teachers' discourses.

The texts were generated from semi-structured focus group interviews (as discussed in chapter 4), with three discussion topics. The first discussion topic sought to ascertain how TEds and trainee teachers identified skills that they understood were developed by their own teaching practices. Subjects were asked to tell me about the skills that they teach. The purpose of this question was to determine what subjects conceptualised as a skill, thus what underpinned their discourses. The second question sought to determine subjects' perspectives on what influences their conceptions of skill. Subjects were asked where they got their ideas of skill from and what influences their understanding of skill. The final question asked subjects how they teach their learners the skills they discussed. This question was asked to determine how discourses of skill are operationalised in practice. Operationalisation is the process whereby abstract concepts are turned into measurable observations (discourse practices) and, as Fairclough (2010) suggests, it is a dialectical process which has three aspects to it: enacting, inculcating and materialising (as discussed in the earlier chapter 4), allowing one to examine how discourses are reproduced.

Drawing on a modified version of Fairclough's (2010) 'dialectical-relational' CDA approach, which is transdisciplinary in nature (see chapter 4), meaning disciplines and theories can be brought together to see the dialogue between them, focus group transcripts were analysed. In doing this, I drew upon the conceptual framework (chapter 3) to examine how TEds and TVET trainees conceptualise skill, while considering how the dominant discourses are (re)produced and act as a relay for power and ideology (Bernstein, 1996; Fairclough, 2010; Lim, 2014).

As discussed in chapter 4, Fairclough's (1999; 2010) approach generally begins by asking if there is an obvious way of characterising the sample overall (in terms of genre). In terms of the sample of subjects, all met the eligibility criteria for their respective focus group interview, either to be a practising TVET TEd or to be completing an in-service FE ITE

qualification with a TVET subject specialism. These individuals were selected as they are likely to be the teachers most prone to being affected by the latest skills policy and, as they are being trained to teach in the TVET sector, their discursive practices should relate (and be recontextualised) from TVET policy (as per CDA 1, chapter 5). Fairclough (1999; 2010) also asks whether the sample draws upon more than one genre. Having perspectives from those that are teaching trainee teachers how to teach in the TVET sector, along with those that are training to teach exposes different genres. As Fairclough (2010) puts it, all subjects are 'grasping the world from [their] particular perspective', in this case, training to teach. As identified in the research of Loo (2018), most TEds in the TVET TEd sector come from subject backgrounds which are typically identified as 'academic' or general education domains. Whereas all trainees in the study are from traditional TVET backgrounds, recently coming to teaching from their previous careers in the respective industries. While there are likely to be similarities in their social practices within the field of contemporary education, their education backgrounds and experiences in employment arguably differ, providing different genres. Moreover, whilst all have a 'training to teach' lens, there are multiple subject specialisms in the sample, ranging from engineering to beauty to digital. It is worth noting that, at the time of interview, only three subjects were being offered as a T-Level and therefore, the discourses of skill from a subject discipline lens may differ between those that are teaching T-Levels and those that are teaching alternative TVET qualifications.

Thus far, I have outlined how I modified a Faircloughian CDA, and I now intend to analyse the findings at the descriptive, interpretive, and explanatory levels around key themes that have arisen from the data.

6.3 Theme 1: Disparate Discourses in TVET Practice

I start my analysis by illuminating the disparate discourses of skill that exist within the discursive practice of TVET practitioners, the potential reasons for this discourse and the subsequent impact. I start with an analysis of the TEds' discourse which I will argue has a weak relationship with contemporary skills policy and aligns more closely with the Higher Education graduate skills discourse and generic teaching practices, thus creating a gap between the skills discourse in policy and practice. In contrast to this, TVET trainee teachers' discourse is then discussed, which I shall argue resonates with the policy discourse, but goes beyond this to focus more on the occupational skills needed.

6.3.1 Teacher Educators (TEds): Higher Education Graduate Employability Skills and Generic Teaching Practices

As can be seen in Table 11, 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 this is at odds with the conceptualisations of skill in current skills policy (chapter 5), where the focus centres on higher-level technical skills and moderately inflated 'basic skills' such as English, maths and digital. Many of the concepts discussed by TVET 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. In addition, many other concepts are highlighted which are immoderately inflated (II3) and this includes things such as resilience and reflective skills.

Table 11. Coding of skill concepts from TEd focus groups.

Subject → Skill conceptualisation ↓	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Total
Technical or Practical Skill (T)	2					1					3
Moderate Inflation (MI)							2	1	1		4
Immoderate Inflation 1 (II1)	1	1	2	1	2	4	1	2	1	1	16
Immoderate Inflation 2 (II2)	1		1					4	1		7
Immoderate Inflation 3 (II3)	2	1		1		3	1	3	1	2	14

Significant in the initial responses to discussion topic 1 in TEd focus groups (TEDFG) 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 (Subject 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 (Subject 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 TVET Initial Teacher Education (ITE), which is ironic given that they are teaching trainee TVET teachers for whom 'skills' pervade the sector. When unpacking the skills that TEds teach their trainees, there was further ambiguity with the skills put forward. Subject F and E engaged in discussion about 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... (Subject 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? (Subject 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 [do not] 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, which usually serve to make a statement but, in this case, and given that the utterances included facial expressions (i.e., frowns, looking up

rather than at the camera), suggested confusion and a lack of confidence with the response. One could argue that these 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 question 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 subjects in the TEd 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. Subject 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. Subject 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 (Subject 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. Indeed, as the labour market has evolved, so too has the demand for 'oven-ready' graduates ready to join the workforce (Atkins, 1999). Assiter (1995) argues that 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 (Walker and Finney, 1999; 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). In doing so, they are but a pawn in

the relay of power. 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 that 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 (Subject F).

Here we see that approval of qualifications are contingent on certain skills from the dominant discourse being included and, whilst the broader dominant policy discourse of employability remains consistent between TVET policy (the ORF) and FE ITE curricula (the PRF) (Bernstein, 2000), there is a gap in the discourse in that contemporary TVET 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.

6.3.2 TVET Trainees: A Discourse of Skills Needed for Work

When we examine the discourse of trainee TVET teachers, there is a stark contrast. These individuals who, due to their professional/occupational backgrounds, are unlikely to have studied in a HEI prior to beginning their TEd programmes, are less likely to have a graduate skills discourse as part of their skills discourse. This is apparent from trainee teacher focus group (TTFG) data, where the HE graduate skills discourse which dominates TVET/FE ITE has not yet been inculcated into the trainee teachers' discourse (Fairclough, 2009), with their discourse instead being dominated by the occupational requirements. Table 12 illustrates how technical, paradigmatic (Winch, 2010) skills were more prominent in their discourses of skill, though they did have a much broader understanding of the skills that they teach.

Table 12. Coding of skill concepts from trainee teacher focus groups (TTFG)

Subject → Skill conceptualisation ↓	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	TOTAL
Technical or Practical Skill (T)	2	1	2	4	1	3	1	1	15
Moderate Inflation (MI)	1	2	1		1		2	1	8
Immoderate Inflation 1 (II1)	2		1						3
Immoderate Inflation 2 (II2)	1	1	2	2	3	1	1	2	13
Immoderate Inflation 3 (II3)			1		3	1	1	1	7

Trainee teachers provided confident and articulate responses to discussion topic 1, particularly when discussing the technical skills that are required for the technical occupation and the TVET qualifications that they teach: 'obviously, we've got practical skills' (Subject A). The use of the adverb 'obviously' in this response emphasises the point that practical/ technical skills are a well-understood component of vocational qualifications. Indeed, many of the trainees identified the importance of teaching practical/technical skills for their respective industries, again communicated with fluency and without disruption to the flow of their speech:

> For us, they have core skills which are defined in the standards for the apprenticeships. But within each of those core skills, there will be numerous specific skills that are written out as a sentence that a student must be able to do X, Y or Z, but those core skills are the sort of driving force behind the whole qualification…[for example]...must show competence in maintaining mechanical devices with the sub skills 'can remove and replace belts and chains' or 'can replace seals' and things like that so they can go into specifics (Subject D).

This coherent articulation of the core (technical) skills aligns with Winch's (2010) paradigmatic conceptualisation of skill and is arguably a consequence of their recent industry expertise where technical skills are at the fore. Subject G is equally fluent with their examples of 'core' (technical skill) requirements for the qualification but also alludes to the wider development of individuals:

> My qualification is 'Essential Digital Skills'. So, this ties in very closely with the government's digital framework, so skills are quite clearly defined in the design around 5 specific areas. So, for example, creating and editing skills are quite clearly defined, so, by the end of this course you should be able to copy and paste, you know, etc etc. Not only are they developing the core technical skills as per the qual, I also see them grow in terms of confidence and building relationships, becoming part of a team, and that is not a defined skill as per the qualification so... (Subject G).

While they fall short of defining ‘confidence’ and ‘building relationships’ as skills, there is an implicit suggestion that they view them as such, suggested by the ‘not a defined skill’ comment. The fluency in talking about technical/practical skills may, as mentioned previously, be due to them being easier to talk about compared to abstract notions as opposed to the broader, social skills that are less fluently discussed:

> You know… there's the skills that the students need to pass the course and… you know… the, the, the sort of concrete employability skills that they need. But we also teach the… you know… the soft skills, the, you know, the how to, you know, take responsibility for their work with their assignments and, you know, things like empathy, teamwork, you know, things like that… communication, the things that you don't see but, you know (Subject E).

As Subject E enters the conversation, they are notably disfluent and have difficulty forming complete sentences. This was corroborated by their facial expressions which appeared confused. Interestingly, the subject uses the term ‘concrete employability skills’ here which, when asked to explain, were clarified as the technical skills required as part of the qualification, with the banner of ‘soft skills’ used to describe all ‘skills’ that are beyond the technical. The use of ‘concrete’ to describe technical skills suggests that they see ‘soft skills’ as less substantial, which is further exemplified in the ‘things that you don’t see’ comment, yet they are quite clear that they teach these ‘skills’.

In respect of those broader ‘social skills’ and other skills that fall beyond the paradigmatic conception (Winch, 2010), whilst consensus was reached on the importance of teaching these, subjects were unable to speak as confidently or coherently about them as they did technical skills but did recognise that they were best developed/learnt in the workplace. For example, Subject D suggests that:

> So, one of the things I often say to people about confidence is like you can do this when you go into the workplace so you have confidence in the way that you do it because hopefully the combination will actually make him better at the practical aspects of it, as well as a soft skill if that makes any sense (Subject D).

Similarly, Subject C emphasised the importance of the workplace for developing communication skills:

> When they're sitting in a class learning about communicating with small children, actually being in the workplace with 20 of them all wanting your attention or all needing observations doing on them, you know, suddenly that's very different. So, without that workplace experience, you know, there would be a lot missing out of their education, I think (Subject C).

This is consistent with the literature where much of these II2 ‘skills’ and ‘behaviours’ are situated in practice (Wheelahan, 2010; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011; CAVTL, 2013) and, despite a general focus on higher level technical skills, contemporary skills policy does have a general lean towards learning in the workplace (Esmond and Wood, 2017), which supports this discourse. However, skills such as communication are what Gooptu (2023), Avis et al (2018) and Avis (2018) suggest are aimed at training people to adapt to the norms and values of the middle class under the guise of desirable work behaviours. This is problematic and suggests that sections of the working class have a deficit in their ‘softer skills’ which may serve to marginalise their norms and values (Avis, 2018).

Fairclough (1992), in his descriptive analysis, explains how both the situational and the intertextual context are central to the process of interpretation. In terms of the situational context, it is useful to ask questions about time and place (Janks 1997). While these aspects of skill may well have been discussed prior to 2021, the focus groups took place during a Covid-19 lockdown, where teaching was restricted to being online and work placements paused:

> Online it's been an absolute killer for education and totally free of practical skills. And so, it's teaching them the theory behind why you’re doing things, the history of why you do the things. You've got to literally teach them everything they need to know to make sure that they will be ready… (Subject C).

This comment reflects the distinction Ryle (1949) makes between knowledge that and knowledge how. The extreme adjective of ‘killer’ used by Subject C emphasises the impact that not being able to practise these ‘practical skills’ had on learning, thus, despite reference to the broader learning required to prepare for an occupation, it highlights the dominance of practical skills in the subject’s qualifications.

Unlike the TEds, trainee teachers had distinctly different influences on their conceptions of skill. A couple alluded to policy influences, but several subjects felt that their views on skill were shaped by the qualification specifications that they were teaching. For example, Subject C felt that their view of skills was informed by ‘what's on the specification, you know, that kind of thing.’ However, while acknowledging the qualification as a key influencer, most subjects opted to be more critical of the qualification requirements and, consequently, opt to develop skills beyond these. For example, Subject B alludes to the

qualification and industry identity and experience as being an influence on their perception of skills:

> I feel I've got dual professionalism. So, I've worked in industry prior before becoming a teacher. I'm quite late being a teacher from my own perspective that not everything that the students are being taught will support them going forward, so I support them with the other, unwritten, things too (Subject B).

As proposed by Neves and Morais (2001) when discussing Bernstein's recontextualisation principle, the official recontextualising field (ORF) is where the government operates at a generative level to legitimise official pedagogic discourse i.e., produce the official curriculum to be taught, and meeting employer needs is at the centre of this (chapter 6). Where policy is interpreted and implemented by teachers, there is further recontextualisation through the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) (Bernstein, 1996; Bertram, 2012) as teachers interpret and develop the curriculum through their pedagogic practices. As Wheelahan (2005: 3) suggests, where the selection of knowledge is strongly framed, it means that the teacher, curriculum and, in the case of the T-Level Trailblazer Groups, have 'selected the knowledge 'that matters' in the curriculum, and often the way in which it is paced, sequenced and evaluated'. Yet, despite employers being involved through trailblazer groups in the developing the standards for T-Levels and Apprenticeships, the trainees do not explicitly refer to policy or employer needs and there is evidently a difference in the knowledge framed by the curriculum to that of the teachers, with the 'know how' that extends beyond the qualification:

> You know, I could say quite a lot around the negative side of it. The stuff that isn't in the curriculum. I see myself as there not only for the learners to come out with the qualification at the end of the day, but also to be able to apply those skills in real life work (Subject G).

Trainees are moving beyond the curriculum to ensure that the students learn what is needed for the respective jobs, and this is based on their own experiences which shape their pedagogic practices. This is congruent with Loo's (2018) theorisation of occupational pedagogy, for example, both subjects below recognise the importance of 'work knowledge' in their respective practices:

> It's always been a big part of an engineer's career that they have specific skills, and they are skilled in whatever trade they do, and that's been sort of inherent in the language and the way people are taught and developed in their career (Subject F).

The language of 'inherent' here demonstrates what was evident in the first discussion topic, that technical skills are a well-understood and significant part of vocational learning

and subsequent qualifications. Here, they do not mention the needs of the employer, which dominates skills policy discourse but, instead, they offer a perspective of the worker within the occupation, ‘the engineer’s career’. Similarly, Subject E, shared an example of their previous experiences in the occupation being the influence on her perspectives of skill:

> My background in digital marketing in particular. So, for example, one of the things that is taught on the course is social media, but it's very, very like you know, these… the social media platforms and all you can message your friends on it. Whereas when I'm teaching that element of the qualification, I push it further than that so you know how you can actually use social media to develop your personal skills. For example, how you can use it to apply for jobs.

The use of ‘push it further’ arguably emphasises that the skills listed in the qualification lack the detail required to understand how the industry operates in practice and therefore, the subject’s own experience of the skills needed influences what and how they teach them. Unlike TEDs, the trainee teachers are experienced in their technical/vocational occupation and are in their early careers teaching in TVET subjects. This chimes with the idea of being a dual professionalism (industry knowledge and experience, alongside teaching practice) (Lucas, Spencer and Claxton, 2012; CAVTL, 2013; ETF, 2014; Esmond and Wood, 2017), and the importance of updating both aspects. Indeed, Subject A acknowledges that discourses of skill change as the occupation evolves and, therefore, curricula become dated and occupational pedagogy changes too, which further emphasises the importance of dual professionalism. For example, when Subject A was in industry and previously worked with apprentices, they were able to share these experiences of the industry which were not in the qualification: ‘Mink's nails were like the hologram nails that at the time were trendy. So not all the trends were being met in the qualification’ (Subject A).

6.3.3 Explanatory Analysis of Theme 1: Disparate Discourses

Discourses often reflect broader ideologies and ideological stances about certain social subject matters (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto and Shuart-Faris, 2004) and, using a critical perspective, these dominant discourses often reflect the ideologies of those who have the most power in society (Gee, 1996; Fairclough, 2010). Globalisation and contemporary capitalism (Fairclough, 2010) have led to a huge layer of networks between

National governments and international agencies and this, according to Fairclough (2010), has created a powerful network that is locked together with the general consensus being a human capital discourse of skills, whereby individuals are seen as ‘a marketable commodity’ with the illusion of being free individuals who can determine their own destiny through the accumulation and deployment of their human capital (Bowles and Gintis, 1975; Lim, 2014; DfE/DBEIS, 2016; Wheelahan et al, 2022). Wheelahan and Moodie (2021) suggest that HCT, which posits that productivity can be increased through skills training, has become more prescriptive and consequently, skills training has become more restricted to those programmes thought to have most economic benefit. The coming together of the dominant employability discourse in HE and official discourses in TVET, results in different skills discourses between TEds and trainee TVET teachers.

Several subjects in the TTFGs alluded to the fact that skills were needed for industry/employment, in alignment with policy, however, as suggested earlier, what is seen in the trainee TVET teachers’ discourses of skill is not so much the ‘meeting employers needs’ discourse but a discourse of experience, of knowing what the job entails. This occupational recontextualisation (i.e., translating the skills needed for the industry into skills their learners need to be able to do) (Loo, 2018) goes beyond those in the technical qualification specifications that are taught, highlighting a disconnect from policy and autonomy in the PRF (Bernstein, 2000). This coming together of the dominant (meeting employer needs) and official discourses (needs of the occupation) therefore results in a tension for trainee TVET teachers but arguably demonstrates their strong ‘professional habitus’ (Beck and Young, 2005), where a common moral and ethical code, and the development of a strong professional identity are determined by their previous socialisation into their subject (Bernstein, 2000). Here, the trainee TVET teachers have an ‘understanding of what their community is about’ (Wenger, 2000: 229) and, consequently, can socialise their learners into the occupation as though it is only through socialisation that one can truly understand the knowledge and skills within that occupation (Weber, 2013). Simultaneously, there is an argument that social closure is signalled (Weber, 2013) at either the stage of curriculum (ORF) production (Bernstein, 2000), where employers have contributed to the selection of knowledge that matters

(Wheelahan, 2005) which, according to Subject G has gaps, or at the PRF, where trainee TVET teachers argue they ‘support [learners] with the other, unwritten, things too’ (Subject B). This implies that the profession has constructed boundaries and identities to maintain their privileges, yet the data does suggest that this notion of social closure and teachers' efforts to induct selected students into their intended occupation are not incompatible.

Trainee TVET teachers’ skills discourse is also pervaded by notions of skill which are said to be conceptualised as those in Winch’s (2010) Immoderately Inflated 2 (II2) category, soft skills. These are referred to as ‘concrete employability skills’ by Subject E, who teaches their learners to ‘take responsibility for their work … [and learn] ... empathy, teamwork… communication, the things that you don't see but, you know’. This discourse locates skill as a ‘readily transferable capability’ that can ‘be operationalised in a variety of contexts’ (Avis, 1992: 363) and, as Gooptu (2018; 2023) suggests, these ‘skills’ assert global ‘normative’ behaviours, training people to adapt to the norms and values of those typically associated with the middle class, which suppresses the authentic self (Avis, 2018; Avis et al, 2018). Furthermore, Avis (1992) suggests that this perspective of skill ignores the social relations and denies forms of power associated with class, gender, and race. One might suggest that the trainee TVET teachers are aspiring for middle class values themselves, as they position themselves closer through being students of a HEI programme and through having a strong professional identity as one of the occupations that forms part of the ‘technical elite.’

In addition, further tension comes from the TEds’ discourse of skills, where there are two fields of production and subsequent Official Recontextualisation Fields (ORF) (Bernstein, 2000) to balance, one of the TVET Initial Teacher Education programme guidance (ETF, 2016), which centres on general teaching skills and the other the HE graduate employability skills discourse (Atkins, 1999; Harvey et al., 2002; Radice, 2013; OfS, 2018). Consequently, one might assert that we see a weakened PRF, with orientation towards a discourse of genericism.

Seldom are TVET TEds from technical or vocational backgrounds (Loo, 2018), moreover, to work on a HEI teacher training programme, there is an unwritten expectation that one has a credential at least one level above that which they are teaching. Therefore, many TEds are likely to have at least a level 7 qualification and, consequently, have experienced the dominant discourse in HE and, arguably, have rarely been exposed to the discourses or ORFs of technical/vocational employment. As Lim (2014) 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 into the trainees a discourse of generic, transferable skills associated with HE graduate skills and general teaching practices.

As mentioned previously, discourse conventions embody ideology and, as much as conventions become naturalised and commonsensical (Fairclough, 2010; Lim, 2014), 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 the earlier part of the century, whereby broader, generic, transferable skills were promoted through the ORF by the then New Labour government to enable young people to make progress and achieve and become 'confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society' (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 Further Education.

To conclude this discussion theme, it was evident in the data that TVET TEds and trainee teachers have different discourses of skills which have different ideologies. Trainees refer primarily to technical skills and 'Immoderate Inflated II' (social skills) such as

communication and collaboration with others, whereas TEds' discourse centres more on generic and transferable pedagogical skills and generic graduate skills (II1) (Winch, 2010). While trainees' discourse aligns more with contemporary skills policy (DfE/DBEIS, 2016), which we have already identified as problematic in chapter 5, these competing discourses serve to reproduce the current structures in TVET. Fairclough (2013) asks us if those that serve to benefit most from the social wrong 'need' this problem. While the data did not include TVET learners' discourses of skill, the competing discourses at the macro (ORF) and meso level (PRF) of TVET may subsequently impact the micro level, arguably lead to confused and ambiguous conceptions of skill which, despite good intentions of those teaching skills, creates disequilibrium in the discourse and may result in perpetual disadvantage for those that are most likely to access a skills-based programme, often the most marginalised in society (Lenon, 2018; Orr, 2020; Esmond and Atkins, 2022).

6.4 Theme 2: Disparate Operationalisation of the Discourse

In this section, I will demonstrate how, in addition to disparate discourses, there is also a contrary approach to the operationalisation of the discourse. Fairclough (2009: 4) informs us that discourses can be operationalised, or 'put into practice via 'a dialectical process with three aspects'. Enactment and inculcation centre on the way in which new genres of interaction exist between individuals or inculcated in new identities of these individuals, and materialisation, which is the creation of new materials e.g., curricula. In this section, I attempt to show how the TEds' and trainees' operationalisation of discourse differs and will draw upon Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic practice to show how the conflicting approaches may serve to exclude.

6.4.1 The Operationalisation of Generic ITE Curricula

According to Koster, Brekelmans, Korthagen and Wubbels (2005: 157) a TEd 'provides instruction or gives guidance and support to student teachers, and who thus renders a substantial contribution to the development of students into competent teachers.' This is developed further by Loughran and Berry (2005) who suggest that the instructional role of a teacher educator is composed of two distinct, complex aspects. Not only do they

teach their students about teaching through the curriculum, but they also model effective teaching practices. In respect to Bernstein's (1996) recontextualising principle, we can see multiple levels of activity in the way in which the teacher educator might interpret and enact their practice or, indeed, deploy their ideas of skill. However, the regulative function of TEds' operationalisation of skills was 'hidden' behind a rhetoric of 'modelling' teaching practice whereby the TEds appear to be using a social learning theory lens (Bandura,1977; Powell, 2016) to propose that the trainee teachers were the main agents in the learning and developed their own practice through copying their TEd: 'I model quite a lot to break down some of the skills and we discuss the impact on learning' (Subject D); 'I think modelling things is is the best way of developing skills' (Subject 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 (Sadovnik, 1991; Bernstein, 2000).

In response to discussion topic 2, none of the trainee TVET teachers cited their initial teacher training as influencing their perceptions of skill, perhaps highlighting the weak classification, and operationalisation, of the TEd curriculum. 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 they learn and then they transfer it. Same communication skills, same with presentation skills (Subject H).

This notion is supported by Barrie et al (2009) and Harpe et al (2009) who found that academics are not comfortable teaching skills beyond their discipline. The exclusion of the subject specialism and an ambiguous, generic focus in the operationalisation of skills discourse in teacher training aligns with the idea of 'trainability', as opposed to specialisation (Bernstein, 2000; Wheelahan et al, 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 (Bernstein, 2000). 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 'academic' (school-based) subject teachers, do not undertake subject-specific ITE qualifications.

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 each of the TVET teachers (Shulman, 1987; Loo, 2020). Bernstein (2000) suggests that generic modes are empty in two forms: firstly, they are conceptually empty, that is, without content; and secondly, socially empty in that the generic skills are decontextualised, which cuts the holder off from communities of practice. 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:

> 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 (Subject C).

This lack of concern for the notion of skill is alarming given the sector that they are training the teachers in (TVET). What is more, trainee teachers also highlighted the fact that skill was seldom, if at all, discussed in class. Subject F, for instance, stated that they 'don't feel like [they have] had a clear definition of skill', with Subject D sharing that they 'don't think we've defined [skill] as such, but feel like every lesson is kind of underpinned by skills'.

While it may seem a logical (and often the only viable) process to bring together multiple subject backgrounds, 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. This is evident where further detail is given on the operationalisation of the skills discourse which all TEds suggest are enacted through modelling, yet there is a vagueness - an emptiness - in the suggestions, whereby inculcation is proposed to simply involve the trainee copying the TEds' approach with their own students in spite of very different contexts, for example, Subject 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'. The use of the verb 'model' indicates a lean towards social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), yet the responses are devoid of the contextualised practice element. It is clear that the generic Professional Standards (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, there is difficulty for TEds in articulating the point they wish to make, where 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).

It is understandable given the diversity of subjects that trainee TVET teachers bring to ITE, though, for Bernstein (2000), generic 'skills-talk', which he coins 'generic modes', denotes a weakening of classification of knowledge boundaries and, where there is a weak classification of knowledge, it becomes an integrated code, with less ritualisation and increased uncertainty (Bernstein 1977; 2000), which is susceptible to being inculcated by the dominant discourse (Wheelahan, 2007). This has marked implications for the way in which teachers and learners construct their identities (Bernstein, 2000) which was evidenced by TEds' confusion around the term and lack of coherence and consistency in the skills they teach. The data also suggests that the curriculum is socially empty, in that there was little reference to the practice element of the training when talking about the teaching of skills. Instead, 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 into the lessons. Does that make sense? (Subject A).

What is interesting in this statement is the use of questions, as if the subject is seeking approval or consensus from their peers, though they may well be meant, or interpreted, as rhetorical. One might argue that this demonstrates a division between the theory and the practice, with ITE qualifications being taught in a very academic, scholastic manner, as evidenced by a focus on teaching 'academic skills', with several subjects sharing how they emphasise broader, generic skills (graduate/academic) skills (immoderately inflated I):

> academic skills that 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 (Subject 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 (Subject F).

Bernstein's (1975; 1996; 2000) theory provides us with the opportunity to see how the TEds' focus on generic, transferable skills could disconnect occupational knowledge from the vertical discourse in which it is classified and relocate 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 discussed in chapter 3.3.6, 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 graduate skills discourse and weakly classified ORF, though an alternative argument could be made that TEds feel obliged to operationalise the graduate skills discourse to emphasise the legitimacy of the ITE curricula and their own position. It is interesting that the trainees' conceptualisation of skills and the forthcoming discussion on their operationalisation of skills, while inculcated into a generic skills discourse, has yet to be materialised, arguably due to the vague and ambiguous ways of operationalising these skills, or perhaps owing to the fact they are relatively new to teaching and lack exposure to the dominant discourse.

6.4.2 Trainee TVET Teachers' Operationalisation of Skills

When knowledge is selected (delocated) from the field in which it is produced and implemented (i.e. TVET specialism) and then relocated by trailblazer groups and the like into an official curriculum, it goes through a selection process where there are assumptions about what is important for learners to know (Bernstein, 2000; Wheelahan, 2005). The way knowledge is framed gives rise to an instructional discourse, which is embedded within the dominant discourse. However, we know from discussion theme 1 that the framing of knowledge is weak due to a difference in how trainees recontextualise further by going beyond the knowledge in the official curriculum (Wheelahan, 2005). Yet, despite this weaker classification and framing (Bernstein, 2000; Guile, 2011), trainees adopt more traditional, visible pedagogical practices compared to TEds (Sadovnik, 1991): 'I will teach them through demonstrating the skill, then they'll put it into practice doing it' (Subject H). While this knowledge goes beyond that materialised in the qualification requirements, this knowledge is founded on formal technical knowledge and practical workplace experience (Gamble, 2013). In terms of enacting in the operationalisation of the skills discourse, subject E uses an interesting verb of 'impart', as though it is communicated with wisdom, which chimes with the idea that trainees' skill discourse is shaped by their industry experiences:

> I try to impart on my apprentice… that you know, you don't just learn a skill, and then it's done. It's developed continuously over time. But almost counter to that, the qualification defines very specific skills and criteria that need to achieve that (Subject E).

The teaching of technical ‘hard’ skills by trainee teachers was articulated with coherence and confidence and unlike the TEds, trainees articulated a wider range of verbs when explaining how they taught the skills: ‘teaching’ ‘demonstrate’ ‘practise’ were frequently used by the trainees. For Esmond and Wood (2017), those vocational areas which are closest to workplace practice proceed the least through theoretical abstraction and the most through the direct demonstration and practice of workplace skills and we can clearly see this in the way that the trainees discuss their social practices. Much like their articulation of skill conceptualisation, trainee teachers were able to confidently and precisely explain how they teach technical/practical skills to their students:

> they'll learn about [the skill] in theory, for example, I will teach them through demonstrating the skill, then they'll put it into practice doing it. You know, vocal skills, for example, we might talk about the diaphragm, and then they actually do it. And then that's kind of like building blocks of how they gain the skills (Subject H)

In addition to the range of verbs used, there are fewer abstract nouns and more material objects which may reflect the way in which these notions of skill are more clearly defined. However, when it comes to the other skills, there was a vagueness and lack of coherence in the response to how they teach these skills. The use of ‘in the background’ from subject G (below) is quite an interesting choice of phrase which emphasises the implicit nature of these broader, social skills (II2):

> Yeah no, I very much agree with what's been said that there's sort of explicit teaching in the, the hard skills. So, in the background you are teaching the soft skills and behaviours 'cause for me and I think... It would be a combination of everything they learn in theory and practice. But then what they go off and think about on their own and and how I've talked to them about specific skills and, and how they can support those hard skills through their other soft skills… [and]...the combination will actually make him better at the practical aspects of it, as well as a soft skill, if that makes any sense? (Subject G).

Interestingly, when thinking about the situational context of the TTFG1 (Fairclough, 1992; Janks, 1997), it came at an unprecedented time, during a national lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, much of the teaching was online and this had a particular impact on TVET subjects owing to their practical nature. Not only this, but workplace learning was also inhibited and thus this may have impacted the skills discourse of practitioners. With it being a lockdown due to Covid-19, several of the subjects in TTFG1 were keen to expand their answers to how they teach in an online

environment, particularly emphasising the difficulty with teaching practical skills to their learners without a workplace or appropriate environment to practise the skills:

> So, we *have* to teach them the practical sides of it… They've had to do therapies and they've had to adapt. They're learning to be able to do online learning and to do it in isolation. For example, we had a girl the other day, again, harping on about Indian head massage and she's got no one else in her bubble. So, she was like, oh, I really feel like I've got no way of being able to practise the movements and I suggested to get a pillow and do the movements, get to know the routine. And she's adapted and now she feels confident because she can do the routine… [but]... without that workplace experience, you know, there would be a lot missing out on their education (Subject B).

Here, the trainee teacher has demonstrated a creative way to teach the practical skill without an individual to practise this on (head massage) yet, in the same point, they suggest that the lack of workplace may result in missed learning. Much like the suggestion from subject G, though again, this is not articulated particularly well. This was emphasised a little more clearly by subject C:

> People use YouTube to work and support them[selves] in isolation. But unless you can practise with another person or have that conversation and be critical about the work that you want to take, you don't get that feedback or another person's perspective to develop that skill even further (Subject C).

This suggests that there is another dimension to learning skills that is added by learning in a workplace environment, that is not explicitly taught. As explored in the literature, a key facet of TVET pedagogy is its integration with the workplace, which offers a different and more complex dynamic compared to other education sectors (CAVTL, 2013; Smith and Yasukawa, 2017; Wheelahan, 2010; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011). Drawing on Winch's (2010) work, the social elements of skill require individual agency and explicitly teaching these independent of context removes agency and thus are better learnt experientially within a context. This is recognised by Subject A:

> You need those social skills and social skills of just that. You need to know how to work on your own and do your own work. You need to work out, know how to work with others in a group. You need to know when to be loud, when to be listening, you know, and and all all of that (Subject A).

Therefore, it seems that the way in which discourses of skill are operationalised by trainee teachers are via two streams. Firstly, the technical /practical skills required for the programme (and often beyond) are taught explicitly through demonstrations, modelling and learned through practice with regular feedback. There are also a set of broader, less clear 'workplace skills' which one could argue typically fall under Winch's (2010) immoderately inflated 2 category of social skills (i.e., communicating and collaborating

with others) which trainees suggest are best learnt in the workplace, situated among a community. If we take Polanyi's (1958) suggestion that skills are part of a culture, without the workplace, the education and training is left in a social vacuum and skills transfer through cultural forms atrophy (Ainley, 1993: 47). This understanding of cultural forms can be seen in the trainee TVET teachers' practices where they appreciate that the workplace is where skills are part of a social collective, not just a property of the individual. This notion of skill also chimes with vocational pedagogy research which arguably rests on a stronger body of knowledge than FE TEd pedagogy, whereby teachers base their pedagogy on their understanding of the sources, types and applications of teaching and occupational know-how (Loo, 2018).

6.4.3 Explanatory Analysis of Theme 2

Given that the discourses between TEds and trainees differ, one might argue that it is to be expected that the operationalisation of the discourse differs entirely too, which is ironic given that TEds are teaching trainees how to teach. TEds operationalisation centres more on the academic, scholastic, and theoretical through invisible pedagogic practices, whereas trainees have more visible, practice based pedagogic practices (Bernstein, 1996; 2000).

Despite Bernstein's (1996; 2000) theoretical work predominantly centred on the school environment and the teaching of school children, the fundamental theoretical principles are applicable to all forms of pedagogy given they focus on the production and reproduction of power. For example, the invisible pedagogical practice of TEds is said to have a weak framing, and where there is weak framing in the instructional discourse (the content), there is weak framing in the regulative discourse (the values and identity) (Bernstein, 2000).

Fairclough (1992), in his descriptive analysis, explains how both the situational and the intertextual context are central to the process of interpretation. In terms of the situational context, it is useful to ask questions about time and place (Janks 1997). For example, could this text have been produced earlier than 2021? To answer this, it could be argued

that the discourse of the TEds will likely have been the same since the inception of generic teacher training programmes in FE and, when we consider chapter 3.1, arguably, much of the discourse of generic transferable skills stems from New Labour policy of the late 90s and early 00s (DfES, 2003; Tomlinson, 2004; QCA, 2008). Indeed, it was during the New Labour era that generic criteria/standards were produced for FE ITE to ensure that teachers/trainers were more than just subject experts (FENTO, 1999), emphasising the importance of generic teaching skills (Bathmaker, 2000) and consequently, a turn towards genericism became part of the official structuring of the curriculum (Bernstein, 2000). Aside from a short period of regulation, little has changed in FE ITE since the early-00s, whereas contemporary skills discourse in policy has arguably seen a shift to prioritising higher level technical skills (DfE/DBEIS, 2016; IPTE, 2016).

Bernstein (2000) explains that theories of cultural reproduction are essentially theories of communication. He elaborates on this, suggesting that the talk, values, and rituals in education establishments are always biased in favour of a dominant group and that codes of communication are distorted in favour of this group. Arguably, the dominant discourse being operationalised in TEd stems from the HE employability discourse, where graduate skills, or attributes (Wheelahan, 2007) dominate. Bernstein (2000) also asserts that, in addition to the distortion of communication to favour the dominant discourse, there is another distortion, and this relates to the culture, the practice, and consciousness of the dominated group, which are misrepresented. Here, I suggest that the practices of the TVET trainee teachers, for whom the ITE qualification is designed to support, are recontextualised as having less value. Despite pedagogy being best rooted in subject content (Shulman, 1976; Coe et al, 2014), seldom do TVET TEds discuss subject specific skills with their trainees. Without sufficient commitment to this, it exacerbates the reification of generic teaching practices at the expense of rich knowledge and understanding (Hyland, 2006). The nature of FE ITE qualifications does little to help this with the presupposition that all teachers ought to develop academic or graduate skills. This presupposition performs an essential ideological function because these skills are, by definition, implicit and, as shown in the data, are difficult to identify and therefore, reject (Lim, 2014). Presuppositions work to manipulate individuals to accept things by making

things appear common sense and perhaps this is why there is an 'unthinking acceptance' of these generic skills in the TEds' skills discourse, leading to the reproduction of institutional order and legitimisation of its values.

For trainee teachers, the shift in contemporary skills discourse to prioritising higher level technical skills (DfE/DBEIS, 2016; IPTE, 2016) has arguably changed the way in which knowledge is classified, orienting towards markets not fields of practice which, according to Wheelahan (2005: 3) 'severs the link between the regions and disciplines and changes the relationship between knower and knowledge'. Perhaps then, the framing is not weak from the perspective of the field of practice but is from the perspective of the ORF, which is dominated by employer needs and, therefore, this may explain why operationalisation of the discourse is via more visible pedagogic practices associated with the learning of the craft. Beck and Young (2005: 188) describe this identity with the profession with clearly defined knowledge base, clear codes of conduct, and socialisation within the profession as 'the creation of a professional habitus'. Whilst a curriculum should underpin a professional habitus (Bernstein, 2000), professionals also develop a professional code alongside this and therefore, learning a TVET programme such as an apprenticeship, 'is not just about learning overt knowledge and skill, but involves moving toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community' (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005: 50). This, I feel, is present in the trainee teachers' operationalisation of the discourse, but arguably not in the TVET TEds, as they suffer from weak classification and framing of the discourse and, subsequently, a lack of professional habitus (Bernstein, 2000; Beck and Young, 2005)

6.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how an adapted Faircloughian CDA has been used to analyse the skills discourse across three levels: the text, the social practices and society. This has allowed me to address some of the research questions I set out to answer, namely:

- **RQ2 -** What role do the practices of Teacher Educators play in recontextualising the policy discourse?

- **RQ3 -** How do the practices of trainee TVET teachers draw on 'skills' discourses, educational understandings and on their occupational expertise?

CDA 2 revealed competing and disparate discourses between the TVET practitioners which are reproduced and operationalised differently. Trainee TVET teachers' understanding of the technical and broader skill discourses required in their occupations goes beyond the ORF (Bernstein, 2000) and are operationalised via traditional pedagogic practices. TEds' discourse, on the other hand, has a double dimension to genericism in the discourse. Firstly, the skills discourse is inherently bound up in higher education 'graduate skills' associated with 'graduate employability', or what Winch (2010) would call immoderately inflated conceptualisations of skill. This was far removed from the discourse of trainee TVET teachers, which was fascinating given they are teaching them a teaching qualification for the sector. This complements a weak discursive frame for skills in FE ITE whereby generic teaching practices were foregrounded, divorced from a core disciplinary or occupational focus and operationalised as invisible pedagogic practices. In chapter 7, I draw on the data from this CDA and consider the findings in relation to CDA 1, using my conceptual and theoretical framework to theorise how the findings contribute to the social wrong, before suggesting ways past the problem.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter plays a significant role in the thesis by drawing together the two critical discourse analyses (chapter 5 and 6) to problematise the skills discourse in TVET policy and its role in marginalising fractions of the working classes in education and employment (Atkins, 2013; Avis, 2018; Esmond and Atkins, 2020; 2022). In doing this analysis, I follow an adapted Faircloughian CDA (Fairclough, 2000), drawing on Bernstein's (2000) recontextualisation principles and build on prior discussions of the significance of social class in TVET (see chapter 3) (Ainley, 1993; Atkins, 2009, 2013; Avis, 2018; Avis et al, 2018; Esmond and Atkins, 2022; Wheelahan et al, 2022), where notions of skill are adapted to reflect the interests of different social actors.

I started out this journey with a clear issue in mind around the way people talk about skills in Further Education and, through exploring the perceived problem using a conceptual lens informed by aspects of Marxism, I drew upon an adapted Faircloughian (2000; 2010; 2013) CDA methodology, rooted in Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1998; 2008) to analyse skills discourses in TVET policy and practice. A contemporary Faircloughian (2010; 2013) CDA begins with two clear stages that warrant initial analysis, the first to focus upon a social wrong (the effect of a causal mechanism) and, in outlining the rationale for the thesis (chapter 1), I identified that there is a 'social wrong' in the way in which the skills discourse invariably affects those that are unlikely to follow a traditional academic route of study. Therefore, my starting (weak) assumption was that the skills discourses in both TVET policy and practice contributes to the reproduction of power relations and class divisions. This led me to the following research questions:

RQ1 - What is the educational and societal role of 'skills' discourses in UK governments' further education policies?
RQ2 - What role do the practices of Teacher Educators play in recontextualising the policy discourse?
RQ3 - How do the practices of trainee TVET teachers draw on 'skills' discourses, educational understandings and on their occupational expertise?

7.2 Structure of the Discussion

I begin my discussion in section 7.3, where I outline the contribution being made to knowledge in the field, before I illustrate how I came to this point using the principles of stage 2 and 3 of a Faircloughian (2010; 2013) CDA in section 7.4. By drawing on the findings from the CDA 1 of Policy (chapter 5) and CDA 2 of TVET Practitioner Focus Groups (chapter 6) and, using my theoretical framework and literature (chapter 3), I identify what I perceive to be significant obstacles which contribute to the social wrong and unpack these to theorise why they are 'needed' by the social order. These centre on competing and disparate discourses in policy and practice which reflect different forms of discourse that come together to maintain educational and societal inequalities. In section 7.5, I follow Stage 4 of Fairclough's (2010; 2013) CDA, providing some suggestions for overcoming the obstacles presented. These include problematising the sustainability of the skills discourse in policy and proposing that higher education providers that offer FE ITE should work more collaboratively with the TVET sector to explore how more strongly classified knowledge can better inform TVET teaching. Section 7.6 identifies some limitations of the work and 7.7 suggests ways to progress with future research in the field which can build on the foundation of this thesis. I end the discussion chapter in section 7.8 with closing remarks for the thesis.

7.3 Contribution of the Thesis

The contribution of this thesis lies in its identification of the gap between the skills discourse in UK TVET policy - which emphasises a human capital perspective of skill, focussed increasingly on higher-level technical skills - and the discursive practice of TVET teacher educators and trainee teachers. In this context, trainee TVET teachers' discourse presented a deep understanding of the technical and broader skills required in their occupations and coupled with their strong occupational identities, their discourse accommodates the policy and its employer-led occupational standards, enabling them to operate as gatekeepers to their profession and maintain their privileged position.

Simultaneously, the discourse of TVET Teacher Educators (TEds) is bound up with generic higher education notions of 'graduate skills' and 'graduate employability'. This

complements a narrow and weak discursive frame linked to atomised professional standards in the ITE curriculum, whereby generic teaching practices are centred to the exclusion of theoretical and subject specialist knowledge. Consequently, this requires teachers to be ready for 'perpetual trainability', reflecting different forms of discourse that come together to maintain educational and societal inequalities. This work has implications for policy makers and those involved in curriculum development in education and training, with the current political skills discourse proving unsustainable and incoherent in the context of teacher education for this sector. In the following section (7.4), I intend to justify these claims to knowledge through a systematic discussion in alignment with stage 2 and 3 of a Faircloughian CDA.

7.4 CDA Stage 2 and 3 - Competing Discourses of Skill in TVET Policy and Practice: an obstacle to the social wrong

This section attempts to combine and unpack the skills discourse from CDA 1 (chapter 5) and CDA 2 (chapter 6) using the conceptual and theoretical framework (chapter 3) to answer the research questions for the thesis and theorise how skills discourses in both English TVET policy and practice may present an obstacle(s) to addressing the reproduction of power relations and class divisions within TVET (the identified social wrong).

In structuring this section, I directly respond to the research questions, whereby I use the conceptual framework and literature (chapter 3) to analyse CDA 1 (chapter 5) to theorise the educational role of skills discourses in UK government skill policies (RQ1), before using Bernstein's (2000) theoretical lens to examine how the discourse is recontextualised from policy to practice. I begin with an analysis of trainee TVET teachers (RQ3) whose discourse is seemingly more coherently delocated and relocated from policy to practice before I analyse the discourse of Teacher Educators (TEds) (RQ2) and the implications. Therein, I build an argument whereby I suggest that, from the data garnered from CDA 1 and CDA 2, there are a series of competing and disparate discourses of skill in both policy and practice which the dominant class have a vested interest in being unresolved.

7.4.1 Discourses of Skill in TVET Policy

It is suggested in CDA 1 that the discourse in UK skills policy (DfE/DBIS, 2016) attempts to address a perceived problem in society - a confused and disparate technical education system which is not linked well enough to the labour market. Despite quite inclusive language in the texts, with frequent use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ and strong statements which emphasise the significance of the policy, e.g., ‘getting it right is crucial to our future prosperity, and to the life chances of millions of people’ (DfE/DBIS, 2016: 5) and the ‘urgent commitment to economic growth and social justice’ (DfE/DBIS, 2016: 11), in unpacking the political skills discourse in CDA 1 (chapter 5), it is clear that there are competing policy objectives (social and economic) which, I suggest, is a way of diverting attention from macroeconomic ideology. In fact, skills policy discourse primarily frames TVET as an instrument of skill formation for economic competition. The use of inclusive language is, I argue, actually deceptive, acting as a cloak for implicit, exclusive principles that may not be obvious to the reader and, despite there being an argument that the production of skills moves society forward, it is constrained by existing forms of capitalist society and the way it is reproduced, which arguably sows the seeds for further division and segregation between the dominant and dominated class.

The data in CDA 1 highlights the dominance of paradigmatic (practical and technical skills) notions of skill (Winch, 2010) in the skills policy discourse. Here, higher level technical skills are valued more because they are seen as necessary for the functioning of the economy and to yield greater returns on investment (Becker, 1975; Allais, 2007; Carneiro et al, 2010). However, in prioritising economic growth through return to investment, there is a ladder created, as Morris (2023) argues, where there is little care for those that offer little return on investment and, critically, this sustains inequality. For example, in spite of the recognition that previous ‘low-level, low-value qualifications lead at best to low-skilled, low-paid employment’ (DfE/DBIS, 2016: 17), the texts in CDA 1 are almost devoid of any mention of those at the lower rungs of the ladder who are unable to enter a level 3 programme of study, with only a very brief reference to a ‘transition year’. Indeed, broader, inflated notions of skill (Winch, 2010), which often pervade weak vocational programmes of study (Atkins, 2009; 2013) are seldom found in the

contemporary skills policy discourse despite their prevalence in previous iterations of skills policy (as shown in chapter 2) and perceived utility in an ever-changing labour market (WEF, 2020), which suggests that these skills yield lower returns on investment.

It could be asserted then, that policy discourse serves to conceal the ways that sections of the working class are disadvantaged, whose ownership of capital in the form of 'skill' begins lower and their programmes of study consisting of weak, generic content (Bernstein, 2000) which prevent meaningful progression to the workplace (Atkins, 2009; 2013). This results in what Avis (1992) and Bathmaker (2001: 9) referred to as 'pre-ordained positioning' in the labour market, whereby individuals are set on predetermined paths that they are locked into as a result of their circumstances. In this case, anyone unable to access level 3 qualifications, destined for service roles in the welfare state, whereby lower-level skills are required and, subsequently, these individuals are deemed of lower value to the economy, and are therefore marginalised (Atkins, 2009; 2013; Esmond and Atkins, 2022). Contemporary UK skills policy, therefore, arguably acts as an instrument of domination, legitimising and stabilising capitalism through the promotion of neoliberal notions of meritocracy, that if you work hard enough you can progress in life (Ainley, 1993; Savage, 2000; Kerswell 2019), thus blaming the individual for their circumstances (Atkins, 2013).

On the other side of the coin, CDA 1 highlighted the significant policy attention given to higher-level technical skills and the way in which this provides favourable circumstances for those able to access those study programmes. In addition to a more clearly defined, well-insulated, bodies of technical knowledge (Bernstein, 2000) (where discourses of skill are more clearly understood by way of occupational standards), where these individuals gain more compared to those from less privileged backgrounds (Wheelahan et al, 2022), they form part of a labour aristocracy (Ainley, 1993; Kerswell 2019), or what Esmond and Atkins (2022) theorise as a technical elite, with relatively more advantages and consequently command greater pay and conditions when progressing to the labour market (Esmond and Atkins, 2022). This only serves to legitimise meritocratic ideology

and the subsequent ladder of value, which Morris (2023) refers to, which contributes to the reproduction of class divisions.

It is ironic, that despite it being a policy goal for over thirty years (see chapter 2), there are still skills shortages, particularly given that we have the most educated workforce in history (Wheelahan et al, 2022). However, Allais (2022) argues that a perceived gap does not mean there is one, and BIS (2016) found no meaningful relationship between basic skill deficiencies and firm level productivity in their research, suggesting that the 'skills need' is actually unnecessary rhetoric which has become a naturalised convention (Fairclough, 2010). As Fairclough (2005) argues, power relations are produced, exercised, and reproduced through discourse and, by placing responsibility and accountability on employers to develop 'employer-designed standards [that] must be put at its heart to ensure it works in the marketplace' (DfE/DBEIS, 2016: 46), I argued in CDA 1 that this helps to coercively persuade employers to 'buy-in' and accept government ideology (Gartman, 1983; Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997; Holland and Aaronson, 2014), mitigating against threats to the hegemony of capitalists. Therefore, the 'skills need/shortage' rhetoric arguably cloaks the ideology of economic competition and the inherent inequality discussed above, helping to divert 'attention and critical consideration from government responsibility for macroeconomic policy' (Atkins, 2013: 31).

As I have articulated above, in response to RQ1, there is a strong argument that the role of the skills discourses in UK skills policy helps to support a division between those that can access higher level skills, a favoured and upper stratum of the working class, and those that cannot, typically 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 (Atkins, 2013). The competing policy goals outlined in policy texts used in CDA 1, are arguably irreconcilable as a focus on economic growth sustains inequality and this can be viewed through multiple optics, as discussed above. It is important to examine how this discourse transcends practice and below, I shall now turn my attention to RQ3 and, in doing so, drawing on Bernstein (my theoretical framework), alongside various complementary conceptual lenses, I

analyse how the skills discourse is recontextualised from policy to trainee TVET teachers' discursive practice.

7.4.2 Skills Discourses: from Policy to Practice (Trainee TVET teachers)

At the official recontextualising field (ORF), where the government operates at a generative level to legitimise official pedagogic discourse i.e., produce the official curriculum to be taught (Bernstein, 2000; Neves and Morais, 2001), 15 pathways are proposed (DfE/DBEIS, 2016). The fact that the trainee TVET teachers in this study are teaching subjects associated with these specialisms, one could expect to see a relationship between government ideology and the skills discourses of the trainees. It is evident from CDA 1 (chapter 5) and CDA 2 (chapter 6) that the dominant discourse has been recontextualised from policy - the official recontextualisation field (ORF) (Bernstein, 2000) - to occupational standards which are built into qualification design and then interpreted by the teachers through the pedagogic recontextualisation field (PRF), with a considerable focus on paradigmatic notions of skill (Winch, 2010), as revealed in CDA 2 (chapter 6). Here, practical/ technical skills are a well-understood component of TVET qualifications by trainee TVET teachers: 'core skills are defined in the standards for the apprenticeships…within each of those core skills, there will be numerous specific skills … that a student must be able to do' (Subject D). As Williams (2005: 45) explains, the discourse around these skills is a 'normalising exercise, in which the desired attributes of 'learner-workers' are defined according to the dominant values, beliefs and expectations of the dominant culture'. The dominant culture in this case is the collusion of large, multinational employers' interests and government ideology and their TVET policy, whereby individuals are being prepared for work. Whilst the data suggests that the knowledge in the ORF is strongly classified and framed by the state and its selected agents (e.g., employer trailblazer groups) via a set of occupational standards (DfE/DBIS, 2016), this idea that students 'must be able to do' reflects the behavioural objectives identified by Moore (1987) (as discussed in chapter 3.3), where ideas of 'the model worker' are projected onto the education system by the state, involving the reduction of education to behavioural objectives, and denying access to 'elaborating knowledge' (Moore, 1987; Gamble, 2016). This, I argue, serves to marginalise those learners that

access level 3 TVET qualifications in two ways. Firstly, as Wheelahan (2010) argues, theoretical knowledge has been displaced in (T)VET by too much of an emphasis on the vocational and that curriculum and pedagogy deprioritises disciplinary knowledge in favour of exposing students to real-world, work-based situations. This is evident in the CDA data in both policy and practice, where theoretical knowledge is seldom mentioned. Where mentioned, in CDA 2, it was suggested that the teaching of theoretical knowledge was a result of moving to an online environment due to Covid-19 lockdowns as a replacement for the practice: 'it's been an absolute killer for education and totally free of practical skills. And so, it's teaching them the theory behind why you're doing things, the history' (Subject C). It would appear then, that this subject views knowledge as a means to an end, rather than the end itself. If this perspective is commonplace in both the ORF and PRF, then TVET learners are being denied access to the knowledge they need to participate in society; to think the 'not-yet-thought' and to imagine alternative futures (Wheelahan, 2010). Secondly, as per the work of Moore (1987: 232), the reduction of TVET to behavioural objectives restricts the individual learner 'to that of a 'consumer' of work whose purchasing power reflects the value of the skills 'owned within a free market for labour'. While there is an argument that this shift towards behavioural objectives supports upward mobility in the labour market, it removes the ownership of knowledge, customs, and traditions in the occupational practices, which arguably alienates future workers from their professions and strengthens managerial power over the labour process (Moore, 1987).

One could argue then, that this compromises trainee TVET teachers as, despite themselves arguably being members of the 'upper and favoured stratum of the manual working class' (Moorhouse, 1978: 61), or aristocracy of labour (Attewall, 1990; Savage, 2000; Kerswell, 2019), they are still part of a dominated group in society and may unknowingly be playing a role in perpetuating the dominant group's ideology through their discursive practices. Moreover, trainee TVET teachers, in some circumstances (i.e., low-paid occupations), through entering the teaching profession have conceivably been increasingly upwardly mobile, identifying even more with the values of the middle class. Teaching technical qualifications to learners that will be entering occupations heralded as

having a greater value (those pathways identified in the Skills Plan [2016]), and having a strong discourse which aligns to the workplace, helps to maintain their position in society as technical elites (Esmond and Atkins, 2022). One might also argue that these individuals are preventing the development of a working-class consciousness and solidarity between those destined to be the future technical elites (those that they teach who study level 3 technical qualifications) and those destined for welfare vocationalism (those studying low-level vocational qualifications), as per the work of Esmond and Atkins (2022). This perpetuates a deeply ingrained neoliberal notion of 'us' and 'them' which is evident in policy discourse (CDA 1, chapter 5), contributing to the marginalisation of those destined for lower-skilled employment.

7.4.2.1 A Competing Skills Discourse

CDA 2 revealed that trainee TVET teachers can confidently articulate the technical skills associated with the respective occupations, implying that the gap between the imaginary and the real discourse of work practice is narrow by reference to occupational needs; a seemingly coherent delocation and relocation of the policy skills discourse (ORF) to practice via the pedagogic recontextualisation field (PRF) (Bernstein, 2000). Subject D for instance, highlights that they teach the 'core skills which are defined in the standards for the apprenticeships'. Likewise, Subject E is clear that 'the qualification defines very specific skills and criteria that [students] need to achieve'. In other words, there is a clear understanding of the occupational profile and its skills which are then recontextualised by the trainee TVET teachers from the occupational standards into their discourse practices (i.e. their teaching of such skills). However, CDA 2 revealed that the trainee TVET teachers were able to 'struggle' with the ideology and have some autonomy in the PRF (Bernstein, 2000). This struggle was based on their recent occupational experiences, and this resulted in a competing discourse to policy, formed from occupational practices which are not in the ORF: 'I support them with the other, unwritten, things too' (Subject B). Here, the subject seeks to move beyond the ORF, perhaps as a result of their strong professional identity.

As discussed in chapter 3, Collins (1979:132) suggests that stronger professions require real technical skills that produce demonstrable results and can be taught, and the data from CDA 2 suggests that all trainees have a clear understanding of the technical skills and the visible pedagogies to teach these. For example, trainee TVET teachers' operationalisation of the discourse articulated traditional, visible pedagogic practices for the teaching of technical skills associated with the craft (Sadovnik, 1991): 'I will teach them through demonstrating the skill, then they'll put it into practice doing it' (Subject H). These pedagogies are associated with more strongly insulated fields of practice (Bernstein, 2000) and there is emphasis on not just learning the skill but on moving the learners towards participation in a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1997), or what Weber (1971; 2013) would refer to as social induction into the occupation.

As Collins (1979) suggests, the skills within a strong profession must be difficult enough to require training and reliable enough to produce results but tread a fine line between these so that outsiders remain unable to judge the work or control the practitioners. This helps a profession to maintain social closure and thus its status. As Esmond and Wood (2017) found in their study on workplace learning, some professions had highly skilled individuals who acted as gatekeepers by implicit processes of social selection. Considering the data in CDA 2, there are two competing arguments that could be made in respect of this. Firstly, given that the trainees are teaching skills that go beyond the ORF ('I could say quite a lot around the negative side of it. The stuff that isn't in the curriculum' [Subject G]), it suggests that it is the ORF that controls what learners can learn and that moving beyond this allows the trainee TVET teachers to socially induct their learners into the occupation (Weber, 2013). However, on the other hand, one could contend that trainee TVET teachers are arguably taking back control of what is learnt and to what extent, implementing a form of social closure. Despite my earlier critique of Loo's (2018) occupational pedagogy framework (chapter 3) for being limited by the ORF, the data in this study supports the notion that TVET teachers' pedagogic choices are based upon an understanding of the sources, types and applications of occupational know-how. In challenging the discourse in the ORF, trainee TVET teachers are challenging the idea of narrow behavioural objectives and thus are protecting their skills and taking back

ownership of the knowledge, customs, and traditions in the occupational practices (Moore, 1987; Beck and Young, 2005; O'Conner, 2007), simultaneously, protecting their profession through this notion of social closure, whilst also ensuring that select students are sufficiently inducted into their intended occupations.

Beck and Young (2005: 188) describe a strong identity with the profession - with clearly defined knowledge base, clear codes of conduct, and socialisation within the profession - as 'a professional habitus'. While there is little in the data to suggest that there is a significant difference in the habitus between different occupational disciplines, it was apparent that those with a clearer conception of the skills they teach and those who seemingly had greater autonomy were those that are arguably more traditional disciplines with richer histories and arguably a higher level of status in society (i.e., engineering compared to digital) (Weber, 1971). Moore (1987) suggests that this status is the outcome of social struggles rather than reflections of the complexity of skill involved in the occupation. This somewhat aligns with Esmond and Atkin's (2020) research where different dimensions of TVET support hierarchical patterns of labour market transition by way of an occupation's social worth. Protecting one's status through a strong understanding of the skills required reproduces division. This is something that, at the generative level of the ORF, is perhaps missing as it is arguably mainly large employers - those that have the means to identify their skills needs - under a discourse of 'skills shortages' that contribute to the design of employer-led standards, as discussed in CDA 1 (chapter 6), rather than those seeking to protect their professional identity by acting as gatekeepers to the profession (Esmond and Wood, 2017). It could be asserted, therefore, that despite on the surface appearing as an ideological struggle, the competing skills discourse between labour market and policy focus, and the occupational pedagogy of trainee TVET teachers, builds upon Esmond and Atkin's (2022) thesis, whereby the division between technical elites and those destined for welfare vocationalism is perpetuated by those that are teaching these subjects and protecting their profession. Whether knowingly propagating government ideology or not, this supports previously discussed notions of trainee TVET teachers being part of the problem when it comes to the social wrong, acting as a labour aristocracy to legitimise and stabilise capitalism

through socially constructing occupations outside of this technical elite as inferior and through the promotion of neoliberal notions of meritocracy i.e., work hard and you can study a higher level technical qualification, which thereby obscures systemic inequalities (Ainley, 1993; Savage, 2000; DiAngelo, 2010; Kerswell 2019).

7.4.2.2 Enter Immoderately Inflated Notions of Skill

While seldom mentioned in the political texts in CDA 1, trainee TVET teachers' skills discourse also makes reference to immoderately inflated notions of skill associated with 'soft skills' (Winch, 2010), which are seen as important to the job role. These are referred to as 'concrete employability skills' by Subject E, who teaches their learners to 'take responsibility for their work … [and learn] ... empathy, teamwork… communication, the things that you don't see but, you know'. This discourse locates skill as a 'readily transferable capability' that can 'be operationalised in a variety of contexts' (Avis, 1992: 363), akin to that of Winch's immoderately inflated conception of skill. However, like Winch (2010), Avis (1992) suggests that this perspective of skill ignores the social relations and denies forms of power associated with class, gender and race, training people to adapt to the norms and values of the middle class - the middle-class habitus - under the guise of desirable work behaviours (Gooptu, 2023; Avis et al, 2018; Avis, 2018). Avis et al (2018) for example, conceive that the use of 'affective dispositions' is an attempt to construct a particular type of person or to attribute specific dispositional traits to members of the working class, carrying real material consequences which may alienate sections of the working class from such labour (Timming, 2017; Quach et al, 2017, cited in Avis, 2018) and, arguably, they are seen as having a deficit in their learning. One could argue that the trainee TVET teachers' discourse perhaps makes reference to these skills as a result of their mobility out of their working-class occupation and into the teaching profession; their own norms now potentially closer to those of the middle class, despite their strong professional identity. However, if not from contemporary skills policy, one must consider where this discourse has been recontextualised from.

For decades, high-level skills policy in both the UK sought to equip individuals 'for a perpetually changing future and thus constantly be[ing] able to 'upskill' (Wheelahan et al,

2022: 482). As a result, subsequent vocational curricula (the ORF) were built on immoderately inflated notions of skill (Avis, 1992; Winch, 2010) which were prioritised at the expense of more focussed, specific skills and knowledge (e.g., Tomlinson, 2004; QCA, 2008). It could be argued that this discourse of skills has been prevalent in the skills discourse for so long, that it has become a naturalised convention (Fairclough, 2010) and whilst trainee TVET teachers still have a strong professional habitus, their skills discourse recontextualises previous skills policy goals. As gatekeepers to the occupation (Esmond and Wood, 2017), this arguably presents a misguided need to construct a particular type of person for the workplace (Avis et al, 2018; Avis, 2018).

This argument is further developed when we consider the operationalisation of these skills, where the pedagogic practices had less clarity and visibility compared to paradigmatic conceptions, which highlights weak framing in the instructional discourse (the content), and regulative discourse (the values and identity) (Sadovnik, 1991; Bernstein, 2000): ‘There's sort of explicit teaching in the, the hard skills … in the background you are teaching the soft skills and behaviours’ (Subject G). It could be argued that this falls outside of their professional habitus, not least because the ideas projected by trainee TVET teachers were disconnected from the occupations (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017), reinforcing the diffuse nature of these skills.

To summarise this section, the above discussion combining the data from CDA 1 and CDA2 highlights that the structural inequalities which exist in the TVET sector are contributed to by the skills discourses in policy and practice. This presents an obstacle at a policy level, with a neoliberal government ideology of individualism, free markets, and meritocracy at its heart, an inherently exclusive ideology, seemingly ingrained in policy rhetoric. Despite what appears to be a renewed focus on higher level technical skills, having unpacked this through the CDAs, I argued that this discourse promotes a division between those with a professional habitus and those without (Beck and Young, 2005) and between those that can access the qualifications based on prior attainment and those that cannot. Moreover, there is an argument that trainee TVET teachers play a role in maintaining this ideology by preventing the development of a working-class

consciousness through contributing to the working-class divide (as proposed by Esmond and Atkins, 2022) and, through promoting a discourse of skills which values the middle-class habitus, this inadvertently marginalises those that are likely to study those lower-level vocational qualifications.

7.4.3 Skills Discourses: from Policy to Practice (Teacher Educators (TEds))

Thus far, I have discussed some of the findings from policy and trainee TVET teachers, answering RQ1 and RQ3, but have omitted discussions about TEds in relation to RQ2, as I feel that there is an added complexity which, although competing and conflicting in the skills discourse, arguably promotes further division, which I shall present in this section of the discussion. As noted earlier, Fairclough (1989) suggests that language plays a significant role in the exercise of power, and it is through discourse that consent can be exercised through ideology. Given the Official Recontextualising Field (ORF), where the government operates at a generative level to legitimise official pedagogic discourse through the curricula (Bernstein, 2000), one might expect there to be a similar pedagogic discourse between the TEds and trainees, however, in the skills discourse of TEds, there is an argument that it resonates more with skills policy pre-2016, with an increased focus on generic modes (Bernstein, 2000). There is also a distinct ‘HEness’ to the TEds’ discourse, which centres on two strands - general teaching skills and graduate employability skills, both of which fall under an immoderately inflated (I) conception of skill (Winch, 2010). One might contend that studying an ITE qualification through a HEI may support increased mobility, however, I argue to the contrary. We tend to associate genericism with lower levels of study (Atkins, 2009; 2013) yet, as I show in the discussion below, there is an argument that these generic skills, devoid of knowledge, result in similar weak and empty learning.

7.4.3.1 HE Graduate Skills Discourse

Much of the ITE qualification design across the sector has HE involvement and this, I argue, exacerbates the discourse of genericism when it comes to skills. Despite arguably seen as 'academic', with attempts to teach in a scholastic manner, FE ITE programmes do not engage with strongly classified regions (Bernstein, 2000), or rich conceptions of knowledge, understanding and vocational practice engagement (e.g. the social sciences (Hyland 2006; Loo, 2014; Rikowski, 2022)). In the data in CDA 2 (chapter 6), much of the generic skills discourse (immoderately inflated, generic, transferable skills) (Winch, 2010) was pervaded by notions of HE graduate skills:

> 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 (Subject A).

For me, this quote symbolises recontextualisation of the dominant discourse, as the subject shares what they perceive to be important for 'an academic'. These higher-order skills may typically be associated with 'specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge' (Bernstein, 2000: 160), requiring induction into this strongly classified body of knowledge (Wheelahan, 2007), typically found in academia and reserved for the upper strata of society. While it may appear admirable that there are attempts to support skills development, this discourse is complex in that the TEds are not teaching a typically 'academic' qualification with a strong classification of knowledge. TEds are teaching a professional qualification which has a weak classification and is largely built around generic modes thus, is arguably competency-based and, as Wheelahan (2015; 2017) suggests, these competency-based models of curriculum contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities.

Singh (2002) suggests that power relations are appropriated by teachers by adopting higher positions to their students and this affects their choice of discourses. A number of trainee TVET teachers in CDA 2 argued that they had not really discussed notions of skill on their FE ITE programme: 'I don't feel like I've had a clear definition of skill' (Subject F). It may be that TEds lack confidence in discussing conceptions of skill beyond those they are familiar with or, taking Singh's point, it might be argued that TEds adopt these HE

discourses of skill, which are unfamiliar to trainee TVET teachers (i.e., immoderately inflated notions associated with 'academia'), to justify their position and authority, in a similar manner to the idea of 'gatekeeping' in TVET (Esmond and Wood, 2017). However, Beck and Young (2005) suggest that there has been a proliferation of generic modes in HE in reaction to the labour market changes and, according to Wheelahan et al (2022), the language of competencies and learning outcomes in HE are based on national and supra-national qualification frameworks. Therefore, this dominant discourse is arguably being reproduced in the recontextualisation of global policy into practice and, given that the HE sector is marketised (Radice, 2013), this discourse allows them to maintain competitive advantage in the market over awarding organisation provision, hence many offering level 7 qualifications (ETF, 2018). Interestingly, while this aligns to skills policy discourse (CDA 1), as suggested by Atkins (1999) 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. In doing so, HEIs become they are but a pawn in the reproduction of inequality in both education and broader society.

7.4.3.2 Generic Teaching Skills Discourse

At the Official Recontextualising Field (ORF) level, there is no mandated government curricula for FE ITE in England, only guidance, and at the Pedagogical Recontextualising Field (PRF), TEds have the challenging task of interpreting this guidance, much of which originated in 2007 under previous iterations of FE teacher training qualifications under the then New Labour Government policies, alongside the current HE graduate employability skills discourse which pervades HE. In doing this, they must then attempt to materialise a qualification that meets a very diverse audience's needs (not just TVET trainee teachers but also other Further Education subject specialists). As outlined in chapter 2, the FE ITE ORF (Bernstein, 2000) has consistently been designed to be generic, where there are attempts, through a set of professional standards, to atomise skills (Loo, 2014) and, as found in CDA 2, many of the concepts of skill discussed by TEds focus on atomised, or generic, transferable teaching techniques. Subject F refers to these as 'practical teaching skills' with reference to things 'like planning, behaviour management etc, and subject D

thinks questioning is their ‘number one skill’. However, these are not practical in a paradigmatic case, nor do they demonstrate sufficient generalisability to be considered benign. Therefore, they are immoderately inflated, and are probably better not considered as skills at all, and instead associated with Winch’s (2013; 2015) idea of ‘second order transversal abilities’, as discussed in chapter 3.

This promotion of particular pedagogic identities is, according to Bernstein (2000), a bias which is projected by the state with the intention that it should become embodied in teachers and students, constructing 'a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices' (Bernstein, 2000: 65). However, the generic Professional Standards (ETF, 2014/2022) and guidance (ETF, 2016) used to frame the current FE ITE curriculum results in a weak classification and framing in the Official Recontextualising Field (ORF) (Bernstein, 2000) meaning less ritualisation and increased uncertainty (Bernstein 1977; 2000). Despite actually providing TEds with greater autonomy at the Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (PRF), this means it is more susceptible to being inculcated by the dominant discourse - the idea of the marketable individual where skills are commodities to be bought and sold (Wheelahan, 2007; Wheelahan et al, 2022) - which is why we arguably see the skills discourse of TEds emphasise themes of a HE graduate skills discourse.

As education is an instrument for much social policy and is constantly evolving, as highlighted in chapter 2, it is plausible to suggest that ITE may never sustain strong classification and framing, made harder by the denial of sociology and philosophy from ITE in favour of the generic standards (Rikowski, 2022). According to Beck and Young (2005) this is illustrative of Bernstein’s (2000: 53) claim that generic modes involve a process of silencing, denying access to ‘forms of knowledge that permit alternative possibilities to be thought’. Instead, the generic skills discourse prioritises the value of developing flexibility with skills over accumulated knowledge and skills (Beck and Young, 2005), which has significant implications for professional identities of both the trainee TVET teachers and TEds. For Bernstein (2000: 59), there is an increasing ‘emptiness in the concept of trainability, an emptiness which makes the concept self-referential and

therefore excluding' (i.e., having no intrinsic content that allows self-definition or self-recognition). Underpinning the generic, ETF Professional Standards (2014/2022) is the concept of 'dual professional' i.e., being an expert in the respective occupation/industry and also being an educational expert (CAVTL, 2013; Esmond and Wood, 2017). However, as Beck and Young (2005) argue, a legitimate professional identity derives from an inner dedication to scholarly and professional activity and the accumulation of a distinctive body of knowledge which is practically engaged with the needs of others. However, the emptiness in content and lack of knowledge base on FE ITE programmes may not only result in trainees being neglected of a lack of understanding and criticism of their lived conditions, but also hinder their ability to build a professional identity beyond their disciplines. This is evident in CDA 2, where their discourse of skills made little reference to either the generic teaching skills, or HE graduate employability skills. On the other hand, this lack of knowledge base may also impact the professional identity or habitus for TEds operating in this space (Bernstein, 2000; Beck and Young, 2005), as found in CDA 2, where confusion and uncertainty permeated responses to questions about their skills discourses: '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'(Subject G). While this is consistent with the competing philosophical and sociological perspectives of skill outlined in chapter 3, were there to be a strong professional habitus, one might expect to see more consistent perspectives in the skills discourses of TEds, much like those in the trainee TVET teachers' discourses.

7.4.3.3 Who are TEds?

It is worth saying at this point that there is the additional challenge faced in FE ITE, in that it is a sector that is dominated by TEds who, by and large, have had a traditional academic educational experience (Noel, 1996; NRDC, 2004; Harkin et al, 2008; Loo, 2020), where these individuals are more likely to have experienced teaching and learning in subjects from sacred, tightly insulated, domains (Bernstein, 2000) and, as such, are disproportionately from higher socioeconomic groups (Atkins, 2013), thus are not necessarily representative of many of their trainee teachers. Avis et al (2018) suggest that, despite the middle class having more in common with the working class than those

that own the means to production, the middle class take advantage of social standing marshalling ‘‘valued’ capitals, both implicitly and explicitly, to secure positional advantage’ (Avis and Atkins, 2017: 5). It could be argued that, despite a lack of professional habitus, though it might be an unconscious act, the data suggests that TEds function as ‘gatekeepers’ to academia, mobilising a discourse of skill where higher levels of credential are valued more, potentially shutting off those who may have the ability to teach their respective TVET subject, but not able to access the academic level.

On the other hand, trainee TVET teachers, many of whom have a relatively low level of general education and, in the main, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Atkins 2013; Thompson and Simmons 2013; Thompson, 2014), have significantly different types of knowledge, often with weaker regions due to crossing multiple boundaries, e.g., construction which uses aspects of maths, physics, languages, law etc (Bernstein, 2000). Consequently, the data suggests a lack of focus on this occupational knowledge, as evidenced in the CDA 2 where TEds seldom mentioned subject specific knowledge or skills:

> 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?... I mean, maybe that's something that Subject Specialist Mentors need to do…(Subject A).

As Cantor and Roberts (1972) suggest, the identification with the profession is important for TVET teachers and to remove this from the pedagogic practices serves to alienate this important identity (Robson 1998). As previously mentioned, in addition to the distortion of communication to favour the dominant discourse, there is another distortion and this relates to the culture, the practice, and consciousness of the dominated group, which are misrepresented (Bernstein, 2000). The dominated group, i.e., the other 50% (Lenon, 2018), who might typically go on to study in a TVET setting or indeed teach there, are arguably being misrepresented by the practices intended to support them. While it might appear that studying more ‘academic’ qualifications only serves to better educate the ‘disadvantaged’ (trainee teachers from TVET backgrounds), as previously discussed, the arrangement of the TEd curriculum and its distribution arguably serves to have the opposite effect.

7.4.3.4 Operationalisation of the Discourse

Owing to the fact that the current FE ITE curriculum is built around generic descriptors (ETF Professional Standards, 2014/22), alongside the pervasive HE graduate skills discourse, these qualifications have a weak classification, devoid of vertical knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Wheelahan, 2007). With this weakly framed knowledge, with unclear boundaries for the profession (Beck and Young, 2005), the data in CDA 2 suggests that the regulative function (Bernstein, 1996) of TEds' operationalisation of skills tended to be 'hidden' behind a rhetoric of 'modelling' teaching practice (Powell, 2016). Trainee TVET teachers are seen as the main agents in the learning who develop their practices through copying their TEd and applying it to their own, very different, contexts: 'I model quite a lot to break down some of the skills and we discuss the impact on learning' (Subject D). This more progressive pedagogical approach is what Bernstein (2000) would refer to as invisible pedagogical practice, which offers the students more autonomy to create their individualised criteria for evaluation, with the teacher acting in a more facilitative than transmissive manner (Sadovnik, 1991; Bernstein, 2000). According to Wheelahan and Moodie (2021: 217), these more 'progressive discourses of human empowerment within curriculum can contribute to instrumental human capital discourses of employability'. By this, they are referring to the way in which genericism supposedly prepares people for a broader field of practice. However, this silencing of the culture and practices of the subject domain consequently produces and reproduces 'imaginary concepts of work and life which abstract such experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions and negate the possibilities of understanding and criticism' (Bernstein, 2000: 59), alienating trainee TVET teachers from their practice and, therefore, their professional habitus (Beck and Young, 2005). This is further compounded by the manner in which FE ITE curriculum is delivered in traditional classrooms, where theoretical/academic knowledge is valued over practical knowledge, which is more often taught and learnt in workshop environments, with markedly different pedagogies (Lucas et al, 2012; CAVTL, 2013; Husband, 2015; Esmond and Wood, 2017). With this in mind, it could be asserted that TEds are accentuating the division between themselves and their trainees through a pedagogic practice that, on the surface may appear to promote social justice/mobility but

may actually diminish the skills discourses and professional identities of trainee TVET teachers (Bernstein, 2000; Beck and Young, 2005).

To review this section, I have discussed how TEds' discursive practices act to marginalise the culture of the trainee TVET teachers that they teach (Bernstein, 2000; Beck and Young, 2005) through a generic curriculum where the discourse is predominantly operationalised in settings which negate practical and vocational pedagogies (Lucas et al, 2012; CAVTL, 2013; Husband, 2015; Esmond and Wood, 2017). There is a distinct lack of learning about their identities, and their construction of these, coupled with a lack of propositional knowledge (Loo, 2018) which arguably makes it challenging for trainee TVET teachers to form their identity as a 'dual professional' (CAVTL, 2013; Esmond and Wood, 2017). This is hindered further by the lack of commitment to professionalisation of the FE sector, as evidenced by the numerous changes to FE ITE regulation over the last twenty years, as discussed in chapter 2 (Leitch, 2006: Lingfield, 2012). Moreover, much of the FE ITE qualification design has HEI involvement and this, I have argued, exacerbates the discourse of genericism when it comes to skills. Due to a pervasive HE graduate skills discourse aligned to globalised perspectives of employability, this allows TEds to act as gatekeepers to HEI through the mobilisation of a discourse which protects the status of HE and contributes to the marginalisation of trainee TVET teachers from their practice and own professional habitus, with their agency reduced as they are ensconced in generic rather than subject specific pedagogies.

7.4.4 Summary of CDA Stage 2 and 3

The purpose of section 7.4 was to identify the key obstacles in addressing the social wrong and suggest reasons for these. Drawing on the findings of CDA 1 and CDA 2, I argued that the competing and disparate discourses of skill help to maintain the social wrong. Firstly, CDA1 found that skills policy discourse (chapter 5) is sharply focussed on higher technical level skills and individualism at the detriment of intermediate and low-level skills which devalues and excludes those destined for lower-level, lower-skilled employment. This discourse is recontextualised from the Official Recontextualisation Field (ORF) to trainee TVET teachers' Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (PRF)

(Bernstein, 2000), practice, as found in the CDA 2 (chapter 6), where a focus on paradigmatic conceptions of skills transcends their discursive practices. Trainee TVET teachers do, however, struggle with the ORF and move beyond its discourse through drawing on occupational expertise which arguably helps them to maintain a strong professional habitus and ownership of their skills. Further to this, the data highlighted that the discursive practices of trainee TVET teachers also includes reference to soft, desirable work behaviours which are often couched in vague and general terms (Gooptu, 2018, Gooptu 2023; Avis et al, 2018; Avis, 2018) and this may be a result of their upward social mobility and aspiration for middle class values. These discursive practices highlight how trainee TVET teachers in this study may inadvertently play a role in maintaining their status as an upper and favoured stratum of the working class (as technical elites) by marginalising broader vocational study, its teachers, and the learners that study these programmes.

For TEds, on the other hand, the data revealed that their skill discourses are pervaded by generic modes in two forms. There is a large focus on generic teaching practices which reflect the vague and decontextualised Professional Standards and guidance that form the ORF. Devoid of elaborative knowledge, these standards lead to atomised perspectives of skill which become commodities to be bought and sold in the labour market. Alongside this, the skills discourse is also pervaded by aspects of a HE graduate skills discourse, reflecting the increased marketisation of the HE sector. These contrasting but somewhat aligned discourses are framed by the backgrounds of TEds and the institutions that they are acting in (Fairclough, 2010), with particular ideological representations for ways of behaving which, I argue, they subconsciously use to protect their status and maintain stratification, marginalising those from TVET backgrounds by denying them access to elaborative knowledge, obscuring their skills and preventing them from progressing into FE ITE.

To conclude, whereas one might expect there to be clear recontextualisation from policy to practice, with a similar pedagogic discourse between the TEds and trainees, the data reveals a complex picture with competing and disparate discourses which compound the

marginalisation of the TVET sector, its learners, and subsequently fractions of the working class, particularly those on broader low-level vocational programmes.

7.5 CDA Stage 4: Ways Past the Problems

In alignment with a Faircloughian CDA (2008; 2013), it is crucial to complement the analysis of obstacles with by identifying unrealised possibilities in the way society is structured and organised. In this section, I aim to offer ways past the identified obstacles by firstly addressing the competing and disparate skills discourses in policy and practice, before then exploring ways to overcome the marginalisation of TVET in FE ITE. In 7.5.1, I suggest problematising the sustainability of the skills discourse in policy before I progress to a discussion for the facilitation of a professional identity for TEds. I then make suggestions for the way in which HE providers might work more collaboratively with the TVET sector to provide greater opportunities for integrating occupational pedagogy and removing the barriers that prevent TVET practitioners from becoming TEds in FE ITE.

7.5.1 Competing and Disparate Discourse in Policy and Practice

Firstly, I focus my attention on obstacle 1 - competing and disparate discourses in policy and practice - and suggest that a discourse focused primarily on developing human capital for economic growth is not sustainable and should be problematised. I also offer ways in which FE ITE could change to integrate more strongly classified knowledge into ITE programmes, so that there are stronger rituals and practices and, despite the tensions associated with what is and is not considered a profession, a move towards the facilitation of a professional habitus for TEds (Beck and Young, 2005).

7.5.1.1 Problematising Skills Policy and Promoting Lifelong Learning

Despite current government policy being aligned to a neoliberal agenda, Springer et al (2016) suggest that national democracy has been eroded so much by undemocratic international forums that parliaments have lost the power over their own policy decisions. The contradiction of neoliberalism, which seeks to promote freedom and democracy via increased deregulation has instead resulted in a demise in voters' rights to choose who governs them (Springer et al, 2016) thus, regardless of who is voted to lead the country,

there is very little chance of ideological change. So, as can be seen in CDA 1 (chapter 5), contemporary skills policy is pervaded by a very prescriptive Human Capital Theory which is wedded to capitalist interests (Avis, 2021), with the government asserting that post-school education should be restricted to qualifications that have the greatest economic benefit (Allais, 2007; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021). However, as previously discussed, this inherently creates a ladder of value (Morris, 2023), with those that generate the most surplus value held in higher regard and invested in more than those with lower value (Rikowski, 2022). So, at a national level, unless the driving force and ideology of the government changes as a result of global policy changes, UK labour market changes, or a case of radical politics, it is unlikely that this obstacle can be overcome.

Wheelahan et al (2022: 478) argue that despite having 'the most educated population in the history of humankind, we putatively still have a skills deficit'. Perhaps then, in a time where climate change is significantly risking the future of earth as we know it, there ought to be a drive to move skills policy away from the current economic model to 'conceive of an expansive notion of [T]VET that is freed from the shackles of capitalism' (Avis, 2021: 176) towards more sustainable approaches. However, even the much-lauded Education for Sustainable Development Goals (ESDG) (United Nations, 2018; ETF, 2022) have come under criticism for their focus on economic growth which flouts the premise behind sustainability (Kopnina, 2020). Moreover, the WEF's (2021) 'Great Reset' economic recovery plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic sets out a stall to move towards more sustainable approaches (Schwab, 2020), which we begin to see in Zahawi's speech (see CDA 1) where he refers to a new discourse of 'Green Skills', though it could be contended that this is simply a rebrand of existing conceptions of skill, where a human capital lens still dominates. For Avis (2018: 177), as long as sustainability is 'lodged on a capitalist terrain', a fairer and socially just society is 'ultimately fraudulent'. To move beyond human capital discourses of skill, more sustainable approaches arguably need to move towards a different ideology then, not where one is pitched against the other as marketable commodities, but where skills education and training is to the benefit of the individual and their community. Here we would see what Wheelahan et al (2022: 489) suggest was the premise of early lifelong learning policies:

> social solidarity, democracy, lifelong education and the fulfilment of the individual 'in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments – as individual, member of a family and a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer' (Faure 1972, vi)

The Dearing Review (1996), as discussed in chapter 2 was, according to Kelly (2001), an attempt to shift 16-19 education policy towards this paradigm, though this vision for lifelong learning reportedly was lost in favour of economic goals, a consequence of neoliberalism (Biesta, 2006). The ideals of the Dearing Review sat in stark contrast to contemporary skills policy, which is sharply focussed on the economy, and despite the skills discourse in the Dearing Review driven somewhat by employers' needs, the ideology was evidently focussed on society over the individual. Here though, conceptions of skill were more akin to Winch's (2010) immoderately inflated notions, as opposed to contemporary skills discourses which align more to the higher level technical (paradigmatic) conceptions of skill. While one might critique the discourse, this was arguably an attempt to bridge the academic and vocational divide, and subsequently divisions in class. Perhaps the critique of the skills discourse in the shadow of 'the Great Reset' (Schwab, 2020) and climate change affords us the opportunity to revisit original conceptions of lifelong learning and associated skills discourses. Here, there is the opportunity to offer a clear vision for a new ideology, where the discourses of skills are conceptualised in policy and practice in a way that sees TVET as an instrument of social formation, rather than for economic growth, thus helping to reduce, rather than perpetuate, inequality.

7.5.1.2 Facilitating a Professional Habitus

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 (2000: 229) proposes that 'members are bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about' and through this joint enterprise, each member holds the other accountable. It is evident from the CDA in chapter 6, that trainee TVET teachers typically have strong professional habitus, largely as a result of a regionalised knowledge base

with common practices. TEds, on the other hand, whilst gatekeepers to the teaching profession, arguably suffer from a lack of professional habitus. This is as a result of weak, genericism which underpins the FE ITE curriculum in a HEI, which is recontextualised and operationalised into invisible pedagogic practices (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, creating a tension and gap in knowledge that needs resolving.

One could argue that this thesis has revealed a systematic issue with efficacy of the FE ITE sector for authentic teaching of TVET practitioners, and the data in this study exacerbates this with TEds exposing a dual generic skills discourse, both of which reflect neoliberal notions of individuality and marketisation. To overcome this one might argue that FE ITE be removed from HEIs and, instead, be situated more in the workplace to make it more authentic. Indeed, this lean towards workplace learning is proposed in the forthcoming FE ITE qualification reform, by way of employer-led occupational standards (IfATE, 2021 DfE, 2021). However, I want to put forward another argument, one which considers Rikowski's (2022) work where he suggests that it is the ejection of the social sciences from teacher training courses that has led to genericism. He argues that what has the potential to be a space for the critique of capitalism through deep learning of philosophy and the social sciences, has become watered down, yet it is in HE that there is greater space for the critical examination of capitalism where trainee TVET teachers and TEds alike may benefit from a greater critique of the skills discourse in policy. To complement this idea, I draw on Wheelahan (2015: 760), who puts forth an argument that (T)VET pedagogy should 'enable students to participate in debates and controversies in society and in their occupational field of practice as the basis for their participation in a democratic society'. If these discussions are marginalised from FE ITE, then TVET

practitioners are unlikely to engage in these in their own practices. Therefore, rather than weakening the academic aspirations for trainee TVET teachers by watering down 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 for two key reasons. Firstly, I believe that doing this will strengthen the classification of knowledge in FE ITE (Bernstein, 2000) and thus strengthen the professional habitus of TEds (Beck and Young, 2005). That said, in a similar manner to the gatekeeping of professions identified by Esmond and Wood (2017), whose sample of TVET practitioners, like subjects in this thesis, had strong occupational identities which enable them to act as gatekeepers to their professions, so too might this happen with TEds who, despite having general strict entry requirements to the profession, currently lack common language and rituals required to maintain their occupation's status.

Secondly, based on some of the principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972), the integration of sociology and philosophy may equip trainee TVET teachers with the tools to understand their role and position in capitalist society, and empower them to recognise how the dominant class operates to maintain structures in society. As Wheelahan (2015) suggests, were trainee TVET teachers to integrate these debates into their practices, it broadens their role beyond discourses of skill to include knowledge, or capital, that supports the students to become good citizens as well as employees, which also links well to my suggestions in 7.5.1.1 in respect to a shift towards lifelong learning. However, this suggestion is in complete contrast to the forthcoming changes to FE ITE, as explained in chapter 2, whereby all trainee teachers will be required to work towards a set of employer-led occupational standards (DfE, 2021; IfATE, 2021) (in the same manner as T-Levels), suggesting further movement of the ORF away from any critique of anti-capitalist approaches, instead driving neoliberal ideology which, as discussed previously, is inherently excluding.

In summarising this section, it is clear that generic teacher standards underpin much of the design of FE ITE qualifications and this genericism akin to Bernstein's (2000) generic modes, denotes a weakness in the classification of knowledge. I argue for FE ITE to move

away from generic standards towards an increased focus on social sciences to promote a critical awareness and stronger identity for TEds and their trainees.

7.5.2 The Marginalisation of TVET

There is an argument that the 'HEness' of the ITE qualification lacks the disciplinary knowledge that would be befitting of a higher-level qualification, instead it is bereft of strong classification and framing in favour of generic modes (Bernstein, 2000). This genericism marginalises the skills discourse and professional identities of trainee TVET teachers (Bernstein, 2000; Beck and Young, 2005) and is compounded further by the manner in which the FE ITE curriculum is operationalised by subjects in this study (CDA 2), where theoretical/academic knowledge and pedagogies are valued over practical knowledge and pedagogies (Lucas et al, 2012; CAVTL, 2013; Husband, 2015; Esmond and Wood, 2017). Below, I propose two suggestions to overcome this obstacle. Firstly, I suggest that FE ITE should inherently be more subject specialist, before then suggesting that barriers preventing the progression of TVET practitioners from being TEds should be removed to offer more opportunities to engage with FE ITE as contributors, or TEds.

7.5.2.1 Increased Subject Specialist Pedagogies in FE ITE

As seen in the data for this thesis, seldom do trainee TVET teachers discuss their subject specialist practice, or indeed different conceptions of skill within their FE ITE curriculum. It would be too easy to offer the solution that FE ITE should offer subject specialist training for all in FE. Afterall, it has been suggested that there are over 200 subject specialisms in Further Education (Crawley, 2005), therefore, it simply would not be viable to offer specialist ITE programmes for all.

TVET teachers are usually described as 'dual professionals' (CAVTL, 2013; ETF 2022) but the two professions are viewed as separate, rather than intertwined, and previous research has found that TVET practitioners value their occupational profession more than their teaching profession (Esmond and Wood, 2017). There is a challenge in maintaining currency in the respective TVET subjects, let alone subject specific pedagogy, and as suggested by Robson (1998), those teaching in TVET fear that relevant occupational

skills will be eroded over time by changes in technique and that this will undermine their credibility.

In order to overcome the marginalisation of subject specialisms in FE ITE, I suggest that HE providers of FE ITE collaborate with the TVET sector to develop more meaningful notions of TVET pedagogy in FE ITE curricula, which not only foregrounds occupational experiences in the manner in which Loo (2020) proposes, but builds on this to include strongly classified knowledge of the TVET subject and its teaching practices. This, I believe, should therefore include greater consideration of Shulman's (1987) concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which refers to the way in which subject content and general pedagogy are blended into 'an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction' (Shulman, 1987: 8). PCK moves beyond generic pedagogy which neglects teacher agency to a more agentic conception where decision making draws upon subject specialist pedagogical knowledge and, according to Coe (2014), is crucial to effective teaching. While some have criticised PCK for reifying subject specialist pedagogy for taking an objectivist view of knowledge deemed less appropriate for vocational education (Lucas, 2007; Nasta, 2007), Hanley and Thompson (2021) argue for a more fluid conception of PCK in which knowledge about the structure of the subject/vocational area and most effective pedagogy is understood. Indeed, this notion can equally apply to TVET with the intersection of subject knowledge and generic pedagogic knowledge, also benefiting from the occupational experiences and habitus (Hanley, Hepworth, Orr and Thompson, 2018; Loo, 2020). Despite Kuhn, Alonzo, and Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia (2016), in their evaluation of the PCK of pre- and in-service teachers of business and economics in German VET, suggesting that PCK typically develops from trial-and-error experiences as a teacher, Kuhn et al (2016: 14) also found that:

> the level of PCK among different groups of in-service teachers in the field of business and economics increased as additional classes on subject-specific teaching methodology were introduced.

While improving pedagogy and, at the same time, foregrounding rather than marginalising TVET subjects within FE ITE, there will likely be a further benefit of promoting more consistent, rather than competing discourses of skill between TEds and trainee TVET teachers.

7.5.2.2 TVET Practitioners' Access to ITE

Regardless of whether the subject is foregrounded in FE ITE, TVET teachers' discourses may never align with that of TEds working in HEIs as they are restricted to becoming TEds themselves due to the inherent nature of HE validated ITE programmes, which creates a barrier to entry for those with lower-level credentials (e.g., those without an undergraduate degree). This is reflected in the current FE ITE workforce, which is dominated by those from more 'academic' backgrounds (NRDC, 2004; Noel, 2006; Harkin et al, 2008; Loo, 2020) and this creates a vicious cycle with the skills discourse, akin to what Beck (2002) was referring to when discussing capitalists becoming the creators of policy i.e., those from more privileged academic backgrounds, who are not ensconced in TVET skill discourses, being the ones that continue to teach and create policy for FE ITE. Perhaps this can be explained as an intentional act to increase the division between the academic and technical and the reason we see the competing discourses in this study.

Regardless, it is essential that to overcome the obstacle of trainee TVET teachers being marginalised in FE ITE, there must be increased involvement of experienced TVET teachers in the delivery of FE ITE, particularly for those in-service programmes who more often work with trainee TVET teachers. I argue that this will have several benefits. Firstly, doing so allows for increased mobility for those TVET teachers who have a deep understanding of their professional habitus and the skills discourses within these communities. With the data in this study highlighting little-to-no explicit discussion of skill in teacher education, and the limited recontextualisation from TEds to trainee TVET teachers, it would be advantageous to place debates about skill front and centre of FE ITE qualifications. This may be enhanced by offering more opportunities for those from TVET backgrounds to become TEds themselves. Removing the obstacle to becoming a TEd for those from TVET backgrounds provides opportunities for those with

clearer/stronger conceptions of occupational skills to contribute to the skills discourses in FE ITE. While some might argue that this may compromise the 'academic' side of the FE ITE curriculum, I suggest that it provides opportunities for a more authentic ITE experience for trainee TVET teachers and, I believe, that lowering the barrier to entry is an important step-change for HE providers of FE ITE. With this argument, some might question the role of the HE provider at all, yet I argue that this approach, coupled with the suggestions made in 7.5.1.2 would raise the status of the profession, strengthen the professional habitus and result in clearer, more coherent skills discourses.

To summarise 7.5, taking two significant obstacles that I feel contribute to the social wrong, I have offered ways to problematise and challenge them to support changes in the skills discourses and contribute to a more socially-just TVET sector. I started by suggesting that the current capitalist, neoliberal ideology that exists to promote individual marketability, with a discourse that focuses on higher level skills to boost economic growth, is unsustainable. This should be critiqued and reset in a new ideology associated with lifelong learning and social cohesion. I then provided suggestions for overcoming the systemic structural issues with FE ITE that currently marginalises TVET. Firstly, by strengthening the classification of knowledge in FE ITE through the integration of philosophy and sociology, this may support the development of a professional habitus and promote anti-capitalise critique. Secondly, by collaborating with the TVET sector to incorporate more subject specialist pedagogy into ITE, may serve to change and create greater coherence in the skills discourse, providing a more authentic ITE experience for trainee TVET teachers.

7.6 Study Limitations

This section will provide an overview of some of the challenges faced in undertaking this study, along with how I mitigated these to minimise their impact. Furthermore, I intend to acknowledge some of the broader limitations that readers might critique.

As mentioned in chapter 4, a Faircloughian approach to CDA is unapologetically vague in what does and does not constitute a CDA. I feel that this degree of flexibility supported

the journey I was on with this thesis, allowing me to utilise theory from different domains in a transdisciplinary manner and to respond to my research questions. This does raise questions about validity and, of course, the interpretation of the texts is highly subjective without a standardised approach, but this is the nature of a CDA methodology. Compared to some of the CDA research I explored in advance of my own attempt, (Mulderrig, 2012; Woodside-Jiron, 2014; Gowhary et al, 2016; Rachman et al, 2017), which I found to be limited, with conclusions derived from the studies often based on tenuous links to what was presented, I attempted to conduct a more comprehensive CDA using the principles of Fairclough's work. In doing so, I realise that this was quite heavy in the descriptive phase. For me, this was an important prerequisite to the analysis but, to the reader, this may seem a little cumbersome to read, particularly in CDA 1.

While CDA 1 was a little more structured and wedded to Fairclough's 'steps' for each stage of the analysis, I adapted the approach for CDA 2 with less emphasis on the descriptive phase, instead using this to identify key discussion themes which were elucidated and explored through the interpretive and explanatory analysis. This was an important change from CDA 1 as the texts (transcripts) were not produced in the same way, with the focus group texts much less coherent than the policy texts. As Smithson (2007) asserts, focus groups can result in some subjects limiting their contributions compared to how they might be in a private, 1-1 interview and I can certainly vouch for this in my focus groups as, whilst I attempted to facilitate inclusive discussions and a safe environment, some subjects dominated the discussion and sometimes they deviated from the key question. Whilst important to allow for subjects to share their views as extensively as possible, facilitating the focus group was made more challenging through the online space we were forced to conduct them in, where it was much harder to interject and read the body language of others in the group (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017). There is a danger with this that some of the subjects were less open and consensus between subjects may not have been legitimate (Hoffman, Novak, and Stein, 2012). Were I to carry out further research in this field, despite its resource intensity, I would perhaps resort to more face-to-face individual interviews to ensure that all views are honest and to allow for easier refocussing of the discussion where appropriate.

When analysing the skills discourse, one of the prominent features of the textual analysis was the way in which skill was characterised and for this, I opted to draw on the work of Winch (2010), as per chapter 3. This, I feel, provided a strong base from which to categorise notions of skill, but it is limited by the fact that this is one typology and there are numerous others which may have been used. Indeed, the notion of skill has been discussed at length across a range of domains (psychological, sociological, philosophical) and I only skimmed the surface of these in my literature review. Fundamentally, it seems, that skill can be viewed in two core ways 1) as a possession of the individual and 2) a social collective (Ainley 1993). In spite of the problems with separating skills from the social context in which they are exercised, and from the bodies of people who use them (Wheelahan, 2007), the view of skill belonging to the individual has pervaded policy literature since the mid-19th Century and this perspective also dominated much of the philosophical and sociological conceptions of skill explored in my literature review. Therefore, I feel that the strengths in Winch's work, based on Rylean ordinary language philosophy, offered a credible way in which to categorise conceptions of skill.

Using a Bernsteinian analysis to consolidate the findings of both CDAs allowed me to examine the recontextualisation of the policy to practice. The theory also compliments a CR philosophy (Wheelahan, 2007) in that it allows for one to determine the causal mechanism for discourse. Yet, as mentioned previously, this theory is ensconced in the school sector and is highly abstract, making it challenging on a practical or empirical level (Dowling, 1999; Beck and Young, 2005). My theorisations, therefore, carefully selected aspects of the theory I deemed to be most relevant to TVET and FE ITE in order to present a coherent argument for mechanisms that contribute to inequality within TVET.

To summarise this section, I have explored some of the limitations of the study and outlined mitigations where appropriate. In doing this, I hope to have convinced the reader of the validity of this thesis in contributing new and important knowledge to the fields of discourse analysis and TVET education.

7.7 Conclusions, Implications and Areas for Further Investigation

To conclude, this thesis has highlighted two structural issues that the data suggests may contribute to the marginalisation of TVET teachers and learners. The first in respect to the discursive practices of trainee TVET teachers which helps them to maintain their advantaged position as a more privileged group through reflecting policy skills discourses. Whilst they may be entirely unaware of their positionality, it may contribute to the marginalisation of broader vocational programmes and the associated skills discourses. This has implications for all stakeholders in the TVET field which seek a more socially-just society, as current practices seem not a solution to inequality but part of the problem. The second structural issue that the literature and data revealed is more systematic of the structure of FE ITE, where the skills discourse is pervaded by dual generic notions of skill, both aligned to neoliberal principles, yet with little substance and without a strongly classified knowledge base. This, I suggest, marginalises TVET professions and their discursive practices. This has implications for policy makers who seek to offer authentic ITE for the TVET sector and, despite forthcoming changes to the FE ITE curriculum, it is evident that any opportunity for anti-capitalist critique and understanding of the TVET system within wider society is omitted. Whilst I have suggested some ways in which FE ITE might be developed to mitigate against these issues, for example, through the integration of more sociology to support a stronger classified knowledge base, and through working more collaborative work with the TVET sector to support subject specialist pedagogy, further research is required to explore the detail of these ideas.

I feel that this thesis has opened the lid to a ‘skills discourse container’ and found a complex and multi-faceted set of discourses that can be directly linked to societal structures of class. These discourses, shared by technical teachers unwittingly transmitting policy discourse, and TEds whose generic discourse does not challenge this, act in concert both to marginalise TVET and limit the extent of its ITE.

The data from this thesis does not enable me to address questions beyond describing the present situation so there is further work required in the field to problematise the sustainability of the skills discourse in policy and examine how skills discourses have

changed or continue to be propagated since the implementation of T-Levels and the transition programme, and to determine the success or otherwise of this in relation to meeting current policy objectives i.e., meeting skills needs subsequent impact on social mobility. Furthermore, with the forthcoming changes to the standards that underpin the qualifications there is important work to be done to explore the skills discourse in FE ITE and discern to what extent policy discourse is transmitted through this.

7.8 Closing Remarks

Like many PhD candidates that have preceded - and will no doubt follow - me, this work has been a painstaking journey of learning and self-discovery. Whilst I realised that there was a problem with the notion of skill very early in my teaching career, I was never equipped with the tools to unpack and critique the issue. This study is, in part, a defining moment for me, a moment where I realise who I am and what I want to be in the world.

It is only through my reading for this thesis that I have developed an understanding of my identity and the obstacles and oppression that I have had to endure. In doing so, I have been equipped with a set of tools that allow me to critique the structures in society that have contributed to this. I say this in the knowledge that, as a White, heterosexual male, I benefit from many privileges that others are not afford and I realise that, as a socially mobile individual, I am now living a life of middle-class aspirations and am part of the problem I seek to challenge. In my conclusions, I allude to the lack of social sciences in FE ITE and its importance in critiquing capitalism and, I now recognise that this is missing from TVET more broadly and, consequently, the dominant class remain largely unchallenged and free from critique. This study is for anyone who, like I was, is yet to find themself and their voice.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Confirmation of Ethical Approval

Kedleston Road, Derby
DE22 1GB, UK

T: +44 (0)1332 591060
E: researchoffice@derby.ac.uk
Sponsor License No: QGN14R294

Dear Daniel
ETH1920-2031
Thank you for submitting your application to the College of Arts, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Committee, which has now been reviewed and considered.

The outcome of your

application is: approved.

with the recommendation;
Please ensure application and supplementary documentation state the same thing, ideally that names will not be collected.

Feedback on your application is available here.
If any changes to the study described in the application are necessary, you must notify the Committee and may be required to make a resubmission of the application.

Please note that ethical approval for this application is valid for five years
On behalf of the Committee, we wish you the best of luck with your study.
Yours sincerely
Jonathan O'Donnell

Appendix B – Email to Potential Subjects

Hello.

I am currently undertaking research as part of my PhD in Education. I am seeking prospective subjects and would like to invite you to be part of my research. If this is something that you might be interested in, please continue to read this document for further information and for guidance regarding how to proceed if you would like to participate.

I look forward to hearing from you,
Many thanks,
Dan Williams
PhD Candidate, University of Derby

Appendix C – Subject Information Sheet

1. Invitation to participate in research

1.1. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study that I am undertaking as part of my PhD in Education at the University of Derby. It is important that you fully understand the details of the research and what your role is as a subject in the research. Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding whether you would like to participate.

2. What is the purpose of this investigation?

2.1. The primary research aim is to explore FE Teacher Trainers' and In-Service FE Trainee Teachers' understanding of the notion of 'skill': what constitutes a skill, how this perspective is formed, what types of skills are taught in the subject and how skills are learnt.

2.2. More specifically, the research aims to address the following objectives:

2.2.1. Determine FE Teacher Trainers' and In-Service FE Trainee Teachers' understanding of what a 'skill' is and what they perceive as skills.

2.2.2. Explore how these perspectives of skill are formed.

2.2.3. Identify the different types of skills that are taught on In-Service FE Trainee Teachers' vocational programmes

2.2.4. Identify the different types of skills that are discussed on FE ITE programmes.

2.2.5. Explore how In-Service FE Trainee Teachers are taught/learn to develop learners' skills.

3. Reasons for invitation

3.1. I am seeking FE Teacher Trainers and In-Service FE Trainee Teachers from a range of institutions to participate in this study. In the interests of diversity, I am asking individuals from a range of backgrounds and experiences. You have been identified as a suitable candidate for participation.

4. What will happen if I take part?

4.1. If you confirm that you would like to participate in the research, within 4 weeks, you will be invited to attend a focus group interview, with me, via Teams. This is likely to last between 60 and 90 minutes and will include a thorough debrief.

5. What happens to the information in the project?

5.1. All data obtained throughout the research project will not be used in any other capacity outside of the research objectives. Data collected will include: age, ethnicity, job role and vocational area in addition to responses to the focus group questions.

5.2. All data derived from the research will be stored in a password protected Office 365 file (audio file and word transcription) for a minimum of 10 years to comply with GDPR (2018) and University of Derby guidelines.

5.3. You reserve the right to withdraw from research at any point during the data collection process by verbally informing the interviewer of your wish. Following the interview, in the event of wanting to withdraw, you may do so at any time, and without reason, until 30th June 2021. Please use the contact details in 8.1 should this be your wish. If you opt to withdraw before the deadline, all data collected to this point will be destroyed (the right to erasure).

5.4. In completing the focus group, you will be under no obligation to answer any or all questions.

5.5. All subject names and place of work will be anonymised throughout the writing of the research to maximise confidentiality. Despite this, should you provide any data that is inaccurate, you have the right to request rectification by 30th June 2021 using the contact details in 8.1.

5.6. Whilst unlikely, it is also important to acknowledge that the questions that the core research questions seek to answer may precipitate an examination of factors such as, but not limited to, subject specialism, sex, age and experience of the subjects. Thus, there is a small chance that you may become identifiable.

5.7. All data collected from your interview will remain accessible to you to refer back to at any point within the next 10 years. This complies with GDPR (2018) and University of Derby recommendations.

6. Additional information

6.1. No financial remuneration is offered for participation in the research.

7. What happens next?

7.1. If you would like to participate in the research project, with full acceptance of the information and requirements listed above, please confirm by completing the section at the bottom of this document.

7.2. Once signed, please complete the separate Subject Consent Form and send back electronically to the email address identified under section 8.1 within 10 working days from the date that you received the form. You will then receive further correspondence regarding access to and completion of the survey.

7.3. If no contact has been made within 10 working days, it will be assumed that you do not wish to participate. In this instance, many thanks for your attention.

8. Researcher contact details

8.1. If you would like to discuss the research in more detail before deciding if you would like to participate, please contact me using any of the communication channels identified below.

Dan Williams

Contact Number: 01332592178; Email Address: 100044978@unimail.derby.ac.uk

Appendix D - Informed Consent

By signing below and returning this form electronically to the email address specified in section 8.1 on the Subject Information Sheet, you confirm the following;

- I have read and understood all sections detailed on the Subject Information Sheet
- I understand the purpose of the study
- I understand what my participation in the study consists of
- I have been provided the opportunity to ask further questions regarding the research
- All reasonable measures will be undertaken to keep my identity anonymous, but I acknowledge the risks identified in section 5.5 and 5.6 of the Participation Information Sheet
- I understand that I will not receive any financial reward for agreeing to participate in the research
- I acknowledge and agree that the researcher will have ownership of the primary data that is generated
- I agree to participate in the study as outlined above in the Participation Information Sheet

Print Name:

Signature:

Contact number/email:

Date:

Appendix E - Focus Group Handout/ Prompt Sheet

Focus Group: subject handout 'skill policy'.

Key Question 1: Tell me about what 'skills' you teach…

Skill is a term which has many connotations and over several decades of policy documentation the notion of skill has evolved**. When you answer this question, think about what you understand by the term 'skill'…**

What would, and what would you not include in the definition of a skill?

Are there things that you would not call skills, but would call something else (e.g. competence, ability)?

Key Question 2: Where do you get your ideas from about skill?

When you answer this question, think about how your view of skill has been shaped by all or some of the below:

Programme Specifications/ Syllabi
What kind of 'skills' are included?

Senior Leaders
What is the college agenda with the development of skills?

Teacher Training
What skills were talked about during your teacher training?

Colleagues
What things do your colleagues associate with skill?

Policy
Have you read or heard of any Government policies that mention skills (e.g. Skills Plan)?

Employers
What do the employers that you work with say about skills?

Personal Reading
Have you read anything related to skills that has informed your view?

Experiences
What experiences have you had that have helped to shape your view of skills?

Key Question 3 for trainee teachers only: How do learners develop the skills that you have mentioned?

When you answer this question, think about the range of skills you teach and how you support the development of these. You might consider:

Theory

Practice

In the workplace

At college

In isolation

In context

Independently

With others

Key Question 3 for teacher educators only: What do you teach about skills to your trainee teachers?

When you answer this question, think about what trainees learn about skills on the ITE programme. You might consider:

Types of skill that learners can learn

e.g. technical, social, transferable

Models of skill acquisition

e.g. Dreyfus and Dreyfus; Fitts and Posner

Learning theory

e.g. situated learning

Learning strategies

e.g. cooperative learning