

Title: It does more than it says on the tin! Problematising higher education in further education in England

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This paper is about HE in FE (Higher Education in Further Education) in England. The content reflects on the nature of this form of higher education by presenting research findings from a qualitative inductive research study. The policymakers ideally wish to see higher education leading to vocational expertise and employability. The research has explored whether or not the perceptions of the policymakers are shared by selected academics and students. The research findings reveal that although some of the participants reflect some of the views of the policymakers, other interpretations of HE in FE are present that differ from the policy documents. The paper interprets this educational context according to a theoretical framework that is based on interpreting theories of literacy as social practice. This enables the content to make an original contribution in knowledge to an under-researched form of higher education in England.

Keywords: consumer; education market; epistemology; policy making; qualitative research.

Introduction

This paper explores the context of HE in FE in England. The content reveals an educational context that is influenced by divergent views about its philosophical purpose. If we go back to the Latin origins of the word 'education', we may see its purpose as enabling individuals to move beyond their current understanding of the world, so that existence is considered in new and different ways. There are, however, other understandings of the purpose of education. This is revealed with the changing nature of higher education in England in recent years in which the students have been portrayed as consumers of educational products. The Browne Report (2010) notes that, 'students will direct where money goes through their choice of course and institution' (2010, 27). The interpretation of the students as consumers of higher education has emerged to become a significant part of the

discourse about higher education in England. There are also other understandings of the purpose of higher education. HE in FE is portrayed as a vocational form of higher education (DfES [Department for Education and Skills] 2003; BIS [Department of Business Innovation and Skills] 2009; Ingleby and Gibby 2016; Parry 2003; 2007). This paper presents research findings from a selection of the academics and the students who are engaged with HE in FE in England. The author has selected these academics and students to be the research participants through purposive and dimensional sampling (Merriam 2009). The research explores whether or not the academic tutors and the students agree with the policymaker interpretations of the purpose of higher education in England that are present within three key policy documents (DfES 2003; BIS 2009; and The Browne Report 2010). Abbas, Ashwin and McLean (2012) argue that these policy documents have shaped the higher education context in England in general. It is important to qualify that not all the policymakers are united in their views on the purpose of higher education. The three policy documents that are referred to in this paper (DfES 2003; BIS 2009; and The Browne Report 2010) have similar themes, but also differences of focus (whereas The Browne Report is concerned with the financing of higher education, DfES 2003 and BIS 2009 explore issues of access, equity and employability in association with higher education). These policy documents reveal the New Labour and Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition governments' interpretation of the purpose of higher education in England. It can be argued that the policy documents present the higher education context in overly simple ways (Ingleby 2015). The complex history of higher education in England is largely disregarded in DfES 2003 and BIS 2009 (Abbas, Ashwin and McLean 2012). DfES (2003); BIS (2009); and The Browne Report

(2010) are framed within distinct political, economic and philosophical agendas. In DfES (2003) and BIS (2009), 'Good teaching' is regarded as being a particularly important indicator of the 'high quality' that will lead to 'employability' (Ingleby 2015, 521). The Browne Report (2010, 2) advocates the importance of nurturing 'competition' in the higher education system in order to maximise 'quality'. The unifying theme within the three policy documents is based on a neoliberal encouragement of regulating higher education through market forces (Ingleby 2015). The content of the article reveals that the academic tutors, the students and the policymakers have different interpretations of the purpose of HE in FE. The research reveals that there are not separate interpretations of the purpose of higher education that are exclusive to the policymakers, the academic tutors and the students. Sometimes the interpretations differ but at other times they are shared. In exemplifying this point, although the policy documents emphasise the importance of 'good teaching' 'in its own right' (Ingleby 2015, 521) this is different to the reflection that is provided by the academic tutors in the research sample and the emphasis that they place on the importance of developing 'reflective practice' through 'good teaching'. Accessing the means of enabling this form of pedagogy is regarded as being especially important and the equity of the policymakers' interpretation of 'good teaching' is disputed in this example. This leads to a fascinating interplay of discursive interpretations about the purpose of HE in FE with regards to its access and its equity. The discussion of the research findings considers the work of van AnDEL, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012) who apply the work of Foucault's theory of 'power' (1971, 1972, 1977) in considering 'students' as 'consumers' of higher education. In van AnDEL, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012, 68), it is argued that

‘power is implicitly part of the consumerism debate’. However, Foucault’s work has been critiqued by McNay (1994, 5) as ‘a dystopian account of post-Enlightenment events within which there occurs a Nietzschean will to power, oppression, disciplinary regulation and subjugation’. I do not consider that the policymakers, the academic tutors and the students in the research project are in ‘a Nietzschean will to power’. There are wider structural factors that are shaping this educational context. I argue instead that it is useful to apply a theoretical framework that is based on an epistemological interpretation of theories of literacy as social practice to HE in FE. This theoretical approach enables researchers to explore the consequences of the texts that are shaping this form of higher education. The context appears to be informed by text-based literacy artefacts producing ‘literary events’ - activities ‘where literacy has a role’ (Tummons 2014a, 35) and ‘literary practices’ - ‘ways that people use language in all sorts of social contexts’ (Tummons 2014a, 36).

Research context

The primary research findings come from a selection of the academic tutors and the students who are associated with a foundation degree in early childhood studies that is coordinated by a University in England and taught in five Colleges of Further Education. The programme has operated since 2005 as a vocational degree. The research develops some of the previous research that is associated with HE in FE (for example Ingleby and Gibby 2016; Parry 2003; 2007). The unification of University and non-University education in England in 1992 resulted in an expansion of HE in FE (Young 2006). By the year 2000, the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council (or ‘LSC’) led to the separation of higher education delivered in Universities and Colleges from the rest of the post-compulsory education sector (Parry 2003). This

resulted in a heightened sense of the importance of vocational higher education as a sector of education in its own right. HE in FE expanded at such a rate that by 2015, approximately 9% of higher education provision in England and Wales was taking place within Colleges of Further Education in England and Wales (Parry et al. 2012; Tummons Orr and Atkins 2013). The pedagogy of these institutions is influenced by a number of variables including differing financial arrangements with University partners and differing structures of management. Some Colleges are more independent and have degree awarding powers, whereas other Colleges work more closely with their local University partners (Creasy 2013). In May 2015, approximately 175,000 students were studying at not only undergraduate levels but also at postgraduate levels in more than 280 Colleges in England (AOC 2015). The curriculum in this context is influenced by what Abbas, Ashwin and McLean (2012) refer to as an employability agenda. Abbas, Ashwin and McLean (2012) argue that the policy documents that have shaped higher education in England (for example DfES 2003; BIS 2009; and The Browne Report 2010) illuminate the key themes of a neoliberal interest in higher education policy in England. An employability agenda is influencing the development of higher education in England. ‘Our challenge is to nurture a higher education system responsive to the demands of both undergraduate and postgraduate training, embedded and integrated into a wider education and skills framework’ (BIS 2009, 16). A second key policy theme is the importance of enabling student choice. ‘Students can make well-informed choices based on an understanding of the nature of the teaching programme they can expect and the long-term employment prospects it offers’ (BIS 2009, 12).

It can be argued that the English policymakers regard HE in FE as a particularly useful form of higher education because of its ‘widening participation’ agenda (Thomas 2001). This reinforces a key theme within BIS 2009 by providing ‘fair access on merit

and potential regardless of family background' (BIS 2009, 16). The current research into this sector of education in recent years identifies the complexity of this educational context (Parry and Thompson 2002; Parry 2003; Parry 2007; Parry et al. 2012). There is variability across teaching, learning, management and administration according to institutions. There are also inconsistencies of access to HE in FE (Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths 2012), differences in student retention and achievement (Schofield and Dismore 2010), variations in governance of HE in FE (Harwood and Harwood 2004; Trim 2001) and variable levels of teaching staff within academic programmes (Burkill, Rodway-Dyer and Stone 2008; Feather 2010, 2012; Wilson and Wilson 2011). The HE in FE context is complex so it does more than it says on the tin! The policymakers, the academic staff, the students, the management and the administrative staff exist within a diverse form of vocational education that is 'unique' (Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths 2011,25) and 'experimental' (Parry 2007). The 'contestation' within HE in FE generates an educational context that is complex and this in turn produces new interpretations of the purpose of higher education (Creasy 2013, 39; Parry 2007).

Theoretical background

The work of van Andel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012, 67) explores the neoliberal interest in higher education through applying a theory of power relations and arguing that 'power is implicitly part of the consumer debate'. This argument develops the work of Delucchi and Korgen (2002). Power is interpreted as being 'neither self-contained nor self- sufficient' (van Andel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman 2012, 68). The dynamics of power and its 'exchange' are considered to depend on the complexity of human interaction. This can lead to 'resistance' to policies and practices via 'power struggles' (van Andel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman 2012, 68). This interpretation of power is based on Foucault's argument that 'relations of power are everywhere because freedom

is everywhere' (van Aniel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman 2012, 68). Foucault (1971) argues that during 'discourse' (or, in our conversations about the world) we witness the exercise of power (Hudson 2003, 134). It is the conversations in society that reveal a 'regime of truths' within social spaces (Foucault 1972, 49). It can be argued that within HE in FE in England, a 'regime of truths' is constituted from 'texts' (policy documents, curriculum documents, academic books and articles), curriculum 'events' (activities generated from these documents) and stakeholder 'practices' - individual interpretations of these curriculum events (Ingleby and Gibby 2016). In order to add to the interest in the neoliberal agenda in higher education I present an epistemological discussion that is based on interpreting theories of literacy as social practices within this research context.

To complement the work of van Aniel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012), I argue too that the differing interpretations of the purpose of higher education are present within this research context. These interpretations appear to be based on a combination of subjective and objective factors. The policy documents shaping the educational context (DfES 2003; BIS 2009; The Browne Report 2010) can be regarded as examples of 'literary texts' (Barton 2007; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanić 2000; Gee 1996). As opposed to exploring the 'power relations' of this context and the 'will to power' (McNay 1994; van Aniel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman 2012), I wish to focus on the literary texts, events and practices shaping this educational environment. I argue that McNay's (1994) critique of Foucault's emphasis on the 'will to power' in individuals can be addressed by regarding the HE in FE context as a form of literacy as social practice.

Literacy is regarded by Barton (2007, 34) as a 'symbolic system used for communication'. Literary texts are 'ways of representing the world to others' (Barton 2007, 34). Texts (like DfES 2003; BIS 2009; The Browne Report 2010) are the basis of

‘literary events’ that are understood as being ‘occasions in everyday life where the written word has a role’ (Barton 2007, 35). The academic degree that is associated with the research study has a curriculum that is informed by the policy documents that shape its wider educational context. Other texts (for example the QAA [Qualification Assurance Agency] benchmark statements for foundation degrees [2010] and early childhood studies [2014] alongside books encouraging ‘reflective practice’ in early years [for example Lindon 2012]) appear to inform the curriculum events that are enabled by the academic tutors within this context. These curriculum events are informed by ‘literary practices’ that are defined as distinctive ways of ‘using reading and writing in particular situations’ (Barton 2007, 36). Scribner and Cole (1981, 234-8) outline that literary practices are ways of using literacy from one particular situation to another related situation. This epistemological understanding of literacies as social practice has been applied to the research context in order to explore the discourse of the policymakers, the academic tutors and the students in their respective ‘domains’ (Barton 2007; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanić 2000; Gee 1996). ‘Domains’ are defined by Barton (2007, 39) as ‘different places in life where people act differently and use language differently’. The research has explored the blending together (or otherwise!) of the literary texts, events and practices that are associated with a degree programme in England in HE in FE. It is this background to the research that has informed the subsequent research question and its methodology.

Methodology

The research has explored ‘the perceptions of students and tutors of the purpose of studying early childhood studies in HE in FE in England’ using a qualitative multimethod (focus groups and interviews) interpretive model of research. The analytical questions in the study have considered key texts revealing the policymakers’

interpretation of this educational context (BIS 2009; DfES 2003; The Browne Report 2010). A further analytical question has explored the extent to which the students and the academic tutors in the research sample agree or disagree with the vision of higher education that is presented within these policy documents. The research sample is constituted of ten academic tutors and ten students associated with a foundation degree programme in early childhood studies. The data was gathered via two focus group discussions (one focus group with the five HEI programme leaders and a second focus group with five programme student representatives) alongside 20 loosely structured interviews with the research population (completed between October 2010 and May 2014). During the research process, the researcher reflected on the traditional concerns of qualitative research in education (Brown, Lan, and In Jeong 2015; Thomas 2011). This resulted in a number of 'coping strategies' within the research process in order to enhance the credibility of the research. The research was approved by the researcher's research ethics committee on condition that the participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the research and reassured that they would be given pseudonyms when the research was being disseminated (Merriam 2009). Purposive and dimensional sampling enabled the selection of 20 research participants. The five academic programme leaders and five academic tutors recommended by the programme leaders constituted the staff in the research sample. The programme's five student representatives and five other students recommended by the student representatives formed the rest of the research sample. 18 females and two males made up the research sample. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research and they were provided with an opportunity to check the research transcripts (Thomas 2011). These transcripts were coded using 'NVivo 10' software during 2015 in order to develop key themes from within the research paradigm (Tummons 2014b). This in turn enabled the

thematic analysis of the research data through ‘a process of working with raw data to identify key ideas and themes’ (Matthews and Ross 2010, 373). The policy documents (DfES 2003; BIS 2009; The Browne Report 2010) contain key themes about the purpose of higher education in England (the importance of higher education resulting in ‘choice’, ‘competition’, and ‘employability’). The research methodology has explored whether or not the research participants interpret the purpose of higher education in ways that are similar to these policy documents. In order to enrich the data generated from the research participants, triangulation occurred with published research on higher education (for example, van Andel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman 2012) and HE in FE (for example Parry et al. 2012; Tummons Orr and Atkins 2013). This adds to the ‘credibility’ of the qualitative research process (Brown, Lan and In Jeong 2015, 143). The emerging findings were shared with a community of scholars through a research seminar at the researcher’s HEI in May 2014 and at an international conference at Aston University, UK in November 2014.

Findings

Thematic analysis has been applied to the research project by considering how the focus-group and loosely structured interview data link to the policy documents that have shaped the educational environment of the respondents (DfES 2003; BIS 2009; The Browne Report 2010). The research context is constituted from the ‘social, cultural and political climate’ in which the data is produced (Kamler and Thomson 2006, 21). The themes that have been generated come from the data alongside the wider cultural context influencing the research focus (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 178).

The 20 research participants gave two types of reflection about the purpose of studying early childhood studies in higher education in England. The ten academic staff in the research population and four of the students are predominantly opposed to the

vision of higher education that is presented within the policy documents (theme 1). These research respondents do not regard higher education as a way of enabling 'choice', 'competition' and 'employability'. They are opposed to the notion that students are consumers of education. In contrast, some of the ten students (n=6) in the research population expressed views that appear to support the recommendations of the policy documents (theme 2). The following content presents selected reflections of the research respondents alongside key themes contained within the policy documents.

Theme 1: the academic tutors and students who do not associate studying in higher education with 'choice', 'competition', or 'employability' (n=14).

Barnett (1992; 2011) argues that the current English higher education is shaped by the government and their interpretation of what constitutes 'quality education'. Within the policy documents 'choice' is a key theme that is presented as an essential ingredient of high quality education.

The choices pupils make can affect their later course options and life chances (BIS 2009, 5). We must break this cycle of low esteem, to offer attractive choices to students about the types of course they can undertake (DfES 2003, 15). Our recommendations in this area are based on giving students the ability to make an informed choice of where and what to study (The Browne Report 2010, 2)

A different interpretation of higher education is offered by nine of the academic programme leaders/tutors associated with the programme. 'Amy', 'Di', 'Janine', 'Vicky', 'Abbie', 'Angie', 'Aniedi', 'Nuz' and 'Anthony' regard higher education as a means of enabling 'reflective practice'. The practitioners reinforce a key curriculum theme in early childhood studies through being 'in praise of reflective practice' (Parker-Rees et al. 2010, 179).

I wouldn't say that 'choice' was a key phrase I associate with higher education. It's difficult to have all-encompassing policies within higher education when there is so much variation in individual subject areas. I see the purpose of higher education in early childhood being to develop reflective practice. (Amy, academic programme leader)

'Amy', 'Di', 'Janine', 'Vicky', 'Abbie', 'Angie', 'Aniedi', 'Nuz' and 'Anthony' emphasise the importance of 'developing students' in their reflections on the purpose of studying early childhood studies in HE in FE in England. This is amplified by 'Di'. 'I see the students as having potential and my role is to develop that academic potential within the students. They need to become better practitioners, so that they can think about what they are doing.' (Di, academic programme leader). 'Janine' emphasises 'the need to become aware of the transformative nature of action research' and 'Vicky' comments on the importance of 'enhancing children's learning'. 'Abbie' and 'Angie' reflect on the importance of raising awareness of 'safeguarding' and 'Aniedi' and 'Nuz' regard 'children's growth and development' as a key 'learning goal'. The programme leaders and academic tutors draw attention to the importance of nurturing 'reflective practice' as opposed to enabling 'competition'. 'Amy', 'Di', 'Janine', 'Vicky', 'Abbie', 'Angie', 'Aniedi', 'Nuz' and 'Anthony' consider that higher education ought to 'nurture' the students to become 'reflective practitioners'. This theme is summarised by 'Anthony':

I don't see us being in competition with other Colleges or Universities. We're doing our best to make the students become good practitioners when they are working with children and families. It's more about how we nurture the students and less about being in competition. (Anthony, academic tutor)

'Rebecca', 'Georgia', 'Charlotte', 'Olivia' and 'Sam' (programme students) also interpret the purpose of studying early childhood studies in higher education in England in ways that do not link to 'choice', 'competition' or 'employability'. As opposed to

focusing on an ‘end-product’ (or a degree), these research participants reflect on other themes associated with HE in FE.

I wouldn’t say that I have the best relationship with my academic tutors. I’m different to them. I don’t know what I want to do really. I just thought I’d be interested in studying early childhood. (Rebecca, a programme student)

‘Georgia’ says that she ‘just likes the idea of being a student’ and ‘Olivia’ comments on the ‘life-changing experiences of being a student’ upon being asked about the purpose of studying early childhood studies in higher education in England. ‘Rebecca’ reflects that there is ‘little else to do, other than go to University’.

Everyone else I knew was going off to University. This wasn’t my first choice but it is a way of giving me time to think about what I want to do eventually. There was little else I could do other than go to University.

(Rebecca, a programme student)

Alongside these reflections, the research participants comment on the increased tuition fees that came into effect in October 2012. The reflections raise moral objections to the association of ‘tuition fees’ with ‘economic recession’. Two reflections (from a programme leader and a student) summarise the reasons for these moral objections.

We talk about children all the time in the degree. What is the future going to hold for our children as a result of these tuition fees? It makes me so angry as it seems so unfair! (Sam, a programme leader)

‘Georgia’ and ‘Olivia’ describe the rise in tuition fees as ‘not right’ and ‘disgraceful’. ‘Rebecca’ and ‘Charlotte’ reflect that ‘tuition fees leave an unpleasant taste in everyone’s mouth’. ‘Olivia’ claims that ‘students in England pay higher tuition fees than any other country in the EU’ and that this threatens the ability to access higher education.

I have a lot of pressures on me at present. I have a young family and I'm also a student. And I think I'm paying student fees because of the financial mess caused by the government. (Olivia, a programme student)

Although the policy documents develop the theme of providing opportunities for non-traditional students, 'Sam', and 'Olivia' question the 'morality' and the accessibility of the current English higher education system.

Theme 2: the students who reinforce the vision of higher education presented within the policy documents (n=6).

A key theme within the policy documents is employment and the recommendation that degrees need to equip graduates with the skills to cope with 'a fast changing work environment' (DfES 2003, 44).

It is also important to ensure that potential students have the best possible information on the content of courses and on the value in academic and employment terms of specific qualifications (BIS 2009, 12). Graduates on average earn much more than those without degrees and are far more likely to be in employment (DfES 2003, 9). Providing students with clearer information about employment outcomes will close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need (The Browne Report 2009, 12)

'Mona', 'Emma', 'Kirsty', 'Naomi', 'Amy' and 'Luke' (programme students) value the importance of 'skills development' and 'employability'. These students appear to associate a degree with employment. There is the expression of support for having a degree and finding employment. This is summarised by 'Kirsty'. 'I'm very lucky to be on the degree programme. For me, it's a passport into the teaching profession.' 'Luke' notes that the 'good teaching' he is experiencing at University is 'improving his

professional skills'. This reflection is mirrored by 'Naomi' who equates higher education with gaining the skills that will lead to employment.

I'm studying early childhood because it gives me a chance to follow a career path I want. I'm very happy studying the degree. It's what I want to do and it's going to help me in the future when I want to work with children and families. (Naomi, a programme student)

Within the policy documents, 'non-traditional students' are identified as a priority.

We need to treat these world class institutions for what they are, and the institutions themselves need to recognise their own obligations to UK undergraduates, in terms of excellent teaching and fair access on merit and potential, regardless of family background (BIS 2009, 16). As more people from non-traditional backgrounds go into higher education we must make sure that they are well-served when they get there (DfES 2003, 63). The higher education system will expand to provide places for everyone who has the potential to succeed (The Browne Report 2009, 12)

'Mona', 'Emma', 'Amy' and 'Luke' provide reflections that echo many of the sentiments within the policy documents. 'Mona' emphasises that she is the first member of her family to be provided with the 'opportunity' to study for a degree. This interpretation of the purpose of higher education is also commented on by 'Amy' who notes that 'my mam can't believe I'm at University!' and 'Luke' who observes that 'they (my parents) will be so proud at graduation!'. 'Emma' reflects on the complexity of being a student from a non-traditional background.

A lot of what we do on the degree is so different to what I'm used to at home. We discuss things that are academic. If I spoke about things like this at home I'd get blank looks. We do a module about research methods in education

and I kept smiling thinking about what my dad would say if he heard the lecturers. They spoke very differently to what we're used to at home!
(Emma, a programme student)

Concluding discussion

The research findings reveal a fascinating interplay of discourse between the policymakers, the academic tutors and the students who are associated with a foundation degree programme in early childhood in five HEIs in England. The academic tutors and the students are influenced by a hyper form of capitalism (neoliberalism) through policymakers who have created a culture of consumerism within higher education (van AnDEL, Pimentel Botas and Huisman 2012). In the research sample these consumers of higher education (or students) talk about and reflect on their experiences of studying on a degree programme in England. Their conversations may appear to be prosaic observations about higher education, but they are also real statements about real experiences. In van AnDEL, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012), we see the application of Foucault's work (1971, 1972, 1977) in their exploration of students as consumers of education. Foucault does not regard discourse analysis as 'textual analysis' (Andersen 2003, 9). Texts are regarded by Foucault as being 'boundless' and they cannot be regarded as being 'independent discursive units' (Andersen 2003, 9). Discourse analysis is critiqued by Foucault as a 'pure description of discursive facts' (Foucault 1972, 234). In consequence, discourse analysis is regarded as being a 'felicitous positivism' (Andersen 2003, 10). The work of van AnDEL, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012) applies Foucault's (1971, 1972, 1977) theory to explore the power dynamics that operate between consumers of higher education beyond 'texts'. To supplement the theory of 'consumption values', van AnDEL, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012, 67) pay particular attention to power and 'power struggles' between

consumers of higher education. Drawing on the work of Burbles (1986), Giddens (1979), and Poulantzas (1978), van Aniel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012, 69) explore the ‘bargaining/negotiation, manipulation, coercion, and supervision’ of undergraduate students in the Netherlands.

To complement the arguments of van Aniel, Pimentel Botas and Huisman (2012), I have interpreted this new research via a theoretical framework that is based on an epistemological interpretation of theories of literacy as social practice. This enables connections to be seen between ‘texts’, curriculum ‘events’ and pedagogical ‘practices’ (Ingleby and Gibby 2016). The students and the academic tutors are influenced by the policymakers and their ‘texts’ (DfES 2003; BIS 2009; The Browne Report 2010). The curriculum ‘events’ within HE in FE have their genesis in such ‘texts’ (Barton 2007; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanić 2000; Gee 1996). The ‘practices’ (or individual interpretations of these curriculum events) are revealed in the research participants’ reflections about the purpose of higher education. The students outline their personal motives for studying early childhood studies that are based on both subjective and objective factors (the subjective wish to ‘have employment’ as revealed by ‘Naomi’) alongside their reaction to objective processes beyond the individual (the creation of a ‘marketplace’ with ‘consumers’ of higher education). I argue that this educational context is more complex than ‘a Nietzschean will to power’ (McNay 1994, 5) as it is a structured environment with a complex background of access and equity. By exploring the texts, events and practices associated with this particular HE in FE educational context it is possible to gain a nuanced understanding of its environment. The reflections of the research subjects are important because they reveal how subjective practices are informed by texts generating curriculum events within this context. In understanding ‘practices’ (Barton 2007) it is important to take into consideration the

‘texts’ and ‘events’ that influence what is unfolding in this form of higher education. The HE in FE educational context is not just what Tummons (2014a, 40) refers to as ‘some physical stuff’. The policy documents influencing its context (for example DfES 2003; BIS 2009; The Browne Report 2010; The QAA Foundation Degree Benchmark Statements 2010; The QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Early Childhood Studies 2014) are not restricted to ‘lying on a desk or in a box file, stored on a USB memory stick or on an email attachment’ (Tummons 2014a, 40). These texts are shaping the curriculum events that in turn produce the social practices that are revealed by the research subjects (Barton 2007; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanić 2000; Gee 1996). The academic tutors in the research sample talk about the importance of developing ‘reflective practice’ in working with children and families. This example of ‘practice’ is informed by key texts that are associated with the discipline of early childhood studies (for example the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Early Childhood Studies 2014). This document makes reference to the importance of ‘reflection on experiences’ (2014, 11) and ‘reflection on practice’ (2014, 13). It is a key theme that is associated with early childhood studies by the academic tutors. The observations made by the academic tutors in the research sample can be understood by considering the texts they are influenced by. ‘Amy’s’ (academic tutor) reference to ‘reflective practice’ mirrors the texts that are informing this subject area such as Lindon (2012, 1) where ‘all practitioners are expected to reflect on what they do with children and families’. The ‘practice’ that characterises the academic tutors in the research sample can be traced back to these texts.

The contestation of the concept of students as consumers of educational products offered by ‘Sam’ (a programme leader) and ‘Olivia’ (a programme student) can also be understood as an example of ‘practice’ (or a manifestation of subjective understandings

of HE in FE). These research participants do not interpret their curriculum events in ways that are the same as the policy texts that have shaped this educational context. Obtaining a degree is considered by the policymakers as being a key way of realising opportunities.

The next phase of expansion in higher education will hinge on providing opportunities for different types of people to study in a wider range of ways than in the past (BIS 2009, 4). Universities and Colleges play a vital role in expanding opportunity and promoting social justice (DfES 2003, 4). Higher education provides a major opportunity for creating social mobility (The Browne Report 2010, 26).

The policy texts are not interpreted in universal ways. ‘Sam’ and ‘Olivia’ reflect on the negative consequences of obtaining a degree alongside accumulating the debt of student tuition fees. The presence of ‘opportunities’ is not acknowledged by these research participants in view of their emotive views on the controversial subject of student tuition fees in higher education in England.

The paper reveals that HE in FE does more than it says on the tin. The current research by academics into this educational context outlines the complexity of provision in this area (Creasy 2013), the particular nature of education in this context (Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths 2011) and the variable level of professional staff who are operating within this educational field (Burkill, Rodway-Dyer and Stone 2008; Feather 2010, 2012; Wilson and Wilson 2011). I have argued that the complexity of HE in FE can be understood through applying an epistemological interpretation of theories of literacy as social practice (Barton 2007; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanić 2000; Gee 1996). The ‘texts’ (for example policy documents and academic books) generate curriculum ‘events’ that are interpreted in subjective ways as social practices. This epistemological position enables subjective and objective factors to be taken into consideration in understanding

this unique educational context. Although this research study is small-scale and qualitative, I hope that policymakers in England take into consideration the views of research participants like ‘Sam’ and ‘Olivia’. Perhaps more funding will be made available to fund a significant longitudinal research study in this area? Just as Bagley and Ackerley (2006) ‘hope’ that the current English policymakers will acknowledge research findings in education, I too continue to live in hope!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

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Word count: 6973