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Beyond subjects and skills or crossing the divide? From additionality to complementarity in college enrichment

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a longitudinal study, organized around national surveys and institution-based case studies, of 'enrichment' in post-16 colleges across England and Wales. These institutions transect general and vocational education pathways, whose curricula are organized respectively around subject disciplines and employment skills. Drawing on social justice perspectives and understandings of curriculum theory and cultural reproduction, the study initially analysed enrichment practices positioned as *additional* to subject-based curricula. However, extending thematic analysis through cross-case comparison, the study uncovered an additional, *complementary* role of enrichment: in some specialist/general education settings, teacher-led, practice-based extensions of subject curricula, complemented by agentic networking opportunities, facilitated middle-class higher education transitions; vocational enrichment, responding instead to 'learner support' imperatives and socializing young people into employment routines, sustained the normative transitions to work that characterize vocational pathways. These distinctive complementary logics mirror the inequalities of epistemic access identified by curriculum theory, suggesting that these extend beyond formal curricula. On the other hand, some marginal practices, including broader, more critical preparation for adulthood and work, suggest possibilities to advance social justice, transgressing the academic/vocational divide. Whilst unequal societies persistently sustain this divide, activities outside formal curricula may support more agentic and socially just transitions to adulthood and working life.

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Introduction: enrichment and curriculum theory

This paper reports a longitudinal study of curriculum and practice located outside examined or assessed subjects, extending the study of curriculum into areas widely thought of as marginal to education and its outcomes, yet which, we argue, have under-reported significance for the educational outcomes and transitions of young people. Whilst neoliberal ideas continue to dominate education internationally, uncertainties about its ethical basis and significance for the cohesion of Western societies have also given rise to initiatives in civic or 'character' education (Hart, 2022; Nylund et al., 2020; Suissa, 2015). In England, requirements 'to develop students' character, broader skills, attitudes and confidence, and support progression' (Education and Skills Funding Agency ESFA, 2022, pp. 34–5) have now become part of the government inspectorate's framework (Ofsted

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Office for Standards in Education, 2022) and a condition of public funding even in vocational settings. Especially, in the country's largely vocational further education colleges, a broad range of activities collectively described as 'enrichment' has long been seen as a means for disadvantaged students to access cultural resources, countering the many opportunities for middle-class families to perpetuate their societal advantages (Atkins et al., 2023; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Lareau, 1989; Reay, 1998, 2000).

Curriculum theory has long focused on the content of assessed subjects that lead directly to qualifications: access to established school subjects, characterized as 'powerful' knowledge, is seen widely as a key determinant of social justice (Carlgren, 2020; Morgan et al., 2019; Muller, 2014; Muller & Young, 2019; Young, 2013). Yet questions of personal formation or 'subjectification' (Biesta, 2010, 2020) have asked whether disciplinary knowledge suffices for the cultivation of the mind or whether such a focus:

> . . . ignores the development of capacities for practical, moral and ethical reasoning and dispositions or virtues such as caring, empathy, compassion, and social responsibility (Deng, 2018, p. 339).

These questions, however, are usually posed in relation to general education and in this shift of attention from knowledge to knower, 'the identities, backgrounds and experiences of [. . .] students [. . .] are little discussed' (Friesen, 2018, p. 7). The study reported here started from the perspective that social justice cannot be served by a system where such concerns about capacities and dispositions are restricted to general education settings where middle-class students are over-represented, whilst vocational students are prepared only for the routines of employment.

Our paper, then, examines whether inequalities normally associated with the subject-based curriculum might also emerge precisely in practices more broadly focused on the formation of the person. Its context is an expansion of enrichment activities in England, extending into vocational settings, that has coincided with the 'knowledge turn' (Deng, 2022; Lambert, 2011) of Conservative-led UK governments towards 'traditional' or conservative curricula since 2010, with the Conservative-led coalition's first White Paper observing that, 'There is much of value that children need to learn and experience which sits outside subject disciplines' (Department for Education DfE, 2010, p. 42). With elements outside the assessed curriculum long associated with elite schooling, several studies have recently examined these in relation to the school sector (Centre for Social Justice, 2021; Donnelly et al., 2019; Robinson, 2024). In the college sector, Ofsted's (Office for Standards in Education) (2022) requirement 'to give all learners . . . the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2022, p. 9), provides little clarity about how this might be achieved, especially in the absence of designated funding. Such demands led the sectoral body Association of Colleges (AoC) to launch a succession of initiatives in relation to enrichment, with the aim of providing guidance and support to its members. AoC approached the authors to provide an empirical study of current enrichment provision that could inform these initiatives and NCFE, founded as an awarding body but now a more broadly based educational charity, for financial support. The funder's objectives for the study sought to 'generate definition and clarity' and 'identify examples of effective institutional programmes' combined with an interest in enrichment's 'positive impact' and 'potential economic value'. The findings of the project enabled both the funder and the AoC to promote and support enrichment for the sector, whilst developing demands based on the study's findings for such activities to be resourced by the state.

In this paper, we report empirical findings from this four-year national study. The section immediately below presents our theoretical approach, informed by commitment to social justice and bringing together curriculum theory with understandings of cultural reproduction, enabling us to extend understandings of inequality into these liminal spaces. We describe the post-16 institutions in the study, located across the differentiated pathways of general and vocational education, and review the historical foundations of activity outside their subject curriculum, illustrating how enrichment in these settings has been discussed in the literature. This is followed by a methodological account of the study design and methods. We then set out our findings,

initially drawing on understandings of curriculum to explain what we describe as the *additional* role of enrichment, before setting out our findings about its *complementary* roles within these pathways, explaining how each contributes to the social destinations of each pathway's students and hence to curricular inequalities. Finally, we examine the implications of these findings, especially their potential either to reinforce the academic/vocational divide usually associated with taught subject disciplines, or to diminish it, complementing vocational curricula in ways that advance social justice.

Theoretical foundations: social justice, curriculum and cultural reproduction

Whilst the study responds to the funders' objectives, it was undertaken by a team for whom considerations of social justice (e.g. Atkins, 2009; Atkins & Duckworth, 2019; Esmond & Atkins, 2022; Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 2020) determine the significance of curricula. Both epistemic access and humanistic approaches face widening inequalities for which policymakers mainly prescribe aspiration to educational and societal mobility. This 'double-edged sword' congratulates the winners whilst deriding the losers (Sandel, 2020, pp. 25–26) through a discourse that systematically devalues the social origins, interests, educational experiences and outcomes of the disadvantaged. On the basis of social justice criteria, we have demonstrated a widening gap not only between general education and vocational pathways but increasing fissures within vocational education itself, further devaluing substantial numbers of students on the basis of class fraction, gender, ethnicity and the intersections of these structural inequalities (Esmond, 2018; Esmond & Atkins, 2020, 2022; Kaur, 2023a, 2023b). Our attention to the distinction between general and vocational curricula in this project, and to the way these shape the trajectories and life-chances of young people, is in this sense attentive to curriculum theory but also to modes of cultural reproduction beyond questions of curriculum content.

Curriculum theory has mainly prioritized the subject disciplines of each pathway, and their links to the reproduction of societal inequalities. Thus, general education curricula are organized around a narrow range of subjects that has changed slowly over the last century: they remain the normative route into higher levels of study and professional employment. Their disciplines provide 'specialized knowledge in contrast to everyday or contextualized knowledge' (Carlgren, 2020, p. 324) and sustain the normative pattern of middle-class transition to higher education and professional employment. By contrast, vocational pathways focus on occupational skills and are 'unproblematically positioned as applied, experiential and work-focused learning' (Wheelahan, 2015, p. 750), whilst 'attracting working-class students and socializing them for working-class jobs' (Nylund et al., 2020, p. 1) and contributing to gender segregation on labour market lines (Ledman et al., 2020). This distinction takes different forms internationally, with vocational pathways including the teaching of civic affairs and school subjects alongside occupational skills in some countries at various times in the last half-century (Bailey & Unwin, 2008; Nylund & Virolainen, 2019; Rasse & Sevilla, 2023). The narrowest forms of vocationalism, emerging in countries like England and Australia during the neoliberal ascendancy from the 1980s onwards, have been almost entirely devoid of such content, focusing instead on the assessment of behaviours, narrowly defined and highly contextualized as indicators of competence (Bates, 1991; Morgan, 2022; Wolf, 1995).

Yet the differences between these pathways have never been confined to subjects and qualifications alone: the reproduction of classed, gendered and racialized inequalities takes place not only through the dominance of normative culture but through its contestation and compromise with the cultures of other social groups (Willis, 1981, 1983; Yosso, 2005). We draw on such understandings and frameworks, not least Bourdieu's notions of institutionalized and embodied forms of cultural capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984, 1990) as we attempt to 'make justice' (Griffiths, 2003, p. 125) in our research. From these perspectives, unequal outcomes and hierarchical distinctions assume greater weight than any formal expressions of parity between general and vocational pathways, such as those that appear in both the rationale for 'technical education' qualifications and the case for their eventual

abolition (Department for Education (DfE), 2023, 2024; Department for Education/Department for Business, Energy, Innovation and Science DfE/DBEIS, 2016; Prime Minister's Office, 2023).

In the following section, we present the setting of our study: the colleges offering both general and vocational education provision across different institutional types outside the school system. We outline the historical emergence of complementary elements to technical curricula in Britain and their successors leading up to contemporary enrichment.

Post-16 colleges and enrichment

The post-16 colleges where our study took place are located outside the secondary school system and teach 41% of 16- and 17-year-olds in n England, compared to 38% in state school sixth forms and 6% at 'independent' (i.e. private) schools (Department for Education (DfE), 2023, p. 27). The most numerous, *general further education* (GFE, or simply 'further education') colleges teach 33% of 16–17-year-olds. They are the most vocationally oriented institutions, teaching most of the 21% of the age cohort who study for 'level 3 technical' qualifications, as well as the 11% on 'mixed level 3' (upper secondary) and the 11% studying at below this level, including on direct routes to employment (Department for Education (DfE), 2023, p. 27). Their noted diversity includes teaching significant numbers of adults, as well as mainly vocational higher education. Importantly, further education colleges also teach 'A levels', the upper secondary general education qualifications taught in state and independent sixth forms.

Sixth form colleges (SFCs), the next largest group, by contrast offer mainly general education courses at upper secondary level: most of their students (8% of 16–17-year-olds) study 'A levels'. Once seen as institutions with potential to overcome the 'academic/vocational' divide (Reid & Filby, 1982), by the end of the 1980s Hodkinson (1989) was able to describe them as 'firmly placed on one side of the academic/vocational divide' (Hodkinson, 1989, p. 369). They can offer a cultural haven to those alienated by mainstream schooling and 'thriving elsewhere' (c.f. Maguire et al., 2020; McPherson et al., 2023, p. 41ff.) but their curriculum largely supports the normative transitions of young people from middle-class families. In short, these different post-16 institutions span both sides of the 'academic-vocational' divide but with different balances and, to a degree, institutional cultures. *Specialist colleges*, which tend to focus on vocational specialisms, such as land-based courses, complete the post-16 sector.

Vocational education has taken an unusually narrow form in England: unlike many European countries where school-based vocational courses include civic and general education subjects, its technical colleges until the 1970s mainly taught part-time courses to early school-leavers (Esmond & Wedekind, 2023; Esmond & Wood, 2017). However, their vocational curriculum was complemented in early post-war years by 'general studies' or 'liberal studies' classes, responding to concerns about its overspecialized or utilitarian focus on technical content (Ministry of Education, 1959, 1961). Provided widely by specialist liberal studies tutors, this activity sought to broaden the perspectives of apprentices (e.g. Ecclestone, 2002; Huddlestone & Unwin, 2024, p. 25). Moves to integrate these approaches into technical qualifications were initiated following the Haslegrave Report (Department of Edecation and Science DES, 1973) but from the 1980s the emergence of a 'new vocationalism' (Bates et al., 1984; Hodkinson, 1991) centred on competency-based training for unemployed youth had little need for this breadth, leading to the demise of general and liberal studies (Bailey & Unwin, 2008; Simmons, 2019). With subject knowledge atomized into 'occupational competences' that denied students access to disciplinary principles (Wheelahan, 2007, 2015), a marketized discourse of 'providers' and 'delivery' (Brockmann et al., 2008; Esmond, 2020, p. 82) became part of an international vocational *lingua franca* of competences and learning outcomes (Allais, 2015).

Following the demise of liberal/general studies, qualifications, such as 'functional skills' in literacy and numeracy, mobilized in support of student 'employability', became the principal complement of vocational courses. Rather than providing epistemic access, such additional provision can easily succumb to vocational imperatives that ironically diminish their value in the labour market (Pietilä &

Lappalainen, 2023). Activities not directly contributing to vocational curricula consequently assumed a more marginal role in the following years, sometimes described as 'enrichment' or 'additionality'. The Further Education Unit (FEU) (1985) included enrichment in its generic 'Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education', designed for low-attaining students 'warehoused' in colleges at a time of mass youth unemployment. No clear relationship to occupational knowledge is evident there, or in the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), 1996) catalogue of enrichment activities. For the FEFC (1996):

> Enrichment is defined as those activities which colleges provide in order to extend students' education *beyond their main course of study*. Extra-curricular activities of interest to the student which promote the acquisition of 'soft' skills such as communication and self-confidence and which involve learning that is *not linked directly to the formal curriculum*. Enrichment is likely to involve activities which are focussed around work-related learning, personal development, and community involvement. (FEFC, 1996, p. 2, our emphases)

This position on the periphery of vocational practice has been widely taken for granted during the intervening quarter-century, without serious investigation prior to the study reported here. Yet possibilities for this kind of informal curriculum and its interests to transgress the academic/vocational divide remained of interest to researchers, for example, Hodkinson's (1991) proposition that concerns around personal effectiveness and autonomy might yet provide as an 'integrating theme' at post-16. These calls provide muted echoes of earlier proposals for education to extend to practical know-how and social dispositions, such as citizenship, notably by Pring (1995) and others (Pring et al., 2009; Raffe et al., 1998).

The re-emergence of enrichment in recent years appears to have followed more recent patterns of a largely marginalized 'additionality' rather than a return to the comprehensive traditions of liberal or general studies. Conservative governments moved this curriculum back towards earlier knowledge traditions, representing this turn as a 'driver of true meritocracy' (Gibb, 2017, cited in Hordern, 2022). This knowledge turn neither provided socialized understandings of knowledge nor produced universal access (Morgan et al., 2019; Young & Muller, 2010). Yet, despite the consequences of market competition, academisation and 'school improvement' regimes in narrowing educational practice, general education continues to provide widely recognized routes to subject-based 'powerful knowledge', higher education and professional careers, from which vocational students remain excluded. Despite public declarations of support and a substantial investment in new 'technical' qualifications, the college sector has seen significant reductions in real-terms resourcing.

Having presented this setting for our study and its background, we explain in the following section the study's design and methods.

Study design and methods

In line with the funder's objectives set out in the introduction, the research was designed as a four-year longitudinal study, enabling it to examine the impact of enrichment activities on young people's transitions into work and further study. The study aimed both to draw attention to practices of value and identify limitations to the provision and its resources. To this end, we worked closely with partners, funders, and participants in an inductive approach to the development of the methodology, actions consistent with social justice inquiry (See Atkins & Duckworth, 2019). Our initial definition of enrichment was drawn from the FEFC (1996) report cited above, adopting its characterization of enrichment as 'learning that is not linked directly to the formal curriculum', a definition we later revised.

In line with the expectations of our funders and partners (whose role centred on facilitating access to field sites and disseminating emerging findings) as well as with the norms of research in vocational education studies, the timescale of the project aligned to young people's transitions from education into employment. A four-year study would allow a preliminary survey, providing a national overview and follow this up with interviews to select regional case studies for in-depth

research. The case studies would draw together a blend of qualitative methods, including observation, documentary analysis and interviews, engaging variously with college managers, teaching and specialist enrichment staff, as well as students. They would also examine the impact of enrichment activities by identifying participants who could be re-interviewed repeatedly over time, including during employment or further study: our partners and funders hoped to be able to identify ways in which enrichment led to improved outcomes for students. This design and the various methods conformed to ethical expectations, including the British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018) ethical guidelines, and our own commitments to social justice and to socially just educational research (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019). The project was approved by the University of Derby, College of Arts, Humanities and Education College Research Ethics Committee (Decision ETH1920–36458), providing an important framework for our research and data practices.

Notwithstanding the pandemic disruption inevitable over a four-year study starting in 2020, the study achieved most of these objectives. The opening survey of AoC affiliates drew 84 respondents, and four follow-up interviews were carried out in each of the 9 socio-economic regions. However, moving on to site visits proved more difficult during periods of COVID-19 lockdown, and when organizational life in vocational settings became exceptionally difficult (Avis et al., 2021). Over many months, interviews were difficult to arrange and were restricted to online interactions, mainly conducted via Microsoft Teams. Whilst this enabled the collection of substantial and significant data, it did render difficult the early establishment of lasting relationships with students, a sample of whom we had hoped to interview repeatedly at each college. In this sense, the study became less a study of individual students' transitions. Yet we also gained insights that we had not anticipated into the long-term impact of enrichment, and indeed of educational pathways, on the whole life-course of students.

Other changes emerged from our developing understandings of the pattern of enrichment activity: whilst we had originally planned to select case studies on a regional basis, we realized that different patterns of enrichment activity across the sector had greater significance than any regional pattern. We moved from a plan for each case study to represent one socio-economic region, to nine ideal types of enrichment activity. Moreover, we were able to build on these nine case studies through supplementary interviews with practitioners and students at other institutions we met during dissemination activities, enriching our understanding of each type. Each of these nine cases was centred on a single college where data was collected through a series of data collection exercises. Patterns of data collection at each varied. At South Sixth, one case study discussed below, we began with an early online meeting with senior managers, followed by three site visits where, in addition to staff interviews, student data collection began with a focus group of 24 students, progressed to 6 paired and individual interviews and on the final visit included three mobile interviews. At Westward College, also discussed below, meetings over the length of the project provided valuable staff and documentary data, but a full day of student interviews only became possible towards the end of the project. However, we also collected comparable data from other sites, especially in following up our second survey. This survey, attracting 109 responses, explored the way enrichment provision had changed in response to COVID-19, having expanded at most colleges surveyed whilst a minority experienced contraction. We also explored at this point what we saw as the most important theme emerging from the data: enrichment's relationship to the mainstream curriculum.

As the case studies progressed, we came to value methods that went beyond formal interviews. We made greater use of documentary evidence, observation and photographic recording. We carried out in-depth individual and paired interviews for key participants; we made use of focus groups especially among students, since which their interaction often proved as significant as the discussion itself; and we probed the impact of enrichment through mobile interviews that visited key locations where students recalled their embodied, relational and sensory engagement with the spaces and settings of their enrichment experience (Kaur, 2023a, 2023b; O'Neill, 2017; Springgay & Truman, 2018).

These approaches generated a considerable volume and variety of data. From the early stages, this was subjected to multiple analytical techniques, including thematic analysis and comparison

across sites. All records of research interactions were uploaded to a double password protected space, including interview transcripts, documentary evidence, photographs, field notes and visit summaries. This made it possible for all researchers to become immersed in all the data (Wellington, 2015, p. 73) and was complemented by regular review meetings, using the 'constant comparative' model (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This gradually revealed the significance of different categories of enrichment and their relationship to specific settings. In our use of techniques developed over many years of qualitative research, we were conscious both of the danger that longstanding engagement with the field informs our constructions (Charmaz, 2006) and Glaser's (1965) distinction of thematic analysis and the search for an axial code from prior coding, on the grounds that researchers constantly redesign and reintegrate theoretical notions (Glaser, 1965, p. 437).

Our analytic procedures utilized an inductive approach unconstrained by either hypothesis or pre-set categories. Rather, we sought to identify and categorize emerging themes whilst acknowledging that data can only ever be partial, conditional and situated (Charmaz et al., 2018, p. 418). Nevertheless, we remained attentive to curriculum theory, initially in its positioning of enrichment outside the framework of subject disciplines. This approach led us to the nine categories of enrichment identified elsewhere in this paper, all of which may be argued to have implications for social justice, in terms of the ways in which they differently and differentially mediate the young people's experience in VET, as well as their transitions to higher education, work, and the broader responsibilities of adulthood. The utilization of an inductive approach leading to Grounded Theory does not imply that we have turned our backs on existing theory. On the contrary, given that Grounded Theory forms a particularly 'powerful qualitative method for social justice inquiry' (Charmaz et al., 2018, p. 411). Thus, our construction of categories of enrichment emerged from building a critical understanding of the unfolding realities of post-16 education which (re-)positioned these categories as key elements of post-pandemic practice, yet largely external to subject-based curricula.

However, as our data collection and thematic analysis proceeded to the careful cross-checking of themes and categories, we reached what we can describe as its axial theme, in the classic manner of grounded theory. This emerged as the different ways in which enrichment relates to the main curriculum, either directly extending the subject or diffused through cross-college approaches mediated by 'learner support' mechanisms. In this, we were more attentive to our understandings of cultural reproduction and the different ways in which students were able to acquire or to contest dominant cultures (Willis, 1981, 1983; Yosso, 2005) or to deploy or acquire institutionalized and embodied forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990) on different educational pathways. Whilst we acknowledge that the use of theoretical frameworks in the context of Grounded Theory is contested, we adopt a constructivist approach to this, given, as Charmaz et al. go on to argue (p. 419) that not beginning a project with a study of the literature 'underestimates researchers' abilities to engage in reflexivity, [providing the opportunity to discard some extant theories] without imposing them on the data [and] adds possible sources of inspiration. . .' or Eureka moments. In our case, whilst reflexivity was achieved through processes of joint analysis, discussion, and reflection throughout the research process, our critical, theorized understandings of established and emerging vocational divides enabled us to make visible the structural foundations of the differences between enrichment types that can appear at first sight to be matters of arbitrary educational practice.

In the following section, we set out our findings in relation to enrichment's role as an *addition* to subjects and skills, discussed above in relation to the literature and confirmed by our early engagement with enrichment practice. Below this, we return to its *complementary* role, building on our understandings of curriculum and cultural reproduction.

Beyond subjects and skills? Enrichment as diverse additionality

This fundamental dimension of enrichment distinguished it as a social and cultural space largely distinct from the taught curriculum. From its earliest phase, the study confirmed earlier descriptions (e.g. FEFC, 1996) with colleges offering a varied range of activity promoting student welfare and

enabling them to develop broader student interests: trips and visits, clubs and societies, above all sport and leisure activities, with the last prominent. We identified nine categories of enrichment, as follows:

(1) *Enrichment for health and fitness*: a foundational core for college enrichment over many years, receiving new impetus from the COVID-19 pandemic
(2) *Subject enrichment in the general education curriculum*, a key focus of the discussion here
(3) *Subject enrichment: technical and vocational*, also discussed below
(4) *Enrichment in creative fields*: specialist opportunities in the cultural sphere that provided both opportunities to work in creative industries and to go beyond industry practices, building on an arts tradition of live projects that cross the boundaries of college and the workplace.
(5) *Holistic enrichment for students with SEND, or studying at Level 1 or below*: enrichment for the most disadvantaged students, which became central to the curriculum for learners in specialist institutions, alongside learning for communication and independence.
(6) *Enrichment for societal participation*: activities with a focus on civic responsibility, including community projects.
(7) *Enrichment for mental health*: post-pandemic activities that explicitly responded to the mental health effects of the pandemic, usually seen as part of 'learner support'.
(8) *Student-led enrichment*: clubs and societies supporting student interests
(9) *Extending perspectives*: activities providing opportunities for active engagement and advocacy, preparing students for participation in a broader society. The differences between these two are further discussed below

Our earliest data confirm the detachment of most enrichment from taught curriculum and assessment. As one of the first participants described it:

> It's a bit of a glue, and it glues students to the college, it makes them feel like they belong to a community without that kind of other thing of, 'Right. Okay, let's complete a CV now. And let's do this. And let's do that'. It's that kind of free space for them to develop in a way that is less kind of monitored, and less, you know, against kind of predefined deadlines or outcomes that need to be achieved. (London senior manager)

In such early interviews, and in our initial survey of AoC affiliates, respondents appeared at pains to explain that the purposes of enrichment lay outside the subjects and skills of the curriculum. Respondents to our opening survey (usually senior managers) overwhelmingly identified their enrichment aims as either broadening human development or strengthening 'employability' attributes. Academic progression within the college emerged as a significantly lower priority, reflecting the conditions of funding (Education and Skills Funding Agency ESFA, 2022) and confirming the detachment of enrichment from taught qualifications. Senior managers and enrichment organizers frequently articulated enrichment as a response to social disadvantage among their students:

> Some of them don't have role models at home . . . the areas we are in are of high deprivation where students are living in poverty and will also be carers. (Enrichment organizer, North-East GCFE college)

> 60-70% of our students will be on free school meals and they have the [lowest] entry point for Maths and English for any college in London and nationally. (Senior Manager, London GCFE college)

As our study progressed, this rationale of enrichment as a response to socio-economic disadvantage appeared to grow in significance. Participants reported that enrichment, cut back in recent years, was now increasing in scope; the difficulties emerging from the pandemic were widely cited, for example, mental health issues as a rationale for sport activities. These understandings have been used widely as a rationale for sports provision since the pandemic, notwithstanding critical accounts (Rossi & Jeanes, 2016; Sandford et al., 2023; Sandford et al., 2006). Moreover, enrichment was rationalized as providing social and cultural benefits to local communities through activities where

students used their technical skills to provide services, such as making products for charity sales or providing hairdressing for pensioners. Student data repeatedly described enrichment not as a means of changing their lives but as a means of sustaining them through their time in college.

An important claim made by some organizers was that enrichment broadened students' societal perspective: that enrichment supported inclusive attitudes among students who might otherwise be prey to racist or other divisive ideas:

> It's about celebrating difference and promoting inclusive behaviour. That is vitally important, because they're all going to go into society, go to the pub or the workplace and come across that. (Enrichment organizer, West Midlands GCFE)

Correspondingly, minority students described opportunities for expression and organization in spaces facilitated by enrichment, notwithstanding the traditions of further education and its international equivalents in relation to race, gender and heteronormativity (Gleeson & Mardle, 1980; Grønborg, 2013; Ledman et al., 2020; Simmons, 2010). Across multiple sites, students from groups at risk of marginalization in these settings described enrichment as a space where they could 'be themselves'. These were opportunities to garner forms of cultural capital recognized in their own communities if not in dominant discourses (Yosso, 2005). Others described enrichment as a space where they would meet others from different backgrounds and studying different subjects, including those who met students from different countries and cultures, for example in sporting events.

Such interventions sustained student continuation; from the perspective of curriculum theory, they do not directly contribute to knowledge; from the policymakers' perspective, this is difficult to measure in terms of labour market transitions. Nor is it always clear how they provide access to forms of cultural capital. These understandings of enrichment have implications for teachers. In most colleges, these activities were supported by small numbers of cross-college staff, at the start of the project sometimes a single specialist organizer of a college-wide enrichment programme, often located in 'learner support' functions, leading to economies of scale. These approaches detach these broader social and cultural purposes and practices from the professional practice of classroom teachers. The minority of colleges that allocated responsibilities to subject teachers and to managers in the core of the college provided a more integrated form of enrichment, directly related to the discipline-based curriculum. This suggested an alternative understanding of enrichment, and in the next section we discuss the relationship between enrichment and the main curriculum, along with its implications.

Connecting to subjects and skills: enrichment as complementary practice

Subject-based enrichment

By contrast, our first survey suggested an organizational model of enrichment that connected enrichment more explicitly to knowledge, with responsibility for enrichment lying with teaching staff rather than enrichment specialists. This data emerged at specialist and sixth-form colleges; some GFE colleges also described a distinctive model for their general education, especially 'A-level', provision. This organizational form reflected an extension of examined subjects with the subject teacher leading enrichment.

This duality was amply demonstrated at South Sixth, where a conscious decision to build enrichment around the subject-based curriculum gave subject tutors hours to develop activities around their subject area: the science teacher leading the construction of a green car; the law teacher's enacted cases or 'moots'; the music teacher's dramatic performance; the media teacher's student magazine. These approaches moved beyond the boundaries of formal study:

> If you want to be a journalist or anything like that, you need to have a portfolio now. And that's what the universities are interested in. (English teacher, South Sixth)

> I've got a student group who have based their entire final personal project on BME topics so they're looking at the origins of Black influenced music over the years [. . .] they're going to this forum completely outside of their course and then they bring that stuff into the class and not only teach their peers but teach me. (Music teacher, South Sixth)

These activities were not described as 'applications' of theory but as ways of bringing subjects to life: one teacher at South Sixth described it as 'professional oxygen' whilst another described it as their only reason for wanting to teach. These appeared closer to what Schwab (1970/2013) describes as 'practical', 'semi-practical' and 'eccentric' concerns. Such activities in vocational curricula are positioned as 'easier and less valuable than "academic" learning' (Francis et al., 2017, p. 417). But staff and students also reflected contemporary arguments for a broader understanding of subjects and the subject, in opposition to the performativity of market-led education (Deng, 2022). Such notions emerged directly from staff data:

> They're very much schooled in rigorous exam style writing and, you know, formulaic ways of creating an argument . . . The pressure to get students through the exam is so high that you basically spoon feed them what you know they need to do. And that doesn't leave very much room for them to express or go off in their own direction or have a chance to respond creatively to something. (English teacher, South Sixth)

For both students and staff, a powerful rationale for these activities, repeated elsewhere in the study, was that these activities support university entry, providing material for the 'personal statement' that UK students were asked to write, to demonstrate their 'suitability' for university study, and beyond this, for entry into professional fields. This view was articulated in student interviews:

> These are things that aren't in our course but which we need for university, and afterwards, to be a lawyer. (Student, South Sixth)

Such enthusiasm for subject breadth extended to a rich range of social activities, clubs, societies and advocacy, promoted by a Freshers' and later Re-Freshers' Fair and co-ordinated by the student union:

> People gained a lot of confidence from it, and it gave a lot of liberty to express their opinions and learn to communicate. (Student focus group, South Sixth)

Indeed, one participant described choosing the college for study because of its reputation for these opportunities. Students commented positively on the opportunity to take a lead within a university-type model of societies. Some GFE colleges also described a special offer for general education courses or 'a mixed economy offer', distinguishing 'enrichment that is related to the qualification, more like additionality' from 'enrichment that is more cross college for students to try new things and develop new interests'. (Enrichment organizer, follow-up interview from second survey.) One college organizer reported:

> . . . an enrichment offer that really was based upon Russell Group [the 'elite' 24 UK universities] entry. We have committed to enlarging this. [i.e. to vocational students](Enrichment organizer, North West GFE)

In a wider sense all these activities related to the general education curriculum as the vehicle for middle-class success as the vehicle for middle-class success, in the sense that these students' preparation for life required the development of cultural facility and critical faculties (Tanguy, 1985). This extension of examined subjects did not mean a deeper engagement with the subject knowledge salient for curriculum theorists (e.g. Carlgren, 2020; Muller & Young, 2019; Young, 2013) but largely practical activities that *complement* subject teaching. Data from students and staff illustrates its significance for their transitions (for students in this case, this meant via university entrance) but for their life course. This emerges through a duality to this pattern of enrichment. On the one hand, this practical enrichment of the general education curriculum provides an unusual example of practices crossing the academic-vocational divide as advocated by Pring and others (Hodkinson, 1991; Pring, 1995; Pring et al., 2009; Suissa, 2016) or a view of practice-based education with the perspective of liberal education as suggested by Carr (1993). Under current pathways, this simply facilitates the accumulation of capital that sustains normative middle-class transitions.

Moreover, as noted above, this form of enrichment looked forward to the deployment of cultural capital in professional occupations. Students spoke with enthusiasm about opportunities to network not only with future university staff but professionals in law or journalism, for example. The ability to engage with these opportunities was seen as a marker for those with the personal characteristics enabling them to engage with this combination of subject teaching, practice-based subject enrichment and agentic social networks. Moreover, students also recognized that participation depended on social factors. This emerged at a focus group dominated by activists from societies and the student union:

> There's a particular type of person that societies and extracurricular stuff attracts because they're going to be keen, they're gonna be willing to do stuff and especially on the Student Union. (Student focus group, South Sixth)

> I think people engage in societies in different ways because some people are quite passive and they just sit there and like are quite interested in that but also…. [trails off] (Student focus group, South Sixth)

Whilst this blend of practices might be described as emancipatory, the question remains whether they work as a process of social closure from which working-class students are excluded. As if to confirm this possibility, a student who had joined the focus group because 'My teacher told me to come to this', said he had never heard of the activities that his peers had discussed with such animation for the previous hour.

We specifically asked about the connection between curriculum and enrichment in our second major survey, when we posed the question 'Do you have any general comments about the way your college's enrichment offer relates to the taught curriculum?' As the study moved into its later stages, we began to ask more insistently: was this kind of practice possible in vocational settings? What were the equivalents for 'technical education' and how did they relate to technical and vocational curricula? We discuss our findings in this area next.

'Technical' enrichment: socialisation and beyond

From the beginning of our study, the research team had taken a critical interest in how enrichment related to transitions into employment. Our initial survey attracted as many responses that prioritized occupational aims as those framing enrichment as development of the person. These raised important questions about how enrichment could broaden the content of technical or vocational courses, as our earlier work had already noted the tendency for early experiences of work or work placements to socialize students into employment routines rather than provide meaningful learning experiences (Atkins, 2009; Esmond, 2018; Esmond & Atkins, 2020, 2022). As we discovered the complementary nature of practice-based enrichment on general education programmes, we became still more interested in the possibilities of enrichment on courses specifically preparing students for work. Might these also complement learning on courses of a primarily occupational nature? Would students gain insight into underlying scientific principles, or might they acquire critical or cultural understandings of industries and occupations through visits or projects or literature? In short, would we find an enrichment that by complementing technical studies provided opportunities to transgress the academic/vocational divide?

Evidence of enrichment specific to occupationally focused technical/vocational courses proved difficult to elicit for much of our study. Whilst colleges cited multiple interesting industry trips and visiting speakers, students found it difficult to distinguish these activities from their subject curriculum. Taught courses already include substantial behavioural elements, either specific to industries and occupations or generic to behavioural expectations of working life. At one urban college outside the capital, a team of enrichment organizers described a busy programme of work they mounted across several sites, including a road traffic accident simulation they mounted for Public Services students. Yet student representatives invited to meet with researchers (one from general education

and one from construction) were unable to describe anything outside their course despite prompting: they saw these activities as part of the normal socialization that widely characterizes vocational study.

Where vocational students were engaged with enrichment, this usually took quite different forms from the subject-specific, cultural or critical elements we hoped to find, being dominated instead by learner support imperatives and taking on therapeutic characteristics. Ecclestone (2011) has drawn attention to the way psychological interventions that address discourses of emotional vulnerability reflect 'disenchantment with an externally-seeking, autonomous human subject and forms of curriculum knowledge that support it' (2011, p. 91). If this critique has validity in relation to formal classroom pedagogies, a focus on student vulnerabilities offers stronger examples. At one college, this was powerfully symbolized by egg-shaped pods where the noise of the world was cancelled in favour of soothing music, calming student anxieties with pastoral images on the wall opposite. Our guide, a strong protagonist of the college enrichment programme, reminded us nevertheless that,

> Sometimes, you have to get out of the egg: you can't stay in the pod forever'. (Student representative, Wales)

We observed a version of this emblematic learner support installation in a more technical department, but without the audio-visual embellishments, symbolizing the different approaches across vocational areas.

Yet our findings also point to possibilities beyond quotidian socialization. We met enrichment organizers who sought to move beyond socialization and therapies. At Westward College, one organizer directed vocational students to research their intended employment destinations, finding out about industry issues and controversies, meeting trade union representatives and learning about their role and the issues that concerned them. Not all students responded well to these broader approaches, as past students deprecated interventions of earlier Liberal Studies tutors (Simmons, 2019). They described their ambitions in simple terms of entry to job roles, hopefully citing their under-valued Health and Social care courses as routes to such relatively desirable occupations as midwives or paramedics. These issues lay outside student expectations, shaped by neoliberal emphasis on skills for jobs and strivings for meaningful identities on their own side of the vocational divide (Ferm, 2021). These limitations recall (Freire's, 1970) comments on those struggling to move beyond normative expectations:

> The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (Freire, 1970, p. 73)

Conclusion

Whilst our study ranged widely across post-16 colleges, this paper has focused on a specific area of inquiry: how different forms of enrichment relate to the inequalities theorized in relation to the subject curriculum. Our findings show a profound difference in the way that enrichment on general education and vocational pathways sustains the transitions—and beyond—of middle-class and working-class young people. Whilst enrichment provides general education with the practical elements that Pring (1995) and others advocate, in one sense transgressing the formal divide between subject-based and practical curricula, this does not negate but in another sense reinforces the academic/vocational divide. This form of enrichment, which we might describe as an integrating form of enrichment, is only readily available to those on the pathway recognized as the authentic middle-class transition.

This distinctive orientation was taken for granted by many in the sector, for whom a separate form of enrichment in general education and vocational provision seemed entirely natural. These differences are part of the cultural expectations of educational hierarchy. As social researchers seeking to make such familiar distinctions strange, our analysis drew attention to enrichment's role in

differentiating educational experiences and outcomes for students from different social groups. Suissa (2016), in a critique of Pring's aspiration to end education's divide, argues that it simply reflects the divisions of class society and will persist for as long as young people from different social backgrounds are prepared through education and other cultural influences, for similar destinations to their parents. This argument might be extended to enrichment. A certain caution demonstrated by some students towards both the curriculum-based activities and social networks we found at South Sixth reminds us of Friesen's (2018) question as to whether 'students' subjective relation to this knowledge . . . is one of integration or alienation, understanding or confusion' (2018, p. 7). Not all students are culturally attuned to the possibilities of an integrating enrichment any more than they are to the general education curriculum, as Francis et al. (2017) point out. The divide between pathways is not a matter of personal interests but expresses cultural and classed distinctions that remain real and have long been central to curriculum theory.

Nevertheless, enrichment remains a space of possibility. Hodkinson (1991) suggested that even the marginal practices around 'personal effectiveness' provided spaces to transgress educational divides. Much of the practice we saw in our study was purposefully intended to provide cultural breadth and new experiences to students. Enrichment for students destined for manual or caring roles, as we saw, does not have to prepare them for routines of passivity but can provide them with broader understanding and prepare them for more agentic and meaningful forms of working life. If enrichment can be a space that moves beyond the performativity, marketization and business ideology that especially dominates the vocational sphere, it can play an integrating and educational role for all its students.

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