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**THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF BTEC  
STUDENTS AT SIXTH FORM COLLEGE: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION**

**SARAH PASSMORE**

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

August 2016

Volume I of II

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## **Abstract**

Sixth form colleges have a long established and valued position within the post-16 education sector in the UK. Despite maintaining a reputation for high quality provision and student success rates, there is very little literature which focuses on this as an institution compared to schools and general further education colleges. Furthermore, there is little research which focuses on students undertaking vocational programmes of study at sixth form, as opposed to the academic A-level qualification which is viewed as its' 'staple provision'. This research attempts to address this through an exploration of sixth form college practices and how these serve to shape the learning experiences of the students.

Immersed within the SFC context, the researcher adopted the dual role of researcher and student support assistant. Informed by the interpretivist epistemology of symbolic interactionism the researcher employed an ethnographic methodology over one academic term, utilising the methods of participant observation and interviews. The participants comprise a cohort of BTEC First Diploma Health and Social Care (level 2) students and teachers. The data are presented in a story followed by a thematic analysis. The subsequent discussion of findings is structured according to a theoretical framework which rejects deterministic assumptions of intelligence located within the minds of individuals and instead posits learning as an inherently social, reciprocal process with others. It draws upon Communities of Practice theory (Wenger, 1998) as a way of understanding how participation in learning is enabled or disabled and Vygotskian theory (1978) as a way of understanding the mechanisms of learning. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979, 2005) provides an overarching and unifying aspect of the theoretical framework, enabling consideration of the complex proximal and distal factors which shape the learning experiences of students.

This research reveals some important considerations for policy makers and providers of SFC. It discusses ways in which college practices and the learning relationships established between students and teachers serve to enable or disable participation in the learning process. Furthermore, it illustrates the complex and intricate web of factors present in the lives of students and how these are shaped not only by the proximal features of their learning community, but by the more distal, wider features of government educational policy.

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## List of abbreviations

A/S- Advanced Subsidiary Level  
A-level- Advanced Level  
AoC- Association of Colleges  
ASCL Act- Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act (2010)  
BTEC- Business and Technology Education Council  
CoP- Communities of Practice  
FE- Further Education  
FEFC- Further Education Funding Council  
GCSE- General Certificate of Secondary Education  
GFEC- General Further Education College  
GNVQ- General National Qualification  
HE- Higher Education  
HSC- Health and Social Care  
LEA- Local Education Authority  
LPP- Legitimate Peripheral Participation  
MSC- Manpower Services Commission  
NVQ- National Vocational Qualification  
OT- Occupational Therapist  
SEN- Special Educational Needs  
SFC- Sixth Form College  
SFCA- Sixth Form College Association  
SpLD- Specific Learning Difficulty  
SSF- School Sixth Form  
TVEI- Technical and Vocational Education Initiative  
ZPD- Zone of Proximal Development

# Preface

## *Research journey and aims*

Like many who embark on a PhD, or indeed any form of research whatever the purpose, the prospect of immersing oneself within research which is driven and motivated by personal and academic interests is indulgently enticing. Having discussed the possibilities of a PhD and the opportunities it presents with my supervisors, I was encouraged to begin my own research journey. Decisions as to what field to research within, methodologies to use and aims to fulfil were somewhat easy to make as they stemmed from my epistemological position (situating people within their contexts) and socio-cultural theories of learning (learning is understood to be a shared social experience) I had embraced during my undergraduate studies coupled with my place of employment at the start of my research.

The nature of this research was opportunistic in its development. Upon graduating I began employment as a student support assistant in a local college at a time when government educational policy was focusing on the reform of 14-19 education and qualifications. The landscape of post-16 education was a high political and economic priority. Having always been interested in learning and the psychology of education it made sense to utilise my employment within the college setting to explore the learning experiences of students in post-16 education.

As an undergraduate I had been introduced to the works of Urie Bronfenbrenner and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. From these theorists, I understood the differing environmental influences which impact on an individual's development and learning (Bronfenbrenner) and how learning can be understood as participation within social spaces (Lave and Wenger). These two theories form a central tenet of this research and how I understand the process of learning.

Having enjoyed relative success conducting an ethnography during my undergraduate studies, the possibility of employing this methodology for my PhD was discussed during supervision. The result of which provided the beginning of my PhD journey with the general aim to explore the learning experiences of students in post-16 education using the ethnographic methods of participant observations and interviews.

My review of the literature surrounding post-16 education revealed it has long been a focus of political and economic priority, subject to a constant output of policies and initiatives by central government. I soon realised that to understand the reasons behind the current

reforms of 14-19 education and qualifications (2008 when my research began), I needed to understand the historical development of post-16 education. This proved to be an illuminating, confusing, yet ultimately absorbing and challenging task.

Initially, my literature search proved to be disappointing for a number of reasons (these are discussed in more depth in chapters 1 and 2). Firstly, there were comparatively fewer papers than those conducted within schools, where research focused on post-compulsory education. Those that did often focused on funding and 'incorporation' of FE and were entrenched in a discourse of 'marketisation' and 'managerialism'. It proved difficult, though not entirely impossible, to locate research which focused on the students, their learning and their educational experiences. Even more difficult was trying to locate ethnographic research in post-16 education. Aside from the few qualitative studies I had found, Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000 & 2001), Sailsbury and Jephcote (2008), James and Biesta (2007) to name a few, I felt that student-centred research which aimed to represent the student voice and views of their learning within post-16 education was significantly lacking in the literature compared with the research which focused on funding and the effects of incorporation on college managers and teachers.

Hence, my research objective was formulated to focus on an exploration of the everyday practices within a college providing post-16 education and the experiences of the students within it. I framed my research aims as the following:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- To explore the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.
- To explore and understand student experience of post-16 education and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.

As I began to unpick the history underpinning the development and evolution of post-16 education in the UK I came to a number of conclusions, informed by what I had read and learnt. Firstly, the nature and development of post-16 education in England is underpinned by social, economic and political agendas. The sector has therefore formed in a haphazard way, resulting in different types of institutions offering different ranges of qualifications. There is a 'global market' and 'skills' discourse which runs throughout the objectives and purposes of post-16 education, encouraged and shaped by the frequent policies and initiatives set by successive governments. This is to fulfil a national aim of producing young people with the necessary skills to contribute to both national and global economies. With this overall

objective in mind, the post-16 sector has a complex history with ever-changing policy shaping and directing it. This has led to an on-going debate as to what counts as learning and divisive opinions over academic and vocational qualifications (discussed in chapter 1).

As the post-16 sector has been such a political focus for successive governments understandably, much of the literature focuses on the impacts of the different policies (in particular funding) with attention paid to the effects this has on the different colleges and the managers of them. This prompted me to make the decision to focus my research solely on the students at the college, rather than the teachers and senior managers. This is not to say they do not play a major role in the education and experience of students, as of course they do however, I feel their perspectives have been documented elsewhere in the literature (see chapter 1). I wanted my research to focus directly on the students on their experiences and their perspectives.

Lastly, I realised that England has a tripartite system of post-16 education. It took some time for me to discover this as much of the literature focuses on Further Education (FE) and describes post-16 education as FE. Also my own understanding and interpretation of post-16 education led me to believe that this sector as a whole could be classified as FE. However, I was directed towards a small output of literature which addresses and explains the distinctions between the three different providers of post-16 education. According to researchers such as Shorter (1994), Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000), Lumby et al (2002), Briggs (2004) and Stoten (2014) there exists a tripartite system of post-16 education which is comprised of General Further Education colleges (GFE), Sixth Form Colleges (SFC) and School Sixth Form colleges (SSF).

This literature revealed the distinctions between the types of institutions and the courses and qualifications they offer to students (a full discussion of this can be found in chapter 1). Importantly, it made me re-think my own understandings of post-16 education and enabled me to recognise that my focal college would be classified as a sixth form college. This sparked significant considerations for my research. As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of research undertaken within post-16 education compared to other educational sectors, there is even less literature and research which focuses specifically on sixth form colleges and sixth form college students. With this in mind, I reframed the objective of my research to focus on an exploration of the everyday practices within a sixth form college and the experiences of the students within it. From this, I readdressed the aims of my research to the following:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- To explore, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.
- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and apply theory to, teaching and learning in Sixth Form College.

### ***The Study***

This research was undertaken in a sixth form college located in West Yorkshire. Utilising my role as a student support assistant within the focal college, I adopted a research position as an 'insider' and conducted an ethnography using the methods of participant observations (including conversations) and semi-structured interviews.

Data collection took place over two academic terms from January-June 2009. Observational data was collected from the level 2 classes in which I supported in; these included BTEC First Health and Social Care, ICT Key Skills, GCSE English and GCSE Maths. Most of the observational data comprises the Health and Social Care classes as I was timetabled into these classes the most. Interview data was collected between May and June 2009 with six student participants from the Health and Social Care class.

This ethnographic study sought to illuminate the experiences of the students and the wider college practices and government policies which shape and influence these.

### ***Thesis overview***

This thesis comprises seven chapters and begins with an exploration of the landscape of post-16 education, detailing the historical context of the SFC sector and how it has been subject to ideological shifts. It will address the distinctive nature of sixth form colleges, their ethos and 'niche' status. Following this, chapter two examines the literature surrounding student's learning experiences and engagement with post-16 education.

Chapter three presents the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of my research; focusing on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development, communities of practice, and Vygotskian theory respectively.

Chapter four defines and outlines ethnography as a methodology and explores my reasons for pursuing it. Following from this, it details the way in which I conducted my ethnography and the decisions I made with regards to data collection.

Chapter five presents the data analysis in two stages. Firstly the data is presented in the form of a narrative using field notes and interview data. Secondly, using the narrative as a focus, a thematic analysis was conducted

Chapter six discusses and explores the themes which emerged from the narrative and thematic analysis.

Chapter seven provides an overview of this thesis, reflecting on the aims of the research and outlining the contributions it has made to the literature on SFCs.



# **Chapter 1 The Historical and Political Landscape of Sixth Form Colleges**

According to statistics published by the Association of Colleges (2015), in England there are 93 Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) providing 'high-quality academic education to 16-18 year olds enabling them to progress to university or higher level vocational education' (p.2). High quality of educational provision has been synonymous with SFCs since their inception during the 1960s (Robinson and Burke, 1996, Shorter, 1994 and Briggs, 2004). Despite their high educational regard, comparatively, there is very little research which focuses on SFCs and in particular their impact on student experience.

This chapter seeks to introduce the educational landscape of post-16 education, with particular focus on SFC provision, and how the structure and underpinning policies have shaped the learning environment it provides for its students.

## **1.1 Background**

The UK education system is a complex one, reflecting the changing political agendas of the government since the Second World War. Post-16 education has developed somewhat haphazardly as it has adapted and changed direction in reaction to the changing requirements of society (Johnson, 2000).

Currently, a plethora of terms exist which aim to define education available for young people after compulsory schooling including; Further Education (FE), post-compulsory education and training, learning and skills sector and sixth form. These terms reflect the ambiguities of the post-16 education sector as well as its fluid and blurred boundaries (Allen and Ainley, 2007). Years of changing societal demands and political agendas has influenced the development and provision of this sector.

Colleges of FE have been part of the educational system in the UK for over one hundred years. Developed from former technical schools or mechanical institutes, they grew rapidly after the onset of the industrial revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, FE has nestled between the end of compulsory schooling and advanced or degree level study with a focus of providing non-academic vocational and/or technical education, general education and adult education (Avis, 2009). Often these types of colleges provide specialist provision in areas such as art and technology and are often community based institutions (Briggs, 2004).

In contrast to this, the history, purpose and provision of SFCs is very different and should be viewed as distinct from General Further Education Colleges (GFECs) and School Sixth Forms (SSF).

## ***1.2 The distinctive origins and nature of sixth form colleges***

This research focuses on student experience of SFC and seeks to explore how the practices of the focal college shapes student learning and their engagement with their studies. Amongst researchers within the SFC sector there is a general consensus that it is an under-researched area, often marginalised in both government policy and academic literature compared to that of schools and GFE colleges (Lumby et al, 2002, Briggs, 2004 and Stoten, 2014). The SFC sector comprises a small space within the research literature and is often discussed generically as a type of FE College (Briggs, 2004). With this in mind, this section will draw upon the work of Lumby et al (2002), Briggs (2004), Shorter (1994) and Stoten (2014) amongst a small number of others as information and research within the SFC is limited and sparse.

SFCs were first established in the 1960s as part of the comprehensive re-organisation of the education sector, often created from existing grammar schools (Lumby et al, 2002). Prior to the introduction of comprehensive education, there existed a 'bipartite' system of education in the UK based upon elitist divisions. Grammar schools were for the most academically able, taking on average the 'top' 20% of children and secondary modern schools taking the rest. Selection for grammar schools were made on the basis of the 'eleven plus' which consisted of an examination to test the intelligence and attainment in English and arithmetic. Children either 'passed' it and went to the grammar school or 'failed' it and went to the local secondary modern school.

The original concept of SFC was engineered by R. Wearing King, the chief education officer for Croydon in the 1950s, as he re-organised a small number of grammar school sixth forms into sixth form colleges. King's vision was of a new type of educational establishment 'devised to give an entirely new look, and geared to the psychology of those in their later teens, who feel themselves emerging as young adults' (p. 119, 1968 in Robinson and Burke, 1996 p. 7). During the 1960s, education was a relatively devolved system with local government taking responsibility for the provision and implementation of education (Stoten, 2014). This local control over educational provision enabled many institutions to adopt Wearing King's model of SFC resulting in a patchwork of SFCs emerging across England (Shorter, 1994).

According to Robinson and Burke (1996) these emerging SFCs 'had a history which was imbued with an elitism which was both academic and social' (p.7) as their roots and special ethos could be traced back to grammar school sixth forms. The Crowther Report (Ministry of

Education, 1959) outlined key distinguishing features of school sixth forms which included their close links with university, strong elements of specialisation, the independent working spirit encouraged amongst students, close relationships between tutors and students and the sense of social responsibility they engendered among students. In emulating the grammar schools as many sixth forms and sixth form centres transformed into SFCs, these traditions and ethos followed. Also many newly established colleges were initially staffed by ex-grammar school teachers 'imbued with academic ideals' (p.7 Robinson & Burke, 1996).

The establishment of SFCs provided many advantages. It could provide more cost-effective provision for A-level study than small SSFs as it could offer larger and broader curriculum with specialist subject staff (Lumby et al, 2002). It also meant that a new role for the grammar schools could be created as local authorities began to implement comprehensive education (Stoten, 2014). SFCs could provide a niche market, specialising in education for 16-19 year olds, offering traditionally favoured A-levels on a full-time basis (Briggs, 2004). From this purpose and provision a distinctive role and ethos of SFCs began to develop.

The distinctive role of SFCs stems from its historical roots emerging from the sixth forms of grammar schools. As many SFCs grew they began to evolve a common identity and ethos which provided a continuation of the traditional high academic provision and achievement and high expectations of students established by grammar schools (Lumby et al, 2002). Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) use the term 'subtle elitism' (p.192) to refer to the academic and elitist ethos of SFCs. Many SFCs have retained the selectivity of grammar schools with their emphasis on achievement and with their provision of a curriculum which is dominated by the 'gold-standard' of A-levels. According to Hodkinson and Bloomer, SFCs encourage elitism as the education and qualifications they provide are to prepare students for entry to university.

Shorter (1994) however, states that many SFCs have moved away from any original elitist meritocracy to develop their own particular ethos which re-defined this as the 'maximisation of potential by all' (p. 463). This is confirmed in the research conducted within SFC which will be explored in the next chapter. Despite their aim to provide high academic provision, SFCs look to support both the personal and intellectual development of each student and unlike GFE colleges (catering for 16-19 and 19+ students on various courses and qualifications) they can focus on the distinctive needs of 16-19 year olds studying on a full time basis (Briggs, 2004).

Recognition of the distinctive identity and nature of SFCs from GFECs and schools was formally acknowledged by the government through the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act (ASCL) of 2010 (Stoten, 2014). This act represents one of many created by the government in order to fulfil its latest educational agendas. The historical evolution of post-16 education in England has been, and continues to be, shaped by highly politicised initiatives which arguably serve the views of government ideologies rather than the staff and students at the centre of this education system. SFCs in particular have suffered from subsequent policy initiatives and changes which has further shaped the learning environment they offer students.

### ***1.3 Political agendas and their influences on post-16 education***

Post-16 education has been targeted by many government policies since the Education Act (1944) which offered the beginnings of a new legislative framework for post-war education promising a free, common and universal system of education for young people up to the age of 18. Local authorities were charged with providing 'adequate facilities' for full-time and part-time education for young people over the compulsory school age of 15.

The right wing political agenda of the 1980s and early 1990s saw ideas of enterprise culture and free market ideologies directly influence educational policy. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s neo-liberal policies were at the heart of not only industry and commerce but also public services. This sought an emphasis on cost reduction, privatisation and deregulation and the promotion of new forms of public management. From this a form of governance was created in which market principles were advanced whilst simultaneously central government authority was strengthened (Jones, 2003). Thus, the aims of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's education policies in the 1980s were to convert the education system from a public service into a market, and to transfer power from LEAs to central government. Consequently, Thatcher's government took control of the curriculum, the teachers and the LEAs (Simmons, 2009).

#### **1.3.1 Incorporation**

The continued drive of the Conservative government to create market forces within post-16 education, meant that under Major's administration there was increased focus on funding and organisational structure above delivery and quality of the education and training (Young and Spours, 1998). Major's administration continued to undermine the powers of the LEAs and eventually their responsibility for SFCs and GFECs were removed as part of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) through a process called 'incorporation.' Incorporation created a new national further education sector and meant that colleges became responsible for their

own affairs and direct employers of their staff. A centralised system of resource allocation was created whereby colleges received funding directly from a national funding council (Further Education Funding Council; FEFC). Post-16 education became a competitive market sector which was engineered and maintained by the state (Simmons, 2009).

The act represented the wider conservative philosophy of providing freedom for each college to deal with market forces themselves, whilst simultaneously decreasing the size of locally controlled public sector. The government hoped the change would enable colleges to respond more effectively to local markets and that more private funding would become available to reduce public expenditure. Through this it hoped to revive vocational qualifications and employer-based training (Jephcote and Abbott, 2005).

Colleges became like independent medium-sized companies enjoying autonomy in planning, marketing and implementing courses to adapt to changing needs within a locality, and servicing employers in the region (Johnson, 2000). As Benn and Chitty (1996) describe, 'there were to be no local systems, only individual education "businesses" competing with one another for "customers" within the centrally controlled legislative framework' (pg.14).

The implementation of the conservative ideal of market forces presented many difficulties particularly for GFECs. Teaching staff saw their workloads increase significantly, many institutions restructured and a series of redundancies occurred which contributed to a period of industrial unrest (Simmons, 2009).

Coffield (2006) writes that the successive waves of regional and market inspired policies created a culture of 'dictat and discipline, performativity and managerialism'. The legislation created a differentiated system created where prestigious schools and SFCs continued to provide A-levels or courses of high status, whereas FE colleges became providers for the disaffected, marginalised and more challenging sections of society (Simmons, 2009) and suffered from of being regarded 'second-best' (Ainley and Bailey, 1997).

Arguably, incorporation was the first major government policy which directly shaped the structure and practices of SFCs. The Act of 1991 meant colleges had to devise their own corporate plans and mission, manage assets and resources, employ staff and contract to provide services such as payroll and personnel (often bought in from the LEA). Many had to appoint administrative, financial and estate managers to cope with these new responsibilities (Shorter, 1994). Colleges were now accountable to the FEFC who were responsible for

maintaining colleges and allocating their funding. Funding was based on a formula driven by student numbers and courses offered (Robinson & Burke, 1996).

Colleges were faced with the task of increasing the rates of student participation in post-16 education and training but without a proportionate increase in funding. According to one SFC principal interviewed in Shorter's research 'The FEFC want[ed] more for less' (p. 468, 1994). Funding became a source of strain and tension as colleges faced the pressure to be more cost effective despite the growing numbers of students (Lumby et al, 2002). This financial position was particularly problematic for SFCs as many had experienced beneficial relationships with their LEA which had enabled them to secure generous funding. Many SFCs were concerned that given their higher running-costs and higher numbers of full-time staff compared to GFECs it would take them longer to reduce the cost of their operations (Shorter, 1994). According to Lumby et al (2002) this focus on funding meant that professional values were replaced with managerial values derived from the private sector resulting in the dominance of management systems and processes in an effort to be more cost effective.

The competitive market created by incorporation meant that funding was allocated to those institutions which could successfully recruit and retain students (Briggs, 2004). Incorporation brought together SFCs and GFECs, into one common sector of post-16 provision despite their different, origins, histories and traditions (Lumby et al 2002, Briggs, 2004, Robinson & Burke, 1996). According to Stoten (2014) colleges 'co-existed often uneasily in a competitive environment' (p.381) with each seeking to maintain and defend their interests through collaboration, competition or merging with other institutions. Shorter (1994) states that the direct effect of incorporation was to essentially 'change the rules' regarding provision offered by different colleges, as such some GFECs began to broaden into the A-Level market and SFCs began to offer GNVQ qualifications. These formed a broad based vocational route between the academic A-level and the NVQ work-specific routes and provided a qualification for those who did not want to follow an academic path (Bathmaker, 2001, Wahlberg & Gleeson, 2003). Many GNVQs were eventually replaced by BTEC qualifications which originated from the merge of the Technician Education Council and Business Education Council and were originally developed as technician level awards. The BTEC National Diplomas and National Certificates are level 3 awards (like A-Levels) and were introduced in the 1970s. BTEC First qualifications were introduced later to provide an alternative qualification to act as a progression route to national level for the increasing number of students staying on in full time education (Wolf, 2011). SFCs also began to 'sell' the broader curriculum that students could receive by studying for four A-levels, the reality of this served economic purposes rather than educational purposes (Lumby et al, 2002).

Lumby et al's extensive research into the SFC sector revealed that in many of the case study colleges featured in their research, each sought to change their provision to attract students with a wider range of entry qualifications than they had previously. Stemming from this they needed to respond to the wider needs of a more diversified student body and looked to increase study skills support and support for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), effectively competing to ensure they obtained the maximum number of students to ensure a high financial return. Incorporation presented a challenge to the SFC ethos as their culture and practices were now directly linked and managed alongside GFECs. Some SFCs retained similarities to the practices and ethos derived from the old grammar school days, whereas others grew closer to environment of GFEC.

Whereas funding issues created pressure for SFCs to compete, pressure to collaborate was influenced by the professional commitment of staff and the concerns they had regarding the curriculum (Briggs, 2004). Statistics from Lumby et al (2002) and Briggs (2004) show that compared with GFEC and SSFs, SFCs reported the most collaborative environments. Collaboration took two forms; negative collaboration where mutual survival with rival institutions was a necessary 'means to an end' to ensure sustainability, and positive collaboration where cooperation with other institutions was a desirable option. In their research, Lumby et al (2002) found that positive collaboration included SFCs creating a consortia for example, NORVIC which is a consortium of SFCs in Yorkshire, Humberside and North East (still in existence today) to promote the sharing of good practice, staff development and use of facilities and curriculum resources. Some SFCs also focused on collaborations with their feeder schools to ensure continuity and progression for students and to ensure maximum student numbers of enrolment.

To ensure survival some SFCs had to consider merging with neighbouring GFECs. Mergers were often viewed negatively by parents of students and staff as they were perceived to be destroying the academic advantages of SFCs (Shorter, 1994). Sometimes, mergers were the only logical solution. One college principal in Shorter's research knew their A-level provision was not large enough and they were unable to compete with the provision available at the GFEC. In this case the two principals produced an agreement to expand the GFEC into a tertiary college with each college supplying part of the market the other lacked.

The principles of incorporation introduced under the Conservatives were continued under the New Labour administration headed by Blair from 1997. The agenda of New Labour was to reform and modernise the education system and to widen participation. It aimed to do this via a 'managed form of marketisation' (p. 380) where, like previously, the government held

control over educational provision and the public sector (in this case colleges) had to compete for resources (Stoten, 2014). A central focus for the Labour government was the reform of 14-19 qualifications in an effort to encourage participation in education and training beyond the age of 16. The policies and initiatives associated with this, again served to shape the provision offered by SFC and the learning environments they offered to students.

### **1.3.2 Curriculum and qualification reform**

14-19 qualifications had been in a constant state of flux with A-levels providing the route for those more academically able, whereas an array of vocational qualifications are available for those wishing to pursue more practical or work-based learning. According to Pring (2008) the Labour government felt strongly that greater simplicity was needed, proposing revision of some qualifications, reduction of others, 'equivalence' established between qualifications and clearer progression through qualifications to HE, full time or part time employment. Further revision they felt was needed for national qualifications to reflect and encourage wider participation beyond 16. The 'general route' of A-Level study was not appropriate for many, but the majority would continue to follow that path. Stemming from the recommendations made by the Dearing Report (1996), the government introduced *Curriculum 2000* (QCA, 1999). This represented the first substantial attempt to reform provision at sixth form level since the inception of A-levels in 1951 (Priestley, 2003). A-level qualifications had begun to be viewed as narrow and inefficient and towards the latter years of the 1990s, they were considered to be 'out of step with the broader curriculum experience of... learners in other European countries' (p.102, Hodgson and Spours, 2005).

The reforms offered within Curriculum 2000 aimed to broaden the post-16 curriculum, provide parity of esteem (better equivalence) for academic and vocational qualifications, to promote greater consistency within and across different types of qualification and to encourage better participation rates in post-16 education (Fisher, 2007). The reforms aimed to encourage students to study a wider range of subjects post-16 which could be selected from academic and vocational pathways or could be a mixture of the two, and for an optional key skills qualification (Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology) to be available within the curriculum (DfEE, 1997, Whittle & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005).

Courses would be modular rather than linear with an assessment at the end of the first year of advanced level study. Hence, the National Qualifications Framework comprised three broad categories:

1. The 'general' or academic course- the A-level was divided into two parts, three units at A/S Level, equate to the first year of a traditional A-Level course, and three A2 units



awarded during the second year of study. When taken together these six units comprise a full GCE A-Level. The three units studied in the first year at A/S level serves as a certified qualification if the student did not wish to pursue the subject to the full GCE A-Level standard. Each unit of the A-Level is equally weighted, with the A/S and A2 programmes each accounting for 50% of the overall grade. Students would be encouraged to study five subjects at A-Level and could retake units in a bid to improve their grade.

2. 'Vocationally-related' school or college based course, formerly the GNVQ.
3. Occupationally specific NVQ

Despite its good intentions, Curriculum 2000 was met with considerable implantation problems (Priestly, 2003, Hodgson & Spours, 2005, Fisher, 2007). Research which reflects upon the impact of the reforms set by Curriculum 2000 offer similar findings based on the responses of students and teachers who first experienced them.

Hodgson and Spours (2005) present a chronological account of learner experiences of reforms during their first two years of Curriculum 2000 implementation. The students in this study reported a number of criticisms which influenced their learning. They encountered difficulties with the heavy learning programmes they had to follow and experienced a sense of panic about how they were going to cope. Students indicated that during their second term of study they were increasingly aware of the rushed nature of learning for AS and the pressures teachers were under to ensure they were covering the requirements of the syllabuses. Within this pressure to manage workloads, students also experienced what Hodgson and Spours term as the issue of 'magnification' (p.107, 2005). As AS levels were usually taught by at least two teachers it was possible, from the perspective of the learner, that studying for four AS Levels felt like studying for eight or more subjects , because each teacher treated their part of the course as if it were the whole course.

Stemming from this pressurised workload, students demonstrated hostility towards Key Skills and General Studies (core subjects) as they had not chosen to study these subjects and felt them to be an unnecessary burden at a time when they were trying to cope with the workload from their four chosen subjects. As such these core subjects were viewed as a low priority, even more so when it was revealed that many universities would not accept them as central qualifications which could form admission to undergraduate courses.

The perceptions and experiences of the students in Hodgson and Spour's research are mirrored in the response of teachers in Fisher's study. Fisher (2007) asked teachers to reflect on the consequences of Curriculum 2000 on teaching and learning in the post-16 classroom.

Many teachers felt there was a need to reform the A-Level curriculum but expressed concern about the quality of teaching and learning in the AS year. Teachers felt the syllabuses were more concerned with 'spoon-feeding' students with the information they needed to pass exams than about genuine engagement with the subject. Many reported feeling their teaching had been compromised in this way as the fast pace of subject delivery restricted opportunities for students to have time to read around the syllabus, make links beyond it and find genuine engagement in their learning. One teacher termed this as promoting a 'learn it forget it' culture (p.111).

These findings are similar to ones found by Priestly (2003) who found that teachers lacked a clear idea of what they need to teach and how to teach it, especially in terms of depth of coverage as many new syllabi were content heavy. This led to many over-teaching syllabi resulting in work overload and stress for both teachers and students.

Teachers were attempting to teach similar levels of content as before with previous A-Levels but with effectively only two and half terms available instead of the traditional three due to the new tier of examinations (AS students would commence study for their A2 after their examinations in the summer term). Also, under the new arrangements, students were encouraged to take four or five subjects at A/S Level as opposed to the traditional three. This resulted in many A-Level courses being forced into less time at a point when students had to do an extra subject and negotiate an extra tier of assessment. With this there was the added pressure of the newly introduced Key Skills qualifications. Like the teachers in Fisher's research, teachers also viewed the AS as a watering down of standards as the breadth it introduced came at price of restricting the depth of study, and depth of study had long been a feature of the old A-Level content (Priestly, 2003).

Despite the criticisms reported in the research, the introduction of Curriculum 2000 did offer some advantages for students. The modular approach in which they could revise and take examinations one at a time was largely supported. Students also felt that by taking four subjects in their AS year of study enabled them to make more informed choices in their A2 year, allowing them to experience specialisation in their three main subjects and to focus their effort on these to maximise their grades (Hodgson and Spours, 2005).

According to Priestley (2003) Hodgson and Spours (2003, 2005) and Fisher (2007), the problems which hampered the Curriculum 2000 initiative can firstly be attributed to the voluntary nature of the reforms as establishments could choose which qualifications they would offer and learners could decide their combination of subjects or whether to combine

academic and vocational study. Secondly, the lack of implementation support for teachers led to the failure of broadening provision through the new curriculum.

The qualification reform introduced via Curriculum 2000 marked the first attempt to reform the A-Level curriculum and to create equality of status between the academic route of A-levels and the vocational route of the newly created Advanced Certificates of Vocational Education (ACVEs). However the A-level route continued to remain at the centre of the qualification framework as students continued to opt for this more academic route.

The Labour government's introduction of Curriculum 2000 illustrates how the learning culture and the teaching practices of SFCs were required to change and adapt, thus shaping the learning opportunities and environment available to students.

Stemming from the criticisms of Curriculum 2000, the Tomlinson Review (DCSF, 2004) offered a more radical reform of the qualification system whilst building upon the unit and module framework design introduced through Curriculum 2000. The Tomlinson Working Group was set up in spring 2003 to address issues within 14-19 education which were causing concern; low post-16 participation and achievement, over-burdensome curriculum and assessment system, fragmentation of vocational qualifications, and the worry that students were not able to fully develop their skills and knowledge. The main focus of the review was to propose a framework of qualifications which would encourage greater participation and retention and would define standards at different levels of achievement. It was important to provide a framework which would encourage a greater number of young people to remain in education and training and which would provide clear and guided lines of progression.

The review proposed a replacement of the existing system of 14-19 qualifications with a four part framework of Diplomas at different levels:

1. Entry
2. Foundation
3. Intermediate
4. Advanced

The Diplomas would consist of 'core learning' to ensure all young people would develop necessary skills in numeracy, literacy, communication and ICT and 'main learning' (subjects chosen by the learner). Diplomas at successive levels would overlap so that achievement at one level would provide basis for progression to and achievement at the next. A young person could therefore enter the Diploma framework at an appropriate level and at a pace appropriate

to their abilities. Increased flexibility was to be a key feature of the Diplomas with learners able to transfer credit from one Diploma to another. Open Diplomas would offer the opportunity to select a mixed pattern of subjects, while specialised diplomas would allow a more focused approach. Greater stretch and differentiation could be introduced at advanced level through completion of an extended project, which would enable the study of a topic in depth.

The Tomlinson Review offered a clear vision for a unified framework of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications, retaining the best features of the existing qualifications, the well-established GCSE and A-Level route whilst offering high quality vocational provision (DfES, 2004). Its offer of clear and transparent pathways was an attempt to motivate young people to stay on in learning after 16.

The Tomlinson Report was a major challenge to a system dominated by A-level exams which originated as a route for a minority into HE, but had come to shape general education for the majority (Pring, 2008). However, the recommendations put forward by Tomlinson were not welcomed by the government. In their subsequent publication *Education and Skills 14-19* (DfES, 2005) the government rejected the idea of an overarching diploma as a means of creating parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses, and withdrawal of GCSES and A-Levels, as politically it was too great a challenge to the internationally-recognised standards associated with A-Levels. After all, according to the DfES (2005) these are 'by far the best-known and best understood qualifications for young people in this country' (p. 16).

Yet according to Pring (2008) the recommendations of the Tomlinson Report received uniquely widespread acceptance across the state and independent sectors of education and among employer organisations. It 'tackled the academic and vocational divide as it encouraged within a single framework a diversity of pathways, incorporated both relevance to the demands of employers within its 'functional skills' and relevance to demands of universities with the 'extended project'' (p.682).

This concern about the skills, or lack of skills acquired by young people during their education has been a ubiquitous theme present in all the initiatives and policies of successive government administrations over the years. Underpinning this concern, was (and arguably continues to be) the assumption that economic competitiveness can be advanced through the development of human capital, which can be achieved through acquiring the necessary skills to contribute to the global economy (Avis, 1997). Historically, these have been linked to vocational and skilled courses (offered by GFECs) with the aim of providing a skilled workforce

to promote economic growth; Technical Education (white paper, 1956) called for the growth of higher level technical education to combat the threat of increasing economic competition from abroad; the Industrial Training Act (1964) sought to make better provision for training in industry and commerce and to ensure an adequate supply of trained people; Manpower Services Commission (MSC, 1974) introduced training and re-training schemes focusing on improving the skills and employability for the increasing number of people unemployed during the economic recession; the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI, 1982) made a systematic attempt to focus 14-19 education towards developing basic skills and pre-vocational training which would help to achieve the country's economic priorities.

Coinciding with the Tomlinson Report, this emphasis on a skills agenda resurfaced as mounting concerns grew from educational and economical sections of government regarding the impact of 'globalisation' and the UK's position on the 'global stage'. Throughout Blair's administration there was a huge output of policy documents concerning the 'skills revolution' in particular the need to provide a more skilled workforce through a transformed education and training system (Pring, 2005). Here educational priorities were underpinned by capital needs to ensure young people were equipped with skills which were 'universal, readily transferable and not rooted in a particular context' (p.235, Avis, 1997).

In 2004 the government commissioned the Leitch Report (DCSF, 2006) to independently review the skills set necessary for the UK to 'maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice' (p.6). The report found that the UK had relatively poor levels of skills and productivity which was preventing successful competition in global markets. The report stated that the UK's skills base was weak by international standards and that this was holding back productivity and economic growth. According to the report, a third of adults in the UK did not hold an equivalent of a basic school-leaving qualification. Almost 17 million adults had difficulty with numbers and 5 million were not functionally literate. Leitch argued that continuing to improve schools was not enough to solve these problems. The UK's intermediate and technical skills lagged behind countries such as Germany and France, having neither the quantity nor quality of the necessary vocational skills.

Leitch proposed radical changes across the skills spectrum with specific focus on 14-19 year olds. The review recommended the UK to raise achievements at all levels of skills (effectively doubling attainment at most levels) as benchmarked by the OECD. In the review, Leitch promotes the mantra of 'Economically valuable skills' (p.2) and emphasised the shared responsibility of the government, employers and individuals to achieve this. Leitch called upon the government to invest in promoting basic skills for everyone and for employers to be

directly involved in determining the training priorities for those undertaking vocational education; enabling it to be demand-led, adaptable and responsive.

Similar concerns regarding education and skills in the UK were highlighted in the Foster Review (DfES, 2005) which examined and reviewed the future role of FE colleges. Statistics produced in Leitch's Review along with a growing unease that Britain as an economic market was suffering internationally prompted the Foster Review to publish a comprehensive set of reforms across the whole of the further education system. It was hoped that these reforms would fuel economic achievement via colleges (more specifically GFECs) which could provide a greater choice of courses and learning modes, streamlined qualifications and learning pathways and better specialisation in Centres of Vocational and Excellence Skills.

In response to the Foster Review (2005) the government issued a White Paper entitled 'Further Education: Raising Skills and Life Chances' (2006) to address the challenges of widening participation in education and training among young people and adults and up-skilling the workforce. The paper included provisions to increase the quality of teaching, to reward colleges for success and to make the further education sector more responsive to the skills needs of individuals and employers.

The findings and recommendations offered by Tomlinson (2004) Leitch (2004) and Foster (2005) culminated in the publication of the white paper *Education and Skills 14-19* (DfES, 2005). This sought to calm the moral panic regarding the society and the economy and the 'purported links between student disaffection, disengagement, truancy, low standards of educational provision and achievement, economic inactivity, crime, poor economic futures for individuals' (p. 181, Jephcote and Abbot, 2005). The white paper aimed to motivate previously marginalised groups. For the most disaffected it promised a tailored programme for 14-16 year olds including intensive personal guidance and significant work-based learning leading to a range of further options including apprenticeships. It also proposed that all 14 year olds should have the choice between following an academic or vocational course, or mixture of the two. It also introduced a requirement for all young people to remain in either education or training until the age of 18 (to be in place by 2015).

Stemming from the white paper, and operating in parallel with the GCSE/A-Level route, seventeen lines of Diplomas were introduced. The first five began in September 2008 with the aim of all seventeen taught by 2013. Originally, the Diplomas took a vocational form, developed by Sector Skills Councils (SSC) with 'principal learning' related to an occupational interest and with an element of practical work-based learning. In addition 'generic learning'

would take place in the form of functional English, Maths and ICT with an opportunity for 'additional or specialist learning' to allow future A-Level study.

As such, these Diplomas can be conceived as a middle-way between academic route and vocational training with the broad aim of providing a more practical, vocational pathway into HE, an occupationally relevant route into employment and a more motivating learning experience for those disengaged from further education and training. The 2005 white paper aimed to widen opportunities deemed essential for a prosperous and fairer society, providing social justice and a competitive economy. An inclusive 14-19 education and training system was viewed as vital to enable Britain to compete on the 'global stage'. Furthermore the drive for increased participation and achievement in economically valuable skills would help to deliver a nation of world-class skills by 2020, with the UK as a whole benefiting 'through increased productivity and economic performance, increased social cohesion and mobility.' (p.17)

Within this framework all qualifications are defined in terms of levels and 'equivalence' between different levels. This enables vocational courses and apprenticeships to be understood in comparison to GCSEs or A-Levels. A level 2 course or apprenticeship is equivalent to five A-C grade GCSEs whereas level 3 is equivalent to one GCE A-Level.

Pring (2008) argues that much of Blair's legacy regarding 14-19 education and training is an extension of that initiated by the previous conservative administration. 'Continuity is more apparent than radical change' (p. 685) as centralisation of responsibility for what is learned is reflected in the number of interventions affecting 14-19. Entrenched within government intervention documents and policies is the increasing use of management language, 'impacts' 'outcomes' 'performance indicators' 'audits' 'targets' 'delivery'. This changed language of education may be one of the major legacies of Blair years, reflecting the belief that educational problems which identified by government, can be solved by central intervention and performance management, a system drawn from the world of commerce and business.

The review of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications (DfES, 2004) meant that Tomlinson was faced with the almost impossible task of trying to resolve contestation between a large number of groups spread across schools, FE, HE, employers and government. Tackling the longstanding divisions and equality of esteem over the status, definition and control of 'academic' and 'vocational' knowledge and their means of acquisition and assessment, was viewed as a major policy aim. Reform of the qualification system was one way to readdress the balance of these different pathways, to encourage cooperation rather than competition.

However, according to Pring (2005) the complex institutional framework created an unequal 'playing field of funding and prestige' (p.80) On the one hand schools were responsible to LEAs whereas colleges were 'incorporated' and funded through FEFC. Schools, in their attempt to encourage young people to remain in education, increasingly began to offer vocational courses (such as hospitality and catering) traditionally associated with GFECs even though they may not be properly equipped for doing so. GFECs had a history rooted in vocational preparation especially for part time study but in more recent years had increasingly encroached upon traditional 'academic' areas of study of SFCs. Generally, FE colleges provided a wide range of vocational and non-vocational courses at different levels both full and part-time. SFCs focused on A-Levels and tertiary colleges provided all education and training at post-16 for a given area.

It can be viewed as a bold move by the government to attempt to align vocational and academic qualifications to offer clearer and more equal routes. However, the government's rejection of an overarching diploma could be considered a lost opportunity to reform an 'archaic examination system' (Garner, 2005 p.192). Jephcote and Abbot (2005) offer further criticism arguing that the 'tailored' curriculum and choice of the Education and Skills white paper 'fails to acknowledge and address the realities of living, growing up and being educated in a society divided by inequality of income and wealth and dominated by a class system and unequal educational opportunities and differentiated future life changes' (p.195) They believe the government is effectively shifting the responsibility for any failure in the system to the individual who has been empowered to exercise choice. Consequently, failure to make the right education or training choice is the responsibility of the individual or their family.

Arguably, the 14-19 curriculum and qualification reform initiated under Blair's government, is just another in a succession of initiatives aimed at the 14-19 age group. On the surface, this reform largely affected provision in GFEC as these are the institutions which focus on offering more vocational routes. However, the re-occurring mantra of Britain's young people having the necessary skills to contribute to the global economy highlights how important it is for young people to demonstrate they possess these skills. After incorporation, SFCs had to begin diversifying their provision to attract and retain more learners in line with the agenda to widen participation in education. Within this it is clear how offering qualifications in Key Skills and General Studies enables them to ensure their learners are equipped with the necessary skills.

Despite criticism, the Education and Skills white paper recognised the need to improve vocational routes for young people. It also further fuelled the longstanding debate regarding



the nature and quality of vocational qualifications. The debate appears to have come full circle stemming from the recommendations of the Wolf Report (2011). This report investigated vocational education for 14-19 year olds and provided a number of recommendations to improve provision and to enable successful progression into the labour market, HE or other training routes. Wolf criticised past attempts at establishing equivalence between academic and vocational qualifications, "In recent years, both academic and vocational education in England have been bedevilled by well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is worth the same as everything else. Students and families all know this is nonsense." (p.8).

Wolf wanted to ensure that qualifications led to meaningful progression, recommending the removal of low value vocational qualifications which did not lead to successful employment. In her report, Wolf made twenty-seven recommendations focusing on qualifications, funding, curriculum, teaching and apprenticeships. Wolf criticised what she termed to be the 'vocational-lite' curriculum available in SFCs, challenging aspects of the level 3 vocational curriculum and the progress which students made in these (Stoten, 2014). As such, this move poses a potential threat to SFCs developing an alternative route to their already narrow 'niche' curriculum (Stoten, 2014, Briggs, 2004).

Since the writing up of this thesis, more policies have been introduced again focusing on the post-16 qualification system. However, the review presented here explores the political landscape of SFC leading up to and at the time of the literature review and data collection. It is clear from this review, how educational policies regarding post-16 education have been influenced and shaped by the political agendas and priorities of central government. Some initiatives like incorporation and Curriculum 2000 have demonstrated the direct impact this has had on the learning environments and provision offered to students in SFCs. Others such as curriculum and qualification reform stemming from the 2005 white paper *Education and Skills 14-19* (DfES) show a less direct link to SFCs but nonetheless shape the educational landscape of post-16 education and the provision available to learners. From this it is useful to explore the general composition and practices of SFC (with the limited research which is conducted in this setting) and the provision they currently offer learners.

#### **1.4 Sixth form colleges: practices and provision**

According to the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA), the 93 SFCs across England are 'experts in 16-18 education' offering 'an extensive range of courses, both academic and vocational' and specialised pastoral care. In 2014, more than 160,000 16-18 year olds were enrolled on a course at SFC with 90% studying for level 3 qualification at either A-level or equivalent (SFCA, 2014). Data obtained by the SFCA (2014) found that SFCs outperform

other types of provider (SSF, academy sixth forms and GFECs) in measures such as better academic exam results, the percentage of students which progress onto HE and the percentage of students who are able to progress to more selective universities. SFCs achieve this whilst receiving less funding compared to the schools sector and academies.

The allocation of funding SFCs receive has a direct influence on the provision of qualifications and support offered to students. Funding has always been a concerning issue for SFC particularly since incorporation as they continue to 'exist on the margins of the educational eco-system' (Stoten, 2014 p. 858). Prior to incorporation SFCs were funded by local authorities; since then funds have been controlled by a series of governmental agencies. The ASCL (2010) removed SFCs from the FE sector and placed them back within the local authority with funding provided by Young People's Learning Agency (Stoten, 2014).

Despite the differing funding bodies SFCs remain under-funded. A funding impact report was recently published by the SCFA (2015) which indicated that SFCs have experienced deeper budget cuts compared to other providers which is impacting the high quality provision they strive to offer. Entitlement funding cuts in 2011, used to provide tutorials, enrichment activities and additional courses was reduced from 114 hours per year to 30 hours with SFCs on average experiencing a 10% reduction in their programme funding. Furthermore, the 16-19 funding formula introduced in 2013 and the reduction in funding for 18 year olds introduced in 2014 have contributed to further losses with some SFCs losing almost a third of their funding between 2011 and 2016 (Kewin and Janowski, 2015). The current Conservative government, led by Cameron has shown little interest in trying to address the funding equalities which exist between SFCs and other institutions. One example is the absence of a VAT refund scheme which is available to school and academy sixth forms but not to SFCs. According to the SFCA Survey (2015) this leaves the average SFCS with £317,964 less to spend per annum (Kewin and Janowski, 2015).

Since the submission of this thesis, it is likely that other funding proposals have subsequently been introduced however, the impact survey commissioned by the SFCA illustrates the funding plight which SFCs continue to experience. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the onset of incorporation encouraged many SFCs to consider practices geared to either compete or collaborate with other institutions to ensure survival. These practices continue to be evident today particularly SFC Consortia which demonstrate inter-institutional ties and networks to protect the survival of the colleges which comprise them (Stoten, 2014). Lumby et al (2002) write of the changing culture of SFC since incorporation as the sector has had to become more managerial. Private sector values which focus on funding and a dominance of managerial

systems and processes have become a key focus along with an increase in market awareness where students are clients and customers of the sector.

The successive waves of government policy targeted at 16-18 education in terms of funding and qualification reform has resulted in many SFCs broadening both the subjects and qualifications they offer. Many now offer a mix of both academic and vocational study at level 3 such as BTEC qualifications. However, A-levels form the basis of their main educational provision as these qualifications are known, understood and valued and serve to make the provision of SFCs distinct from other providers (Lumby et al, 2002). As such the provision offered by SFCs is often regarded as a 'niche' market (Briggs, 2004, Stoten, 2014) because of the specialised delivery of 16-18 curriculum and the structured support available to students to achieve in this and progress on to HE (Lumby et al, 2002).

Generally, the curriculum offered within the SFC sector is dominated by A-levels in a range of traditional academic subjects such as mathematics, physics, history and English literature. Depending on the local needs of the students some SFCs offer the opportunity to re-sit GCSE English and maths, some supplement the core curriculum of A-levels with BTEC diplomas at level 3 such as those in business, media and health and social care (SFCF 2008a in Stoten, 2014). According to the Sixth Form College Forum (now known as the Sixth Form Colleges Association SFCA) 'the guiding principles of the SFC curriculum are: continuity with school; the provision of different levels of study; the provision of breadth and the opportunity to specialise in subjects; stretch and challenge through high quality teaching and learning and enrichment activities. Students are supported by a pastoral system that guides them through the process of applying to university or employment. They typically study for 4 AS-levels in their first year and complete three full A-levels in their second year, often with an additional qualification through general studies of the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)' (SFCF 2008b in Stoten, 2014 p. 856).

As illustrated earlier, SFC are more vulnerable to changes in post 16 government policy due to their niche market offering A-levels as their 'main product' (Lumby et al, 2002, Stoten, 2014). However, as Lumby et al found, students (and their parents) value the cultural currency attached to A-level qualifications. Not only this, SFC have been responsive to government policy and have diversified their provision over the past twenty years, and despite comprising a smaller sector in comparison to GFECs and schools, they make a significant contribution to level 3 educational provision in England (Stoten, 2014).

Despite SFCs being an under-researched sector of educational provision, the literature which is available consistently views SFC as distinctive in their provision and their position as a niche market which in itself offers a distinctive ethos and learning culture for students (Lumby et al, 2002, Briggs, 2004, Hodgkinson and Bloomer, 2000, Stoten, 2014). This culture stems from the grammar school roots of SFCs which focus on high quality teaching and learning to enable high academic achievement (as discussed earlier in this chapter). The learning culture also embodies the ethos of the school sector, particularly their provision of pastoral care and the relationships established with parents (Stoten 2014b). How then does the institutional culture offered by SFC shape the learning of the students within it? Lumby et al's research revealed that students' reasons for studying at SFC was based on a culture choice as much as an academic choice. This is mirrored in the research of Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000) who found that students valued the positive culture for learning created within SFC. This notion of a learning culture and the context within which learning occurs in SFC will be explored further in the next chapter.

### ***1.5 Chapter summary***

This chapter has explored the historical and political landscape of SFC, from its grammar school origins to the SFC in existence today, providing a curriculum dominated by A-levels but with increasing provision of level 3 vocational subjects (as is the case with the focal college in this research). This chapter has illustrated the challenges the SFC sector has faced in response to changing government educational and economic agendas. Despite the impact of funding cuts and qualification reform initiatives, the sector has managed to retain its distinctive ethos and has preserved its provision and learning culture. The next chapter will explore the literature surrounding student learning within SFCs, looking at how as a learning culture, the practices of SFCs shape the learning and engagement of students.

# **Chapter 2 Learning and engagement in Sixth Form College**

## ***2.1 Introduction***

The previous chapter detailed and explored the evolution of SFCs within the post 16 education sector in England, revealing the distinctive ethos and culture present within SFCs. This chapter will explore and discuss the literature which focuses on student experience and learning within SFC. As indicated in the previous chapter, SFCs as a sector are under-researched in comparison to schools and GFECs (Lumby et al, 2002, Briggs, 2004 and Stoten, 2014), it is therefore necessary in places to borrow from the literature and research within these sectors. Furthermore, literature which focuses on the experiences of students enrolled on vocational courses post-16 will also be discussed as the focus of this research is on students studying on a vocational course at SFC. As indicated in the previous chapter, SFCs increasingly provide vocational courses to learners at different levels. The focal college within this research offers BTEC qualifications at level 1, 2 and 3 which are typically classified as vocational qualifications compared to the academic qualifications of A-levels. Additionally, the focal students are those studying towards a BTEC level 2 qualification (more information regarding the focal college and participants can be found in the methodology chapter). Much of the literature which explores vocational education post-16 refers to GNVQ but these often comprise BTEC qualifications and will be similar in form and function to the qualification undertaken by the focal students.

The focus of this chapter is to explore the literature available surrounding student experience of post-16 education in terms of SFC as the institution and/or students enrolled on a vocational programme of study. It will explore the reasons students present for continuing in further study and will examine the practices which enable and disable learning and engagement in college.

## ***2.2 Motivation to engage in learning***

Much of the literature which explores student experience of post-16 education tends to explore the reasons behind why students decide to continue to study and their choice of course, qualification and institution. At the time this research was initiated and conducted (data collection began in January 2009), education and training beyond the age of 16 was not compulsory. Proposals had been made to make education and training for young people compulsory to the age of 18 from 2013 (DfES, 2005) and government discourse at the time emphasised that learning was the key to economic prosperity both for the individual and the nation as a whole (DfES, 2005, Leitch, 2006).

Within this upskilling and economic discourse, vocational qualifications such as GNVQ provided an education and training route which could 'prepare young people for employability by developing generic skills, breadth, career planning, self-reliance, flexibility and a willingness for lifelong learning' (Bathmaker, 2001 p.85). Central to GNVQs was the emphasis on the learner to take responsibility for their own learning and to gain the skills employers seek (Avis, Bathmaker & Parsons, 2002). GNVQs and the vocational pathways they offer are often considered to be a non-academic option for young people perceived as non-achieving and with low aspirations as they fail to meet the government benchmarks in terms of GCSE grades at A\*-C (Atkins, 2010). Although policy rhetoric claims parity of esteem between academic A-levels and GNVQ, (DfES, 2005) GNVQs are perceived by students to be a second chance route for those who have not achieved the grades in their GCSEs to progress to A-level and who do not have the academic abilities required for A-level study (Bathmaker, 2001, Avis et al, 2002).

According to Bathmaker (2001) GNVQ offers a qualification for young people who do not wish to follow an academic route. In her research with students enrolled on a foundation (level 1) GNVQ, students were keen to make a fresh start and wanted a course which they would not fail at, as according to government education indicators they were viewed as failures in terms of their poor GCSE qualifications. An appealing feature of GNVQ courses is the emphasis on coursework compared to A-levels (Hodkinson, 1998) and the opportunity for students to study at their own pace in order to achieve (Bathmaker, 2001).

Although GNVQs are perceived to be of lower status compared to A-level, the opportunity to study them at a SFC is an important factor to students, as the young people in Hodkinson's study revealed, SFCs are considered to be a high status place offering a quality education despite, in some cases, GFECs being better equipped to provide vocational education. In his research, Hodkinson, found that students placed the choice of institution, particularly if there was opportunity to study at a SFC, above the choice of course. 'Often the 'choice' of GNVQ was really a choice to stay in the SFC rather than go' elsewhere (p.157).

As explored in the previous chapter, SFC have a reputation for providing high quality education and are synonymous with high achieving students who progress into higher education and professional careers (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000, Lumby et al, 2002, Briggs, 2004, Stoten, 2014). SFC is perceived by students and their parents as a prestigious institution where students can achieve excellent results in most prestigious awards (A-levels) and so motivation to study at SFC is high (Lumby et al, 2002).

According to Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) the choice to study at SFC is underpinned by the 'subtle elitism' attached to studying within this environment. Here the choice of SFC will enable achievement in qualifications (A-levels) which will allow entry into university (Keys, Maychell, Evans, Brooks, Lee & Pathak, 1998, Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). Keys et al (1998) found that for the SFC students in their research, their choice of course was influenced by their interest within the subject followed by their ambition to progress on to university. Even for those students studying vocational courses, SFC provides an attractive place to study as opposed to that of a GFEC because it offers a different and distinctive institutional and learning culture (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000).

In their longitudinal research with students, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) found that their focal SFC fostered a positive culture for learning, providing a community with a well-developed personal tutoring system, an extensive extra-curricular programme, and numerous sporting and extra-curricular clubs which helped to provide a common experience for students. This then contributed to the creation and maintenance of a coherent college identity which set itself apart from other types of learning institutions such as GFECs. This institutional culture fostered an independent and autonomous learning spirit in the students whilst strengthening their ambitions to progress to HE. The college provided a culture which was continually shaping and shaped by the interactions of the students and teachers which nurtured the culture of engaging and progressive learning.

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identify that many of the students who entered the college were already 'positively orientated' to the college culture (p.196) and so it can be assumed that many of the focal students had experienced prior educational success and achievement and were equipped with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to engage with their learning. Arguably students such as those in Bathmaker's study would not be so positively orientated in terms of engaging with learning due to their 'failed' attempts at learning previously. This concept of prior educational experience and its influence on student engagement and learning will be explored later on in this chapter. However, the availability of the adult atmosphere provided in SFC which is perceived to be more mature than that at school and offers a fresh start for all students are repeatedly found in the literature as motivations to pursue further study (Keys et al, 1998, Hodkinson and Bloomer, & Lumby et al, 2002).

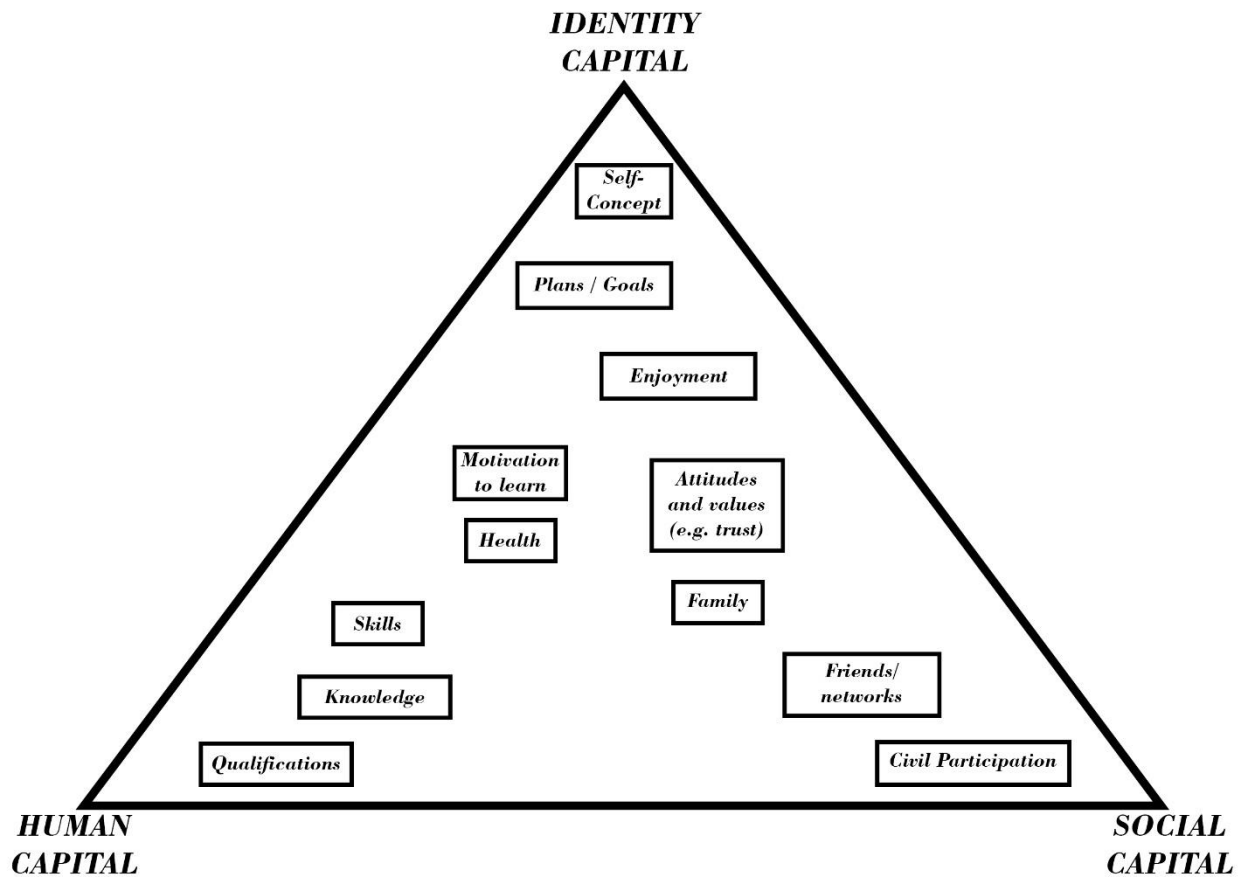
The literature frequently cites that a common motive for young people to engage in further study whether it be vocational or academic, is the idea that investment in learning will enable achievement of 'good' qualifications which will enable them to get 'good' jobs and better

opportunities in life (Hodkinson, 1998, Bathmaker, 2001, Wahlberg & Gleeson, 2003 Atkins, 2010).

This notion of utilitarian interests in the form of economic, social and cultural capital, are increasingly influential upon student engagement with their learning (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001). Gorard and Smith (2007) propose that human capital theory explains why young people continue in education. They suggest that individuals participate in further learning 'according to their calculation of the next economic benefits to be derived from education and training' (p.144). In accordance with this, Glover et al (2002) found that students continued with education post-16 and then HE because they believed they would gain enhanced earnings in the future.

This idea of human capital theory 'refers to the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals which enable them to function effectively in economic and social life' and stems from the work of American economists Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) where 'investment in education produces returns, in more or less the same way as investment in physical capital does' (p.14, Schuller et al, 2004). Schuller (2004) proposes that learning is a process where people accumulate assets in the form of human, social or identity capital. He presents the three different forms of capital; human, social and identity in the form of a triangular diagram.





**Figure 1 Schuller's triangular representation of capital**

The diagram presents a conceptualisation of the wider benefits of learning. Within this, social capital refers to the relationships that exist between individuals or groups of individuals which enable the fulfilment of common goals. Deriving from the work of Côté (1997), 'identity capital refers to the characteristics of individuals that define their outlook and self-image' (p.19 in Schuller, 2004). These characteristics can include self-esteem, personal interests and views and are not necessarily innate personality traits but are socially shaped. 'These characteristics are vital factors at almost every stage of the learning process. They are major determinants of motivation and whether or not people choose to engage in learning; they effect performance in the classroom and are also an outcome of learning.' (p.20, Schuller, 2004).

According to Schuller (2004) many learning experiences and outcomes of these learning experiences can be viewed as an interplay between human, social and identity capital. Schuller emphasises the centrality of lifelong learning in people's lives and how previous life experiences can influence learning in complex ways as 'it is hard to disentangle the effects of education from those of family background or local context' (p.14). Thus, engagement with learning is underpinned by complex social processes occurring over time which serve to shape an individual's motivation to learn. The literature supports this and suggests that student

motivation to learn stems from previous education and learning experiences. Gorard and Smith (2007) ascertain that staying on rates in post-16 education is determined by prior attainments at GCSE level. 'Success' in school examinations is an influencing factor on whether to continue with education, creating a linear pathway from FE to HE which can predict a student's educational routes and later employment (Pustjens et al 2004, McIntosh 2003).

Gorard and Smith (2007) emphasise that an individual's lifelong pattern of learning is transmitted through family generations and is influenced by an individual's social and familial background and their educational experiences which then becomes embedded in their 'learner identity'. They conclude that 'inequalities in early-life education...' can be viewed '...as a manifestation of profound multiple social disadvantages...' which are '...then reflected in later participation.' (p.154).

Similar findings are also reflected in the research of Archer and Yamashita's (2003) qualitative study which followed 20 year 11 pupils through their final year at school, their GCSE results and their post-school routes. The focal pupils were predicted as not likely to progress onto further education by their teachers and were predicted GCSE grades D-F. Thus, they were considered educational 'failures'. The study highlights the way in which the young people viewed themselves as 'not good enough' and 'knew their limits' (p.53) in relation to further study after school. The findings revealed how student's negative experiences of school affected their decisions post-16. The focal school was located in a deprived area of a city, the poor physical state of the school buildings fostered negative views of pupils' self-worth this, coupled with a high turnover of staff and employment of supply teachers made the pupils feel 'abandoned' (p. 65) and prevented the establishment of good relationships with their teachers.

Stemming from their school experiences and the identity they had constructed as failed learners, many of the pupils perceived themselves to be 'dumb' (p.58) and low achievers and felt they would be unable to participate in further education for fear of academic failure and would be 'blamed for not paying attention' (p.59) if they had difficulty understanding or keeping up with college. According to Archer and Yamashita (2003) those pupils who were unsure or not thinking of continuing on in education employed self-protective strategies of avoiding further educational failure by not engaging with further study.

The research discussed here suggests that engagement in learning in post-16 education is rooted in and is influenced by family, locality and history (Gorard and Smith, 2007). The process of learning cannot be viewed in isolation, acknowledgment of the wider social

influences need to be considered. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) refer to the term 'learning careers' as a way of illuminating how a student's life beyond college affects their participation and learning opportunities. This concept of learning careers proposes that learning changes and transforms over time and that unlike policy rhetoric, they are not linear and predictable. Research (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000 and 2001, James and Biesta, 2007) illuminates the significance of situation and activity in shaping the learning process; demonstrating that learning is a profoundly social phenomenon.

James and Biesta (2007) utilise the concept of 'learning cultures' to refer to the 'particular ways in which the interactions between many different factors shape student's learning opportunities and practices' (p.21). They offer a cultural theory of learning which sees learning as happening through social practices rather than in the individual heads or brains of students. In embracing an holistic approach to looking at learners and learning practises, James and Biesta (2007) state that students cannot separate their college learning with other parts of their lives (even if they consider them as separate). This is because 'dispositions, attitudes, motivations and interests, ways of dressing and behaving all develop through a student's past life in home, school, work, leisure and the local community' (p.23). This demonstrates the social nature of learning and how the individual histories of students contribute to the learning culture created within post-16 institutions. Stemming from this, 'student learning is not simply an 'outcome' or 'product' of participating' (p. 22) within a particular learning culture but is something which in turn shapes the nature of the learning culture itself.

The literature discussed here indicates that student motivation to study post-16 is influenced by their prior educational histories as well as the social and economic context of their current life and formative years. A student's motivation to enrol on a course and study cannot be viewed in isolation as it is a product of their life, their acquisition of human, social and identity capital, and their learning history. Moving on from the motivations which underpin a young person's reason for engaging with further study, practices within and beyond the learning environment will further serve to enable or disable their learning which in turn will shape a student's learning experience.

## ***2.3 Enabling and disabling learning practices***

### **2.3.1 Student biographies**

As the literature suggests, a student's educational history and personal biography will either enable or disable their engagement with learning. The students in Bathmaker's (2001) research perceived themselves to be failures at school however, could see the value of completing a level 1 GNVQ course as this would provide a route to further educational

progression. Arguably, this underpinning concept of human capital theory (Schuller, 2004) provides an enabling feature of engaging with learning as students believe that by doing so they will receive opportunities in their future lives in terms of jobs and earnings (Atkins, 2010).

However, for some young people who have constructed and internalised learner identities which perceive themselves to be educational failures (Archer and Yamashita, 2003), they are prevented or disabled from participating in further education. In the absence of any positive learning experiences, it is better and safer to accept your failures and prevent any future ones occurring.

Similar findings from Pustjens et al (2004) reveal that 'success' or 'failure' at school affects the choice of what an individual will do post-16 and 'lays the foundation of what could be an enduring learner identity' (p.151). 'Success' is defined as a positive experience of school, such as achievement in prior exams, which establishes an enduring attitude towards further learning. In contrast, those who 'fail' at school see post-16 education as 'irrelevant to their needs and capacities' (p.151). Thus, previous educational experiences and achievements not only prompt young people to continue in education, but can also prevent them.

Looking beyond the prior learning experiences of students, Selwyn et al (2006) consider how the personal, social and economic factors of an individual influence their participation in post-16 education. Evidence from the research of Feinstein et al (2004) demonstrates that parental education and income are key influences on the early educational achievements of a child in that children of parents who themselves are educated to a high level and are in relatively well paid employment or careers, are more successful achievers and learners at school. Selwyn et al (2006) state that the time of an individual's birth in relation to the opportunities for learning and social expectations, coupled with where they were born and brought up shapes their educational expectations and access to local opportunities to participate. Similar findings from the student stories in Hodkinson and Bloomer's (2000) data 'demonstrate the influence of socially and culturally grounded experiences outside formal education, related to family, peer groups, home and employment', upon the learning experiences and learning careers of young people (p.200). Gorard and Smith (2007) identify these factors as creating dispositional barriers as they influence an individual's motivation and attitude to learning.

In addition to the factors which shape a student's educational biography, practices within the college setting- the institutional culture, the teachers and the curriculum, all serve to further shape the experiences of students.

### **2.3.2 Institutional culture and practices**

Much of the literature emphasises how the institutional culture of college provides enabling learning opportunities for students. Research exploring students engaged in studies at GFEC revealed that their experiences were often described in contrast to what they had experienced at school. Sailsbury and Jephcote (2008) found that students enjoyed the more relaxed atmosphere in contrast to the 'petty rules' and 'regimentation at school' (p.154). The students appreciated a less rigid timetable which gave them more free time and enabled them to combine their studies with a part-time job. Furthermore, many students felt they were 'treated like adults' (p.154) in the college environment which promoted responsibility and an opportunity to establish close working relationships with teaching staff. Many enjoyed how teachers were approachable and able to understand the various situations and needs of the students both as learners and people with lives beyond the course.

This idea of an 'adult atmosphere' was a predominate theme reflected in much of the research. Young people appreciate the culture of college, allowing them to dress how they want, being treated as adults, involving activities other than reading and writing and offering experience of real adult life (Ecclestone, 2006, Gorard & Smith, 2007, Lumby et al, 2002, Briggs, 2004).

The adult culture, particularly within SFC, as discussed earlier, can create positive learning attitudes within students contributing to and maintaining a purposeful working atmosphere, with students valuing the responsibility they can assume for their own learning (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). According to Lumby et al (2002) SFC is as much of a culture choice for students as it is an academic choice. The strong learning culture found within the focal SFC of Hodkinson and Bloomer's research created and sustained a strong learning community where learners assumed positive dispositions to learning. This continued to strengthen the community and shape the dispositions of other learners within it. Thus, the learning culture was continually shaping and being shaped by the interactions between the students and staff which valued and supported independent learning. Students reported feeling increased confidence and strengthened ambitions to progress to HE as a result.

This idea of a learning community is significant in that students who feel part of or within the learning community of their college are more likely to feel enabled in their participation. The students in Bathmaker's (2001) research reported that it was important to them to feel like they were insiders to the learning environment of their college rather than outsiders. Their accounts emphasised the importance of 'being students'; being accepted, being liked by staff and having friends who were students and generally accepting the ethos of the college. For

these students, Bathmaker (2001) suggests that these factors were of more value than the content and nature of learning itself (p.97)

Despite the enabling adult learning culture reported by students in the literature, some college practices disabled positive learning and experiences for students. Contrasting against the appeal of the adult environment offered within college, students from Salisbury and Jephcote's (2008) research struggled to adapt to the academic demands and assessment styles of college and felt overwhelmed by the sudden difference in the teaching and the volume of independent work required. Elsewhere in the literature, A-level students' accounts highlight some of the challenges they encounter when making the transition from GCSE to A-level, particularly the difficulty of understanding many of the more abstract concepts of some A-level subjects (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997).

Learner accounts from Avis' research (1984) revealed that students found themselves defined as children by staff. College attendance policies required them to account for their every move and if absent they were required to bring a note in from their parents. Whalberg and Gleeson's (2003) study highlights the contradictions surrounding the adult atmosphere at college. The students in their research reported that they preferred college to school because they were treated in a more adult way however, in some instances they felt as though they were treated like 'kids' if they were sent out of the class for talking or for arriving late. College tutors themselves were contradictory as at times they would refer to their students as adults, but at other times as 'kids'. In the research, tutors strove to develop an adult atmosphere but did not provide a consensus that the students were adults. According to Whalberg and Gleeson (2003), a reason for this contradiction can be attributed to the 'second class' image associated with these students (enrolled on an intermediate level GNVQ Business Studies course). Tutors would justify their treatment of students as 'not adult' (p.432) because they perceived GNVQ students to lack motivation and saw their choice to take the course as a 'soft' option. This demonstrates how powerful these kinds of teacher perceptions are at constructing the learning culture within a college site.

Lumby et al's (2002) findings offer further support as they state that SFCs provide for learners who are neither children nor adults. Students want the freedom and self-expression offered within the college culture however, they also need a structured learning environment to ensure attendance and that learning outcomes are achieved. These practices stem from wider government policy of allocating funding based on student numbers and objectives to ensure that students complete and achieve in their qualifications. For some students this strict and

structured environment showed little difference to school (Avis, 1984, Whalberg & Gleeson, 2003).

Other disabling practices revealed in the literature stems from the organisation of the colleges themselves in terms of entry procedures for courses, timing and scale of provision (Gorard and Smith, 2007). In their study of FE student drop outs, Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2001, b) found that timetable issues prevented a student, Daniel, from choosing the subjects he wanted to study, *'I couldn't do psychology because it was in the wrong column, and I wanted to do philosophy and it was in the wrong column. And then I thought, politics, but it was in the wrong column. And in the end, I just had to put up with sociology'* (p.122). This restriction upon the freedom to pursue subjects and courses was reflected among other students in the study. When students failed to get the necessary entry grades, they were forced to make quick decisions about courses, which often resulted in not what they really wanted to do. Arguably, if a student is enrolled on a course which they did not set out to study they may fail to identify and engage with their learning.

The literature presented here illustrates the social processes which underpin the institutional culture of college sites and the practices located within them. James and Biesta (2007) advocate a cultural theory of learning which provides a more holistic way of viewing learners, learning and learning practices. The current domination of measureable outcomes within the post-16 sector such as achievement of qualifications and student retention rates, are generally accepted as the main purpose of learning and are considered to be a reliable measurement of the effectiveness of learning. In opposition to this James and Biesta (2007) state that *'being a student in FE does not simply result in acquisition of knowledge, skills and qualifications, but affects the whole person'* (p.36). They promote the need to use *'contextualised judgement due the relational complexity of learning, differing positions and dispositions of learners'* (p.37).

Hence, there is more to learning than a student staying on their course and passing their formal assessments. Learning involves complex, social processes shaped by the individual learner biographies of the students and the practices of the college. Stemming from this, the relationships students form with teachers are an important feature of their learning. Many of the college cultures and learning environments within the research centre upon the nature of the relationships students felt they had with their teachers. These relationships were shaped not only by the interactions themselves between students and teachers, but by the wider college practices and the prescription of the curriculum being taught. The following sections will discuss these concepts further.

### **2.3.3 Learning relationships**

Many student accounts in the literature reveal how central their relationships with their teachers are to their learning experiences. According to Young (1998 in Bathmaker, 2001) teacher-student relationships are significant and essential to learning. Students in the literature identified 'good' teachers who would enable their learning and 'bad' teachers who made learning and engagement difficult.

As discussed earlier, some of the institutional practices of the colleges which teachers are required to implement such as attendance and behavioural policies, served to disengage some students as they felt they were being treated as 'kids' similar to their experiences at school. In his research with students on pre-vocational courses, Avis (1984) found that students displayed resistance to the 'infantilisation' (p.141) they experienced but also as a means of dealing with a boring class or an unpleasant teacher. Resistance here took the form of messing about in class; challenging or setting up teachers, general disruptive behaviour such as joking and talking, and at times absenting themselves from the class. To an extent, the wider college practices themselves influenced the learning relationships teachers and students formed, as indicated in Avis' findings (1984) prior to any learning taking place, measures such as taking the register and attendance monitoring reminded students of school and hindered the process of forming the adult learning relationships students sought at college.

However, many student accounts of their relationships with teachers indicates a positive learning experience. In Sailsbury and Jephcote's research (2008) students felt motivated to learn if their teachers were approachable and able to understand and empathise as this created a sense of being cared for. Students in Mayes and Crossan's (2007) research felt that positive learning relationships could be established with their teachers if the teachers were personally and genuinely interested in their progress, not only in terms of their formal learning but also in their personal development. Characteristics such as patience, a sense of humour, helpfulness and discretion were valued by the students and enabled them to forge a strong learning and personal relationship with their teachers. This is consistent within Dziubinski's (2014) research where positive relationships according to the students, involved more mature interactions than those they had experienced with teachers at school. Students felt that generally their relationships with tutors at college compared to school were more social as tutors were more approachable and open and students could refer to them on first name terms. Students believed this created a more equal power balance and enabled them to feel more connected to their teachers. Students felt valued and experienced increased confidence when their teachers took an interest in their personal views, even if this was beyond the remit



of the subject being taught, and when teachers understood student's individual needs and abilities.

In Bathmaker's study (2001) students felt that having a good relationship with their teachers was important to their learning. For these foundation GNVQ students a good teacher would help, supply information and make time for them whilst treating them respectfully. In contrast to their school experiences these students felt that a good teacher would not pressurise them or 'stress them out' (p.93) and could relate to them on a more informal level. According to Bathmaker (2001) a key reason contributing to the success of these students on their vocational course (in contrast to their failure at school) was 'closely linked to their relationship with teachers and their acceptance within the college environment' (p.97). This demonstrates how social and reciprocal the learning process is, as it is negotiated between students and teachers. Students value the importance of their tutors being flexible and engaging with them as equals, thus establishing a learning relationship which is continually negotiated between the two (Mayes and Crossan, 2007). This is confirmed in the findings of Avis et al (2006) who refer to teachers and learners working and participating collectively within their classroom community in order to accomplish the qualification outcomes.

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) further illustrate this by stating that teacher-student relationships are 'constructed and continually negotiated within... strongly bounded and stable shared values' (p.200) This was particularly evident in the focal SFC within their research, where a positive culture of learning was created and maintained. Students contributed to and preserved the purposeful working atmosphere and valued the responsibility they could assume for their own learning. These positive learning experiences for these students stemmed from their positive accounts of their relationships with their teachers.

The research reveals that the differing teaching and learning styles offered to and expected of students varied depending upon the level and type of qualifications. As illustrated in Hodkinson and Bloomer's study (2000) SFC students both valued and initiated independent learning in line with the expectations of their A-level courses, their teachers and the whole college culture. Whereas, the students enrolled on vocational courses, placed the responsibility for their learning with their teachers. According to Bathmaker (2001) for these students, GNVQ offers a safe option with limited failure, in which they do not intend to manage or take responsibility for their own learning. Avis et al (2006) also found that GNVQ students lacked confidence and motivation as a result of their previous educational experiences. Rather than being capable of taking responsibility for their own learning, accounts from their teachers

revealed they needed a considerable amount of help and support to enable them to succeed on their course.

This need for closer teacher support and guidance was also found in the A-level student accounts of Dziubinski's (2014) research. These students revealed that the responsibility they were required to take for their own learning and progress made them feel insecure as this differed from their school experiences, and they felt in need of closer direction from their teachers. Focus group discussions within this research illustrated that positive relationships (as detailed earlier) with teachers enabled the students to feel part of a learning community and this in turn contributed to success in their A-level studies.

Whalberg and Gleeson (2003) highlight the contradictions evident in the learning accounts of the GNVQ students in their research. Students sought to be perceived and treated as adults within the college environment however, a 'good' teacher was viewed as 'someone in charge, who knows their subject area' (p.441) and who can essentially 'deliver' the learning required. In 'contrast the tutor who leaves it up to the students to learn for themselves is seen to be unprofessional' (p.441). Therefore, for learning to be enabled, the teacher is required to deliver the necessary knowledge and curriculum content and the student needs to be motivated and prepared to respond to this accordingly.

This of course is a simplistic notion gathered from the subjective perspectives of the students in the research. To be perceived as 'good', a teacher needs to be able to adapt to and respond to the learning needs of the students enrolled on a particular course. They need to deliver course knowledge and ensure course objectives are met whilst creating a respectful and informal relationship with students. This is arguably a difficult balance to achieve as there is no 'one-size fits all' approach to teaching nor is there an exact science to being a 'good' teacher. As explored earlier, learning should be understood as a complex cultural process involving prior educational experiences and the dispositions young people bring to their learning, teacher-student relationships, classroom interactions and institutional practices (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000, James and Biesta, 2007).

Accounts from tutors in the research also provide descriptions of 'good' and 'bad' students. The ideal student is 'one who manages their own learning, participates in the course and seeks advice about their assignments' (Bathmaker, 2001 p.89). 'Bad' students showed no sign of motivation or desire to complete work and were described as 'hanging in' (Whalberg and Gleeson, 2003, Avis et al 2006), absenting themselves and avoiding contact with teachers. For those students who did display signs of engagement with their learning,

teachers showed a high level of time and commitment towards providing additional support for them (Avis et al, 2006). These findings suggest that the learner is as much a contributor to the learning process as the teacher, as it is through negotiation and collaborative working that learning is enabled (Hoogsteder, Maier & Elbers, 1998). This suggests that learning relationships are not necessarily those that exist between teacher and student but are also those relationships which exist between the students themselves.

Mayes and Crossan (2007) propose that learning can be enabled by providing learners with access to the learning experiences of other learners. Through a process of social learning, a student's approach and attitude to learning is shaped via their observation of other learners. This process of social learning is underpinned by the extent to which a student identifies with the other students within their learning environment. Mayes and Crossan (2007) suggest that learning should be considered as situated at different levels; 'the sociocultural level of the community, at the organisational level of the college main campus or learning centre, at the more localised learning or teaching group, and at the level of individual relationships' (p. 292). Thus, student learners are simultaneously represented in and shaped by these multiple levels and the practices in place within them. From this a student will experience a need to identify with other members of their learning community and a strong need to participate within this as a full member.

According to Mayes and Crossan (2007) 'the attitudes and norms of the learning group are powerful determinants of the nature of the learning that actually occurs' (p. 293). They suggest that a student's motivation to learn can be determined by social goals that have very little association to the curriculum or the characteristics of the learning environment but are instead linked to peer esteem. Deriving from social identity literature, Mayes and Crossan (2007) posit that a student can become defined more by a group or community, and their motivation to learn stems from the desire to belong fully to the group. Thus, the group provides the student with a reason to learn.

This concept of learning being a social process shaped by both student and staff within a learning community is a salient feature in the literature and is central to understanding and exploring student experience at SFC. Theories from which this idea emerges from include situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). These are presented and discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

These findings, further illuminate the complex interactions between a student's personal and educational biography, their choice of course and college and the interactions and

relationships formed between fellow students and staff, and how in complex and differing ways they can either enable or disable learning. Linked within this are the varying curriculum objectives of the course a student undertakes. These shape the course delivery and style of teaching implemented by teachers which in turn contribute to and shape the formation of learning relationships.

### **2.3.4 Curriculum and learning styles**

The previous chapter established that as SFCs evolved and adapted to changes over the years, many now offer vocational qualifications to their students alongside their 'staple' A-levels. Some researchers have questioned how appropriate SFCs are in providing for vocational learners (Hodkinson, 1998) nonetheless, many SFCs offer vocational curriculum in the form of BTEC qualifications at various levels to appeal to the varying needs and abilities of their students. This is the case for the focal college in this research and the focal students enrolled on a BTEC level 2 Health and Social Care course. Therefore, the curriculum offered within vocational courses and how it is taught is an important aspect of the literature to explore in order to understand the learning experiences of the students.

In terms of the vocational curriculum offered via GNVQ, the literature collectively confirms that this provides an enabling learning opportunity for students, particularly, as it offers a fresh start with limited opportunities for 'failure' for students viewed as reluctant or unsuccessful learners at school (Bathmaker, 2001, Hodkinson, 1998, Bloomer, 1998). As explored earlier, vocational qualifications like GNVQ offer parity of esteem in comparison to the more academic A-levels although researchers question this, (Atkins, 2010, Whalberg and Gleeson, 2003, Avis et al, 2006) but are often courses taken by students who have not succeeded at school and so lack the confidence in their learning ability. According to Hodkinson (1998) students actively choose GNVQ courses as they provide a greater emphasis on coursework, allowing for them to take responsibility for their learning with the direction and guidance of their teacher (Bathmaker, 2001, Avis et al, 2006). Findings from the accounts of GNVQ students confirm that students experience success in their learning which increases their confidence in themselves as learners (Hodkinson, 1998, Bathmaker, 2001, Bloomer, 1998). Thus, the components of vocational qualifications such as GNVQs and now more commonly BTECs, provide enabling learning opportunities for students undertaking them.

One of the most enabling learning opportunities which GNVQ students reported in Bloomer's (1998) research was the practical experiences they undertook to aid them in their understanding of the theoretical aspects of their course. This is a key feature of vocational curriculum and students in this research felt this practical experience was most beneficial to

their learning as it was easier to remember things if they had done them or seen them first hand.

Another enabling (yet contested) feature of GNVQ curriculum is that it provides a progression route for students from foundation/level 1, to intermediate/level 2 and finally to advanced/level 3. Students in Bathmaker's (2001) study admitted that they were aware that their foundation GNVQ held value only as a stepping stone to gain enough credentials to progress to the next level of qualification. Therefore, 'GNVQ represents a sort of educational ladder, and once on it, students aspire to continue up it' (p.96). In doing so, students exchange credentials in order to acquire more human capital (Schuller, 2004) and progress through the different levels and routes. Students in the literature felt positive about their futures and felt they were on a clear route to a successful career (Bathmaker, 2001, Hodgkinson and Bloomer, 2000, Whalberg and Gleeson, 2003). Although in terms of government rhetoric this ability to enable young people to progress in education and ultimately into employment is a highly valued one, researchers question the learning value offered to students.

Bloomer's (1998) interview data with students enrolled on GNVQ courses revealed that their learning was constrained by assessment requirements, with teachers occupied with judging coursework evidence and 'ticking off performance criteria' (p.181). Many students felt that their assignments resembled 'data retrieval exercises' (p.179) as teachers emphasised the need to demonstrate outcomes for the purposes of assignments. Teachers in the research revealed that assessment requirements emphasised a 'tick-off' approach focusing on evidence indicators and performance criteria boxes over a holistic approach. Despite, GNVQs intending to provide a general vocational knowledge with emphasis upon the acquisition of relevant skills and the opportunity for independent learning (Bloomer, 1998, Avis et al, 2006), teachers in Bloomer's research indicated that the courses are viewed in terms of outcomes with teaching concerned with 'directing students along pre-specified paths to pre-specified goals' (p.178).

Some students in Bloomer's study liked the progressive and predictable opportunities offered through coursework assignments whereas others felt limited and restrained working to adhere to assignment outcomes. These findings are reflected elsewhere in the literature. Many students enrolled on GNVQ courses learn to 'fit into the system' learning to work to a particular order, rather than 'developing a critical understanding of the nature of the work' (p.89-90 Bathmaker, 2001). Business Studies students in Whalberg and Gleeson's study (2003) began their course with a keen interest in the subject with the aim of wanting to understand *how*

businesses work. However, as the course progressed they became more preoccupied with understanding the assessment grid rather than establishing an understanding of business. The reality it seems, is that students do what they need to do without much critical understanding in order to gain their qualification and progress (Avis, 1984, Bathmaker, 2001, Whalberg and Gleeson, 2003).

Bloomer's (1998) research does indicate that students engaged in interactive learning activities where they assumed independent responsibility for their learning through group discussions, project work and individual research. However, much of the course was dominated by receptive learning activities where students took down notes from the teacher or course textbook. Bloomer found that the 'emphasis in learning is placed firmly upon the 'taking' rather than upon the 'making' of knowledge and understanding' (p.183). It appears that although vocational courses may be described as enabling students to take responsibility for their own learning, it is difficult for teachers to offer this opportunity within a curriculum that desires performance and outcome indicators rather than a holistic approach to acquiring knowledge and understanding.

The literature demonstrates that the curriculum found within vocational qualifications provides an enabling learning opportunity for those learners considered to be 'unenthusiastic' and 'fragile' (p.97 Bathmaker, 2001), it rebuilds their confidence and self-esteem and offers educational progression. This progression however, can be viewed as a double-edged sword as the literature questions whether deep or meaningful learning has taken place as students endeavour to meet the demands of the assessment criteria. A further criticism highlighted in the Wolf Report (2011) was that some vocational qualifications were of little value, holding no meaningful progression to successful employment. Time will tell as to whether the recommendations made in the Wolf Report will improve vocational curriculum and progression learners can make

## **2.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored the literature available surrounding student learning experience at SFC and whilst enrolled on a vocational programme of study. It has confirmed that students view the learning culture offered within SFC as prestigious and highly valued whilst, vocational qualifications offer an enabling learning opportunity for many disaffected learners or those lacking in confidence to engage with further education.

It has revealed that student learning and engagement in education post-16 is underpinned by complex interactions between a student's prior educational history (the extent to which they have acquired capital in the form of qualifications and 'success' at school), the socio-

economic context of the given period of time, their ability to engage in the learning culture provided at their college site and the learning relationships they establish with teachers and fellow students. The chapter has explored the enabling and disabling practices that influence student learning and engagement and has revealed the significance of situation, activity and social relationships to learning (Avis et al, 2006, James and Biesta, 2007). This concept is explored in more depth in the next chapter which establishes the theoretical assumptions which underpin this research.

## **Chapter 3 Theoretical Perspectives**

The previous chapter established that a student's learning is socially constructed through engagement with the learning culture established within a college setting and negotiation of learning relationships within this. It proposed that learning cannot be viewed or understood in isolation, as the literature argued for a consideration of the wide ranging personal, social, political and economic factors which contribute to understanding the nature of students' learning experiences. Moreover, learning is politically constructed as illustrated in chapter 1. Successive government educational policies and initiatives and qualification reform have shaped the post-16 sector, particularly the establishment of SFCs and the provision they offer to students.

In this chapter I will outline the key theoretical perspectives which I believe are applicable towards understanding the nature of student experience in SFC. I propose that SFC should be viewed as a multi-tiered environment which involves complex modes of participation. Within this I will utilise the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger on legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice. Collectively these theories will provide an explanation of student experience and participation which will consider the wider conditions that surround learning and the social networks in which students are embedded. In addition I will draw upon Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning with particular reference to the Zone of Proximal Development as a way of understanding how learning can be enabled by teachers in the classroom setting. Providing a unifying aspect to my theoretical framework, I employ Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (2001). Although this is an ontogenetic model, I will use this to explore the proximal and distal processes which influence student participation and engagement in their learning (note where I refer to individual, in Bronfenbrenner's original writings he refers to the child).

### ***3.1 Communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation***

To understand Communities of Practice (CoP), firstly consider the conventional theories of learning embedded in the current UK education system- pupils enter classrooms and knowledge is received from teachers. Success in learning is located within the individual pupil and is associated with academic ability and achievement in the form of 'good' grades. Thus, successful learning is measured by intelligence and an ability to perform well in national curriculum assessments. Arguably there may be other explanations for achievement such as individual motivation and the presence of a 'good' teacher. Whatever the reason for success, it can be attributed to an individual, the successful pupil or the 'good' teacher. As opposed to this acquisition model of learning, CoP theory focuses on learning as social participation,



offering a framework which posits learning in social terms. Rather than learning as acquisition, learning is seen as participation in social spaces.

### **3.1.1 Learning as situated in communities of practice**

Communities of Practice emerged from Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on participation as learning. In their work *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, they challenged acquisitional models of learning which present learning as an unproblematic, intra-individual process whereby teachers 'speak' and 'students' learn. At the time when this work was published, a movement in cognitive science focused on experiments in 'artificial intelligence' (AI) in order to demonstrate that 'learning' was an accumulation of symbolic representations which could be replicated using AI. Experiments unsuccessfully attempted to create a computer program that could interpret and not just 'read' newspaper articles. The failure of this illustrated the importance of *context* in understanding and learning, and that knowledge is not just 'acquired' in a mechanical way (Resnick, 1987 and Sfard, 1998).

Situated learning theory locates learning in the process of participation and not in the minds of individuals. Learning is not considered a one person act but is embedded in the wider, social world. Lave and Wenger's original writings evolved from their ethnographic research into apprenticeships. They argued that learning should be viewed as a situated activity whereby the defining characteristic is a process called Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). The key assumption being that learners progress from the peripheral position of novices to increasingly expert status. On entry to a given community, learners are legitimate peripheral participants and with experience (may) become full participants with the attendant identity shifts. Thus, rather than being an individual event, learning becomes a process distributed across person, time, place and activity.

LPP challenges conventional explanations of learning providing an understanding that it is more than an unproblematic process of internalising knowledge via transmission and assimilation. Lave and Wenger argue that learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice based upon situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. Thus, understanding and experience are in constant interaction. As an analytical viewpoint Lave and Wenger posit that learning can take place where there is teaching however, this intentional instruction cannot be the sole source or cause of learning.

In their early writing on situated learning, Lave and Wenger generated the concept of communities of practice to illustrate that learning involves the whole person not only in relation to specific activities but in relation to social communities. LPP presented a theory of

understanding learning within the context of social spaces. Wenger (1998) developed these ideas and concepts further and presented CoP as a theory in its own entirety. CoP encompassed situated learning theory and evolved from focusing on learning in the context of social spaces to looking at learning via participation in the communities that constitute those social spaces i.e. CoP. From this, individual learning depends upon opportunities to participate in CoP through a complex process involving practice, context and negotiation of meaning. Resulting from this, an individual will develop an identity providing belonging, commitment and a sense of membership to the CoP.

### **3.1.2 Defining communities of practice**

CoP exist in a number of contexts, therefore a complex interplay of factors exist which influence their development. Knowledge and literature on CoP is both considerable and diverse in nature and is a concept which is widely used in educational settings and learning contexts. To put simply a CoP is an informal or formal group which shares participation in a common activity. Participants in these 'communities' learn through doing, becoming and belonging.

According to Wenger, to define CoPs is to understand that they are places where: '...collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise.' (p.45, 1998) A further definition offered by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder define CoP as 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis' (p.4, 2002). Therefore a CoP framework considers learning in social terms; learning as social participation.

Wenger et al (2002) identify the various forms CoP may take:

- ◆ CoP may be a small and intimate involving only a few members, whilst others can involve large numbers of people.
- ◆ The lifespan of a CoP can vary widely. Conole, Ingraham and Cook (2003) compare the recent emergence of the learning technology community to that of chemistry, a well established community. In terms of lifespan, learning technology is recognised to be a relatively young, short lived research community emerging just over a decade ago, whilst the chemistry discipline, as a recognised field, has had a long history, spanning at least two hundred and fifty years when it emerged from alchemy.
- ◆ CoP can be co-located or distributed. Shared location is the starting point for many developing communities; for example children who are located in the same school classroom (Linehan and McCarthy, 2001). However, shared location is not a necessity

for community development and sustained interaction. CoP can be distributed over vast areas with web-based facilities, telephone and letter correspondence providing alternative forms of communication to face-to-face relations.

- ◆ CoP can function homogeneously (with people from the same discipline or function) or heterogeneously (with people from different backgrounds).
- ◆ CoP can exist inside and across boundaries. For example, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) describe how four different subject departments located within the same secondary school, operated as a CoP. Each departmental group had developed different cultures and working practices which served to influence teachers' learning. Whilst these communities emerged and existed inside the boundaries of each departmental group, each community also belonged to the wider school community, and in this respect, the school community of practice stretched across the boundaries between departments.
- ◆ CoP may emerge spontaneously or intentionally and be formal or informal in nature.

Taking a CoP approach involves an understanding of the particular relationships between learning, identity and participation. It situates learning in social participation whereby the practices of transmitting and sharing knowledge are a dominant feature.

### **3.1.3 Participation**

Participation is a central tenet of CoP as it is through participation that identity and practices develop. Participation, according to Wenger refers 'not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998 p.55 emphasis in original). Therefore, aside from being a physical action or event, participation involves the ability to connect and negotiate meaning. Accordingly, learning can only take place if participation in a specific learning community is meaningful to its participants.

Wenger writes that CoP will offer a number of learning trajectories based on different forms of participation stemming from the apprenticeship model of learning (mentioned earlier) offered by Lave and Wenger (1991). This model emerged from research on craft apprenticeship among Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia (Lave, 1990). At the beginning of their apprenticeship the apprentices watched and observed the experienced tailors, participating on the periphery of their community. They then progressed to limited participation adopting the practices of their masters to produce simple garments, and then finally enjoying full participation having gained the expertise to tailor complex garments.

Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualised a model of LPP within CoP as it illustrates the way an individual can belong to a community. At first, due to his lack of experience the apprentice's participation is at first restricted and thus referred to as legitimate. In being characterised as a process of LPP within CoP, learning involves the mastery of knowledge and skill which sees newcomers move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community.

### **3.1.4 Practice**

The notion of practice is acknowledged to be socially and historically situated and is essentially understood by the acts of doing and knowing (Wenger 1998). It is the language, tools, documents, images, symbols and roles which shape a community. Practice is that which is said but also that which is unsaid. It includes tacit conversations, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, perceptions, underlying assumptions and shared world views (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). Practice is that which is represented and that which is assumed.

The process of engaging in practice according to Wenger, is where an individual can experience the world and their engagement in it as meaningful. Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life. Wenger argues that as humans are not merely mechanical machines human experience has to be meaningful in order to make sense. He goes on to explain that the transformative potential of CoP as participation in social communities not only shapes our experience but also shapes those communities. This sees learning not solely as access to instruction but also as access to the practice setting and seeing those practices first-hand. Ibarra's research (1999) illustrates this as he found that individuals develop practices by observing others, imitating them, and then adapting and developing their own particular practices in ways consistent with not only the wider community's norms, but also their own individual sense of self. Hence, in serving to define a community, practices are both constituted by and constitute the participants.

A CoP does not retain a set repertoire of practices; instead practices are reconstituted and negotiated by the participants. The dynamic nature of CoPs means that as individuals we can simultaneously belong to multiple CoPs, hence we can utilise a range of different practices in any given situation.

For example, a group of female college students belong to two CoP: one as a friendship group, one as a health and social care class both valuing conflicting practices. Within their friendship group a desire to look good is a valued practice with focus on always carrying a make-up bag and mirror in order to re-apply lip-gloss and touch-up their hair. Ensuring their appearance matches the standards maintained by their peers is of vital importance to not only their continued membership within the friendship group but also to their self-image. Here their

identity is dependent upon the need to be considered fashionable which is justified by their physical appearance and how they present themselves. For some this can become an all-consuming endeavour as their attempts can cause them to be late for their lessons. This valued practice directly conflicts the desired practices of their membership to the health and social care class they are enrolled in. Here valued practices centre on punctuality, an ability to commit and concentrate on the task set during the lesson. Frequent application of make-up and consultation of fashion magazines are not tolerated and are considered to be activities the girls should engage in during their break and lunch periods.

The college students are faced with the problematic reality of their multiple CoP membership. They are not willing to give up the valued practices of their friendship group as this would impinge on their sense of identity and belonging; nor do they want to be subject to constant verbal warnings and possible disciplinary procedures by their class teacher. Consequently, within their class a shift in their practices occurs: make-up bags and mirrors remain in their bags and mirror checking and re-application of lip-gloss occurs during carefully considered periods when the teacher has his/her back turned or has left the classroom. The students formulate a compromise in order to meet the valued practices of these differing CoP.

Practices therefore continually develop and evolve via meaningful negotiation creating a social endeavour that distributes learning across the individual, activity and community.

### **3.1.5 Situated learning and distributed cognitions**

As outlined earlier the current organisation of education within the UK is founded upon reductionist views of learning as an unproblematic and linear process of skill acquisition. This assumes that knowledge, skills and understandings are general and independent of the context in which they were learnt, thus suggesting that any information gained in the classroom context is considered to be transferable and of use in everyday life beyond the realms of the classroom (Lave 1990; Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989). The CoP framework recognises learning as a complex, multi-dimensional and socially situated process, which involves the whole person- body, senses, emotions and thoughts, not just a disembodied mind. It involves more than knowing about the world; it involves being in the world. Learning involves processes of embodiment and ways of understanding that are not always conscious and able to be articulated (Light, 2003).

The centrality of distributed cognitions (person, activity, context, community) is evident in many research studies. In her research, Pitri (2004) applied a situated learning approach to a children's art class which enabled opportunities for learning through activities that were relevant to, or rooted within, the children's social and physical context or school context. Pitri

employed the method of emergent curriculum where curriculum development is based on the idea that children learn through engagement with the environment and should be given the opportunity to explain what they have experienced. Stemming from the Reggio Emilia approach (where expressive arts play a central role in learning and a reciprocal learning relationship exists between teacher and child. Focus is on the learning process rather than the final product) the process of emergent curriculum enabled Pitri to guide the children through the art project by reacting to their needs and interests. Consequently, she was able to support the children's ideas and explorations which were relevant to the Olympic theme of the project. Rather than formulating specific goals for each activity in advance, Pitri's respect for the children's interests meant that she could consider their ideas and determine which ones to pursue and how they might be supported (Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001).

Pitri's (2004) study exemplifies how the individual thoughts, ideas and views of each child in the class, combined with the classroom environment and the social, cultural and historical context of the Olympic Games in relation to the children's community in Greece influenced the direction of the art project and determined the learning outcomes. Pitri's research illustrates the interplay of distributed cognitions in learning. She states that 'situated learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, complex, social environments made up of actors, actions and situations. Contextualization makes knowledge meaningful to children and offers opportunity to negotiate meaning.'(p.12, 2004).

The importance of context in the pursuit of meaningful learning is also evident in Light (2006) who examined the learning that took place for young people in an Australian surf club. Utilising Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory he found that learning was not only situated within social and cultural contexts but also within a particular physical environment. Light (2006) found that the natural environment of the beach and the ocean (where the surf club was located) gave meaning to the member's learning. Skills such as swimming have no meaning out of the water. Light considers whether a child could be taught to perform the techniques of swimming without going in the water- could this be considered as swimming? Light argues it only becomes swimming when performed in the water. The physical environment within which the swimmer must engage gives the activity meaning. The performance of the swimming technique within the water (surf) also involves the development of understandings, of knowing the surf by being part of it to enable a comprehensive understanding. The learner, what is learnt and the physical environment are inseparable. Through years of being in the 'surf' the young people learnt by being engaged in their physical world, by participating in 'activity with and in the world' (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.33). The learning and development that took place in the surf club is situated within a particular social

context but also within a particular physical context that according to Light (2006) is vital in the production and reproduction of meaning.

The notion of situated learning and cognition is important in understanding a student's learning performance and competency in SFC, particularly on first entry to SFC or at the start of a new academic year. As indicated by Tobbell (2006), failure to participate upon entry to a new community is not a problem but an inevitable by-product of the process of human learning. She states 'when we enter new domains we need time to understand and negotiate the skills necessary to function within them. It is not possible to simply transfer behaviours from other domains because they may not be appropriate, instead we wait and see how our present knowledge and skills can be used and in so doing, this knowledge and these skills are developed by and in the new community and as a result the trajectory of participants is changed' (pp.53-54).

According to Wenger (2000) notions of competency are socially and historically defined and knowing is a matter of displaying competences considered valuable within a particular community. Within the UK educational community, clear value is placed on obtaining desirable grades which indicate educational success and competency. Here knowledge is assessed and measured by performance in the fulfilment of educational objectives such as written assignments or completion of examinations under timed conditions.

According to Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) many teaching practices have inevitably limited effectiveness because they implicitly assume that conceptual knowledge can be abstracted from the situations in which it is learnt. They argue that by ignoring the situated nature of cognition, education defeats its own goal of providing useable robust knowledge.

The notion that knowledge is an abstract, internalised entity ready for use in applied settings has been challenged by De Abreu, Bishop and Pompeu's (1997) research which investigated children's mathematical activities outside school. They interviewed two children: Rita, who the teacher framed as having problems with maths at school and Ana, identified as a successful school mathematician. They found that the practices at home constructed their mathematical ability out of school. Rita was given money to buy bread and charged with returning with the correct change; she was expected to perform this calculation, which varied according to how many loaves her parents could afford in a given week and this she did successfully using mathematical skills of addition and subtraction. Ana knew the cost of three loaves of bread, because she always bought three loaves and was given the right money for this by her parents. When asked how much five loaves would be, she couldn't answer as she

never bought five loaves. In this example, Rita who was described as having difficulties with mathematics in the school context, was the competent solver in the mathematics embedded in outside-school practices. This research suggests that the ability to perform is not located in the individual but rather in the situation, being able to solve complex mathematical calculations when given a responsibility by your family to obtain food is not the same act as doing set mathematical problems and calculations in school.

The research (Pitri 2004, Light 2006, De Abreu, Bishop and Pompeu 1997) demonstrates that knowledge, skills, understanding and competence are context dependent. They are the product of distributed cognitions- the person, activity, context and culture in which they are developed and employed. As Lave and Wenger (1991) point out '...the organisation of schooling as an educational form is predicated on claims that knowledge can be decontextualised, and yet schools themselves as social institutions and as places of learning constitute very specific learning contexts' (p. 40). In acknowledging the situated nature of learning, it follows that the mastery of knowledge and skill application does not reside in the individual but in the organisation of the community of practice in which they are a part. Thus, according to Lave (1993) educational success and failure are a product of specialised social and institutional arrangements rather than attributes of the individual child.

### **3.1.6 Negotiation of meaning**

As discussed earlier, experiences of participation within the multiple CoP to which we belong change and adapt throughout the course of time. Wenger comments '...in the pursuit of enterprises we engage in all sorts of activities with complex bodies that are a result of millennia of evolution. Still in the end it is the meanings we produce that matter.' (p.51)

Understanding this in reference to student experience in SFC suggests that the most important aspect is the meanings that the students construct surrounding their educational environment as it is these that will influence their participation. Accordingly, those students who are 'successful' (in terms of high achievement) are able to access teaching and curriculum and become a full and recognised member of the SFC community, engaging in the desired practices expected from their teachers in order to succeed. However, the meanings produced by the students hold the key to their ability to 'successfully' participate in their SFC community because without meaningful learning there can be no understanding and without understanding there can be no meaning. This suggests that it is not enough to look at the knowledge and skills which constitute the students' learning curriculum or the instructional methods which they engage within the classroom. More importantly it is the meanings that the students construct around their learning experiences which influences the nature of their



participation within their SFC and educational community and which in turn shape their learning trajectories.

For example, a teacher produces a handout with bullet-point instructions on how to structure and write an essay; in doing this the teacher aims to produce a tool to aid and guide their students. Some students who have experienced 'success' previously in their ability to utilise their knowledge, use this alongside the handout and are able to attempt the essay. However, for some, who have not, for whatever reason, been able to positively experience the production of an essay, the handout is meaningless. They do not have the ability to draw upon the knowledge and skills they have made in class and apply it to the essay question. This is not a mere matter of intelligence or ability, but a matter of meaning. For these students the production of an essay is not a meaningful enterprise; some will seek further help in an attempt to try whereas others will see it as a pointless objective finding means of distraction to prevent them from what they perceive as a meaningless and unachievable task. The response and completion of the essay task will influence the students' level of participation and thus their educational progression.

Wenger (1998) states that meaning is located and understood in the ongoing emergent negotiation of meaning which is understood to be historic, dynamic, contextual and unique. This involves the dual processes of participation and reification, which relate to the social experience of membership in multiple CoP. Participation refers to more than the mere presence in a community; it relates to all the activities of mutual recognition in which people engage in within a social context such as competitive acts, confrontation and co-operation. Furthermore, participation is transformative, shaping both the experience and meaning of the individual and the community of practice.

The concept of reification refers to the process of giving form to aspects of human experience and practice by producing concrete and fixed forms such as artefacts, tools and procedures, around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organised. Reification is more than objectification because, although the artefact or procedure itself is important, more important still are the attendant meanings which surround the reification.

For example, within the focal SFC of this research, disciplinary procedures were in place to enable teaching staff to enforce desirable behaviour in relation to student conduct in class and ability to follow the college rules such as arrive to lessons on time, hand in homework on time etc. Failure to meet behavioural standards is decided by the teachers and depending on the severity of the student's shortcoming they would be placed on a disciplinary stage. These

stages were given a numerical position with stages one and two serving as a warning; three and four indicating a major cause for concern with student behaviour monitored closely by their teachers and senior management team. Finally, stages five and six notified parents and encourages their involvement in the resolution, with stage six usually entailing a suspension or full exclusion.

Despite the disciplinary procedure's aim to create order and maintain standards it served to be a confusing and frustrating concept for students due to the meanings attached to the stages and thus the reification. Students attached different meanings to the disciplinary stages and being placed on a stage one or two was of little significance to them. However, as the disciplinary outcome was decided by the teacher, in cases of what they believed to be severe misconduct, stages one and two could be passed over and students could be placed on stages three and four or higher. This would serve as a source of conflict if the student disagreed with the decision made by the teacher. This example serves to highlight how, in the case of this college, student participation and therefore practices within their college community was influenced by the prospect of being placed on a disciplinary stage. Whilst the implementation of these disciplinary stages constitutes an important practice within this SFC setting, the meanings which underpin the procedure are as much a part of the reification as the actual behaviour of the students.

As discussed above, the dual process of participation and reification together form the negotiation of meaning. The reified processes and objects not only shape participation but are also a source of identity hence, through the process of negotiation of meaning, meaning and identity become inextricably linked (Wenger, 1998).

### **3.1.7 Identity**

At any time, an individual can be a member of multiple CoP which typically reflects the varying areas of their lives: home, college, work, leisure, interests and so on, assuming the position of a core member within some communities and an occasional or perhaps 'peripheral' participant in others. Each community is dynamic and fluid in nature. As mentioned earlier, the practices of a given community are continually evolving, developed via the contributions of all members participating in that community. In that each individual belongs to multiple CoP, the practices of every community are negotiated via the social co-participation of the constituent participants. Thus, according to Wenger (1998) shaped by the changing CoP to which each individual belongs and their participative experience within these social spaces, their identity undergoes a continual state of renegotiation throughout the course of their lives.

According to Wenger (1998), multimembership in CoP is an inherent aspect of a person's identity. In the context of SFC a young person may be a son/daughter or brother/sister in one community, but across other communities may also assume the role of college student, friend, shop assistant, guitarist, netball player etc. The student's membership within the college community does not cease when they go home to their family at the end of each college day; it continues as the student reconciles their various forms of membership into one identity.

As each CoP is dynamic and fluid in nature, so too is the concept of identity. Far from being a stable or fixed entity, a person's identity is renegotiated and transformed throughout their life-span through the interplay of participation and reification. Wenger (1998) states that identity extends in time; it is a trajectory in progress that includes a person's history and aspirations. Thus, in order to gain insight into student experiences of SFC it is necessary to consider the student's history, present circumstances and aspirations in addition to those of the communities they are a member of.

### **3.1.8 Critique and defence of communities of practice**

The CoP literature is not without its critics. Roberts (2006) criticises Lave and Wenger for not acknowledging the significance of power in shaping participation. She argues that power is central to negotiation of meaning as the meanings produced by differing CoP are a reflection of the dominant source of power within that community. Roberts states that Lave and Wenger (1991) fail to explore the implications of distribution of power within their CoP case studies. This concept of power is an important one, as depending on each community, the balance of power will be distributed and located differently. This will inevitably have an important influence on the formation of a community.

However, Lave and Wenger (1991) do draw attention to the dynamics of power in their case study of the meat-cutter apprentices in US supermarkets. Here, the 'commoditization of labor' transformed apprentices into cheap labour who were put to work in ways that denied them access to the activities of mature practice (p.76). This case study illustrates how the power of the wider supermarket community in which the meat-cutter apprentices were located prevented them from progressing from apprentices to fully trained meat-cutters in their own right. It was the power of the supermarket managers which influenced the meat-cutter's participation rather than the power located within the community that comprised the apprentices on a daily basis. This serves to illustrate how the wider exosystem in Bronnfenbrenner's ecological model (presented in the next section) can determine participative experiences of those participants in distal communities.

Roberts (2006) offers further criticism of CoP, arguing that they are '...predisposed to the absorption and creation of certain knowledge and negotiation of particular types of meaning to the detriment of other possible interpretations.' (p.629). In response to this I would posit that the CoP framework consistently refers to the notion of distributed cognitions and advocates how central contextualisation is in order to make knowledge and learning meaningful. CoP by their very nature, are context dependent and determined by the participants and practices which constitute it. Therefore, there may be a likelihood that certain communities are 'pre-disposed' to certain practices and ways of functioning. However, this is how different communities develop and evolve. The pre-dispositions that a community may hold may be the purpose of that community and will hold meaning for its members.

Whilst the notion of participation is central to the CoP formulation, it is presented as unproblematic in the literature. Handley, Sturdy, Fincham and Clark (2006) suggest that the term 'participation' is somewhat ambiguous because there is a difficulty of knowing when an individual *is* or *is not* participating in a community of practice. Handley et al question the distinction between what Wenger refers to as 'mere engagement in practice' (1998 p.57) and participation. They question whether an individual can *appear* to be a full participant of a CoP whilst not actually participating in the sense of experiencing a feeling of belonging, mutual commitment and responsibility. Quite rightly they posit that in line with the CoP literature, 'participation entails a sense of belonging (or desire to belong), mutual understanding and a 'progression' along a trajectory towards full participation which-indirectly-defines the community which is the target of 'belonging' (2006, p.649).

The complexity of participation is a view shared by Linehan and McCarthy (2001) who suggest that the CoP literature presents an oversimplification of the participation process, paying insufficient attention to the complex and messy relations between individuals and their communities. Likewise, Tobbell (2006) observes that Lave and Wenger's presentation of participation implicitly assumes that mere presence in a community establishes legitimacy and moreover, that the acquisition of practice takes place in a benign way. For example, in an SFC context it is assumed that students will participate in the practices of the social spaces which surround them; that they will each express a desire to become members of them and that all will be welcome. This infers a linear relationship between mere presence and legitimate participation, one which is overly simplistic and certainly not inevitable.

Handley et al (2006) attempt to bring clarity to the concept of participation by offering a definition which seeks to separate it more clearly from the concept of practice. Handley et al (2006) suggest that by limiting the term practice to observable activity it becomes easier to

utilise because meanings and relationships need not be considered. Participation then can be understood in terms of meaningful activity where meaning is developed through relationships and shared identities. I believe it is too simplistic to separate the two terms. Practice and participation are inextricably linked. To say that practice has no meaning nor is it influenced by relationships is absurd. Practices are shaped and influenced by the relationships occurring in a given community. Moreover, practices have to be meaningful to enable participation. CoP do not occur in isolation therefore the terms 'practice' and 'participation' should not be isolated. Consider a classroom environment; how can the practices of the classroom not involve the formation of learning relationships between student and teacher and the associated meanings which underpin the classroom practice of learning?

Participation within CoP is founded on the negotiation of meaning; a process which involves both the production and adoption of proposals for meaning (Wenger, 1998). The duality of production and adoption enables an understanding as to why membership is not an inevitable outcome of mere presence in a community. A person cannot be a member if s/he does not produce proposals for meaning or alternatively, if the person's production of meaning fails to be adopted. The process of production and adoption of meaning allows for the practices of any given community to achieve fluidity. Thus, membership to the community relies on its participants to fulfil the dual criteria through shifts renegotiation and reinvention of meaningful practices.

Through further consideration of the relations between participation and non-participation, Wenger (1998) makes efforts to address the ambiguity that the notion participation presents. He defines the following participatory terms:

- ◆ *Peripheral*- for newcomers permitted to participate to a limited extent in simple, relatively discrete tasks and relationships.
- ◆ *Full*- for 'old-timers' who participate at the core of the community.
- ◆ *Marginal*- for participants who are kept at the periphery of their community.

(Wenger, 1998 pp.165-172).

However, as Tobbell (2006) writes, if an individual (child in original) is marginalised, the choice of participating in a community has been taken away from him/her. Although they may seek to belong to a particular community and produce proposals for learning, the adoption of these by other members is not inevitable and in turn membership is denied.

In an attempt to define more clearly the varying forms of participation (peripheral, full and marginal) I believe Wenger serves to illuminate the complexity of participation further. I do

not see this as a weakness of the CoP theory rather a dynamic demonstration of the scope and influence participation has on identity formation. Arguably, participation is inevitably messy and complex as the participative experience reflects the messiness and complexity of daily human life located in the individual participant. To assume that participation is uncomplicated is to then assume that as human beings life in our social world is then too uncomplicated? Far from it.

The interplay between participation and non-participation has significant ramifications for the shaping of an individual's identity, with both the individual and wider social communities maintaining power and influence over forms of membership. In some social communities an individual may be a core member and in others s/he may have occasional or limited participation and be located on the margins of the group. It is the individual's position in a community of practice which has significant effect on their opportunities to access and engage in the learning process.

The varying degrees of participation in the various CoP which form their social world mould and shape an individual's identity. Participation cannot and should not be viewed as a simplistic process. Even though this is not explicitly written in the CoP literature, the very premise of situated learning and CoP theory posits that learning is a social mechanism distributed and dependent upon individual, activity, context and world. As such, learning and therefore participation and membership to CoP is never going to be easily defined. This is my interpretation of the literature and I believe that the intricate notion of participation, although not without complexity, offers a valuable theoretical lens through which to investigate student's learning and experience in SFC.

To address this gap in literature, this research embeds the CoP theory within the bioecological model of Bronfenbrenner. Through situating CoP in the wider concentric circles comprising the ecological model, the latter can act as a powerful analytical tool in which to illuminate the wider and more proximal factors impinging on the quotidian experiences of communities. It is these factors which serve to contribute to the messiness and complexity of the participation process. This is evident in the research of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) where they observed secondary school teachers in the workplace. The observations revealed that teacher's learning experiences were shaped by their membership in CoP which had formed around the departmental groups in which they were located. Despite being located in the wider school community, each of the four subject departments were characterised by different cultural and working practices. Reflecting the CoP literature, Hodkinson and Hodkinson noted that the social practices of each community were in part influenced by the positioning, actions

and personal dispositions of those teachers who comprised the department. Furthermore, they found that social practices were influenced by wider policy and structures operating outside the immediate context of community. This research demonstrates how the evolving practices of any community are also shaped by the wider societal context in which it is embedded.

### **3.1.9 Section Summary**

CoP offers a theoretical framework which situates learning within the context in which it occurs. It gives consideration to the distributed nature of cognition and how this is impinging upon the individual, the activity and the setting. CoP challenges traditional learning theories which locate learning solely within the individual and provides a framework which considers a more holistic approach to understanding learning as a meaningful process. A central consideration for this research is the notion of participation in social spaces and how this can serve to include or exclude students in their SFC community. It is the nature of the student's participation which will allow for understanding of their learning experiences. CoP presents a theoretical lens to explore how the practices central to the CoP which make up the student's social spaces influence their participation and in turn shape their learning and identity formation.

Whilst not explicitly acknowledged in the writings of Lave and Wenger, CoP are situated in broader social, cultural and political contexts. According to Pitri (2004), learning involves both socio-historical and ecological approaches to learning. She writes that '...learning is not separated from the world of action but exists in robust, social environments made up of actors, actions and situations.' (p.12, 2004). The significance of both the individual and their surrounding influences are central to the bioecological theory offered by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2001) and enable a wider consideration of the multiple factors which shape student learning and experience at SFC.

### **3.2 Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model**

The bioecological framework first developed by Bronfenbrenner in his book *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979) proposed a theoretical perspective that recognised the importance of the environment in an individual's development. This position postulates that development cannot be explained through exclusive consideration of the individual, but must explore the complexity of his/her environment. As Bronfenbrenner states 'Development never takes place in a vacuum, it is always embedded and expressed through behaviour in a particular environment' (1979, p 27). Accordingly, the individual is placed in the centre of what Bronfenbrenner terms, nested systems (alike to a set of Russian dolls-each located inside the

next) where proximal and distal processes operating within the multi-tiered environment of the individual interact with their personal characteristics, thus shaping their development.

The nested systems represent the following contexts:

- ◆ The *Microsystem*- the immediate social and physical environment of the individual. This can comprise the individual's proximal relationships with family, friends and teaching staff and also any activities in which they are engaged with.
- ◆ The *Mesosystem*- represents the network of interrelations amongst the Microsystems containing the individual.
- ◆ The *Exosystem*- represents the larger community setting in which the individual lives. It comprises contexts that do not directly involve the individual but influence their behaviour and development.
- ◆ The *Macrosystem*- is the super- ordinate level representing the societal blueprint. It includes the central cultural, legal, political, religious, economic and educational values of a given society. The macrosystem influences interaction within all other levels of the ecological model.

In his later writings, Bronfenbrenner (1989) engaged in a self-critique of his over-emphasis on context (nested systems), recognising that he had discounted the role that the person plays in his/her own development. Often the child or individual was placed as a passive element of the nested systems, whereby the varying contexts influenced them; little consideration was given to the influence of the child/individual on the surrounding contexts. Although Bronfenbrenner altered, revised and extended his theory, themes from his early writings remained central to his later work: social and historical context, and the impossibility of understanding an individual's developmental processes in isolation (Darling, 2007). More recently scholars have argued (Darling, 2007 and Trudge et al, 2009) that the essence and core of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Development is the interrelation of the *processes* of human development.

Bronfenbrenner (1989) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) argue that the conceptualisation of the environment using the four nested systems provides a theoretical focus on a temporally embedded person-context process. This enables researchers to access and understand the dynamic and multilevel environment in which a person is situated. The key principles of Bronfenbrenner's framework are illustrated in the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. This considers the influence of multiple factors in shaping the course of development: the personal characteristics of the active, developing individual, his/her



proximal relations in the immediate environment, factors in the more distal environment in which the individual is embedded and the spatial and temporal broader context.

PPCT Model:

- ◆ Developmental *process* which involves the combined and dynamic relation of the individual and the context.
- ◆ The *person* with his/her individual repertoire of biological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural characteristics.
- ◆ The *context* is conceptualised in the nested systems structure (Micro, Meso, Exso and Macro levels).
- ◆ *Time* involves the multiple dimensions of temporality such as ontogenetic time, family time and historical time.

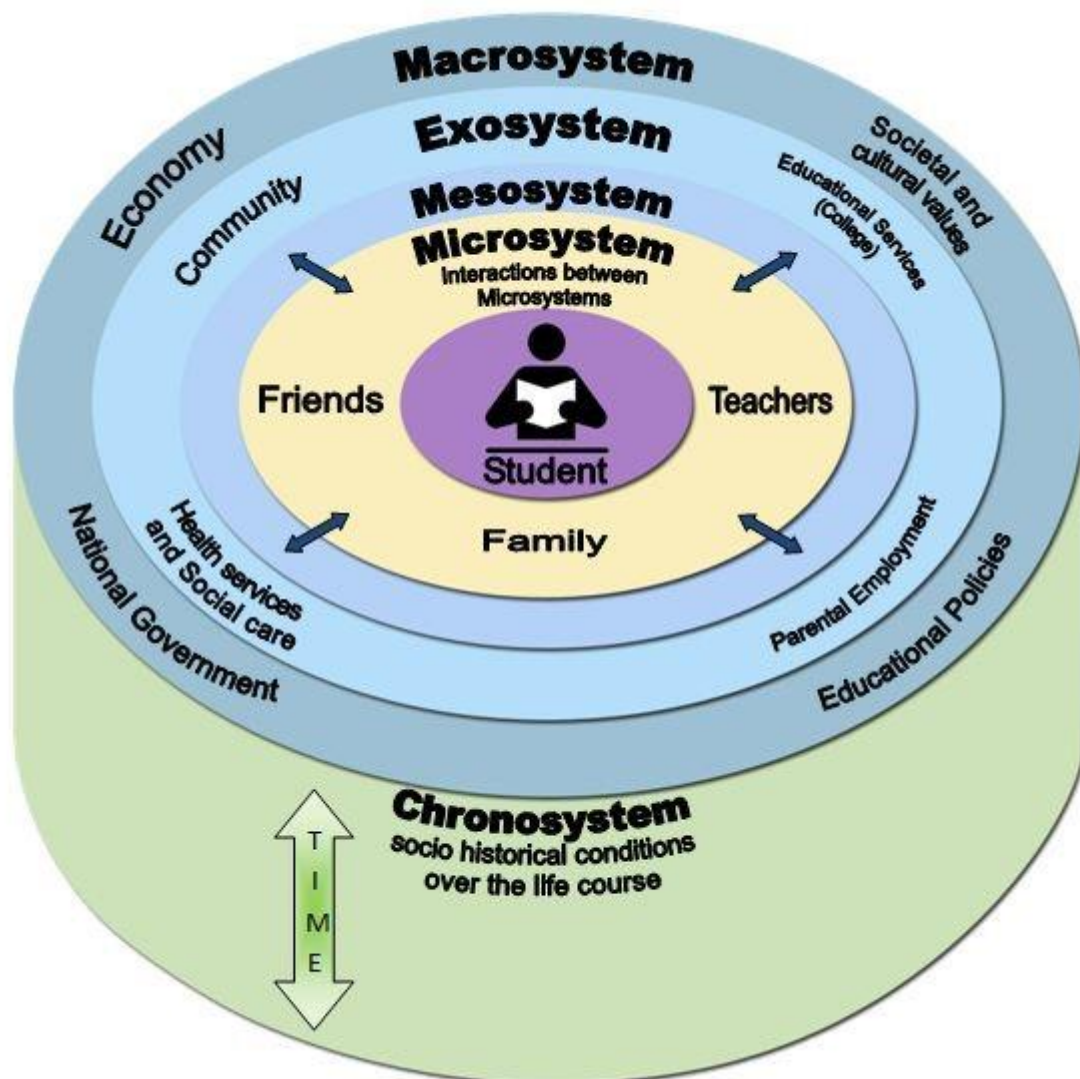


Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner's nested systems model

Bronfenbrenner (2001) explains that developmental processes are central to the PPCT model. Particular emphasis is given to proximal processes as Bronfenbrenner states that 'human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate external environment' (p. 6). He states that interactions must be enduring over time to have effect. In terms of a SFC student, proximal relations may include activities between student and teacher, student and parent, and team activities students engage in during classroom tasks. As proximal processes are not only limited to interactions with others, they can also include objects and symbols in the student's immediate environment for example reading, problem solving, making plans, learning new skills and studying. Such interactions clearly contribute to the identity of a SFC student as exposure to and participation in a given activity will enable a student to develop understanding.

Although Bronfenbrenner (2001) presents proximal processes as the 'primary engines of development' (p. 6) distal processes also have an important influence. 'The form, power, content and direction of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environment – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place, the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration, and the social continuities and changes occurring over time during the historical period through which the person has lived' (p. 5). Distal processes for a SFC student may comprise of their parent's employment and financial circumstances, the structure and practices of the SFC institution they attend, relationships with teacher and friends within college, local and national SFC policies. With this, it is necessary for researchers to understand their participants in relation to these distal and proximal processes because without this only a partial view of development is possible.

The proximal processes account for the person, the individual; with this the person dimension of the model acknowledges the relevance of the biological and genetic aspect of a person. More specifically, attention should be focused on the personal characteristics that an individual brings with them in any social situation.

However, key to the model is an appreciation of the individual being embedded in her/his environment and the attendant influences (context and time aspects of the model). Bronfenbrenner summarises Elder's (1974) work in life course perspective research, which seeks to place the individual in the environment in a certain time. Briefly, life course principles argue for the importance of historical period in shaping individual development; for example the lives of children in the West today are powerfully shaped by information technology, which

provides unprecedented access to global information (Claxton 2002). The second life principle, of great importance to this research, claims that the culturally determined timing of biological and social transitions can serve to advantage or disadvantage individuals. Raising the school leaving age to 18 can be used as an example here: those students who are engaged with and enthusiastic about education could view this as a further opportunity to achieve, whereas those less engaged, disillusioned or disinterested will lack motivation to continue in education for a further two years. The final life course principle argues that human beings influence their own life course through the choices they make providing the limitations of historical, cultural and socio-economic conditions. The time concept of the PPCT model reflects Elder's work and describes what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the chronosystem. The chronosystem recognises that developmental processes are likely to vary according to specific historic events occurring as developing individuals are at one age or another.

Thus, an argument is made for considering the wider influences of the SFC student, the political historical dimension. The society in which a SFC is situated and the decisions it makes about education and young people is an important part of understanding the experiences and subsequent trajectories of students. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory behoves researchers and policymakers to look beyond explanations of learning located solely in the individual and give greater consideration to indirect influences of external factors in the student's embedded world. Most importantly, focus should be given to the interrelated processes of the person and the context.

### **3.2.1 Bioecological model employed in research**

Bronfenbrenner developed his bio-ecological model and theory of human development in response to prevailing research models which typically employed a traditional, scientific lens focusing on isolated activities in out-of-context, laboratory experiments (1979). Many of these controlled experiments required children to take part in activities remote from their day-to-day experiences, thus restricting and darkening the researcher's vision of environmental influences. Bronfenbrenner wanted to offer a theory that enabled researchers to study development in context emphasising the individual's experience of the objects, people and interrelations within differing environments.

Puzzlingly though, many studies appear to overlook the PPCT model's argument for individual experience and development, instead implementing research of a quantitative nature, concerned with picking out the influences of the different systems and arguing for varying normative effects across groups rather than individuals. For example, Logsdon et al (2008) use the bio-ecological model to describe social support in postpartum adolescents and to determine the relationship between the context of social support and symptoms of depression.

Reading this research, I felt uncomfortable with the cold, clinical manner in which it was written. Logsdon et al describe how they used a 'battery of self-report instruments used to measure the macro, meso and micro systems of social support' (p. 116, 2008). They go on to describe how depressive symptoms were measured by using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies of Depression (CES-D) Scale. The researchers conducted interviews with eighty-five adolescents, no details were given about the nature or extent of these interviews but one can assume from the 'battery of self-report instruments' the interviews can be likened to a questionnaire-like procedure. The details given about the participants was brief-adolescents between the ages of thirteen and eighteen who had given birth four to six weeks prior to the research taking place.

Reading Logsdon's et al study further, pages of data are presented in tables followed by a statement that the most significant predictor of depressive symptoms was perceived stress. They go on to offer further predictor variables in relation to the four systems, concluding that 'context is important to consider when comparing international studies of social support' (p, 122, 2008). This made no sense to me. The researchers made no efforts to fully explore the social support available in each of the contextual levels, preferring to regurgitate numbers and statistics from various scales of measurements and other similar studies. It seems pointless that they claimed to use Bronfenbrenner's model, as no-where in their research were they concerned with the proximal processes implicated in the participant's lives.

For me, the study focused on young, new mothers (as opposed to just adolescents) at a critical point in their lives, dealing not only with new parenting responsibilities but the emotional journey that is embedded within this, with many experiencing emotions associated with depression. Rather than being sensitive to the vulnerability and fragility of these young mothers and enabling them to voice their views on social support available to them, thus influencing the way in which health and social care practitioners treat their depressive symptoms, Logsdon et al completely disregard an exploration of the nature of their social support and consequent influences. They also overlook the individual voices of the young mothers which are lost in the mass of symbols and numbers.

With the focus of Bronfenbrenner's later work extending to emphasise the role of the individual and the context of his/her development, Tudge et al (2009) argue that scholars claiming to base their research on Bronfenbrenner's theory are actually showing a great disservice to his work as they do not use the theory or relevant research methods appropriately. Tudge et al (2009), in their evaluation of studies which use Bronfenbrenner's theory in research aims and design, found that twenty-one out of twenty-five studies do not

incorporate all four elements of the PPCT model. Hence, they argue that research of this nature does not permit adequate application of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Despite this, Tudge et al (2009) recognise the difficulties of translating the PPCT model effectively into research. Bronfenbrenner himself did not make these connections as clear as he might have done, in none of his writings did he provide a clear methodological guide to help in the application of his theory. He did not write about any of his own research as a way of showing how he applied an appropriate method, preferring instead to comment on the research of others which was not designed to specifically test his theory.

To design and carry out a study completely faithfully, including every aspect of the theory, would be a large and complex (though not entirely impossible) task. It would involve focus on the differing personal characteristics and genetic attributes of the individual, consider all four contextual systems and the differing aspects of time. With this, research should include collecting data over time and situating research into its' historical time. Data should also focus on the proximal processes, regular interactions and activities with significant people, symbols and objects in the developing individuals lives (Tudge et al, 2009).

Although I understand and identify with the arguments put forward by Tudge et al (2009), Bronfenbrenner never implied that each and every aspect of his theory had to be included within studies using his framework. Bronfenbrenner's theory could be considered limited due to the conflicting writings: include all aspects of the model versus focus on certain aspects of the model. If studies do only focus on one aspect of the model, then with Tudge et al I agree researchers should make clear that they are doing this. However, I believe that even if researchers state they are focusing on a single aspect, inevitably their research will overlap with other aspects of the model even if not explicitly acknowledged, due to the dynamic nature of the PPCT model. For example, a study may state that the focus is on the context element of the model. Examination of the four contextual levels will demonstrate the process and the person aspect as this is how the four systematic levels interact with one another and initiate a reciprocal influence between the individual and the environment. The time aspect will also be evident in consideration of the macrosystem or chronosystem as this will situate the research in a given social, cultural and historical point in time. A researcher may not give clear or direct reference to all aspects of the model, but a thorough exploration and reading of the study will reveal that these elements are in situ even though not explicitly drawn upon.

I feel it is important to emphasise the connectedness and power of Bronfenbrenner's model as an explanatory and analytical tool. I also recognize and stress that whilst Bronfenbrenner's model is useful in providing a detailed framework of the ecological context for individuals, it

cannot provide specific information relating to the complex interplay of an individual's subjective experience. Experiential qualities such as an individual's feelings, relationships with others, activities and interactions in which they engage can contribute in powerful ways to shaping the course of a person's development. This is a view shared by Bronfenbrenner himself (2001). Thus, it is my understanding that bio-ecological theory offers a view of development and learning experience which is different for every individual.

My extensive critique of Logsdon et al (2008) may appear harsh, but this coupled with the writings of Tudge et al (2009) may beg the question: why use Bronfenbrenner's model as a theoretical framework if it can so easily be misunderstood and misconstrued? I believe the answer lies in the scope and explanatory power of the bio-ecological model and when applied properly, (that is focusing on how an individual's proximal processes are influenced by their internal repertoire of characteristics and attributes as well as the contexts in which they are occurring), can serve as an effective analytical tool for researchers.

Despite the criticisms discussed, valuable data has emerged which demonstrates the importance of both proximal and distal processes and the context of a given environment, and how these shape an individual's development.

Odom et al (2004) looked at how pre-school (three-five years old) children with disabilities were included in educational programmes with 'typically developing children'. They reviewed studies taken mainly from the US between 1990 and 2002 focusing on classroom-based inclusive settings and in some cases community integration. Odom et al (2004) explain that their rationale for the research was to demonstrate the influence of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, specifically nested systems. Their review sought to highlight the broad range of contextual factors that affect human development and education. Their employment of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems extensively researched how influential the following aspects were on the children under study:

- ◆ Biosystem- the outcomes and factors associated with the different child characteristics and disabilities.
- ◆ Microsystem- the factors within inclusive pre-school classrooms.
- ◆ Mesosystem- the interactions amongst participants outside the inclusive classroom for example family members, neighbours, friends.
- ◆ Exosystem- the influence of social policy decisions
- ◆ Macrosystem- focusing on research related to cultural and societal values, population demographics and how they influence children in inclusive pre-school programs and their families.

- ◆ Chronosystem- focusing on the evolution of inclusive pre-school programs across time and the longitudinal outcomes for the children.

Within each level Odom et al (2004) detailed the contextual influences on the children with disabilities. They state that Bronfenbrenner's theory is utilised as a general framework and that they have oversimplified some of the features. Nonetheless, their review was extensive and revealed that cultural variables (social class, family employment and education, provision of services and education, social policy) shaped the nature of inclusive classrooms and the access the children and their families had to inclusive educational settings. Their findings suggest that educational and social policy makers need to consider these issues more fully in order for disabled children to benefit from inclusive settings throughout their communities.

Mahruf, Shohel and Howes (2007) studied transition from a non-formal primary school to a formal high school in Bangladesh. Using bio-ecological theory, they focused on the significance that the different contextual levels had on the pupil's school and learning experiences. To enable an understanding of the pupil's transitional experience, Mahruf et al used photographs of the non-formal primary school during interviews with the pupils. This enabled them to make sense of the different school environments and the challenges experienced of transition. They were able to express strong feelings and clear memories from the photographs as they compared the different school environments. Mahruf et al found that the children's school and learning experience connected all four of their contextual levels. The photographs used provided the children with a way of discussing real-life settings across the different systems: micro and meso systems within the classroom (expectations, rules and school practices) and at home (they had to help look after younger siblings), and exosystem beyond their home and family. The children understood their poor position in society and their low social class compared to other children they knew outside of school. The children were also aware of the implications of the wider community and government on their education. Many children spoke of the Non-Governmental Organisation workers who visited the primary school to check provision and progress of the children. Mahruf et al assumed that this aspect of the education system was purely concerned with accountability however, these workers held meaning for the children who experienced them as a caring community feature of their education. Through the use of photographs, Mahruf et al were able to illuminate the connections between the personal and social structural context at different levels of the bio-ecological framework.

Bronfenbrenner's model accounts for the multiple contexts of the education system, a focus of interest in this research. Whilst it is taken from an American system the settings and

contexts are comparable to the UK. The multiple contextual levels outlined previously provide an interesting framework for considering the huge complexity of the model and to speculate about the influence this might have on an individual student's experience. For whilst some students may be unaware of the wider policies of the local authorities and Government, these still exercise influence in their lives.

### **3.2.2 Section Summary**

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework provides a broad theoretical lens that gives prominence to the interplay of the developmentally instigative characteristics of the developing person and the changing properties of the environment which make up his/her world. As these factors are specific to each individual, it is my understanding that this theory offers a notion of learning and development which is different for everyone. This research is concerned with the learning experiences of students in SFC and seeks to explore how the influences of the multi-level environment in which they are embedded contribute to their experience of SFC. With the incorporation of CoP theory alongside Bronfenbrenner's framework, a greater insight into the intricacies of factors operating within the personal identities of SFC students and the different contextual levels that comprise their educational community can be provided.

Research literature presented and discussed in chapter two, demonstrated how a student's engagement with learning is shaped by the differing influences occurring around them. With reference to Bronfenbrenner, the more proximal influences include classroom and college practices and the learning relationships established within this, to the more distal influences of the economy and labour market and the wider government education agendas and policies. Furthermore, students are shaped by their educational biographies and arrive at college with a learner identity that has been established during their school years. With CoP theory in mind, students have to negotiate the transition from one learning community to another in order to successfully participate in their new learning environment. The extent to which they are able to do this is dependent on a student's ability to identify with the learning community and the valued practices at play within this. A key feature to this, and one which was highlighted in the literature of the previous chapter, is the learning relationships students establish, particularly those with their teachers. Students felt that a positive learning relationship enabled them to engage with their studies and succeed on their courses. I therefore feel it is appropriate to draw upon Vygotsky's theory of learning as a way of understanding how practices implemented by teachers in the classroom context can enable the learning of students.



### **3.3 Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning**

Through the utilisation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory I have proposed a framework which considers the complex interplay the social context and environment has on the learning experiences of students. Moreover, CoP literature reveals how learning is a social phenomenon, where students participate in learning via the practices of the learning community they comprise. Each of these theories enables careful consideration of the differing factors influencing students' participation in learning. However, they do not consider *how* practices are learnt. To understand how learning happens it useful to operationalise the process of teaching and learning, for this I turn to Vygotsky.

Vygotskian theory, like that of Bronfenbrenner and CoP, views learning as stemming from interactions within a cultural and historical context, rather than individualist assumptions which locate learning and thus intelligence in the mind of an individual. In proposing a socio-cultural view of learning, Vygotsky suggests that learning is inherently social, in that rather than it starting with and occurring within the individual, it is a shared social experience,

*'Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within in the child as an intrapsychological category... Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships.'* (Vygotsky, 1981 p.163).

Accordingly, Vygotsky proposes that the cognitive and social development of an individual (child in original) occurs through the reciprocal influence of the person and their social environment (Tharpe and Gallimore, 2007). For Vygotsky a central focus for teaching and learning is the contrast between assisted and unassisted performance at a task. This concept forms Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) model and represents his 'most profound contribution to educational debate.' (Daniels, 2001 p.56).

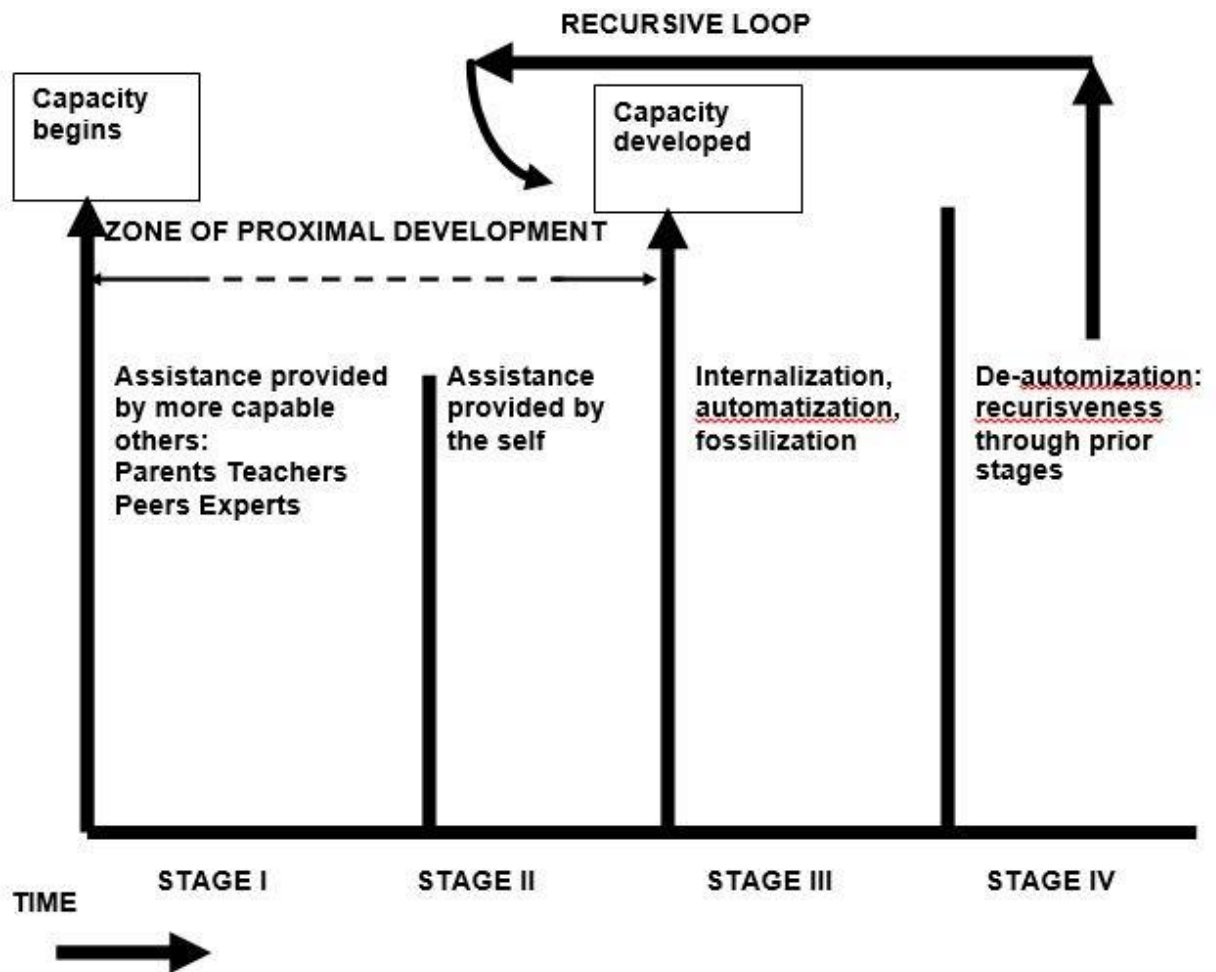
I believe the ZPD to offer a powerful theoretical and explanatory tool for understanding the process of learning. Whilst I acknowledge that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory encompasses further opportunities to explore individual development, schooling and teaching, I am choosing to focus on the concept of ZPD. I feel that this is necessary for the purposes of my research as it provides a model which deconstructs the learning process for the individual (Tobbell, 2003) and illustrates how the ZPD can be considered as an enabling practice within the college classroom.

### **3.3.1 The Zone of Proximal Development**

The ZPD refers to an individual's competence and performance in a task with support and collaboration from a more capable other. Vygotsky proposed that a person's actual level of development is represented by independent problem solving, whereas problem solving in collaboration with a more capable adult represents their potential level of development. Thus, the ZPD signifies the distance between a person's individual capacity to perform in a task and their capacity to perform with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). This provides an interesting point to note, as in our current education system, values regarding achievement focus on the assessment of a person's individual ability, operating within their actual level rather than their performance in conjunction with others despite the fact that in almost every aspect of a person's life, the ability to form successful relationships is key to achieving goals. This demonstrates that our education system continues to judge learning and therefore skill and ability upon individualistic achievement.

Vygotsky refers to the ZPD as the 'buds' or 'flowers' of development rather than the 'fruit' (p. 86) he proposes '...that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalised, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement.' (p.90). Thus, distinguishing the ZPD from a person's actual development level has profound implications for educational practice. Learning can be viewed as progressing through the ZPD and teaching as offering assistance at points in the ZPD where performance requires assistance (Tharp and Gallimore, 2007).

Tharp and Gallimore (1988, 2007) offer a 4 stage model to illustrate an individual's progression through the ZPD.



**Figure 3 Progression through the zone of proximal development and beyond (Tharpe & Gallimore, 2007)**

In stage one the task or activity is introduced by a more capable other, for example a two year old completing a jig-saw puzzle with the help of a parent. The parent might show the child the image of the completed picture from the box, turn all the pieces so they are picture-side up and demonstrate how to put them together. The parent might then pull the puzzle apart to encourage the child to repeat the jig-saw again, modelling strategies that will aid completion such as guiding the child to look at the shape of the piece or the image on it, or to start with the four corner pieces first as a way of structuring the puzzle or physically demonstrating with the child's hand how to pick up and join the pieces together appropriately. It is also likely that the parent will provide a verbal commentary to further assist and prompt the child such as "Where are the corner pieces, find them first, yes here they are, let's put them here. Now we can see the start of the picture, what do you think goes next?"

The way in which the guiding adult assists with the performance of a task is often described as scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976). Scaffolding explains the role that adults or

more capable others play in collaboration with children or learners. The metaphor derives from the field of construction, where a scaffold is a temporary structure erected to aid the assembly or modification of a building. Within the field of learning, scaffolding 'refers to the temporary support provided for the completion of a task that learners otherwise might not be able to complete. This support can be provided in a variety of manners... for example...modelling and the posing of questions.' (van de Pol, Volman & Beishuizen, 2010).

As Vygotsky proposes that learning takes place firstly on a social (intermental) level before it takes place on an individual (intramental) level, Stone (1993) views scaffolding as a fluid, interpersonal process where both the student and the teacher are active participants. Both participants actively build a common understanding or intersubjectivity through communicative exchanges in which the student learns from the perspective of the more knowledgeable other. The scaffolding offers a dynamic intervention tailored to the learner's ongoing progress, with the support from the teacher dependent upon the characteristics of the task and the responses of the student. Consequently, scaffolding will be applied to different situations in different ways (van de Pol, Volman and Beishuizen, 2010).

Taken from the work of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and Tharp and Gallimore (1988) van de Pol, Volman and Beishuizen (2010) offer classification and definition of what they term are the means and intentions of scaffolding.

*Scaffolding intentions:*

- Direction maintenance-refers to keeping the learning on target and maintaining the learner's pursuit of a particular objective.
- Cognitive structuring-where the teacher provides explanations to structure, organise and justify the task.
- Reduction of the degrees of freedom-refers to the capable other taking over those parts of the task that the student is not yet able to perform, thereby simplifying the task for them.
- Recruitment-refers to getting students interested in a task and helping them to follow the requirements set by the task.
- Contingency management/frustration control-concerns the facilitation of student performance through a system of rewards and punishments as well as keeping the students motivated by preventing or minimising frustration with the task.

*Scaffolding means:*

Scaffolding means are the supportive strategies utilised by the teacher during the learning activities of the student:

1. Providing the student with feedback about their performance.
2. Provision of hints or suggestions by the teacher to help the student progress. Under these circumstances the teacher deliberately does not supply the entire solution or detailed instructions.
3. The teacher directly instructs the students by telling them what to do or providing an explanation of how something must be done and why.
4. The teacher offers explanation in the form of more detailed information or clarification.
5. The teacher models or demonstrates the performance of a particular skill or task.
6. The teachers employs a range of questioning techniques to prompt the students to actively think about what they have learnt and to verbalise it accordingly.

Following from this, it is clear that the interaction between the adult and child/teacher and student is fundamental in the achievement of the task goals. The more able other must find ways to interest and motivate, they must respond to the child by assessing their current performance level and reducing any potential risk. Successful scaffolding varies across task, space and time and is dependent upon the quality of the learning relationship constructed by the learner and the more able partner (Tobbell, 2003). Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) suggest that the quality of the learning relationship can or cannot result in a building of confidence in the learner which enables or disables performance. It is here that CoP framed within the nested systems of ecological theory provide a useful explanatory tool. Relationships are complex, embedded in practices and contexts, but they are essential to learning.

Referring back to the example of the child and the jig-saw, as the child repeats the activity they will gradually begin to understand the way different parts of the activity relate to one another. The parent will continue to tailor assistance for the child until eventually the child is able to perform the task independently.

Once the child can carry out a task without the assistance from others, the teaching adult has essentially passed responsibility and control to the child, much like an expert would do for an apprentice in LPP terms. The child has now passed from stage one to stage two. Tharpe and Gallimore (1998) suggest that at this stage performance can be managed by the child but the learning has not yet been internalised. In this stage the child assists herself through the use

of self-directed speech, essentially talking through in her mind the task at hand. This is a familiar situation to most people in learning situations. It's not uncommon to see a child playing and whilst doing so talking herself through the activity using the language modelled by the adult she learnt from in stage one.

In stage three of the model the performance for the task is automatized and the accompanying self-directed dialogue is no longer required. Indeed assistance from an adult or self-directed speech can be disruptive or even irritating at this stage.

In stage four the child finds her/himself unable to do what s/he formerly could do as a result of de-automatization caused by 'environmental changes, individual stress, major upheavals or physical trauma' (Tharpe and Gallimore, 2007 p.206). This represents an inevitable feature of the ZPD whereby the child retreats to previous stages of the ZPD (illustrated by the recursive loop in the diagram) in an effort to restore their competence. The recursion feature of stage four highlights how important it is for a teacher to be ready to repeat aspects of lessons previously taught if self-directed speech by the child is not enough to restore their capacity to perform the task. This concept is also useful to consider in terms of moving into a new community of practice, where the modes of performance suitable in other communities are no longer so. For example in the secondary school located next to the focal college, students address teachers by their title and surname and should ask permission to take off their blazers. In the college however, the students address the teachers using their first names and can determine themselves if they want to spend the lesson with their jacket on or off. The students' internalisation of classroom behaviour requires modification to be re-automatized to enable successful participation in the new environment.

### **3.3.2 Section Summary**

Vygotskian theory proposes that the learning process for any individual impinges upon the teacher's ability to assist them through their ZPD via effective scaffolding strategies tailored to the individual and the task at hand. A vital part of this process are the learning relationships which are established between student and teacher. This collaboration enables the teacher to successfully guide the student through the ZPD. This aspect of Vygotskian theory is framed within an ecological model and CoP, recognises the complexities of learning and how essential learning relationships are to enabling students' participation in their learning and in shaping their overall learning experiences.

### **3.4 Chapter Summary**

The three theoretical perspectives explored in this chapter provide a framework for understanding the complexity of student experience and participation in SFC. Ecological

theory prompts consideration of the multiple contexts which comprise an individual's world. By rejecting traditional, individualistic assumptions of learning, bioecological theory reconceptualises learning and development as a wider phenomenon distributed across agent, activity and world. In doing so it behoves the researcher to consider the proximal and distal factors which influence and shape the learning process. As such, it should be recognised that development and therefore learning is not a uniform process and is different for each student.

Embedded within bioecological theory, CoP conceptualises learning as participation in social spaces. Within this student experience can be understood as a process of movement from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation by performing the practices valued by the college. Aside from the physical action of participating in the valued practice, participation also involves the ability to connect with others within that community and to negotiate meaning. Therefore learning can only take place if participation of the valued practices are meaningful to the participants within it. Ecological theory and CoP demonstrate how multiple factors comprising an individual's life interact in a non-linear way making student experience of SFC a complex and unpredictable process.

Utilisation of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development operationalises the process of learning and highlights the importance of the learning relationship between the student and the teacher and how this can enable student's engagement and learning. It illustrates how students are active contributors to the learning relationship through the exchange of knowledge, skill acquisition and performance. As with bioecological theory and CoP, Vygotskian theory views the learner as situated in a complex socio-cultural milieu.

I intend to use the theoretical frameworks discussed in this chapter to analyse and interpret data collected from a SFC college. In light of the theoretical perspectives outlined, to explore the everyday practices within the college and the experiences of the students I need to:

- Understand the complexity of students' world and the role of micro, meso, exo and macro-systems in shaping the learning process
- Observe the practices which characterise the different communities of practice the students are members of (including exploration of meso and exo- systems)
- Analyse practice which serves to include and exclude student's participation
- Understand how contexts and practices influence and shape student identity
- Examine the learning relationships and how these relate to the educational experiences of the student

In employing a theoretical framework which acknowledges both the individuality of a SFC student and locates them within the social, historical and cultural context of their world, it is vital to adopt a methodology which enables the researcher to observe the lived lives of students within a SFC environment. I believe ethnography offers a qualitative methodology which best enables a deep exploration of college practices and the experiences of the students. The following chapter reviews the ethnographic approach to research and how its underpinnings will be applied in this work.



## **Chapter 4 Methodology**

This research is focused on exploring the everyday practices at SFC and how these shape the learning experiences of students. This demands a qualitative methodology which can reveal the rich and complex realities of the students studying at SFC and one which can enable an understanding of how the differing practices which comprise a student's learning environment interact and shape their learning and participation. It is argued that as a methodology, ethnography best fits these requirements.

This chapter will define and discuss the ethnographic approach to research; it will then describe and detail the ethnographic methods implemented and methodological steps taken within this research.

### **4.1 Ethnography**

#### **4.1.1 Defining ethnography**

Ethnography does not readily submit to a neat and bounded definition (Madden, 2010). Due to its complex history rooted in anthropology, ethnography is associated with various methodological approaches and is influenced by a range of theoretical ideas (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethnography's conceptual origins emerged from the field of social and cultural anthropology (Madden, 2010). Here it provided a means to explore cultural and community practices in foreign and 'exotic' lands (outside the white, western world) where an attempt was made to make the strange familiar (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2001). Modern ethnographic research, however, is not limited to the exploration and understanding of foreign cultures. It is now much more widespread across disciplines (sociology, psychology, geography and education) and in cultures 'closer to home' (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007).

Multiple 'schools' operate, each offering a different conceptualisation of ethnographic methodology, fieldwork application and interpretation. Despite the diversity in definition and practice, ethnography can be simply defined as the study of people in naturally occurring settings and the employment of multiple methods or triangulation of data collection. It may involve data collection methods such as observation, interviews, document analysis and quantitative methods such as questionnaires or demographic data (MacDonald, 2001). The data are then analysed and presented. Its key features are the detail of the data, which are collected over a long time in the field, and that it involves participant observation (Rock, 2001).

Brewer (2000) describes ethnography as not a particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by the objective to understand the social meanings and

activities of people in a given setting. A salient, common feature of ethnography is that it is 'grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of participant observation.' (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland and Loftland, 2001 p.4). Participant observation involves the researcher engaging in the daily lives of people under study, in an attempt to capture their experiences in detail, in context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In representing the ordinary lives of the participants the researcher may remould or re-present them and hence they may be rendered remote from the participant's own accounts or interpretations, therefore making the familiar strange (Goodley et al, 2002).

On the surface ethnographic research appears deceptively simple. The researcher identifies the 'field', goes there and records what happens. It is, of course, not so simple as in the field, the ethnographer is faced with a number of decisions. What to include and exclude? How should data be collected? How long should be spent in the field? The prospect of participant observation can be problematic, as at what level does the researcher participate? Does s/he become part of the field, adopting the practices or would this undermine the notion of observation? (Brewer, 2000). In answer to these questions I feel it is necessary to explore the main school of ethnography that best represents my epistemological position and which is relevant to the methodology of this research. Of course, there is insufficient space in this thesis to go into much detail, and at the time of writing, this school seemed to best fit my research and epistemological understanding.

#### **4.1.2 Symbolic Interactionism and ethnography**

Prior to any form of research, one must acknowledge the philosophical issues which underpin it, as in doing so methodological decisions can be made. Ontological positions (relating to existence) in conjunction with epistemology (relating to knowledge) inform a researcher's theoretical perspectives and consequently the methodology and methods used (Crotty, 1998). My research is concerned with the context and experiences, the nature of participation in the valued practices of SFC for students and looks at exploring and understanding these complex contexts and experiences. The epistemology of my research is informed by the mean-making and interpretivist ontology offered within ethnography.

Symbolic interactionism is concerned with meaning in social worlds. Derived from the work of Blumer (1969), it focuses on basic social interactions, language, interrelationships and community and looks to study a subject's actions, objects and society from the perspective of the subject themselves. Symbolic interactionism presupposes that the world exists separate and apart from the individual, the world is interpreted through the use of symbols (language) in the process of interaction. People then act on the basis of the meaning that is

derived from symbolic interaction. Meanings are assigned and modified through an interpretive process that is ever changing. Through selection and interpretation of people, objects and situations in the social world, people form new meanings and new ways to respond and thus are active in shaping their own future through the process of interpreting meaning.

Symbolic interactionism assumes that the individual and context in which the individual exist are inseparable. The truth is tentative and never absolute as meaning changes depending on the context for the individual. Ontological questions are best understood through individual interpretation in a social context. Symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical perspective for studying how individuals interpret objects and other people in their lives and how this process of interpretation leads people to internally construct their world and understanding of it.

Rock (2001) speaks of ethnography as an interactional process between the researcher and the external world on which they are focused and exemplifies the symbolic interactionist approach to ethnography. The assumption that individuals act on the basis of meaning that things have for them, allows for a multiple method research design, demonstrated by ethnography. Rock (2001) describes the practice of interactionist ethnography as guided by two organising assumptions of symbolic interactionism. Firstly, research cannot be planned. It should be viewed as a process that does not start from a fixed condition and changes with each stage of enquiry. Research is 'interactive and creative, selective and interpretive, illuminating patches of the world around it, giving meaning and suggesting further paths of enquiry' (p.30, Rock, 2001).

This position presents multiple problems for any research endeavour. To what extent is it possible to describe and analyse people and by extension situations, in constant flux? The moment the data are committed to paper it becomes obsolete because the focus of the data has moved on. I think it is for this reason that symbolic interactionist ethnography is described as process. As an ethnographer all one can do is record and attempt to explain what is happening during the time of the data collection, giving light to the meanings which are important in the situation and which the participants interpret and act upon. It means that any research grounded in this perspective will be tentative but it also means that all knowledge about a given context or culture can only be found in the situation of that context, that is in the field.

The second assumption of interactionist ethnography is that the knowledge generated is not a product of the researcher's own intellect and reasoning as this knowledge is conceived and

interpreted by the researcher and does not necessarily capture the social world as others conceive and interpret it. This poses implications for the data collection and end product of the research, for the researcher is not exempt from this constant negotiation and repositioning in which their participants are involved and it would follow that as the research cycle progresses, the researcher undergoes re-evaluations and re-positionings. Research then becomes a very active and value laden pursuit, subject to not only the developing (in the sense of changing) field but also to the developing researcher. Here again the notion of process rather than practice is exemplified. Research becomes an interactive system in which the researcher responds to the emerging questions as they go along, framing their experiences and subsequently reframing them in light of incoming experience and outgoing action. On this basis ethnography is a non-predictable trajectory.

## **4.2 Doing ethnography**

Thus far ethnography has been defined as a research endeavour concerned with revealing the deep, rich and contextual layers of an individual or group of people in order to gain insight and understanding of their lives. Despite the differing schools of ethnography, participant observation remains a key method in ethnographic research amongst an array of methods available to the ethnographer. In the following section I will give consideration to the methods which prominently feature in this piece of ethnographic research and how they address meaning and context. I will then go on to discuss examples of ethnography in educational settings.

This poses a clear problem of ethnography: if the moment it is laid down it becomes obsolete then what is the point of it? One argument could be that in the process, understanding can emerge from the complexity of even very familiar and ordinary contexts, Rock (2001) suggests 'what ethnography *can* contribute is a disciplined unravelling of the breadth and complexity of relations ...' (p31). Hence, knowledge revealed through ethnographic endeavour should not be dismissed as irrelevant but considered meaningful within the specific context under study.

### **4.2.1 Ethnographic methods**

As established earlier, ethnography is more than a methodology. It is a style and process of research which utilises multiple means of collecting data to enable the ethnographer to gain a rich understanding of how individuals in different cultures or communities make sense of their lived reality (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). As triangulation is a routine feature of ethnography, as such, there is no 'recipe' for conducting ethnographic research. Indeed Hammersely and Atkinson (2007) state that 'each new researcher must discover for themselves what is required in order to produce an ethnographic study' (p.20). They advise

to explore ethnographic literature beforehand however, in doing this I discovered a plethora of writings on the methods available but little detail as to how data are collected and recorded.

Instead I turned to *The Handbook of Ethnography* (Atkinson et al 2002), where leading academics in the field of ethnography provide a useful guide to employing the key methods of this research- participant observation and interviews.

#### **4.2.1.1 Participant observation**

Participant observation is at the core of ethnography and involves 'establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting' (p.352 Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2001). Key to this is the researcher, overtly or covertly, engaging in the daily lives of the people under study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In doing this, the ethnographer must establish a way of systematically recording what s/he observes and learns during their time in the field. Not only should they be immersed in the field of study, the ethnographer should produce written accounts and descriptions of it in order to share this with others. Central then to participant observation is the use of fieldnotes.

#### **4.2.1.2 Fieldnotes**

Fieldnotes are contemporaneous in nature; they are written observations and reflections made in or close to the field. Thus, fieldnotes are a way of reducing observed events, persons and places to written accounts which can be preserved and reviewed again in the future (Emerson et al, 2001). As fieldnotes are representations of the field they are inevitably selective and unable to capture everything. This leaves the ethnographer with a choice between the breadth and detail of the fieldnotes taken. It also requires the writing up of those things that seem significant and leaving out or ignoring those that are not (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

In practice fieldnotes are not a straightforward matter. Not only is the ethnographer faced with decisions about what to write down, they must also decide how and when to write it. Further to this there is disagreement as to what actually constitutes fieldnotes (Jackson, 1990). Emerson et al (2001) report that ethnographers count diverse sources in this category; 'head notes, scratch notes, fieldnotes proper, fieldnote records, texts, journals and diaries' (p.354). It is possible that all of these represent different representations of events.

Ottenberg (1990) writes that headnotes are the researcher's mental notes and memories of the field research. Scratch notes refer to those instances where the researcher writes down a mnemonic word or phrase to fix an observation in his/her head or to recall something

particular that was said in the field. As noted by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) even the briefest of notes can be valuable aids in constructing a detailed account. Supported by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) 'A single word, even one merely descriptive of the dress of a person, or a particular word uttered by someone is usually enough to "trip off" a string of images that afford substantial reconstruction of the observed scene' (p.95).

Fieldnotes proper take the form of a daily written log. Researchers may choose to write these detailed notes soon after witnessing an event, write brief notes at the time of the event and then elaborate and finish these initial records upon the leaving the field, or postpone writing of notes until they have left the research field and returned to the academic field where they begin to write the ethnographic account. Field note records may include reference to the researcher's own reactions, sources of background information or preliminary analysis (Emerson et al, 2001).

Despite the form of fieldnotes used, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) advise that notes should be made as soon as possible after the observed action, as the quality of notes diminish with the passage of time and detail will be quickly lost. It would be ideal to make notes during the actual observation but this is not always possible as the process of writing them may be disruptive and may prevent natural participation. In these situations headnotes can be used by researchers to prevent pulling away from the scene and missing key details in order to note down observations (Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul, 1997).

In using headnotes or scratch notes, Werner (1999) advocates the use of memory training techniques to improve the researcher's recall for example recollecting the interview or observational event in his/her mind three times, each time increasing the recall of detail. This would allow the researcher to record micro details (speech, actions, relationships) rather than ones that are more macro or descriptive. An over reliance on the use of headnotes can be criticised on the basis that they can be subject to distortion, elaboration or forgetfulness however, it is imperative that one should remember that any attempt to record 'objective' fieldnotes is futile. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out, it is impossible to record *all* data acquired during the course of fieldwork and that any fieldnotes or headnotes used are inevitably selective by nature. Further to this, as fieldnotes are a representation rather than an exact record (Emerson et al, 2001) one must acknowledge that the researcher is never a passive or neutral channel of communication and as such, data sets, analyses and reports cannot be considered objective sources of knowledge about the world but must be viewed as social products (Rock, 2001).

Alongside the debate upon what fieldnotes are, there is further disagreement amongst researchers about what should be included in fieldnotes. Some argue that they should include a description of the actions taking place in the context, whilst others think it should be the actions and the researcher's own reflections and feelings. May (1993) suggests that the personal experiences of the researcher should be part of the fieldnotes as in doing so the role of the researcher in carrying out and analysing the research can be shown. However, Emerson et al (2001) insist on a sharp distinction between the recording of emotional experience and observational data. They recommend the use of a journal or a diary to record the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the researcher.

Van Maanen (1988) has identified three writing styles used to organise fieldnotes:

- ◆ *Realist tales*- accounts which are characterised by the absence of the author in the text and an impression of objective description.
- ◆ *Confessional tales* – in this style the researcher is at the centre of the notes and it is her/his feelings and emotions which drive the narrative of the notes.
- ◆ *Impressionist tales* – these are more story like in their production.

He suggests that typically ethnographers use a mix of all three of these styles. From this it can be argued that the treatment of fieldnotes are related to these decisions; to write impressionistic tales demonstrates notes made in detail afterwards according to the story the ethnographer witnessed unfolding, whereas more realist approaches must take place contemporaneously within the field.

Amid the overwhelming decisions the ethnographer must make regarding the nature and practice of fieldnotes, a checklist suggested by Spradley (1980), provides a useful reference for what should be included:

1. 'Space: the physical place or places
2. Actor: the people involved
3. Activity: a set of related acts people do
4. Object: the physical things that are present
5. Act: single actions that people do
6. Event: a set of related activities that people carry out
7. Time: the sequencing that takes place over time
8. Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish
9. Feeling: the emotions felt and expressed'

(p.78)

Whilst this list appears straightforward, further examination raises more problems. What constitutes an actor? Does there need to be interaction or does mere presence qualify an actor? How can one identify when an activity or act starts and when it finishes? What constitutes an object? Again, does there have to be interaction or does mere presence qualify it being recorded? How can the researcher be aware of the goals their participants are trying to accomplish? In a classroom setting it is possible that the goal of the teacher is not the same as that of some of the students. Finally, how can one identify the feelings of others unless they are expressed? Should the researcher record his/her own emotional feelings and reactions? Or should data be related to those participants under observation?

In utilising participant observation as a principle method, Emerson et al (2001) argue that the ethnographer's presence will inevitably impact upon the participants under study. Loftland and Loftland (1995) argue that it is critical for an ethnographer to document his/her own activities, impressions and emotional responses as these serve to shape the research process and can illuminate powerful insights. For these reasons the researcher should seek to understand the effects of their presence rather than try to eliminate them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The treatment of fieldnotes also differs. Some ethnographers write a log at the end of the day, others take their daily notes and organise them at the end of each day, others make brief notes at the time and as soon as they can afterwards type up elaborate and detailed descriptions of the event. Others leave any elaboration until they have left the field and have a more analytical view of the notes (Emerson et al, 2001).

Following this discussion of fieldnotes it is still difficult to pin-point an exact definition and instruction for carrying them out. As Walford (2009) writes they are 'very personal and idiosyncratic in nature and our knowledge of the detail of what is recorded and how the record is used is limited' (p.117). In his study, Walford (2009) interviews four ethnographers (Paul Connolly, Sara Delamont, Bob Jeffery and Lois Weis) to understand how they construct their fieldnotes. He found no consistent terminology between the four to define or describe the stages they go through to produce a written record of what they have seen in the field. The one aspect which all four did do was to 'go out into the field armed with some sort of notebook or pad to write in.' (p.117).

In the absence of a definitive set of rules to follow regarding fieldnotes my understanding is as follows. One must as Walford (2009) found, simply go out into the field with a notepad and pen and record what is observed, these recordings should then be written up and expanded



as soon as possible when the researcher has left the field. How fieldnotes are written and recorded depends upon the context of the research and the views of the researcher. The process of writing appears to be a negotiation between what the researcher deems significant enough to include and this may change as time in the field passes.

### **4.2.1.3 Interviews**

Participant observation is concerned with 'walking in the shoes' of those under study and representing the observed social world through written fieldnotes (and subsequent analysis of these). Alongside participant observation, interviews have become a cornerstone of the ethnographic method (Madden, 2010) as they 'help to gather rich, detailed data directly from participants in the social world under study' (Heyl, 2001 p369).

By definition, the essential feature of interviews is that a verbal stimulus - the question, is used to elicit a verbal response- the answer (Brewer, 2000). Ethnographic interviews stem from cultural anthropology where interviews were traditionally conducted on-site during field studies (Heyl, 2001). Thus, ethnographic interviews can be distinguished from other types of interview projects as within the field of study the ethnographer can establish respectful, ongoing relationships with participants which creates a rapport where interviews can be open and allow a genuine exchange of views to be made. Ethnographic interviewing allows the ethnographer to 'get up close and personal' to those participants under study and hear directly how they interpret their experiences (Heyl, 2001).

Spradley (1979) states that the core of ethnography is concerned with the meaning of actions and events to the people under study. Thus, the ethnographic interview should seek to genuinely understand the thoughts and feelings of the interviewee. Although there are different types of interview, the ethnographic interview refers to the more informal and less structured forms of interviewing. This allows 'access to people's meaning-endowing capacities and produces rich, deep data that come in the form of extracts of natural language' (p.66 Brewer, 2000). Semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to establish key topics or questions they wish to pursue whilst allowing natural conversation to take form. This enables the interviewer to determine the course of the interview but also gives the interviewee the freedom to express their views (Madden, 2010).

Conducting an ethnographic interview is a complicated verbal exchange which relies on many conversational norms and patterns to help it to flow and be productive (Madden, 2010). Hence, there are many points to consider in order to create a 'successful' ethnographic interview. Thought should be given to question formation. In order to keep interviews flowing it is important that the researcher avoids ambiguous questions whilst giving the participant

enough conversational space to answer. Thought should also be given to the nature of the questions; a balance of open questions which allow for expansions and clarification and closed which can put the participant at ease as they allow a straightforward answer.

Spradley (1979) in his classic text *The Ethnographic Interview*, has broken down interviewing into twelve 'speech events' that demonstrate the conversational structure of a good ethnographic interview. These events or stages are as follows (I will expand on the stages which are not self-explanatory):

1. Greetings
2. *Giving ethnographic explanations*- whereby the ethnographer has to explain and reiterate the nature of the research, the type of questions asked, the way answers will be recorded and the nature of the interview process. This should be done in a manner that makes sense to the interviewee.
3. *Asking ethnographic questions*- this is to allow an insight into the participant's world-view by asking questions that draw out the descriptive (how do you...?), structural (what's the relationship between...?) and comparative (what's the difference between...?).
4. *Asymmetrical turn taking*- this refers to the idea that the ethnographer should be doing most of the questioning whereas the interviewee should be doing most of the talking. Of course in natural conversation the interviewee will ask questions and the interviewer will tell stories, but the balance should weigh heavily towards the talking of the interviewee.
5. Expressing interest
6. *Expressing cultural ignorance*- this is used to get the interviewee to 'educate' the interviewer using expressions like 'I never knew that!' or 'I didn't realise that...' This enables information to flow and for the interviewee to clarify any misunderstandings the interviewer may have.
7. Repeating
8. Restating informant's terms
9. Incorporating informant's terms

Stages 7-9 are all ways in which the ethnographer begins to refine questions in order for the interview to be conducted in a more familiar speech terrain for the interviewee and to demonstrate that the ethnographer is learning to see from the point of view of the interviewee

10. *Creating hypothetical situations*- a way of building knowledge about other possible situations using language familiar with the interviewee.
11. Asking friendly questions
12. Taking leave

Spradley notes that successful ethnographic interviews may not incorporate all of these speech events and that conversations need not and do not unfold in this order. Nevertheless, he emphasises that ethnographic interviews should follow a structure of informality and friendliness when starting and explaining the purpose of the interview (stages 1-2), working slowly and sensitively through to information-gathering and checking steps (stages 3-10), and finally moving to informal and friendly leaving steps (11-12). Spradley emphasises how it is crucial to make interviewees as comfortable as possible in order to get the required information and to leave them in a position where they will be happy to speak to you again in the future. Heyl (2001) concurs with this stating that friendly introductions and explanations, sensitive information-gathering and friendly leave taking creates a successful ethnographic interview.

Heyl (2001) notes that ethnographic interviewing is concerned with accessing and representing meanings from participants therefore it is the researcher's job to conduct the interviews in such a way to enable this. She suggests that the following should be addressed in interviewing:

1. Listen well and respectfully, developing an ethical engagement with the participants at all stages of the project;
2. Acquire a self-awareness of our role in the co-construction of meaning during the interview process;
3. Be cognizant of ways in which both the ongoing relationship and the broader social context affect the participants, the interview process and the project outcomes;
4. Recognize that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained.

(p.370)

The goals presented by Heyl (2001) present a problematic concept with interviewing in terms of the partial knowledge that is gained and the nature of the data in terms of meaning, context and relationship. Hammersely (2003) criticises ethnographers for an over-reliance on interview data. He notes that concerns have been expressed about discrepancies between what people say and what they do, that the interview context is merely an of the moment construction from which the talk emerges. This highlights the 'interviewer effect' whereby interviewees may lie or say things in interviews which they believe are socially acceptable but are not a true reflection of what they think and feel (Brewer, 2000).

It is evident that caution needs to be exercised when conducting interviews and collecting the data which emerges from them. The problems of interviewing can be addressed; Brewer (2000) writes that the interviewer effect can be moderated to a certain extent as the informal,

conversational nature of unstructured interviews allow a skilful interviewer to manage and manipulate topic choice. He also notes that researchers should understand the importance of reflexivity and to be aware of the situated understandings that interview data represent and convey this to readers when writing up.

I concur with Tobbell's (2003) view that interview data should be assessed on its own merits and despite the context and construction that Hammersley refers to, it still tells us something about our participants. Just because the situation is constructed it does not mean the data are inaccurate or unreliable. In her interview study on school transition, Tobbell (2003) points out that the students she interviewed talked of their experiences and feelings and that this represented these students at a particular time and at a particular place. She goes on to note that wider knowledge and theory should be employed to reflect upon what the students revealed in their interviews.

Ethnographic interviews can be tricky to conduct and require a skilful interviewer in order to be successful. Interviewing is essentially a process founded on the active participation of both the interviewer and interviewee and compliments the method of participant observation as the ethnographer can access and explore the thoughts, feelings and views of the participant and thus extract data that is meaningful to the context in which it was obtained. Like fieldnotes in participant observation, interviewing is also an ongoing negotiation between the knowledge, ideas and assumptions that the researcher and the interviewee offer. Interviewing involves a complex form of social interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. Central to this process is how interviewees reconstruct events or aspects of their experience, as well as how interviewers make their own sense of what has been said (Heyl, 2001).

To conclude this discussion about ethnographic interviewing I refer to Kvale's (1996) metaphor of the researcher interviewer as a traveller to illuminate the process of ethnographic interviewing. Here Kvale notes that the original Latin meaning of *conversation* (italics in original) is 'wandering together with' (p.4). The route of the interview may be planned ahead of time, but unexpected twists and turns will appear as the interview-traveller follows their particular interests and adjust their paths according to what those met along the way choose to share. The travellers' knowledge and experience is influenced by the people they meet and vice versa through meaningful dialogue.

#### **4.2.2 Educational ethnography**

Ethnography has the potential to explore educational practices and to shed light on teaching and learning relationships. However, as a methodology within educational research its application is surprisingly limited. Extensive literature searches have not easily revealed

educational ethnographies. Gordon, Holland and Lahelma (2001) make reference to a number of educational ethnographies which were conducted in the late 1990's and which looked at schools outside of the UK. Woods (1979) and Hammersley (1990) both studied the day-to-day practices of secondary school classrooms however, much of this research is outdated. Frustratingly, there is also a huge lack of educational ethnographies conducted within the post-16 sector. My sustained efforts eventually enabled me to locate more recent ethnographies and more importantly ethnographies conducted within the field of post-16 education.

Demie and Lewis (2011) conducted an ethnographic study to examine the key barriers to learning in schools for White British working class pupils. The aim of the research was to study the school experiences of these pupils and the reasons for their underachievement. This ethnography involved 14 schools (primary and secondary) within the local authority of Lambeth, London. Along with observational methods, semi-structured interviews were carried out with head teachers and deputy heads, class teachers, teaching assistants, learning support teachers, school governors, working class parents and pupils. The purpose of the interviews was to triangulate the voices of the different stakeholders in the White British working class pupil's education. The focus of the interviews was to gather evidence on the main barriers to achievement in schools. Parents and pupil focus groups were also set up in each school to give the researchers an opportunity to introduce themselves and the research, and to explain the purpose of the focus group. The ethnography involved pupils from Key Stage 1, 2, 3 and GCSE cohorts.

Demie and Lewis (2011) present an extensive and thorough explanation of their ethnographic findings. They go to great lengths to include as many different points of view and to include verbatim quotes from interviews, conversations and focus groups to highlight their argument. However, they omit details about the nature of their observations, fieldnotes and their length of time in the field. Nonetheless, their findings (not explicitly acknowledged in the study) demonstrate Bronfenbrenner's nested system model to illuminate the barriers to learning for White British working class pupils. Demie and Lewis argue that the main reason for the underachievement of these pupils is the low aspirations their parents display regarding education and social deprivation (microsystem). Coupled with this are parental low-literacy and educational levels and feelings of marginalisation within the community (Exosystem). Demie and Lewis argue that there is a lack of targeted support within schools to raise achievement and break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage these pupils experience. They conclude that the main obstacle to raising achievement for these pupils is the failure of central government (Macrosystem) to recognise their particular needs, arguing that social class and

poverty are overlooked by national policy makers and therefore support for these issues are not implemented in schools.

Demie and Lewis' ethnography enabled them to explore at length the thoughts and feelings of all the participants involved in the research. Thus, it enabled them to show the legacy of low aspiration and disinterest in learning is evident in these pupils and how this poses difficulties and challenges faced for the schools and educational policy makers.

Kim (2010) conducted an ethnographic study in an 'Alternative High School' Arizona, USA. In this context, an alternative high school exclusively serves students with one or more of the following: behavioural issues, those identified as dropouts, those with poor academic standing (more than one year behind on academic credits), those who demonstrated a pattern of failing grades, and those who were pregnant and/or parenting. Students at this school do not choose to go there; they are referred (expelled for resistant behaviour) by principals from regular high schools. In her ethnography, Kim critically examines student resistance in an alternative school employing a framework of resistance theory to promote a way which encourages listening and communicating with resistant students rather than imposing the popular 'zero tolerance' approach to behaviour management.

Kim's ethnography took place over a five month period where she assumed the role of participant observer, immersed in the school setting throughout Monday-Friday. Her classroom observations were focused on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade (ages 14-16) amongst other classes. Kim worked hard to gain a deep understanding of the school. She attended faculty meetings, assemblies and school events- even helping to serve food at the Halloween and Christmas parties. She conducted nine interviews with students and staff, the former having been recommended by their teachers who believed they displayed resistant behaviour more frequently than others. Interviewees were asked to talk about their backgrounds, views on alternative schooling and their school experiences. Interviews with staff revealed insight into school structure and workings of the school, whilst interviews with students revealed insight into their attitudes and perceptions of school and teachers. Alongside her observations and interviews, Kim also looked at students' homework materials, the school policy handbook and teaching materials.

From her ethnography, Kim identified three emerging themes:

- ◆ *Resistance can be communicated as a self-defence mechanism*- here Kim found that the students would rather refuse to learn than be identified as a 'total disaster' (p. 269). Students use resistance as a survival strategy to prevent internalising learned

helplessness- where they are conditioned to believe that educational failure is unavoidable. A student would rather promote personal pride than admit that they are an educational failure.

- ◆ *Resistance can be communicated as a way to demand meaningful instruction-* Throughout her observations Kim noted that common classroom and teaching procedure was to promote rote memorisation of facts, fill-in-the-blanks worksheets and copying answers from textbooks. Teachers told her that lessons focused on the 'basics' needed for entry level jobs, hence understanding the material delivered was not encouraged. Kim observed that some students employed resistant behaviour as a way to communicate boredom in class, demonstrated that they wanted lessons that were more meaningful to them instead of just 'learning definitions' (p. 271).
- ◆ *Resistance can be communicated as a way to affirm one's agency and self-empowerment-* students would use resistant behaviour to claim their agency or 'stand-up' for themselves against an oppressive situation. This was a way of making themselves heard and to define themselves as an active participant in their world of school and learning. Through resistance they could show awareness of the power relations and challenge the structural aspects of the school to try and create change.

Kim (2010) found that the zero-tolerance disciplinary policies were not contributing to improved student behaviour or overall school safety. Instead they were threatening youth and equal opportunities and were contributing to alternative schools resembling prisons with security guards and spot-checks. She concludes that resistant behaviour should be viewed holistically and offers a transactional theory of resistance as a communicative act, allowing for an open dialogue and communication between teachers and students. She argues that this would create an equitable school environment which transcends zero-tolerance measures and the conflict and tensions this creates. Thus, teachers should take more time to talk and listen to students in order to gain a better understanding of their resistant behaviour.

To me, communities of practice literature jumps from the pages of Kim's ethnographic findings. The students in this ethnography felt marginalised in their educational participation and learning. Their educational community was chosen for them as they were 'referred' to an alternative school where many of them were grouped as students displaying resistant behaviour. From this the students are faced with a negotiation of participating- that is fully adhering to school and zero-tolerance behaviour policies at the expense of refusing to participate because the learning that is enforced upon them is not meaningful. Resistant behaviour occurs as a mechanism as the students attempt to define their identities and meaning in the given school community.

Kim's study exemplifies how the multiple method approach offered by ethnography enabled her to gain rich detail of the school, teachers and students. It also enabled her to gain a deeper understanding and insight into how the students really felt. Her observations and fieldnotes were a key methodological tool. This is evident in her analysis as many quotes are taken from her observational fieldnotes. I personally felt that Kim could have explored the student's feelings and attitudes further through her interview data in her analysis as this was not mentioned or referred to. I felt so engaged in reading her ethnography and empathetic towards the student participants, I wanted to find out more! However, I have to respect her decision and analysis to focus on the data and themes she felt necessary to discuss and publish.

These final examples of educational ethnographies present accounts from research conducted in the post-16 sector and are most useful to refer to for the purposes of this thesis. Salisbury and Jephcote (2008) followed the learning journeys of students and teachers over a two year period in three FE colleges in Wales. Salisbury and Jephcote recognised the complexity and diversity of the FE sector- its' structures, policies and students- and so used a multi-method ethnographic approach that could capture the lived experience of learning and working within FE. The specific focus of the paper was on the sense that students made of their early encounters and experiences in colleges of FE. Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, student journals and observational fieldnotes were all methods employed to reveal the students' experiences of relationships with teachers and induction into the college routines and expectations.

Jephcote, Salisbury, Rees and Roberts (2005) presented a working paper of Salisbury and Jephcote's ethnography at the Annual British Educational Research Association Conference (University of Glamorgan). In this a detailed account was provided of the research questions, design and methodology, decisions they had made about entering the field, ethical considerations, access, sampling, method of taking fieldnotes and the emerging themes from their data. This provided a thorough explanation of how and why they had conducted their research and was very beneficial and illuminating for myself and my own ethnographic research.

Salisbury and Jephcote numerously used the voices and texts of their student participants throughout their ethnography to illustrate their initial experiences of FE. They found that those students transferring directly from secondary school or formal education reported feelings of discontinuity whereas students who were older and returning to education expressed anxieties and self-doubt about their capacity to learn.



James and Biesta (2007) conducted an extensive longitudinal study focusing on the learning cultures within FE. They explored the complexity of relationships between teaching, teachers, learning, learners, learning situations, and wider historical, economic, social and political influences. They state their methodology as a nested case study approach however, the range of data collection methods they employed suggest their study can also be considered an ethnography. Their research focused on four FE colleges across 19 learning sites; these were defined as locations where students and teachers worked together on learning and comprised different qualifications and subject areas. In each site data was collected through repeated interviews with a sample of usually six students, through interviews with tutors who had the main teaching responsibility for the site ('participating tutors'), through participating journal tutors, and through observation of the site in action. A questionnaire was also administered with all the students, not just the interviewees. These were administered at the start and end of each learning site, or at the point which the student left the site. Where possible exit interviews were conducted with students after they had left the site. Data was collected for three consecutive cohorts of students.

At the end of data collection, James and Biesta (2007) had gathered 600 student interviews, 100 tutor interviews, 16 log books, 700 sets of observation notes, notes from local team meetings and discussions, interviews with a small number of college managers, and a large amount of documentary material. The quantitative and qualitative data they collected were analysed separately then integrated. The quantitative data explored the differences among the sites, mapped changes in expectations over time, related expectations to perceived outcomes, and looked for relationships between sets of variables. The qualitative data, used the main sites as the primary unit of analysis. After first round of data collection, a detailed case study account was produced for each site, then as data collection progressed, case studies were updated progressively, focusing on deepening understanding, mapping change, and examining in depth the impact of various interventions into site culture (imposed by the tutors or by external influences).

James and Biesta's (2007) research supports the view that learning is an inherently social process, shaped by person, context and time (Bronfenbrenner) and how central negotiation of meaning and engagement in learning relationships (CoP and Vygotsky) is to learning. A fuller presentation of their findings can be found on page 10 in chapter 2 of this thesis. Their research however, indicates how ethnography can reveal the complex nature of learning.

Ethnography is a powerful tool for uncovering deep insight and rich detail of experience, and as the ethnographies discussed in this section show, they can provide vivid descriptions and

explanations of feelings and behaviours. I believe if you want to know how something works, what happens or how people feel in specific contexts or situations, then ethnography seems the most logical methodology to use. The educational field is broad, complex and diverse. It is fraught with challenges and difficulties regarding the best way to teach, the best way to create meaningful learning environments, the best way to respond to students needs and the best way to establish good pedagogical relationships.

Maybe educational researchers are put off ethnography because as a methodology it does appear vast and daunting and requires an ethnographer to be skilful in the art of negotiating access to the field and establishing rapport with participants, observation, fieldnotes, interviewing, transcribing and ultimately some form of thematic analysis. It requires dedication of vast amounts of time both in and out of the field as the ethnographer is faced with a multitude of data. However, this is the very reason ethnography should be used more, particularly in education. Education is a complex and messy environment. It therefore requires a complex and flexible approach to share the lived experiences and stories it creates with others. That way more understanding is encouraged from all educational stakeholders-policy makers, schools, teachers, parents and students. I applaud the educational ethnographer who has grappled with the enormous task of ethnography in an attempt to give those in education (both teachers and students) a voice, making their story accessible to others.

### **4.2.3 Ethics in ethnography**

Ethical issues remain an ever present concern within ethnographic research and places a responsibility on the ethnographer to conduct his/her research in a way that will minimise harm or distress to the participants involved.

Professional ethical codes of practice have been developed across multiple disciplines in an effort to provide an outline which allows a research endeavour to fulfil the aims it set out to do whilst protecting the participants involved. Psychological research within the UK must conform to the ethical guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society, similarly educational research by the British Educational Association Ethical Guidelines. Although these guidelines offer advice and direction on a number of key issues (consent, de-briefing, withdrawal, confidentiality), they serve only as guiding principles rather than a definitive procedure. They cannot account for ethical dilemmas which may unexpectedly emerge throughout the research process.

Alongside the ethical standards set out by regulatory and professional bodies, ethical choices and responsibility ultimately lie with the individual researcher. The philosophical

underpinnings of the research, focus of the research, field setting, methods used, participants and the researcher's own moral and ethical beliefs all impact upon the understanding and management of ethical issues within the research setting.

Murphy and Dingwall (2001) provide two approaches to the philosophy of ethics, Consequentialist and Deontological. The former gives focus to the outcomes of research, have the participants been harmed in any way? If so has this outweighed the research's benefits? The latter focuses on the inherent rights of research participants such as the right to privacy and respect. In response to these ethical concerns, Murphy and Dingwall (2001) suggest the use of an ethical framework provided by Beauchamp et al (1982) to guide research practice. Research should consider four factors:

- ◆ *Non-maleficence* – no harm should come to participants
- ◆ *Beneficence* – research should result in an identifiable and useful outcome rather than be carried out for its own sake
- ◆ *Autonomy/self-determination* – research participants' own values should be respected
- ◆ *Justice* – people should be treated equally, one group should not be promoted at the expense of another group.

Given the fluid and spontaneous nature of the ethnographic approach, not all events can be anticipated. It is acknowledged amongst ethnographers that ethical dilemmas are an obligatory feature of fieldwork (Goodwin et al, 2003) that are inextricably linked to the specific context in which they arose (Goode, 1999). Ethical dilemmas must then be resolved 'situationally' taking account of the unique and personal dimensions they incorporate (Punch, 1994).

I refer to Barbour's (2010) ethnography of digitalized classrooms within an FE college to illuminate the ethical dilemmas that can unexpectedly arise. In his study, Barbour assumed the role as participant observer in an FE college. He had previously worked at the college and so had 'insider-status' already knowing some of the lecturers and students. The main aims of the research were to study how new media, new digital technologies and socio-digital technologies were affecting teaching and learning and students' approaches to their work. The students involved were between the ages of 16 and 18 years old and were on a full-time 2 year arts orientated course.

During his research, Barbour found that the accessibility of dominant classroom technology, the computer and personal mobile phones, gave some lecturers the opportunity for a distraction or break from the demands of the students in the class. This allowed escape into more personal, socio-cultural spaces and also an opportunity to complete administrative

workloads, despite having contracted non-teaching time set aside for such work. It became apparent to Barbour that some lecturers were using the digital technologies available to them to abuse the college's strict policy against the use of non-academic technologies in the classroom. If a student was caught then their online account could get suspended for up to a month. As some lecturers were failing to set an example, the students overlooked the punishment they might receive and sanctioned their own socio-cultural use of technologies within the classroom. Barbour regularly observed one lecturer organise his social life using either the staff classroom computer or personal mobile phone. Barbour also observed more unprofessional practice with lecturers openly accessing their mobile phones for social contact either responding to texts or calls from friends. During one observation a lecturer organised a car insurance quote using his mobile phone, making no attempt to disguise what he was doing.

Throughout his research, Barbour's observations confirmed the frustrations the students expressed to him during conversations and interviews. Students felt distracted in lessons and lacked motivation to complete their work. Barbour also observed lecturers frequently turning up late to lessons or leaving part way through. It became evident that some lecturers failed to adequately plan their lessons and often told students to carry on with work from the previous lesson. This also contributed to demotivating students who often felt bored and were beginning to lose the aspirations they had for higher education when they first started the course. Barbour found that the lack of professionalism from some lecturers was reciprocated by a lack of engagement and motivation amongst students.

Barbour was faced with unexpected ethical questions based on what he was observing and hearing. The sustained continuity of lecturers abusing college policies and the respect of their students was disturbing to Barbour as these were colleagues he held in professional regard. One student anonymously wrote to a college manager to complain about the course and quality of teaching but no apparent changes occurred and the students felt that their voices were not valued. Deontological assumptions and notions of justice presented Barbour with a difficult decision- should he share his findings and demonstrate disloyalty to his colleagues, as morally he had an obligation to those students he felt were receiving a less than ideal education? However, consequentialist assumptions and notions of non-maleficence prompted him to think about the damaging impact this would have on the careers of his colleagues and indeed his own as he would lose the confidence of those lecturers (gatekeepers to his research) and hence risk losing access to the field. Principles of non-maleficence are to ensure that no harm comes to any focal participants, including lecturers in this case. Barbour had to grapple with notions of autonomy as he considered whether to intervene to identify

the unprofessionalism occurring and to give weight to the students' voice. Should he have risked harming and betraying his colleagues in order to prevent harm to the students and to safeguard a positive educational experience?

Barbour was presented with what Ellis (2007) refers to as the dilemma of the 'fragmented self' – the ethnographer as a friend and a researcher. This can create difficulties when friendship is placed secondary to the research. Barbour decided to continue his research without intervening as he felt that his priorities were focused on sustaining the momentum of the research. He felt that if he had acted upon what he found the course of his research would have changed direction and he would have jeopardized the trust and friendship of his colleagues. Once he had completed his data collection and left the field, Barbour sought to try and address the ethical dilemma he encountered. Did he have an ethical obligation to intervene on behalf of the students in order for them to have an education they had expected and were entitled to? Barbour himself admits he is yet to reach an answer. If he had done so he would have risked losing access to the field environment which he was unlikely to access again for the purpose and aims of his research.

As Barbour's ethical dilemma highlights, unpredictable situations can arise within the field of study which can challenge a researcher's ethical principles and indeed the ethical framework provided by Beuchamp et al (1982). It is incumbent upon the researcher to ensure that no harm is inflicted upon any participants involved in the research and it is common practice that researchers follow ethical guidelines produced by professional bodies. However, these alone cannot deal with ethical dilemmas that may arise; ultimately the decision lies with the personal, ethical judgment of the researcher. Much careful consideration can be given to the ethical procedures of ethnographic research, however; the ethnographer must remain flexible and open in order to deal with those ethical dilemmas which may arise unexpectedly.

#### **4.2.4 Ethnographic analysis**

Upon leaving the research field, the ethnographer must return to the academic one to analyse the data and to fulfil the aims of the research. At this point the ethnographer will be faced with a mass of data: stacks of interviews, piles of fieldnotes, collections of reports, documents and drawings. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) point out that these materials alone do not create ethnography; it is the process of analysis and interpretation by the ethnographer. Analysis reduces data to a more manageable form allowing ethnographers to tell a story about the people at the heart of their research. Analysis can then stimulate interpretation which enables the ethnographer to make the story meaningful to both the people it centres on and to the readers of it (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999).

Qualitative research provides vast amounts of analytical opportunities of which ethnographic data can be subjected to. I will now give provide a brief outline of two different approaches to data analysis: thematic and narrative, and give consideration to the applicability of these to this research.

#### **4.2.4.1 Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis involves the identification of concepts or themes in the data. Through recognition of patterns within data, the researcher can identify emergent themes and is subsequently able to generate theory. In reviewing the literature, it is evident that there are multiple ways of conducting thematic analysis. Immersion in the data is common practice whereby the researcher reads and re-reads the data, and subsequently codes, sorts and organises the data before themes are decided upon (Ezzy, 2002). Holliday (2002) notes, importantly, that the way in which the researcher sees the data will be influenced by his/her own understanding, thus acknowledging that the emergent analytical construction of themes or concepts from the data would not necessarily be found by other researchers.

Thematic analysis enables an inductive approach where themes are identified and theories are generated as emergent concepts from the raw data (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). As no pre-determined theory of structure is imposed upon the data, the approach retains the advantage of allowing previously undiscovered relationships to emerge. There is also the possibility to identify resonance between the new data and existing literature (Ezzy, 2002). It is difficult to locate critique of thematic analysis within qualitative literature, however, a principle disadvantage is that in the process of breaking down data and reassembling it, the situation or participants are not considered as a whole, but rather there is an assumption that they are the sum of their parts. This may then lead to the possibility of distortion of data (Tobbell, 2006).

#### **4.2.4.2 Narrative analysis**

The narrative approach is concerned with the ways in which people make and utilise stories to interpret and understand their world. Narrative analysis is a means of examining the stories which people impart. These stories are viewed as a social product, constructed by people embedded in specific social, historical and cultural contexts (Cortazzi, 2001). With this, the key assumption of the narrative approach is to give consideration to the structure of narratives as a whole (Ezzy, 2002). This notion is underpinned by the belief that the meaning cannot be understood just by reference to isolated concepts or themes but rather in relationship to the other phenomena which surround the research context. Richardson (2003) refers to such analytical approaches in ethnography as CAP ethnography that is creative analytic practices. She suggests that the following criteria be used to judge such approaches:

- ◆ *Substantive contribution* to our understanding of social life;
- ◆ *Aesthetic merit* in terms of how interesting the piece is (although presumably this would differ between readers) and to the extent to which it invites an interpretive response;
- ◆ *Reflexivity* in terms of the awareness of epistemological position demonstrated;
- ◆ *Impact* in terms of how it moves the reader to discover more, to express emotion etc;
- ◆ *Expression of reality* in terms of the writing as a credible account of the real.

There are a number of opportunities available to the narrative analysis: self-narratives, fictional stories, ethnographic stories and poetry (Cortazzi, 2001).

Thematic analysis and narrative analysis require the researcher to immerse themselves in their data in order to know it in depth so meaning can clearly be extracted. Both analytical approaches represent the findings from the data in a manner which compliment the methods used (participant observation and interviews) in conjunction with a symbolic interactionist epistemology centred on understanding meaning and context of the participants under study.

#### **4.2.5 Reflexivity**

Founded upon the epistemological assumptions of symbolic interactionism, this ethnographic research is concerned with how the focal students interpret the world around them, constructing meaning and understanding.

As a qualitative researcher my aim is to understand the complexity and richness of the students' experiences. The subjective meanings interpreted through events and emotions in specific contexts are central to the research process and analysis. Positivist quantitative assumptions are inadequate when researching into complex human behaviour and experience. The positivist ideal of establishing causal laws of behaviour is inappropriate for studying students' experiences, their complex emotions and behaviour, which can often be unpredictable and context dependent. The very purpose of the qualitative research process is to reject the positivist notion of an unequivocal world in which to observe and record human behaviour.

In utilising an ethnographic methodology, I am attempting to represent a meaningful interpretation of SFC students' every day experiences, trying to make sense of the stories that unfold throughout my data collection and analysis. My epistemological underpinnings will permeate through all aspects of the research process as I aim to uncover deep insight and rich detail of experience. As such I am inevitably and intricately involved within the research process. Moreover, my 'insider' status as a college employee undoubtedly means that my

personal and emotional involvement will in some form shape and direct the trajectory of the research.

The term 'reflexivity' essentially refers to the researcher embracing rather than discounting their subjective involvement in the research process. Finlay (1998) identifies four subjective elements which illuminate the influence of the researcher on the research:

1. The influence of the researcher's assumptions
2. The impact of the researcher's expectations
3. The researcher's behaviour and emotions
4. Effect of unconscious responses.

In her discussion of the above elements, Finlay refers to her own experience as a researcher adopting an 'insider' position whilst exploring the experiences of Occupational Therapists (OT).

Like myself, Finlay assumed an 'insider' status; as a qualified and experienced OT she was interviewing and observing OT. As is the benefit of insider status, Finlay's previous knowledge and experiences gave her insights that outsiders may not have appreciated. This identification allowed her to adopt her researcher role with comfort and ease- understanding jargon, language and dilemmas that would often occur for OT. However, Finlay (1998) discovered that despite sharing the same language and meanings as her participant OT, did not indicate that they viewed their job the same way as she did. Finlay admits that she formed an assumption based on her own previous experience that OT retained a fair amount of autonomy and that team relationships were reasonably egalitarian. Her research revealed that many teams/practices were very hierarchical which was contrary to her experience as an OT. By recording and reflecting on her assumptions, Finlay demonstrates the importance of both shared and individual meanings in the research process. This is significant in my own research. My insider status means I will adopt many shared meanings with college staff and students. As a member of staff I will make assumptions about students and college practices. However, as a member of staff employed to support and advocate for students it is inevitable that I make assumptions about my colleagues and pedagogical practices. Throughout my data collection and analysis it is important that I record and reflect upon the assumptions I may make.

Equally, I must recognise and reflect on my expectations as a researcher. These may be shaped by my own personal views and beliefs, but also by the college's rules and practices, my department's rules and values and the views held by society regarding students and post-16 education. The college, my department and society will all present expectations some of



which I will share and some of which I will reject. Moreover, my behaviour and emotional responses throughout the research will inevitably shape the direction of data collection but as Finlay (1998) suggests can also reveal deeper insight into the research itself. My various roles as researcher, college employee and student support assistant will each prompt differing emotional responses and behaviour throughout the course of this research, which I am sure at times will be conflicting. However, by reflecting upon these as Finlay (1998) found, I hope that they can provide a further dimension of inquiry during both my data collection and analysis.

However impartial and non-judgemental I strive to be as a researcher, the unavoidable nature of qualitative research means that whether consciously or unconsciously, my behaviour as a researcher affects participant responses thus influencing the direction of the findings. A different researcher in the same context would establish a different relationship with their participants and would discover a different story. Arguably, any research endeavour is co-constituted by the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Hence, it is important to recognise what Warin (2011) terms as *relational awareness* which is an 'awareness of how I as a researcher am influencing my research participants' perceptions and a simultaneous and interdependent awareness of how they are influencing me' (p.811).

The wealth of reflexivity literature available promotes the importance of a researcher to utilize and recognise their involvement within their research. Etherington (2007) argues that it brings greater transparency to the research process while Coffey (1999) believes it brings greater authenticity. Despite vast agreement on conducting reflexivity, there appears to be conflict over what level of reflexive accounts, if any, should be included in written research. Some researchers chose to omit any evidence of personal and emotional experiences from published accounts, whereas some limit their subjective experiences to the appendix rather than view it as an integral aspect of the research itself (Finlay, 1998).

Some researchers prefer to integrate their reflexive commentary within their analysis (Shaw, 2010). Stemming from this, an approach which seems to be gaining popularity within some academic circles is the autoethnographic account whereby, the researcher draws extensively upon their own experiences as a vehicle to gain further understanding and insight of a particular community or culture. They are required to look both inward and outward in an attempt to make connections between their personal life and the cultural, social, and political realms of the research (Ellis, 2004).

Gough (2003) however, warns researchers to be cautious in their reflexive efforts. Reflexivity, whilst vital in making explicit the researcher's interpretive activities should not be the objective of the research and should not overshadow the phenomenon under study. Finlay and Gough (2003) argue that published research should include a separate section where the authors declare their position in relation to the research question and/or the participants. I concur with this position and will myself aim to acknowledge my influence upon the research without interrupting or dominating the analysis and findings.

Therefore, I must take active measures to recognise both my feelings and expectations prior and during my research to not only enable further insight into the research journey but to also eliminate the risk of letting my 'unelucidated prejudices' dominate my research (p. 108 Finlay, 2003). According to Shaw (2010) transparency is central to producing a trustworthy research publication. Indicating motivations for decisions within the research design and providing discussions of context from the perspective of both the researcher and the participants will show that a reflexive approach has been adopted. At this stage I cannot comment as to whether my reflections will be totally directed to a separate section of my thesis or whether it will be necessary for me to draw upon them more explicitly during my analysis. Either way my aim is to let my data unfold and tell a story whilst my role as researcher is a transparent but not a dominant feature.

Consistent with the theoretical lens of Communities of Practice literature and the symbolic interactionist epistemology of ethnography, reflexivity draws upon the co-construction of meaning within a socially orientated research context. As social beings the experiences of the researcher and the researched must be understood in the context in which it occurs. Meaning-making is at the core of human experience and as such we make sense of our experiences and those of others within the constraints of the social world in which we live. As a researcher my aim is to experience and interpret the world from my participant's perspective, in doing so I cannot escape subjectivity nor my own presuppositions. In this respect, it can be argued that my subjectivity comprises a critical aspect of this research and subsequent ethnographic account.

#### **4.2.6 Managing 'insider' researcher status**

From the start it was clear that the advantageous position of 'insider' would not be without shortcomings. I anticipate a blurring of boundaries as I negotiate my role as college employee and member of staff with that of not only a researcher, there to gain the trust and confidence of the students, but also as a student support assistant there to provide academic and social support to students as individuals within the college setting.

Burns et al (2012) explored the challenges of observational research between midwives and women when the researcher was themselves a midwife. Common difficulties Burns et al (2012) encountered were role confusion and over identification with midwife participants, prompting the need to negotiate 'relational closeness' whilst ensuring 'analytical distance'. This continual negotiation and balancing of remaining 'in' the research setting whilst endeavouring to observe with an 'out' lens became an important way of clarifying the researcher's position. Burns et al (2012) states that in order for them to achieve this it was crucial for them to be able critically view their own subjective positioning and engage in ongoing reflexivity. They argue that the moral and ethical challenges which arise from the observational experiences should be viewed as an opportunity for reflexivity and exploration of the subjective positioning of the observer.

Therefore, it seems logical to engage in ongoing reflexivity to manage the potential conflicts and dilemmas associated with my 'insider' status. This I believe should be done by noting down my thoughts, feelings or questions that have arisen as a footnote to an observation or interview. I will also keep a small note-book with me during data collection to allow for thoughts and reflections to be noted and which can be referred to if necessary during my analysis. Alongside keeping written reflexive notes, regular meetings and discussions with my thesis supervisors will enable me to deal with any worries or dilemmas but will also provide me with an outsider's views and opinions. This academic discussion will allow me to step back and separate my roles as college employee and researcher.

#### **4.2.7 Section Summary**

This section has sought to illuminate ethnography as an appropriate methodology based upon the theoretical and epistemological assumptions I have adopted. Epistemologically, ethnography has been shown to be concerned with understanding the contexts and meanings of the participants of the ethnographic setting and it is this that makes it especially relevant to the aims of this research, which are concerned with examining the everyday experiences of students within SFC and the practices which form their college life. Ethnography allows for deeper consideration and exploration of the college setting and can provide rich detail of student experience that otherwise could be overlooked.

Ethnographic methods of data collection have been discussed. It appears that in organising these practical aspects of data collection the tools and methods available are used as a matter of personal choice. Continuing from this I have presented examples of ethnographies conducted within educational settings, emphasising how crucial ethnography can be in revealing thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; in making people's experiences and thoughts accessible to others whilst informing pedagogical practices and policies.

The importance of considering ethical issues were discussed however, given that ethnography is a non-predictable trajectory ethical dilemmas may emerge despite careful planning. It has been argued that these must be addressed with reference to context and in consideration of the consequences and benefits which may potentially emerge. The section then concludes with a very brief review of analytical strategy and argues for an approach to analysis which enables meaning and situation to emerge. Consideration is given to reflexive approaches and the importance of acknowledging the advantages and disadvantages my 'insider' status entails.

This discussion has demonstrated that in an attempt to make 'the strange familiar', the objective of ethnography is to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given setting. As such, the researcher's particular philosophical beliefs inevitably shape and guide the research endeavour. In the next section I will detail my ethnographic journey, describing the methods and procedures I utilised whilst conducting my ethnography.

### ***4.3 Conducting my ethnography***

The previous section discussed the origins, objectives and approaches to ethnography. Revealing that many of the decisions an ethnographer makes during the course of their research is founded upon not only epistemological beliefs but also personal preference. I highlighted debate and discussion within the literature about how best to conduct ethnography with little confirmation about the best way to do it. As such I have drawn my own conclusions and so this next section will outline how I conducted my ethnography, detailing the decisions and actions I took regarding the collection and recording of data. Through the messy and complex realities I experienced I hope to make clear to the reader what I did and how I did it. I want to guide you through my ethnographic journey.

#### **4.3.1 The route to ethnography**

In 2008 I completed my undergraduate degree in psychology. Part of my studies for this enabled me to conduct a small scale research project which would go on to form my final year dissertation. Here I assumed the novice role of ethnographer and took to the field to research how environmental and contextual factors can influence the everyday classroom behaviour of children labelled as having Emotional and/or Behavioural Disorders (EBD). Although small scale, I found ethnographic research exhausting yet rewarding. I experienced the excitement of conducting my own research first hand and my passion for research was ignited.

Following my graduation, in September 2008 I began employment as a student support assistant at a sixth form college. My job role and work environment prompted academic

discussion with my undergraduate personal tutor who suggested that I consider conducting a full-scale ethnography as completion of a PhD. My interest in qualitative research and in particular ethnography had been stirred during my undergraduate studies and I felt that this coupled with my interest in educational research and my employment in a SFC, provided a research opportunity I could not overlook.

Preliminary research into the post-16 policies and literature surrounding post-16 education at the time I began my PhD studies highlighted what I considered to be major gaps, most notably in that very few actually gave insight into what SFC was like for those students studying within it (a comprehensive literature review can be found in chapters one and two). I felt that this gap in the literature provided a rationale for my research as I could utilise my position as student support assistant to discover what really happened during an average college day for students and how their experience impacted upon their learning and identity. My objective was to gather and explore the everyday practices within a SFC and the experiences of the students. From this I formulated the following research aims:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- To explore, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.
- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and apply theory to, teaching and learning in sixth form college.

As a method of data collection I felt that ethnography would best fulfil my epistemological views as a researcher but would also best fulfil the aims of my research. As detailed earlier in this chapter, the qualitative methods available to me via ethnography were best suited to the breadth and depth of data I wanted to collect specifically participant observation, interviews and conversations.

### **4.3.2 Focal SFC**

Hillcroft College is a sixth form college located in West Yorkshire. Near to Hillcroft College there is another sixth form college and a general further education college. When I began my research (January 2009) 83% of learners at the college are recruited from schools within the surrounding metropolitan area. According to Ofsted (2008) the pass rate for five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C including English and Mathematics, within schools in the local authority where the college was located, was below the national average of 46.8%. Significant numbers of learners entered the college with a much lower than average GCSE points score,

placing the college in the bottom 10th percentile of sixth form colleges based on GCSE scores on entry.

By 1<sup>st</sup> October 2008 Hillcroft College had enrolled 2,115 learners with 21% from minority ethnic backgrounds, 28% from economically and socially deprived areas and 15% having learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Almost all learners were aged 16 to 18 with a small number of students aged 19 and over. At this time, the college provided courses from foundation to advanced level covering a wide range of subjects, including vocational BTEC courses at all levels. The college embraces an inclusive ethos and recruits many learners with relatively low GCSE results and as such is not a typical sixth form college. Hillcroft provides courses at levels 1 (foundation) and 2 (GCSE and/or equivalent) as well as 42 subjects at advanced level, 43 AS levels, 10 National Diploma courses, 1 National Certificate and 3 National Awards.

The college employs approximately 250 staff including the senior management team (SMT) made up of the principal and vice principals, teachers, administrative and secretarial teams across subject areas and departments, technicians in ICT, science, sport, performing arts and DT, student support assistants, SEN specialists, two librarians, health care professionals (including sexual health nurses) caretakers, cleaners and caterers.

Hillcroft College is situated on one large campus, sharing the site with a local high school. There is one main driveway to enter the site which takes you through a one way system via the bus bays. The college lies straight ahead with the high school located to the left.

#### ***4.3.2.1 The Study Centre and the role of Student Support Assistant***

Hillcroft College's ethos centred upon providing quality education in a friendly, safe and supportive environment. Emphasis was placed on valuing student individuality and diversity and ensuring equality of opportunity and support was available to all students. Arguably, the college strived to provide support and inclusivity for all the learners enrolled there.

I was one support assistant from a large team of fourteen. We were based in the college's Study Centre which offered a cross college resource for all students. Generally, it was an area that could be used for private study. It had computers for students to 'drop in' and use and provided a subject timetable where students could access subject teachers for extra help or to complete extension activities to boost grades. Further to this, the Study Centre provided specialist dyslexia support via two specialist teachers, ESOL (English as Second/Other Language) support and mentoring. Due to the extent of support available in the Study Centre,

it was also a 'safe haven' for the more vulnerable students who needed somewhere quiet to retreat to and feel safe and somewhere which provided a friendly face and a listening ear.

The Study Centre was headed by a Study Centre Manager who as well as a teacher of English acted as a SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) and was answerable to the vice principal responsible for student support and learning. The manager was supported by the Study Centre Admin Manager who oversaw the day to day running of the Study Centre from its reception desk: general management of student behaviour, booking in students for assessment and support with the specialist teachers, paperwork and reports for the specialist teachers, up keeping spreadsheets and databases linked to students receiving support and the budgets for this, organising exam access arrangements with the specialist teachers and exams department, and generally acting as the first port of call for any student who arrived at the reception desk needing help or advice.

The Study Centre had one full -time and one part-time (2 days per week) specialist teachers who carried out dyslexia assessments followed by one-to-one support sessions for as long as the student required. They would also ensure students with dyslexia or with similar difficulties (for example medical conditions, ESOL) could have suitable access arrangements in their exams such as extra time, use of a word processor, reader or scribe. Students requiring the support of the specialist teachers were identified by a number of ways; firstly, prior to starting college via their application form and/or information from their school secondly, via a short online assessment given to all new students early in the first term to highlight learning styles and any indications of dyslexia and thirdly, through teacher referral at any point during the year.

The specialist teachers often got a high number of students requiring assessment and support. Once their assessments had been completed, where appropriate the specialist teachers would refer students to mentors for follow-up one-to-one sessions. All of the student support assistants were trained as mentors alongside a handful of admin staff and subject teachers across college. The role of a mentor ranged from helping students co-ordinate and organise their notes and assignments to providing social and emotional support for students experiencing anxiety, depression or bereavement amongst other difficulties they may be facing at home or at college. Mentoring sessions were agreed upon between mentor and student and involved meeting in a discrete, safe place where the student felt able to talk.

At the start of each academic year I would be assigned the timetables of specific students who required support. Student information was gathered prior to the summer break from the

students' application forms and staff from partner schools in order to get a full picture of what support those students who had disclosed a learning difficulty or disability would need. I was required to work within the classroom setting to provide support tailored to the specific needs of individual students. This support included note-taking, spending time with the students listening to their worries or problems, discussing assignments or coursework, helping them plan a schedule to complete work, assisting with research and completion of work, liaising with subject staff on their behalf and reporting on their progress to relevant teachers and parents. For some students with more physical difficulties, I was also required to arrange transport to and from college, ensuring their arrival and departure was safe.

Depending upon the nature of the student's need determined how many students I would be assigned. The academic year that I conducted my research I was primarily assigned to Aysha who had a visual impairment and so required a note taker in all her lessons. Although I was there to specifically support Aysha, I became aware of other students who were struggling and so would become rather like a teaching assistant; making copies of my notes for other students, answering their questions, ensuring they understood what they were supposed to be doing, checking on their progress, proof reading their work and generally pointing them in the right direction. Aysha would be my priority and I would ensure she understood and had everything she needed to complete what was being asked before I went on to other students. Similarly, the students in the classes I was in knew I was there for Aysha and that I could not always spend my time checking on and helping them if she needed me.

Occasionally, as was the case in the year I was conducting my research, some students would emerge from the classes as more or just as needy of support. This was the case with Lucy. She had disclosed on her application form that she had dyspraxia (a movement and co-ordination difficulty that can affect thought, speech and language) but felt she did not need classroom support. Lucy was in the same Health and Social Care classes as Aysha and it soon became apparent to me that Lucy was struggling because of her inability to take handwritten notes down at the pace needed to keep up with the rest of the class. Positioned at the front of the class, Aysha was able to make independent notes which could then be supplemented with my own to ensure she had not missed anything. This then enabled me to support Lucy, as my note-taking for her, enabled her to listen to the teacher and not concern herself with writing the notes down quickly.

As I got to know the classes and students I was able to use my intuition as to which students understood the task set and which would need more help. Often those who tended to struggle would sit nearer to me in class and would seek me out in their free periods if they needed



help with their assignments. Although 'officially' I was only present in these classes for Aysha, I felt it my duty to help other students who were finding their work difficult. This was the norm for many support assistants- assigned one or two students in September and ending up with five by December.

As evident in many of the roles and responsibilities I undertook as a support assistant, I worked with a diverse range of students, including those with speech and language difficulties such as dyspraxia, dyslexia and ESOL, those with physical disabilities, those with psychological and emotional difficulties, those with hearing and visual impairments and those on the autistic spectrum, who found social interaction and communication difficult.

In attempting to meet the demands of the diverse range of students I supported on a daily basis I had to be able apply my knowledge and understanding of the academic world and the range of subjects I supported in, which in the case of maths and science was, I have to say, limited! Nonetheless, I had to use my skills of logic and reasoning plus commonsense to the subjects in which I supported students so I was able to help them. By no means was I expected to *teach* the subject areas to the students, I was there to assist the students accessing the content of the lesson and the classroom resources. However, there was an element of self-teaching as I felt I needed to have some level of understanding in order to help the students to complete the tasks they were set. As such the life of a support assistant at the college was never quiet or dull. It was busy and hectic, changing from lesson to lesson and day to day as new assignments were set and new demands were required from the students.

#### **4.3.2.2 Access to Hillcroft College**

I began employment at Hillcroft College as a student support assistant on 28<sup>th</sup> August 2008. As discussed earlier in this chapter, I had graduated a month prior and was already considering post-graduate research within the field of education. I settled into my role and during the first half-term formed relationships with staff and students with whom I worked with on a daily basis. I became familiar with the layout, management structure, rules, mission statement and values of the college as well as the ethos and expectations of a support assistant working as part of the Study Centre team. I also became familiar with how the college 'worked'; behaviour and disciplinary procedures, referring students for help and/or advice, timetabling, enrichment activities, college bus routes and timetables, departments responsible for ICT issues, photocopying, financial support for students, wellbeing and sexual health support for students and so on.

At the end of the first half-term (October 2008) I had undertaken preliminary literature and policy reviews of post-16 education and student experience of post-16 education and given the nature of my job felt that subject to the college's approval I could conduct my research there. I discussed the possibility of my research with fellow support assistants and the Study Centre Manager. All supported my research endeavour and felt that it was a beneficial venture for me to pursue and one that the college would take an interest in. My manager felt that I would not encounter consensual issues from the principal.

I verbally outlined my proposed research project to the college principal requesting her co-operation and consent in November 2008, and fortunately she agreed subject to adherence of the ethical precautions I had stated. Following, this I provided the principal with written confirmation of my proposed research (appendix 4, p.x) to which she confirmed and agreed to. I planned to begin my data collection during the next new term in January 2009.

### **4.3.3 Ethical considerations**

This research was subject to the ethics panel of the School of Human and Health Sciences at the University of Huddersfield. My submission to the panel can be found in the appendices in volume II (appendix 17 p. ccxxxvi) and includes all the consent forms (appendices 2 and 3) and information sheets (appendix 1) discussed below.

#### **4.3.3.1 Consent**

Prior to undertaking any data collection my first priority was to obtain consent from the participants who would be involved. My first focus was to gain consent from the students and staff in which whose classes I supported as these would form the basis of my participant observations. As mentioned previously I had been assigned a student called Aysha to support and so it made sense to use the classes that comprised her timetable. Initially, I approached each subject teacher and informally explained my research and how I hoped to collect data through participant observation. During these conversations I was careful to emphasise that my aim was to research student experience and although this would involve classroom practices and teacher-student relationships, the focus of my observations would not be to be negative of their teaching in any way or to act as a 'spy' for SMT. As clearly as I could I emphasised that my research had no hidden agenda and that my real focus was how the students behaved in class. I also wanted to make clear that my job as a support assistant was a priority and that my observational notes would not disturb the lesson or student learning and that these would be made in my own time.

I felt it necessary to gain the consent and understanding of the teachers before I turned to the students, as any refusal by a teacher would make observations in their class extremely difficult. Fortunately, all the subject teachers granted their consent and from here I was able

to address the students. In much the same way I had approached the teachers, I gave an informal talk about my research to each class. Kindly, each teacher granted me time during their lesson to explain my research and data collection. I tried to maintain a relaxed and informal manner, emphasising that their participation would be of great aid to me in my studies and essentially they did not have to *do* anything other than be themselves. Many students were disinterested in what I had to say, some asked questions about how old I was, was it for a degree, what university I was studying at, with none directed at the focus of my research. A handful of students who I had formed a good rapport with asked me questions privately concerning their anonymity; some wanted this whereas others were disappointed that they would not be named and therefore could not be 'famous'.

Once I had an opportunity to speak to and inform those that would be involved in my research, I prepared briefing sheets about the research and consent forms. I was mindful to use language and layout that would be accessible to both students and staff. I wanted the sheets to look professional and reputable so included the university's logo to illustrate its academic backing and support of my research. This I felt would be more beneficial to the teaching staff than the students. I used headings and questions to ensure that all the information that participants needed to make a decision was included. I emailed the information sheet and consent form to all those concerned, as printing would have been timely and costly for the amount I needed (3 different classes with around 20 students in each class) and students were far better at responding quickly via e-mail. Whilst briefing students and teachers about my research I made it clear I could be contacted in person or through email/telephone if they had any questions.

As all the participants were over 16 years old, the students were able to give their own consent. However, I did encourage them to discuss their participation with their family or indeed show them my research information sheet as I did not want to appear as though my research was something to be hidden from parental knowledge. In doing this I left the decision to the student as to whether they wanted to inform their parents or not. As consent forms were returned I was able to tick each student's name off on the class lists I had been given. After some chasing, all of the students eventually returned their consent forms.

I also thought it beneficial to brief the Study Centre team that I was part of and to obtain their consent. Although they were by no means the focus of my research I would daily engage in conversations about students and college life some of which would aid my research. Again I approached this informally, holding conversations where they naturally occurred with small groups of staff. I made it clear that I was not a 'spy' and did not have any hidden agendas

and that I would not be noting down anything about their personal, social or family life. I wanted to obtain their consent on using any information that may be discussed during conversations specifically about students, student support and college in general. I had formed a very happy working relationship with the Study Centre team who were all willing to consent and were supportive of my studies. I issued them with the same research information sheet and consent form to return.

As I became more familiar to the staff and students, establishing rapport and building relationships as part of my job, some staff and students questioned me in more depth about what I was doing. I made every effort to be completely open with them and discussed what would happen to the information and my work. Many students viewed my work as one big university essay and many of the teachers 'forgot' about my research as I was not overtly writing down copious amounts of field notes during their lessons.

To supplement my participant observation I also sought to conduct interviews with six students from the Health and Social Care class I supported, including Aysha and Lucy. Although the other four girls were essentially randomly selected, I approached those who I felt would reflect the diversity of the class. Towards the end of the summer term 2009 I approached the girls individually and informally explained the purpose of my interviews. Generally, the objective was to document their educational life-story thus far with the aim of:

- Illuminating their educational journey from their earliest school memory to current SFC placement, discovering their likes/dislikes, positive/negative memories, events which impacted their education and subsequent educational decisions.
- Gaining insight into their personal SFC experience and discovering their views on this.
- To gauge how their educational experiences, particularly their SFC experiences had shaped their identity and consequently their ambitions and goals for the future.

After informal discussions regarding their participation in my interviews, I issued each of the six girls with a consent form, see appendix 3 p.viii (the same research brief applied as with participant observation) which they signed and returned. I had initially considered conducting focus group interviews with all six students. However, on subsequent deliberation I thought it best for the comfort and respect of all of the girls that individual interviews carried out privately would generate better data. I felt this because some of the girls had 'big' and domineering personalities which may have impacted on how at ease the others felt about revealing and talking about their personal experiences.

I had also considered interviewing a small sample of the teaching staff involved in my observations however, after further thought decided that I wanted the focus of this research to remain on the experience of the students and not the teachers, although the thoughts and views of the teaching staff involved would be collected via my observations and conversations during the data collection period.

#### **4.3.3.2 Debriefing**

I have offered the college and participants access to the analysis and conclusions of my research in the form of a debriefing report. I also offered to give them a copy of the full thesis however, given its length, they felt a summary would be more suitable.

#### **4.3.4 Summary of ethical precautions**

- *Consent*- Informed consent obtained from students and teachers involved in my participant observations. Informed consent from the students participating in my interviews. Informed consent from the Study Centre team.
- *Anonymity*- Anonymity of the participants and focal college were employed via the use of pseudonyms. The location of the college is given as a town in West Yorkshire.
- *Confidentiality*- Confidentiality could not be assured as the data gathered would be discussed in multiple forums including supervision sessions and written and verbal research reports.
- *Right to withdraw*- All participants signed a research consent form and acknowledged their right to withdraw themselves and any data relating to them from the research at any time.
- *Data protection*-Data protection has been employed. Throughout the research process all data has been kept in locked conditions in my home and all electronic data has been password protected. All data will be destroyed on completion of the project.
- *Respect for participants*- It was imperative that I made every effort to withhold judgments pertaining to participants, to ensure they felt at ease throughout the research endeavour and that they did not feel I was making time or resource demands on them.
- *Debriefing*- Debriefing reports and/or the full thesis will be made available to all participants and the college

#### **4.3.5 Managing ethical tensions in the field**

Despite utilising the above ethical precautions, as is inevitable with an ethnographic approach, during my time in the research field I encountered ethical dilemmas which required management and resolution, as without this they could have had potential ramifications on the research process. A reoccurring ethical issue I had to face was finding a balance between

my multiple roles of student support assistant both as advocate and aid to the students but also as a fellow colleague to teaching staff and employee of the college and researcher.

As discussed in earlier in this chapter, the dilemma of the 'fragmented self' (Ellis, 2007) emerged. The very nature of a student support assistant meant that as a team we would often experience a sense of being caught in the middle of tensions and discord between students and staff. With one teacher in particular I viewed her teaching as poor and her attitude to the students as disrespectful and at times patronizing. She was often variable in mood which in my opinion meant that the quality of her teaching was often inconsistent. I frequently found myself empathising with the students in her class, who became confused and disengaged with the lessons. This resulted in some students becoming outwardly defiant and rude towards her. I myself had formed a negative opinion of this teacher and held a strong dislike of her not only because of her manner with the students but also towards me. I felt that she would often patronise me and treat me as though I had no formal academic skills. As was often the case in her lessons, I frequently sought her clarification on what she wanted the students to do so I could then support the students. Many students in her lessons would seek my help to ascertain understanding of the tasks they had been set, often when I had given an explanation many students could then go onto complete their work quite happily and successfully. I can only assume that as the teacher she understandably felt that this was her job and that by the students seeking out my help rather than hers 'ruffled feathers.' I felt she would then try to overcomplicate explanations to me in order to confuse and withhold clarity so the students had no choice but to turn to her.

As time and my research went on, students became increasingly frustrated and disaffected towards this teacher with some students behaving deliberately rudely and obnoxiously towards her. During these instances I did feel sorry for the teacher who did not always deserve the verbal backlash she received from some of her class. In some instances she would turn to me as a fellow colleague as a sounding board and would complain about the students behaviour. Although I could not condone the behaviour of the students, I couldn't help but think that if her approach to teaching was different she wouldn't be encountering these issues. I also couldn't help but think that the behaviour the students exhibited was the only way they knew how to communicate their feelings of discontent and although on the surface this behaviour and attitude was wrong, it was demonstrating very clear feelings that needed to be addressed.

My experience with this teacher reflects how Barbour (2010) felt during his FE ethnography. As discussed in previously, Barbour conducted his ethnography in an FE institution where he

himself had worked as a lecturer. His research revealed many of the lecturers (his colleagues) were abusing college policies in relation to the use of mobile phones and using the internet for personal use during class time (something which if the students were caught doing was a punishable offence resulting in the blockage of their internet/email access in college). Barbour (2010) found that many lecturers lacked professionalism; arriving to lessons late, lack of lesson planning and structure and preoccupation with personal use of social media during the lesson rather than on the students. This resulted in a lack of engagement and motivation amongst the students similar to that which I myself witnessed.

Barbour (2010) was faced with an ethical dilemma: should he break the loyalty to the colleagues he held in professional regard with the possibility of damaging their careers and risk losing access to the field or should he intervene on the basis of his moral obligation to the students whose education was in jeopardy? As a researcher Barbour had to ensure non-maleficence to all his participants just as I did. An intervention would have significant ramifications on the direction and outcome of the research. Barbour admits he is yet to reach an answer in relation to his ethical dilemma. With regard to my own dilemma, I felt I had a loyalty and obligation to this teacher as a professional colleague and I did not wish to betray her trust or upset our relationship. I was also clearly aware of the damaging impact my research could have on the career of this teacher resulting from any negative aspects that emerged from my findings. However, I also felt that failure to document the tensions and difficulties that arose during my observations could compromise the trajectory of my research.

Once I had completed my data collection, I had time to engage more fully in reflexive thought. As I read over my observational data I realised how at times my strong dislike for this teacher and my empathy with the students was prominent in the way I had made my notes. Although my personal opinion of this teacher remained unchanged I did not want my research to reveal a judgemental and personal attack on one specific individual. As a teacher I held a negative perception of this woman nonetheless, I could also appreciate that she probably had both professional and personal stresses which impacted upon her personality and pedagogical practices. This made me recognise how it is crucial for a researcher to be clear about their own position within the research so that the reader can formulate their own opinion regarding the conclusions and recommendations made.

As I endeavoured to maintain my integrity as both a colleague to this teacher and a researcher advocating students educational experiences and stories I reached a compromise by considering the benefits for the students in revealing the findings versus the potential harm to the teachers. Regarding the treatment and dissemination of my data I decided that any

recommendations made, I would carefully position within a larger societal framework thereby avoiding the singling out of individuals or institutions for criticism. Moreover, I believe that offering purely critical conclusions and applications is of limited use. Much more helpful and constructive is to offer a framework which situates and explains behaviour which can then offer suggestions and recommendations for future development.

#### **4.3.6 Data collection**

The qualitative ethnographic methodology this research utilises has been outlined and discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Essentially, ethnography involves triangulation or multi-method focus which allows for the collection of rich data in the form of multiple views which add depth to the research process (Flick, 1998). Generally, my aim was to gain an understanding of the relationships and environmental influences which shaped student's experience of SFC. More specifically I wanted to explore the everyday practices of SFC, to gather the educational experiences, stories and of the students in order to explore their 'nested' world. I wanted to discover how the students accessed and participated in SFC and how this impacted on their identity and the relationships they formed.

This research employs the use of the following data collection methods:

- Participant observation
- Semi-structured interviews
- Conversations
- Document analysis

Through triangulation, these methods complimented each other and enabled me to gain access to the rich and varying viewpoints of my participants. Participant observation formed the principle method of my data collection, supplemented by conversations that took place between myself, students and colleagues at the college. This data, I felt would reveal and bring to life the everyday occurrences and practices within SFC. To access a more detailed picture which would illuminate student experience I felt that student interviews would allow me to 'story' their educational journey and thus reveal further insight into SFC.

My data collection began in January 2009 and took place over the Spring/Summer term, finishing in May. Student interviews were then conducted between May and June 2009.

##### **4.3.6.1 Participant observation**

The core principle of ethnographic observation is that of participating within the context of the given field of study. Throughout this research I was completely immersed in the SFC setting and college community as I held a recognised role as a student support assistant. It



was through this role I was able to collect observational data in the form of field and head notes.

As mentioned earlier, at the start of the academic year I had been assigned a student, Aysha, and was timetabled to support her in all her lessons. Her focus subject was Health and Social Care (BTEC First Diploma) with classes in GCSE English and Foundation Maths. This provided an opportunistic sample of staff and student participants however, the Health and Social Care (HSC) lessons represented the majority of my observations as these compromised a total of 9 classroom periods out of 15 on her timetable.

My observations were designed to address the following research aims:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how this influences student learning and identity
- To explore, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how this influences student learning
- To explore and understand student experience of SFC and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and apply theory to, teaching and learning in SFC.

#### **4.3.6.2 Fieldnotes**

As stated previously, I was an employee of the college and assumed an insider status as researcher. A key element of my work as a student support assistant was to take down lesson notes to aid both the student I was supporting and myself and so it was not unusual for me to be seen with a notepad and pen writing throughout the course of the lesson. I always had an A4 lined writing pad with me, which was pre hole-punched and perforated so that when I made notes for my students I could tear them out neatly and they could go straight into a ring-bind folder. When making lesson notes I would write these at the front of the notepad. I would then make my fieldnotes from the back of the notepad using a post-it sticky pad as a page marker so I could easily flip back to the page I was currently using to write on.

My dual role as researcher and student support assistant meant that I had to rely heavily on the use of scratch notes and key words. If the class had been set on task and my students were working independently, I took every opportunity to scribble down as much observational information, snippets of conversations and quotes as I could. During free periods and break times I would add as much information as I was able to through the use of headnotes. Fortuitously, I believe I have a good short term memory which enabled me to retain what I had observed long enough for it to be noted down during a break opportunity. With time I

also developed my own style of short-hand which enabled me to record my observations more contemporaneously.

At the start of each observation I would use the next fresh sheet of paper in the back of my notepad and noted down the full date, time, lesson and teacher. I then attempted to make a record of everything I saw and where I could direct quotes from conversations or statements made throughout the lesson. In instances where I felt a strong feeling or reaction to what was happening during my observations I would make a short note of this in my page margin or in brackets. I did not want these to become a feature of my fieldnotes but for reflexive purposes I felt they should be noted down then recorded more fully in a research diary I kept. I made every effort to make my notes as objective as possible but inevitably my feelings and reactions did become part of what I documented especially regarding lessons taught by the teacher I disliked, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Also, my dual roles meant I had limited time to record my fieldnotes and often the key words and scratch notes I employed helped me to relocate myself to the context of what had happened during a particular lesson.

I felt that the method of recording notes by hand was less obvious and inconspicuous and could be done inside and outside of the classroom setting. If I engaged in a conversation with somebody, I would write it down at the earliest possible opportunity as it would have been both rude and inappropriate to make notes whilst talking to somebody. I would attempt to record as many features of direct dialogue as I could remember and summarise what was discussed.

I ensured that my handwritten fieldnotes were typed up onto my computer straight away each evening when I returned home. Memory permitting, I would attempt to expand and elaborate where I could on my initial observations as I typed them up on the computer. Once my handwritten notes had been typed I destroyed them. Without doubt there will be instances where I was unable to record fully what occurred in each lesson in its entirety however, I feel that the observations I recorded contain enough data to allow me to address my research aims.

#### **4.3.6.3 Interviews**

In conjunction with participant observation I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with six focal students from the HSC class I supported in. Here my rationale was to 'story' the educational journeys of each student with the aims of:

- Exploring their educational experiences prior to SFC and how this impacted on their educational attainments and decisions.

- Exploring the everyday experiences of the students in SFC and how this influences their learning and identity
- Gaining insight into the relationships formed between the students and their teachers, from the students' perspective, and how this served to shape their learning and influence their educational participation and experience.

I developed a framework for the interviews by using topic areas and key questions to promote discussion:

- Family structure and background- area where they live, educational attainments of parents/siblings, employment type of parents/siblings
- Tell me about your earliest school memory- positive/negative, happy/sad
- Tell me about your primary school- location, likes/dislikes, subjects, teachers, friends, events.
- Tell me about your secondary school- location, likes/dislikes, subjects, teachers, friends, events.
- GCSE choices made and why. Options for after school
- Choosing college-open days, transitional visits, independent research, career advisors, family thoughts and influences
- Prior to starting college- thoughts, feelings, emotions, ideals
- Transition to college- tell me about your first day/first week, meeting teachers/classes, making friends, differences compared to school
- Tell me about your teachers/lessons- how are they taught? Academic demands and changes compared to school?
- Tell me about social life in college
- Looking back- first year at college do you feel you've changed and if so how? Would you make the same decisions again? Has college given you what you wanted/expected? If you could what changes would you make at college?
- Where do you hope to go from here- continue with education or employment?
- Final thoughts on making further education/training compulsory for all 16 year olds by 2015.

The interview topics and key questions provided guidance during the interviews. However, I wanted the students to feel able to talk freely and to give them an opportunity to discuss any matters pertinent to their experience. I therefore began with asking the students to talk about their family as I hoped this would ease them into opening up and did not require them to think too deeply about their answers. From here I then asked them to recall school memories

of their own choosing in order to stimulate discussion about their educational experiences and journey.

I hoped that by conducting the interviews at a venue chosen by the participant (4 in the homes of the students and 2 in a private room at college) would make them feel at ease and empowered to open up and talk about their experiences and feelings. All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed (see appendices' 6-11, p. cxxv-ccxvii).

#### **4.3.6.4 Conversations**

As opposed to interviews which are conducted in a more formal and planned manner, conversations are often more casual and spontaneous. The function of interviewing is to follow a purposeful question and answer format whereas the purpose of a conversation is often someone making an unplanned remark or observation.

Throughout my research I took note of conversations I engaged in with students and staff. I did not and could not make a record of all the conversations I had but rather those that seemed relevant to the research. For example, I recorded passing comments the students made to each other or between teacher and student. Occasionally, there were instances where teachers would talk to me either before or after a lesson regarding particular students, the course they were teaching or something generally concerning college. As discussed earlier, I could not record them as I was speaking but endeavoured to write them down at the earliest opportunity.

The inclusion of conversations in my data address the following research aims:

- To explore the teaching and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity
- To explore from the perspectives of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student learning
- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.

#### **4.3.6.5 Document analysis**

To further aid the pursuit of the following research aims:

- To explore the teaching and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity
- To explore, from the perspectives of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student learning

- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.

I collected copies of handouts, worksheets and student behaviour agreements. Being a student support assistant meant that these were often readily available to me and some teachers would often include me in their numbers for photocopying. However, there were times when insufficient copies of handouts etc were available or my students ended up keeping my copy. Nonetheless, I was able to collect a representative sample of the type of documents which shaped the student's college life. I was also able to access more formal records through the internet for example, OFSTED, reports.

### **4.3.6.6 Summary of data collection**

#### 4.3.6.6.1 Time frame

Once ethical clearance had been granted by the university's ethics panel and consent had been negotiated with the college principal, intended focal students and staff, data collection began in January 2009 and finished in June 2009 (spanning the spring and summer term of the college academic year).

#### 4.3.6.6.2 Research environment

As an employee of the college I could assume an 'insider' status and had access to the following areas for the purpose of my research:

- BTEC Level 2 Health & Social Care Class
- 1 GCSE English Class
- 1 GCSE Maths Class
- 1 ICT Key Skills Class
- 1 Foundation Maths Class
- College canteen
- College social areas for students
- Staffroom
- Study Centre & adjoining staff room
- Whole of the college campus

#### 4.3.6.6.3 Analytical focus

Data collection focused on:

- Students
- Teachers
- Quotidian tasks
- College environment

#### 4.3.6.6.4 Participants

Participants included the teaching staff and students present and who had given consent in the classes listed in the research environment. Interview participants were selected from the Health and Social Care class:

1. Aysha
2. Lucy
3. Kim
4. Kirsty
5. Sharon
6. Raquel

More information regarding the focal participants is offered in the next chapter.

**Table 1 Summary of data collection processes**

<b>Data</b>	<b>Data Type</b>	<b>Data Form</b>
Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College campus and building layout</li> <li>• Classroom design (layout, decoration, technology)</li> <li>• College location</li> <li>• Student – student interactions</li> <li>• Teacher – student interactions</li> <li>• Student – support staff interactions</li> <li>• Teacher – teacher interactions</li> <li>• Teacher – support staff interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawings/diagrams</li> <li>• Written notes</li> <li>• Documents</li> </ul>
Interviews	Student interviews (n=6) with students from BTEC Level 2 Health & Social Care Class.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taped interviews ranging from 20 minutes to 90 minutes.</li> <li>• Transcripts</li> </ul>
Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students in the classes I was present in</li> <li>• Teachers in the classes I was present in</li> <li>• Study Centre Team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written notes</li> </ul>
Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worksheets</li> <li>• Handouts</li> <li>• Student Learning/Behaviour Agreements</li> <li>• OFSTED Report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photocopies</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>

Data collection was determined in an opportunistic manner, determined by the classes I was present in to support Aysha and Lucy. The following table represents the timetable I followed and the classes represented in the data (see appendix 5 p. xii in volume II)

**Table 2 Sarah's support timetable**

Monday	9.00-10.15 Health & Social Care	10.30-11.45 Foundation Maths	11.50-12.50	12.50-13.50 GCSE Maths	13.50-15.05 GCSE English	15.05-16.10 Health & Social Care
Tuesday	9.00-10.15 GCSE English	10.30-11.45 Health & Social Care	11.50-12.50	12.50-13.50	13.50-15.05 Health & Social Care	15.05-16.10 Foundation Maths
Wednesday	9.00-10.00 Health & Social Care	10.00-11.00 Health & Social Care	11.20-12.20 GCSE English	12.20-13.20		
Thursday	9.00-10.15 Health & Social Care	10.30-11.45 GCSE Maths	11.50-12.50 Health & Social Care	12.50-13.50	13.50-15.05	15.05-16.10 IT Key Skills
Friday	9.00-10.15 GCSE Maths	10.30-11.45	11.50-12.50	12.50-13.50 Foundation Maths	13.50-15.05 Health & Social Care	15.05-16.10



Aysha and Lucy's main course was a BTEC First Diploma in Health and Social Care. This comprised the majority of lesson time during the week and in doing so I established a good rapport with the students and teachers. Although during much of these lessons my support was directed to Aysha and Lucy, I inevitably found myself helping many other students over the course of the year.

Given that I was present in a large number of lessons observing/working with a range of students and staff (see my support timetable above), it became clear as I collected my data that I had established a good rapport with the students and staff in Health & Social Care as I spent the majority of my time in these classes. I selected the six focal girls from this class based on a number of considerations. Firstly whether I had established a good inter-personal relationship with them as this would enable them to open-up and talk to me with ease. Secondly, if the fieldnotes had drawn frequent attention to them throughout the observations collected, and thirdly I wanted girls who varied in personality and abilities and would represent the diversity of the Health and Social Care class. (More information detailing the analytical decisions I took regarding inclusions of observations and interviews can be located in the following chapter).

The six focal girls were interviewed at the end of the summer term just as they had completed the course. I conducted the interviews at each of the girl's homes which made them feel more at ease and enabled them to talk more honestly about the college and their experiences. It also provided an insightful view into the physical setting of their home lives. Some interviews were relatively short ranging from around twenty minutes with Kim and Aysha who found it difficult to talk and expand on their answers, to over an hour with Lucy, Sharon and Raquel who were confident and happy to go give detailed answers and views.

#### **4.4 Section summary**

This section has detailed the data collection methods implemented, stemming from the ethnographic methodology which was employed. It has attempted to describe and guide the reader through the decisions and actions I took pertaining to my data collection and how these were best suited to fulfilling the objective of my research: an exploration of the everyday practices within a SFC and the experiences of the students within it whilst addressing the following aims:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- To explore, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.

- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and apply theory to, teaching and learning in sixth form college.

Utilising my role as a student support assistant within Hillcroft College, I adopted a research position as an 'insider' and conducted an ethnography using the methods of participant observations (including conversations) and semi-structured interviews.

#### ***4.5 Chapter summary***

This chapter has demonstrated how as a methodology, ethnography is best suited for the purposes of this research. Through triangulation of qualitative research methods such as participant observation, conversations and semi-structured interviews, student experience of learning and engagement within the SFC environment can be explored and analysed. Ethnography allows for data to be collected within the everyday setting of Hillcroft College and enables observation of the quotidian practices as they naturally occur. The symbolic interactionist epistemology of ethnography enables an understanding of the meanings attached to the practices and activities students engage in and the context in which these occur. This is consistent with CoP and bioecological theory discussed in the previous chapter and will allow for a deep and rich exploration of student experience, focusing on the practices and surrounding influences which contribute to and shape the learning identities of the students.

The following chapter details the first analytical stage of this research and presents the data in the form of a story to illuminate to the reader the experiences of the students at Hillcroft College.

## **Chapter 5 Analysis**

### ***5.1 Storying the findings from Hillcroft College***

In this chapter I will provide an analysis of the field and interview data I collected during my time at Hillcroft College. The aim of this analysis is to try and re-present the quotidian practices of the college and the experiences of the students situated within it. To achieve this I employ story-telling as both my interpretive and analytical tool. In so doing, I attempt to provide readers with a framework which enables an understanding of Hillcroft College as the shared learning community of the students and which demonstrates the complexity of learning within SFC thus, illustrating the immediate and more distal factors which shape the learning experiences of the students. The wider themes which emerge from this story are addressed and discussed in the following chapter.

I begin this chapter by outlining and discussing the narrative method and the story-telling process I have adopted followed by the story of Hillcroft College.

### ***5.2 Re-presenting the data***

Having spent a term undertaking ethnographic research at Hillcroft College, inevitably I had gathered a huge quantity of data comprising field notes, interviews and documents. There are many choices of analyses to employ; I wanted to employ one that would re-present the college practices and how it shaped the students' learning experiences. I wanted an approach that would translate my data into an accessible ethnographic account where readers could gain insight and understand the practices which comprise SFC and shape the students within in. Within Lave and Wenger's (1991) LPP literature, I particularly liked his use of vignettes to illustrate practices which mediate participation as they enabled the reader to gain insight into the experiences of the focal person. I wanted to utilise an analytical lens which would meet my research aims and remain true to the epistemological beliefs which inform and underpin my work as a researcher. Stemming from this I present the use of story narratives as a way of not only representing my data but a way of also engaging the reader.

### ***5.3 Analysis through storytelling***

Tovey and Manson (2004) advocate the use of storytelling as an interpretive and analytical tool in qualitative research. They argue the use of story over more traditional analysis in the form of themes suggesting that this 'chops up data, creating generic themes and categories for comparison' whilst stories (as quoted by Bochner, 2001) are 'true experience in the sense that the experience presents itself in a poetic dimensionality, saturated with the possibilities of meaning, however perishable, momentary and contingent' (p.230). In this sense, storied

narratives enable the reader to make sense of the experiences of others over the course of time and in relation to particular circumstances.

A useful definition of a narrative is offered by Hinchman and Hinchman (1997, in Elliott, 2005) 'Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it.' (p. xvi). This definition proposes three key features of narratives; firstly they are chronological representing a sequence of events, secondly they are meaningful, and thirdly they are inherently social and produced for a specific audience (Elliott, 2005). As this research is concerned with situating the focal students within a specific context over a specific period of time to enable their learning experiences to be explored and represented, the use of a narrative can convey this to the reader. The use of a story narrative can provide a temporal, organised interpretation of the events and experiences which emerge from the research data (Murray, 2003) and will best reveal and communicate the quotidian practices of the college and the learning experiences of the students.

#### ***5.4 Constructing the story***

As discussed previously, my interpretivist epistemological assumptions underpin all stages of the research process, including data analysis. As such the narrative which I present here is more than a simple story, rather it is a construction which reflects my beliefs and actions as a researcher and storyteller. The story is a product of my chosen ethnographic methodology and my participatory role in the research process as both researcher and Student Support Assistant at Hillcroft College. My narrative can be considered as a second-order narrative (Elliott, 2005) as it is constructed according to how I have made sense of the college practices and the students' experiences.

There are conflicting ideas regarding the structure and composition of story narratives. Esin, Fathi and Squire (2014) state there is no single prescribed way to implement a narrative analysis. As such there are no guidelines for researchers to follow in terms of identifying a story or what aspects of them they should investigate. Thus, narrative analysis should be viewed not as a method but rather a theoretical approach to interpreting events and experiences (Stephens and Breheney, 2013). Whilst, I agree with this, Lieblich et al (1998) offer a framework to consider when constructing a narrative analysis. They propose two dimensions; firstly analyses can be characterised by whether they focus on content (what happened and why) or form (structure of plot, style/genre) of the narrative, and secondly whether it is holistic (the narrative is provided in its complete entity) or categorical (short sections of the text are extracted and organised into categories for analysis).

Arguably, this framework provides an oversimplification of the procedures which can be undertaken as when composing a narrative the two dimensions will inevitably overlap and interlink. With reference to my research, the narrative approach I have adopted is categorical focusing on the content of the Health and Social Care lessons and interviews with students. It became clear that as I looked across the data I had obtained from all the different classes I observed, the sheer quantity of field notes made it difficult (although not impossible) to confine the data to just one story. Furthermore, the data available from the Health and Social Care class revealed the most depth and complexity in terms of analytical focus. This data set provided the most powerful analytical opportunities and so I made the decision to hone my focus on the events and observations I gathered from the Health and Social Care lessons as opposed to all the lessons I had observed, as these could be supplemented with the interviews conducted with six students from this class. Consideration was given to the form of the story and to ensure a holistic element was present to ensure the reader could be given an overall 'snap-shot' of college life for the focal students from this class.

Clough (2002) suggests that the real question a researcher should ask, is not how a story will be constructed but rather what the point of the story is. For me, the construction of the story represents the first stage in my analysis of the data. The point of it, is to organise the vast amount of data I collected, firstly to make sense of it and secondly, to offer an accessible account of an average day and/or lesson for the HSC students to the reader. In making sense of, and categorising my data in this way, a subsequent thematic analysis can be conducted which can illuminate and explore the richness and complexity of the data (this process is discussed later on in this chapter).

In constructing the story of the college, familiarity with the data was of central importance. This was not a difficult task for me to do considering I was positioned as an 'insider' and shared in the day-to-day practices of the college and classroom environment. My immersion within the college community enabled me to access the experiences of the students and as such I became privy to the intricacies of life at college. Moreover, I recorded the data, transcribed it and read it several times and so I am well acquainted with it.

The use of storytelling as an interpretive and analytical tool does however, present a problematic concept in the contention of the 'truth' of narratives, their authenticity and whether they 'risk privileging what the self has to say, as reality' (Tovey and Manson, 2004 p.230). Throughout this thesis, I have repeatedly acknowledged the inherent subjectivity of the research process. It might then seem unusual that I have chosen to write up my role in third-person ('Sarah') rather than first-person ('I') in the story. As suggested by Tierney

(2002), the avoidance of using the first-person can be viewed as the hallmark of positivist texts. Whilst it is evident in the qualitative field that the researcher is located more explicitly in narrative texts, there is the danger of the author taking centre-stage in texts which employ first-person (Tierney, 2002). As such I was keen to avoid a position where the story focused more on my role as the author than the focal participants. Darlington and Scott (2002) recommend such an approach that does not privilege the researcher's experience so that the voices of the participants are lost or overshadowed.

Padgett (1998 in Darlington and Scott, 2002) proposes two different ways of representing 'voice' within narrative research. 'Etic-emic' represents the extent to which research is written from the perspective of the participant (etic) or the researcher (emic), whereas 'reflexive-non-reflexive' refers to the extent to which the researcher's experiences and perspectives are included in the research. I believe that my narrative account best reflects Padgett's (1998) 'etic-reflexive' approach as my story presents a combination of an etic representation of the research findings however, in places it is necessary to draw upon my own experiences of the research and how my presence has influenced it. Hence, I endeavour to present an account which represents the focal participants whilst acknowledging issues of reflexivity. I therefore felt it was important to acknowledge my presence as Student Support Assistant, researcher and storyteller, but crucially not focus on my role. By referring to myself as Sarah rather than I, I believe this is achieved. The narrative that I have produced is a way of representing my data and so I emphasise that it is not free from interpretation but is in itself a form of analysis.

To write the story I decided to begin by situating the college geographically, socially physically and historically. This reflects the importance of the context and environment inherent in bioecological and CoP theory and also how the college evolved historically as described within the literature in chapter 1. I then moved on to detail the college campus and the common practices which were in place. I did this with the intention of providing enough detail so that the reader would be able to form a picture of the college community.

The Health and Social Care course was taught by three teachers, each delivering different units from the curriculum. I move through the story focusing on the different classes according to the teacher in an attempt to illustrate the different quotidian practices present in each class. The story is a composite of all that I observed, the conversations I had, the interviews I conducted and the documents I had access to. As May (2004) suggests a 'story includes a multitude of narratives and identities, which are tied to the larger story the narrator is attempting to tell' (p.171). This is the case with my story; sometimes I quote the students or teachers directly, sometimes I rephrase conversations or observations, sometimes I interpret,

and in doing so narrate my data to reveal the lived experiences of the participants through my lens.

### ***5.5 The story of Hillcroft College***

Hillcroft is a large sixth form college with over 2000 enrolled learners. It is located within a large town (population over 160,000) within West Yorkshire. Historically, the town has a past rooted in the manufacturing industry, specifically textiles. Today a small number of textile companies exist alongside chemical and engineering companies, with the local university providing the highest rate of employment for the town.

The site of Hillcroft College used to be occupied by a boy's grammar school. The grammar school opened in 1958 merging Hill College (founded in 1839) and Croft House Technical School. In 1959 the local girls-only school moved onto the campus housed in their own school buildings under the name of Hillcroft School. Hillcroft College as it is today was formed in 1973 with the gradual transition from a boys-only grammar school to a co-educational sixth form college. The site of the girls-only Hillcroft School became Croft Side High School, providing local education to all girls and boys from 11 years old. Due to their shared history and evolution, today Hillcroft College and Croft Side High School share the same geographical site, including the main entrance, exit and bus bay, but each occupy their own campus and respective buildings. There is one main driveway to enter the site which takes you through a one way system via the bus bays. The college lies straight ahead with the high school located to the left. A grassy field lies ahead of the college and high school adjacent to the bus bays.

The college has a barrier entry system in place. The barrier is up until 9.30am to allow staff and students to drive in. After this time the barrier comes down and staff or students can swipe in with a secure card or press a buzzer which notifies a member of staff in reception. The barrier comes up again at 3.30pm and remains up until the estates team lock up the college at night. From passing through the entrance barrier there is a staff car park to the left, or continuing along the road it curves around to the right and leads to a large car park for staff and students behind which is the sports block. At the far end of this car park is a small wooden smoking shelter next to and strategically concealed by the rubbish bins which is the only place staff and students can smoke on site.

Aesthetically, the college has a modern look. The main entrance curves outwards in a semi-circle shape with sliding doors opening into a large reception area housed within curved glass. There are large, rectangular blocks, three storeys in height on each side of the main entrance, clad on the outside in shiny, grey metal. Once inside the main reception, the maths, history and business studies classrooms are located within the left rectangular block, with the

Study Centre on the ground floor. Directly behind the main reception is 'the street' a term used by staff and students to describe the long corridor linking the reception to the main college building and the only remaining structure left from when the site was a boys grammar school. 'The street' had wavy, wooden benches and students would line either side during break and lunch times. During these periods it would be nearly impossible to get through due to the large numbers of students. In the summer term the Senior Management Suite was created by merging the staff room and photocopier room. This was accessed directly from 'the street' and so for appearances the wavy benches were removed in an attempt to reduce the crowds of students socialising there. The staff room and photocopier were relocated to 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the left rectangular block.

At the end of 'the street' there was a staircase leading up to the main computer suite for the college and then up to an English classroom. At the bottom of the staircase a corridor leads to the science classrooms, science technician lab, photography, and graphic design classrooms on the first floor with respective teaching staff offices. At the end of the corridor a staircase leads up to more science classrooms, a further science technician lab and classrooms for politics.

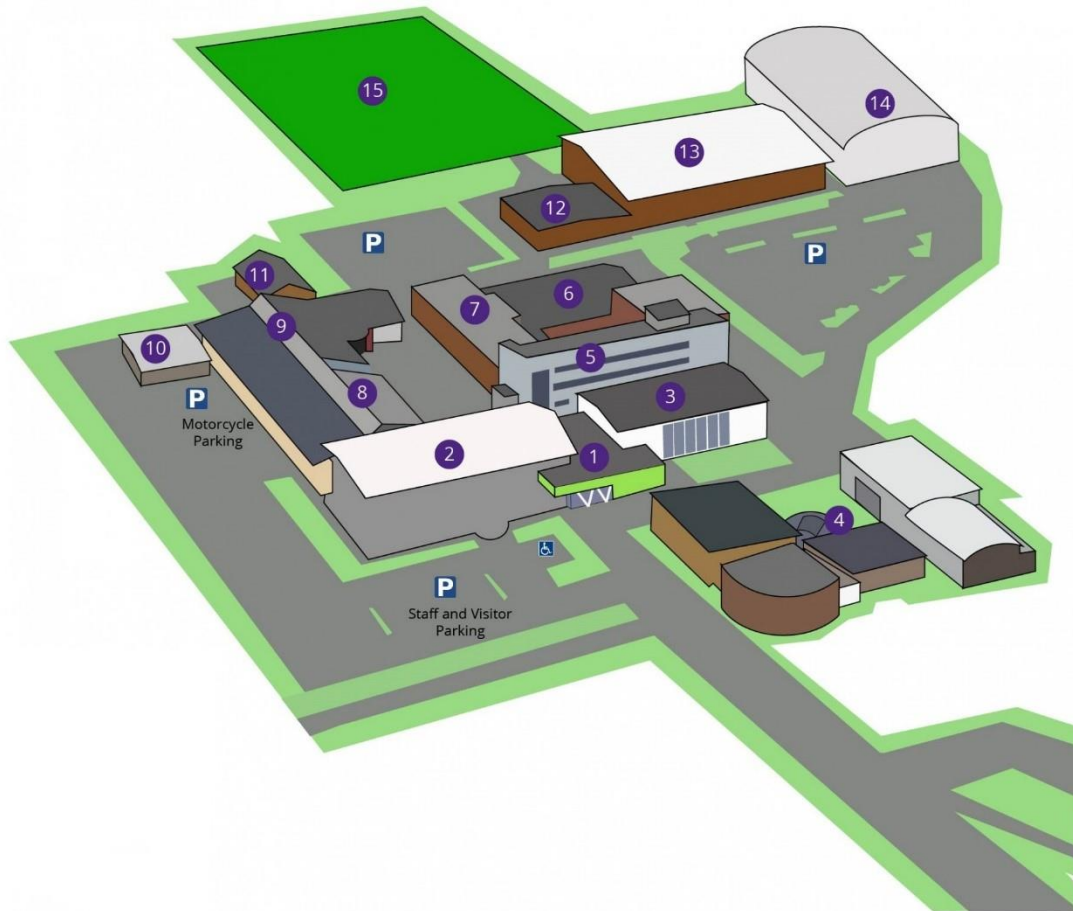
To the right of the staircase at the end of 'the street' is the entrance to the main dining area for students with an arrangement of leather couches, tables and chairs and a conservatory area with round, leather stools that could be pushed together in different formations. The canteen served hot meals, with the addition of a salad and panni bar and a small shop selling sweets, cold drinks and stationery items. From the right side of the dining hall was a corridor which led to the library, exams office and a second entrance to the Senior Management Suite. To the rear of the dining hall a stair case led up to the English block. The first floor housed the IT Support Team and the Conference Centre with the second and third floor housing the English classrooms and teaching staff office. The college's 'Open Door' (wellbeing and sexual health advice and support from nurses) was also located on the second floor.

From the left side of the dining hall was the Guidance Centre. Here, there was a small reception desk for booking appointments with the careers advisors or Connexions Advisor. A small number of computers for general use were set out in a circular shape around the room, and these could also be booked out to classes or tutorial groups. To the rear of the Guidance Centre was an office which housed 4 Guidance Tutors. These tutors dealt with varying student issues from behaviour and attendance and were responsible for supporting personal tutors and the UCAS (The University and Colleges Admissions Service) process.



Opposite the main college building is the Red House theatre, a cylindrical building cladded in strips of wooden panels attached to a large square building which houses classrooms and dance studios. These are the only buildings visible from the front of the college. Situated to the rear of the college campus is the sports block with the sports fields and astro-turf pitch situated behind this. The main sports block houses the sports hall downstairs with a corridor of classrooms for sports studies and sociology and a fully fitted gym. Upstairs are classrooms for sports studies and travel and tourism, an office for sports teaching staff and one for travel and tourism staff. Adjoining the sports block is a smaller rectangular block linked via a set of swinging glass doors. Through the doors there is a small communal space with large stylish round, leather stools which can be pushed together. This leads onto a corridor housing 4 classrooms dedicated to Child Care and Health and Social Care with an office for the teaching staff.

Behind the main front college building is an inverted 'L' shaped block which contains classrooms for art, textiles, geography, psychology, modern languages, IT and media studies with offices for staff teaching in each department. It also has a dining area called the IT Café and Student Services, where students could go about general enquires, pay for bus passes, collect forms, pay for trips etc. This building along with the sports block have a very modern feeling both inside and out as they are the most recent additions to the site.



**Figure 4 Hillcroft College Campus**

1. Reception, SMT
2. **2nd Floor:** Business, Economics, Accounting  
**1st Floor:** History, Classical Civilisation, Government & Politics, Mathematics, Statistics  
**Lower Ground Floor:** Study Centre
3. Guidance, Careers
4. Red House Theatre, Performing Arts, Drama & Theatre Studies, Music, Dance
5. **2nd & 3rd Floors:** English  
**1st Floor:** IT Support Centre, Tutorial Centre  
**Ground Floor:** Central Dining Area, Library
6. Graphic Design, Product Design, Photography
7. **1st Floor:** Chemistry, Science, Law  
**Ground Floor:** Biology, Physics
8. **Ground Floor:** IT Cafe, Information Technology  
**Lower Ground Floor:** Media & Film Studies, Languages

9. Ground Floor: Art  
Lower Ground Floor: Psychology, Geography
10. Swimming Pool
11. Prayer Room
12. Outdoor Changing Rooms
13. Health & Social Care, Children's Care, Learning & Development
14. **1st Floor:** Health and Social Care, Sport, Travel  
**Ground Floor:** Sports Hall, Sociology
15. All Weather 3G Astro pitch

Hillcroft College has a good reputation in the local and surrounding areas. Some students living in towns some distance away have to travel anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour to get to college. The college has a contract with a local bus service to provide buses exclusively for Hillcroft students which serves many of the local areas and those more distant. Geographically, the college site is on a main road with frequent public service buses and is situated close to a regional motorway. Some of the college's teaching staff travel from all over West Yorkshire and some parts of Greater Manchester and East Lancashire.

The college takes great pride in its aim to provide quality education in a friendly, safe and supportive environment. Whilst recognising and valuing student individuality and diversity it strives to provide equality and inclusivity for all the students enrolled there. Following from this, the college recruits a range of students with varying educational achievements and abilities and will accept learners with relatively low GCSE results (Grades D-F). In line with this it offers courses from foundation to advanced level covering a range of subjects, including vocational courses at all levels. As such, the college is not a typical sixth form college where academic courses are given more prominence. Arguably, the vocational courses are held in high esteem and offered a great attraction for those students wanting to succeed in a highly regarded place of study even if they were 'less academically able' compared to those studying for A-Levels. The vocational sports courses on offer at the college are highly sought after with high numbers of students competing for places on these courses. This is due largely to the extensive and specialised sports resources and equipment available and the excellent reputation the department has for its different sports academies (football, cricket and so on). In fact, many students from this department went on to secure sponsorships to study and play sport abroad. As such the sports department is held in high esteem by the college and the local area.

Generally, Hillcroft College is regarded both locally and regionally as a good college offering a balanced mix of vocational and academic subjects. In all its OFSTED inspections it has consistently been graded as 'good' with 'outstanding features' (specifically in the areas of student support). Most students achieve well at the college and progress onto further study. The students attending Hillcroft College value the reputation it holds as a place of study for those more academically able and those who are not. It is viewed as a desirable 'middle-ground' college compared to the two other FE establishments in the town. Alexandra College is the town's 'typical' sixth form college providing A-Level courses for the most academically able with high GCSE entry requirements. It is consistently graded as an 'outstanding' college by OFSTED. West Yorkshire Technical College is a general college of FE providing a range of full time and part time courses for all age groups mostly in vocational areas but also including some GCSES and A Levels and some H.E courses. It is situated in the town centre in grey brick buildings erected in the 1960s. From the outside (and inside according to Hillcroft students) it is shabby and outdated and lacking in resources and equipment. It had performed poorly in OFSTED inspections (Satisfactory and Requires Improvement). Students associated with this college are viewed as less academically able. It recently merged with a college from a nearby town and was renamed Grange Moor College. Despite the rename this college was referred to by students and staff as the 'Tech'. It was held in low favour and regard by students at Hillcroft College, with students expressing their anxiety at the thought of having to study at the 'Tech' if they had not got the GCSE grades needed to enrol at Hillcroft,

*Kirsty: "First I went to look round Tech but it were like...it were really scruffy and I didn't really like it"*

*Sharon: "I got an interview at Tech but I didn't really want to go because it's not my kind of college to go to you know [Sarah: "Can you tell me why?"] well, it's dirty to me."*

Hillcroft College is viewed as a popular college by students. It has the attraction of modern buildings and facilities and a good reputation as a place where students of varying abilities can succeed. The college ensures facilities such as computers are kept up to date and that subject specific resources are available such as MAC computers in art and design areas. The college also dedicates time and money into promoting the courses on offer and attracting students via open days, open evenings and social media. Each department is responsible for its own displays and notice boards, with some putting more effort and thought into it than others.

Students enrolling at the college for the first time do so the week after they obtain their GCSE results in August, with returning students enrolling once their A/S or equivalent (Pass, Merit

or Distinction for vocational subjects) have been released. Once enrolled on their chosen courses, students have their student ID card made and issued to them in a lanyard. This contains their unique student number and also doubles up as their library card. They are then issued with a college planner (A5 in size with a spiral bind). This has all important college information such as term dates, staff names and staff codes (as they appear on timetables) map of the college, useful telephone/contact numbers for college, health and wellbeing. It contains the college's vision and aims and states what it will provide for students and what is expected from students in return in the form of behaviour and attendance. There is space for students to fill in their timetable and for personal and/or contact information. The rest of the planner forms a homework diary for students to use to keep track of their assignments and hand-ins. Students then sign a student contract in which they agree to follow the college's rules and expectations for desired behaviour and attendance (such as treating others with respect and attending all lessons on time). At enrolment students also have the opportunity to purchase bus passes (termly or yearly) and NUS (National Union of Students) card.

Once enrolled, first year students usually start a couple of days before returning students, with the whole college beginning the new term at the end of August. The first 2 weeks of term are classed as induction weeks, allowing students to settle in and giving them the option to swap or change courses if they want to during this period. After this time, courses and timetables are fixed and students cannot alter their subject choices. This time coincided with an important cut-off date for the college whereby the funding was granted according to the number of students enrolled, hence it was essential to retain a certain number of students after the induction period.

All students are part of a tutorial group and are allocated a personal tutor who they are usually timetabled to see once a week. Each student is issued with their timetable when they start on their first day. The structure of the college day was as follows:

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday

9.00-10.15am: Lesson 1

10.15-10.30am: Morning Break

10.30-11.45am: Lesson 2

11.50-12.50pm: Lesson 3 (or lunch)

12.50-13.50pm: Lesson 4 (or lunch)

13.50-15.05pm: Lesson 5

15.05-16.10pm: Lesson 6

Wednesday

9.00-10.00am: Lesson 1

10.00-11.00am: Lesson 2

11.00-11.15: Morning Break

11.20-12.20: Lesson 3

12.20-13.20: Lesson 4

13.20 Onward: no timetabled lessons but students are able to participate in enrichment clubs or undertake placements or work related to their course.

Each time-slot on the timetable is assigned a letter between A and G, a computer programme system then generates timetables based on a student's course choices and level. There are instances where clashes occur between different courses and sometimes students do not always end up studying their first choice subjects if it does not fit in the timetable. Generally, most students do get to study their chosen subjects. Students studying for A-level courses are timetabled in lessons for around 12-16 hours per week (4 hours per subject) with similar hours of study for level 3 vocational courses (equivalent to A-Levels). Students who are re-sitting GCSE English or Maths are timetabled to 3 hours per week for each course and students studying for level 1 or level 2 vocational courses are timetabled between 7 and 9 hours per week. On their first day of term students are issued with a paper timetable and can access it online when they log on to the college's VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). See example timetable with subject, room number and staff code (First letter of subject followed by first two letters of their surname).

**Table 3 Example timetable (Aysha)**

Monday	9.00- 10.15 HSC 1 Hbo	10.30 - 11.45 Maths 20 Mdo	11.50- 12.50	12.50 - 13.50	13.50- 15.05 English 12 Ech	15.05 - 16.10 HSC 1 Hse
Tuesday	9.00- 10.15 Englis h 12 Ech	10.30 - 11.45 HSC 1 Hse	11.50- 12.50	12.50 - 13.50	13.50- 15.05 HSC 1 Hse	15.05 - 16.10 Maths 20 Mdo
Wednesday	9.00- 10.00 HSC 2 Hlo	10.00 - 11.00 HSC 2 Hlo	11.20- 12.20 Englis h 12 Ech	12.20 - 13.20		
Thursday	9.00- 10.15 HSC 2 Hse	10.30 - 11.45	11.50- 12.50 HSC 2 Hse	12.50 - 13.50	13.50- 15.05	15.05 - 16.10 IT Key Skills 6 Hlo
Friday	9.00- 10.15	10.30 - 11.45	11.50- 12.50	12.50 - 13.50 Maths 20 Mdo	13.50- 15.05 HSC 1 Hbo	15.05 - 16.10

Timetabling for 2000 students across many different subjects and course levels, inevitably results in a sometimes uneven distribution of lessons across the average day or even week.

A student may find themselves in 9am-4.10pm one day with back- to- back lessons and then the next day be timetabled for just one hour. A blank square on a student's timetable would indicate that no lesson was timetabled for that period. To the students these were known as 'frees' or 'free periods'. Teachers promote and encourage students to use these free slots as study periods to complete homework or assignments in a computer room, the Study Centre or the library. However, this is not compulsory and students are free to choose how they want to spend their free/study periods. Some students who may have large free time gaps in their timetable may decide to go into town with friends, or if they live close enough, go home.

The library is a quiet study area and students are severely reprimanded or asked to leave if they are too noisy. The main computer room and the Study Centre allow students to talk however, if staff feel students are noisy and disruptive to others they are warned to quieten their behaviour or be asked to leave. For the number of students enrolled at the college and considering its modern design and recent addition of a new Senior Management Suite (cost of around £250,000) there are very few social spaces students can enjoy. There is of course the main dining area, which at certain times can be very busy. Furthermore, different groups of students enjoy an undeclared ownership of certain areas. For example it was commonly accepted by students and staff that the conservatory area of the dining room was used solely by Asian students. These students would always sit in this area and would rarely be seen sitting in other areas of the dining room. The middle part of the dining room was used by 'pretty' students, boys in fitted jeans and chinos with Jack Wills gilets and girls with styled hair wearing either leather jackets and skinny jeans with ballet pumps or a dress and leggings. There would also be a group of girls with their hair styled to look messy, wearing Juicy Couture velour tracksuits and Ugg boots usually applying make-up or painting their nails.

Elsewhere in college, some students would sit along corridors or in doorways to meet and socialise with friends. Students with a taste for heavy metal music, long hair and black eye liner often sat along the 'street' playing computer games and/or music on their laptops. Some students socialise in small seating areas close to their subject areas such as performing arts or sports. On warmer days in the summer months, students often choose to sit on the grassed areas to the front or rear of the college, or else if they or their friend had a car they would sit in this in the car park, music turned up loud and windows rolled down. Despite limited social space, Hillcroft College offers plentiful, free parking for students which adds to the appeal for those students with access to a car.

Attendance is monitored and taken very seriously at the college. Students are expected to be on time and attend each lesson. Unlike school, the college does not have a bell system so



students are responsible for their own time-management. Following from this, lessons finish at the say so of each teacher, with some finishing five minutes before the end and some working right up to the last minute. A register is taken during each lesson and each week all students can view their attendance when they log on the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) with their username and password. Their attendance will be displayed in terms of a percentage, with anything below 85% viewed a poor attendance by the college. Students must ring the college before 10am if they are not attending that day and if they leave college early they must sign out. All absences have to be authorised. If a student does not attend a lesson and there has been no absence call or record of the student signing out they will be marked on the register as unauthorised absence.

### **5.5.1 First Diploma Health and Social Care**

This is a one year, level 2 course at intermediate level offered at Hillcroft College and is equivalent to 3 GCSEs. Entry requirements for the course are low, students need to have a minimum of 5 GCSEs grade A\*-E, including English Language and Maths, achieving at least one GCSE at a grade C or above. Students enrolled on the course are often re-sitting GCSE Maths or English and in some cases both. This course is classed as a vocational course in which students complete 12 units of study. The units are mostly assignment based and students create a portfolio of written evidence in the form of assignments, posters, leaflets, audio or video recordings, group work or role-plays throughout the year. Some units are externally assessed but most of the work is marked internally by the course tutors. Each unit is graded as Pass, Merit or Distinction with an overall grade awarded at the end of the course. On completion of this course, many students have the correct number of GCSE grades to progress onto level 3 study at the college. Students can go on to study A-Levels, but many remain with a level 3 vocational BTEC course. The First Diploma course is often chosen by female students, occasionally there may be one or two males enrolled each year. This year however, the course had a cohort of female students only.

The class had around 25 girls all of whom were 16 years old and beginning college for the first time. All of them had completed their GCSEs in the summer prior to starting at the college in the September. The girls were a diverse group. There was a mixture of religions and ethnicities and the girls often sat within friendship groups. There were girls who would come to lessons prepared with a college bag containing paper and pens like Lucy and her friends. These girls would be on time to lessons and generally employed a good work ethic. Lucy and her friends could be considered a quiet group who just got on with what they were required to do. There was Anita and Gita who were cousins and although Muslim they wore fashionable western clothes. Both had long glossy, black hair which they were constantly brushing or styling in between applying make-up or texting on their phones. They always sat next to each

other and spent most lessons sitting back in their chairs chatting or arguing, and were often mistaken for sisters. There was Aysha and the two girls she sat with Shusitra and Nayema who wore traditional Asian clothes and headscarves. Although they spoke English, their writing skills were very poor and they often struggled with understanding and completing written work which was set. Occasionally Winona, who was originally from the Caribbean would sit with Aysha and her friends. Winona had limited English and her attendance was very poor. When she did come to lessons she would have headphones in her ears which had 2 sets of large gold hooped earrings hanging from them. She often wore a baseball cap and colourful designer velour tracksuit top and jogging bottoms.

The rest of the class was dominated by a group of confident, opinionated, chatty girls. Amongst these were Kim, Kirsty, Sophie, Sharon and Raquel (who were twins). A common feature of these girls was to arrive late, with small but very fashionable handbags which were unable to hold a note pad or folder. Despite the small size of their bags, many of these girls managed to cram their entire make-up contents including mirror and hair brush in to them, leaving no room for the most basic classroom necessity- a pen.

The Health and Social Care (HSC) department is based in the small block which adjoins the main sports block. It shares a corridor with the Child Care department and staff for each area share the office at the entrance to the corridor. The corridor is quite short with two classrooms on the right and one on the left, the first room on the right is a dedicated classroom to Child Care and the other two are primarily HSC but are used for some Child Care lessons. The walls on both sides of the corridor are lined with display boards, housed in sliding, locked, protective doors which display student work, information about the course and photos from various trips. The layouts of the HSC classrooms were a mirror image of each other. See figures 5 and 6.

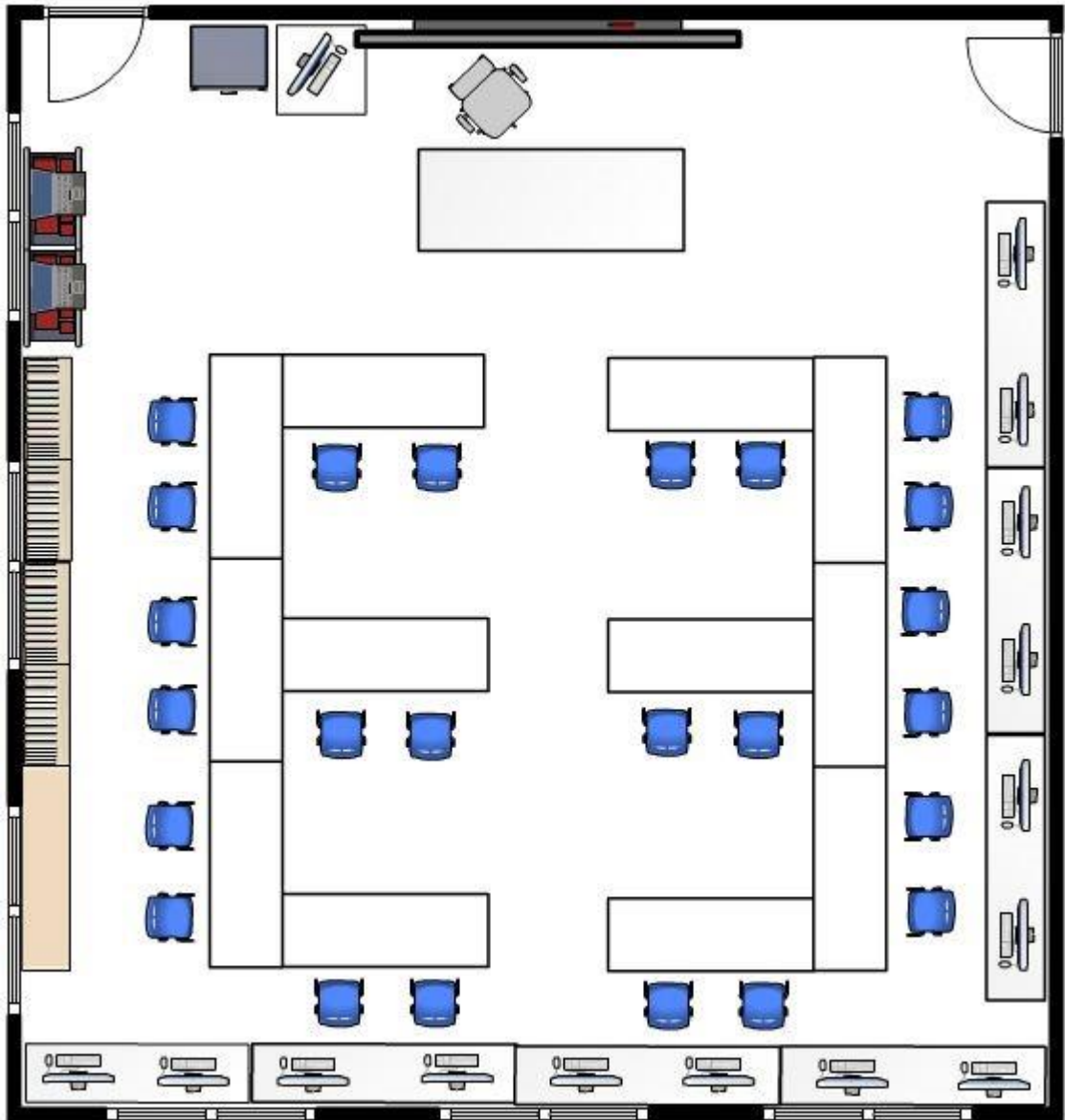
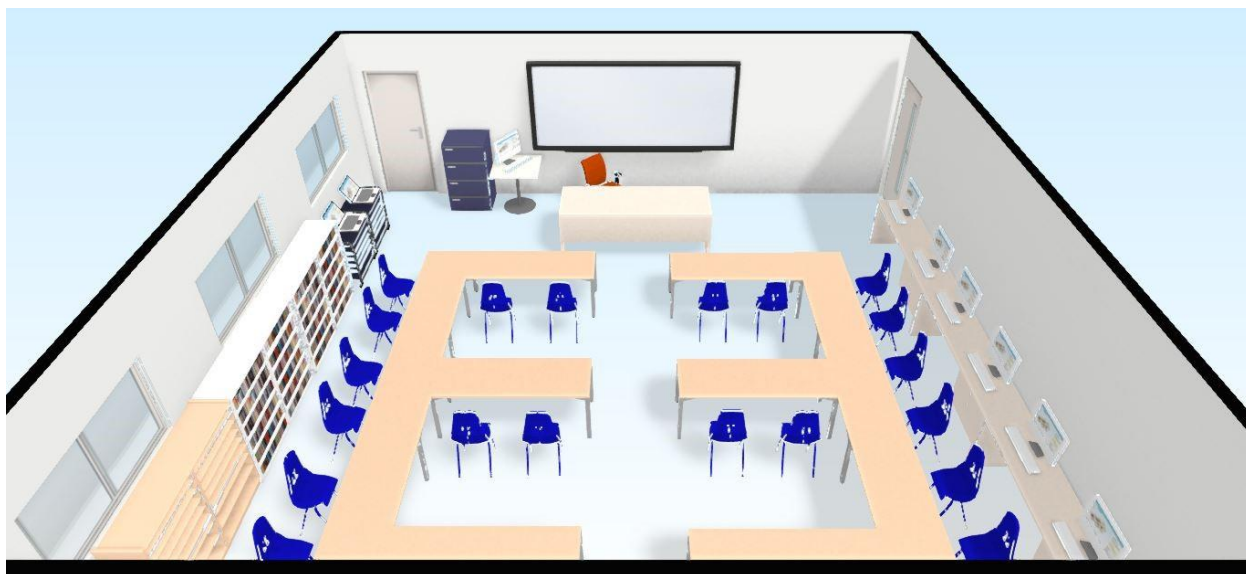


Figure 5 Classroom floor plan



**Figure 6 Classroom 3D visualisation**

The walls of the classrooms were covered in posters and leaflets students in the department had made as part of their unit work. These were brightly coloured, some had handwritten work, and some contained typed work. Great effort had been given to the appearance of them, some with photos or pictures printed from the internet, some with pictures cut out of magazines and some with hand-drawings and 'bubble' writing coloured in. Along the top part of the walls (just above the top of the windows) there were the references for the main textbooks used for the course. This was printed in large text over many pages (1-2 words per A4 page) and stuck together so the reference ran along the whole side of one wall. Each classroom was equipped with PCs and a trolley containing laptops, however, students preferred to use the PCs located around the edge of the room as the laptops were old and out-dated and were often unreliable. Students who sat on the tables that backed on to the PCs, were at an advantage and could access these quickly, whilst students sat in the middle of the room had to use the laptops.

Pinned up on the wall next to the classroom door was a typed list of the ground rules which the class discussed and agreed upon with the guidance of Rachel (teacher) at the start of the academic year (see appendix 15 p. ccxxxii).

The First Diploma course was taught by three teachers: Rachel, Daniel and Agatha. As was normal practice throughout the college, students referred to staff using their first names. Rachel was head of the department and taught five lessons per week, Agatha taught three lessons per week, one of which was IT Key Skills and Daniel for 2 lessons per week. Each teacher had worked within the health and social care sector prior to teaching. Rachel had

studied as an undergraduate and postgraduate at university and had gone on to work in and manage a care home. Daniel had worked as an A&E nurse for 10 years and Agatha had been a mental health nurse for 25 years. Arguably, each of them had real-life knowledge and experience of the health and social care sector and would share stories and examples of practices and events which happened during their time in this work.

The 12 modules which comprised the course were divided amongst the teachers according to how much lesson time was allocated to them and their background or specialist knowledge. For example, Daniel taught the units associated with human development and biology, Rachel taught units on health and safety, communication and therapeutic activities for different service users. Each unit was structured according to an assignment brief, created by the teachers, which required students to work through a series of tasks from pass level to distinction level (for example assignment brief see appendix 12, p. ccxviii). For each unit the students had to produce evidence of work for each pass, merit or distinction task which could be recorded and kept in their portfolio of evidence. The way in which the lessons were delivered differed according to each teacher however, they all utilised one key method of using hand-outs which included key information or help on how to structure written assignments. The students held mostly unanimous feelings and views about each of the teachers.

#### ***5.5.1.1 Introducing Daniel: "He's just like the best! [He] is so laid back"***

Daniel was the only male teacher in the department. He was in his early 30s with blue eyes, curly brown hair, cut short to his head and gelled. He was always dressed smartly with a shirt and tie and clean shaven. He had taught at the college for 3 years and it had been his first and only teaching post since leaving the nursing profession. He admitted to me that he preferred teaching and would not want to go back to his nursing career.

Many of the students considered Daniel to be a good teacher and favoured his lessons, as one student Raquel stated:

*"I think right, Daniel is first, then it's Rachel, then it's Agatha. Cos Daniel he's just, he's a good teacher he's like, he's just a funny guy, he just lets you get on with it."*

Daniel was friendly and chatty with the girls and took an interest in what they talked about whether that was related to college or not. He would often sit on the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom or indeed the desks where the girls sat if he was having a conversation. Daniel had a sarcastic sense of humour which often engaged the girls in an exchange of banter

which they enjoyed. He was good at intervening when the girls began to argue and bicker amongst themselves,

*Towards the end of the lesson the twins are bickering, one of them shouts "Why don't you finish your work?" the other replies "Don't tell me what to do!" They get quite loud before Daniel jokingly says "Alright ladies calm down!"*

Daniel had a relaxed manner that appealed to the girls, he wouldn't reprimand or shout at them if they arrived to the lesson late, he would simply ask them why they were late and always appeared content with the reasons they gave,

*9.20am the twins come in... A few minutes later a couple of other girls come in, Daniel asks them why they are late. They reply that the bus was late, he asks which bus, they tell him, he says ok sit down.*

In fact Daniel would regularly arrive late and would disappear throughout the lesson,

*9.10am Daniel arrived and the girls begin to get their folders.*

*It gets to 9.05am, there's no sign of any other students or Daniel*

*Lucy: "[Daniel] he'll just go set the work and go! I don't know where he goes to but he goes! (Giggles) He dunt stick around for long!"*

Daniel's lessons often followed the same routine. At the beginning of each lesson he would have a bullet point list on the white board detailing what the girls needed to do during the lesson.

*Daniel gives the class 3 options, written on the board: 1. Complete re-sub work, 2. Do cover sheets for each tasks, 3. Complete Rachel's work set on Thursday which is to be handed in today.*

If a new topic or module was being introduced, Daniel would write this along with any aims or objectives on the board as well. For any new material Daniel would give a short PowerPoint presentation alongside any hand-outs which explained the tasks they needed to complete. Daniel's lesson relied heavily on the use of text books and the girls would often copy from them when producing their work. Daniel would then make his way around each table in the classroom checking the girls understood what they were doing and offering help to those who needed more clarification or re-explaining what the task was,

*Every now and then a girl shouts for Daniel to check work. He works his way around the classroom, he is mostly telling them what to do and what to copy from the textbook. Some aren't really engaging, they just sit back and let him tell them, some are listening and understanding what he is saying.*

Despite encouraging their independence, Daniel often ended up showing the girls exactly what they needed to do,

*Ashya hasn't drawn some of the body parts in the correct place on her diagram for one of the tasks. Instead of consulting a book she takes a guess and draws them where she thinks they go. When Daniel checks he ends up drawing them on for her. He finds the pages in the textbook and tells her what to copy down for the re-sub on one of her other tasks*

Daniel encouraged the girls to write their name on the whiteboard if they needed his help. Many girls would do this and he would consult the board and tick them off once he had seen them. As was the usual practice in all the HSC lessons, each girl had their own paper folder for each teacher to store their assessed portfolio work. This was kept by the teacher and brought to each lesson. The girls could take their class notes and assignment briefs away from class, but any completed assignment work that wasn't saved on the computer went into the paper folder and was stored by the teacher. Once a piece of work was marked by the teacher, it could be resubmitted if they hadn't fulfilled the criteria for which ever grade they were working towards. Daniel would often bring folders or plastic wallets for the girls to store their work in. He would leave these at the front of the class at the beginning of each lesson,

*Daniel arrives at 9.05am and puts their plastic wallets at the front. One girl asks to see him and he tells the class it's going to be the same system as last week, write names in a list on the board and he will see each of them one to one.*

Daniel's lessons followed the same predictable routine where the girls would be given a to-do-list and they would be left to get on with this independently as Daniel went round checking on their work and progress. The relaxed atmosphere and Daniel's laid-back approach meant that the girls would chat amongst themselves and with Daniel as they worked. Daniel would also let the girl's listen to music via their mobile phones or iPods as long as they were not disturbing others. This inevitably meant that some girls used the lesson time wisely and productively and completed their work. Many did not, and took advantage of the freedom given,

*Many of the girls sat with ear phones in chatting, Sophie is very disinterested and looking at herself in a mirror*

*Sophie and Kim grooming themselves*

*Most of the class talking, not even got up to get their wallets- mobile phones, mp3s, make-up out and lots of chatter.*

*It's a noisy lesson, music blaring from phones and mp3s. 9.15am Sophie and Kim arrive- make-up bags and mirrors out, spend most of the lesson on this.*

*The girls are sat chatting, bags on tables, magazine, phone out.*

For many of the girls (around 10), this behaviour was normal. They would often arrive and leave their bags on the desks and begin chatting amongst each other, texting on their phones, playing music or applying make-up using a compact mirror. It would often be at least 10 minutes after the lesson had started that these girls would make attempts to get their work and textbooks. This did not appear to bother Daniel and he would leave the girls to sort themselves out and would intervene politely and calmly if he felt the girls needed to stop chatting or put their phone or make-up away,

*In the absence of Daniel Sophie and Fozia begin painting their nails, Daniel doesn't return immediately. When he does he sits on one of the desks and starts chatting to some of the other girls. He then notices them painting their nails he goes over and simply asks them to stop and put it away-they stop but continue once his back is turned.*

Daniel's relaxed approach and easy-going personality appealed to the girls and provided the main reason for enjoying his lessons as Sharon and Kirsty explain,

*Sharon: "Daniel is really good... he lets you get on with it and he's a laid back kind of person so you know you just do, you get along with it. You know I find that lesson good, you just get on with it"*

*Kirsty: "He's the best teacher in Health and Social Care, cos it's like, he's just...I don't know, he understands you. He has a laugh with you as well- you're learning at the same time but you can still have a laugh"*

His ability to engage with the girls and talk easily with them meant they understood the work they were required to do,



*Raquel: "Daniel doesn't make me or any other people feel like stupid, like we can't talk to him, he'll talk to us on a level like the same level as he'd talk to like a teacher"*

Daniel himself admitted that he,

*Doesn't like to stand at the front of the class and talk, he would rather they get on with it*

It appeared that his chatty, laid-back lessons suited both the students and Daniel. Arguably, how much the girls were learning in these lessons was questionable. When asked whether she felt she was learning in Daniel's lessons Kirsty replied,

*"Yeah, I think I learn a lot from Daniel because I like to listen to him more cos I know we're gonna get something at the end of it like... with another teacher sometimes I just switch off"*

This response is somewhat true as all the girls completed and passed Daniel's units with almost all of them achieving the Distinction grades.

#### **5.5.1.2 Introducing Rachel: "She's nice. And she explains it properly...and she helps you."**

Rachel was the newly appointed head of the Health and Social Care department and had started working at the college in the September; she had worked previously as a head of department at a different college. She was very tall and slim with long black hair and stylish straight cut fringe. She was in her early forties and often wore stylish dresses with tights and boots or black trousers and floaty shirts or tunics. She always looked smart and fashionable with manicured nails and often wore silver bangles and a silver thumb ring. Rachel taught five of the timetabled nine lessons for the First Diploma course and consequently she taught the most number of modules (8 out of 12 units).

Rachel was a friendly and warm person. She would always greet the girls at the beginning of the lesson and thank them at the end for their work. She was like a mother figure to the girls and would often use terms of affection in very genuine ways when talking to them, as Aysha describes,

*"She helped you, called you darling and stuff like that when you needed help"*

Rachel had the right balance of authority to ensure discipline and behaviour in her lessons but was also very approachable and understanding of the girls' abilities. The girls respected

Rachel because she showed them respect and valued their opinions and would take the time to ensure they all understood the work they had to do,

*Sharon: "She talks to you like you're an adult"*

*Kirsty: "I think she's a good teacher- cos she like... she'll listen to you, you know like if you've got something to say, she'll listen to what you've got to say and then she'll explain it to you if you don't understand it and stuff- like with other teachers they won't do that"*

*Aysha: "You could understand what she was saying and she didn't shout at you when you didn't understand and if you asked her for help"*

Rachel's lessons began in a similar way to Daniel's. She would have a title of the module and/or the work on the board along with a bullet point list detailing the aims of the lesson. Rachel would go onto explain what they were going to do in the lesson in more depth and would give out assignment briefs which detailed what the girls needed to do for each task.

Rachel would use different approaches to delivering the subject materials to the girls. In addition to the assignment briefs, Rachel would create information hand-outs or activity sheets which would require the girls to either answer questions related to their current task or to fill in a table if they had to look at more than one question or source of information simultaneously. Sometimes these activity sheets would directly complete the task set on the assignment brief and could go straight into each girl's portfolio. Rachel would also create case studies to enable the girls to link and exemplify their knowledge.

*Rachel draws a letter template on the board and gives out the task sheet. On it there is a picture of a teenage boy slumped in a chair with a cigarette [typed underneath is background information about his lifestyle] he eats sausage and chips a lot. The girls have to write a letter to him explaining why his eating habits are bad and advise him on a healthy balanced lifestyle... Rachel goes on the internet and prints out a variety of things on balanced diets and eating 5-a-day.*

*Rachel gives the girls a handout for them to fill in... she explains that they have to fill in the sheet which is their draft copy, they have to fill in: the activity, the service user group, step-by-step instructions, equipment, health and safety, 3 benefits and why, relevant health and safety legislation*

Rachel would also ensure that where she felt necessary, the girls had handwritten notes on topic areas, the purpose of which to both deliver the content and to provide material the girls could then use when completing the associated tasks. Rachel would use a combination of her own knowledge and the course text books to produce the notes she would write on the whiteboard for the girls to copy down. Sometimes these notes would be full written paragraphs and sometimes they would take the form of spider-diagrams.

*Rachel writes task P2 on the board then draws a spider diagram for them all to note down to help them when they answer the question*

*Rachel writes notes on the board for them to copy down about the benefits of different health services for individual needs. She then refers to the girl in the case study and what health services she would need, the benefits of this and what could get in the way of achieving this. She does an example of smoking, she draws a table on the board and asks the girls for ideas to fill it in... [the girls] can then write it up in their own way*

The girls liked the way Rachel delivered the course material and the fact that she would spend time explaining things in detail and drawing on examples which they could understand to illustrate a point. She would also ask for input and ideas from the whole class in an effort to get them to think about applying their knowledge, as Lucy explains,

*"She'll give us the information that other teachers give us but then she'll go into more depth about it, like explain what you have to do"*

*"She'll teach us from like our own knowledge and what we know to start with and then she'll write them on the board and then we'll kind of expand on them gradually, as we get on in the lesson"*

Rachel used a combination of ways to assess the assignment brief outcomes from the girls, including independently produced essays or leaflets or working in small groups to produce posters or PowerPoint presentations. For group work Rachel often put the girls into groups to ensure that the chatty girls were not always together, sometimes she would let the girls choose who they wanted to work with. Due to the large amount of time Rachel was timetabled with the girls and the large number of units she taught, it meant that Rachel could dedicate time to letting the girls pursue more creative and practical ways of fulfilling their task work. The girls enjoyed the different teaching methods Rachel employed,

*Kirsty: "I think it's a good way because it's not always just her talking and you actually get to do summat. I don't like it when teachers just talk and talk"*

They were often more proactive to begin the tasks they found interesting and would begin to source the materials they needed to complete it,

*Lots of activity, the girls are getting out the posters and huddling in their groups and chatting*

*Rachel writes on the board their next task and explains they have to make a leaflet as though they were training carers on the benefits of creative and therapeutic activities... some girls get up and start getting card, markers, textbooks etc.*

The girls particularly enjoyed a unit which looked at creative and therapeutic activities for service users as this allowed them to actually carry out activities they enjoyed whilst linking it to the requirements of the assignment task,

*Rachel has written the next activity on the board- making and decorating buns. The class copy down ingredients and recipe and spider diagram ideas for decoration. The girls chatting, interested in the activity- "Are we making the buns?" Rachel smirks and one girl says "You've brought us buns to decorate!" Rachel laughs and tells them all to go and wash their hands...When [decorating the buns] is all done they fill in the activity sheet, describing it, what service users it would be suitable for, benefits, health and safety issues then rate it out of 10. Rachel asks them for service users, then health issues she explains about different allergies and gluten intolerant.*

Rachel was very aware of the low abilities the girls had in relation to independent research and essay writing skills. She acknowledged that encouraging them to work independently wasn't a bad thing but knew that many of the girls were not capable of this. She admitted,

*"They're not the best academically but they're a nice bunch"*

In some instances many of the girls in the class lacked the ability and logic to carry out simple tasks,

*Rachel tells them to order their work and put in a contents page, she writes on the board the order their task work needs to be in. [She] is amazed to see that nearly all the girls cannot do this. They cannot think to look at their assignment brief and order their work*

As a result, Rachel would offer a lot of guidance and would often model how to structure and write an essay, writing example introductions and paragraphs on the board for them to use,

*She writes a paragraph which defines [creative and therapeutic activities] and sums up what it is and tells them they have to include this and examples of different activities*

Rachel would guide the girls step by step when they were writing essays and as the year progressed so did their written skills. Rachel's lessons always had a structure and her way of teaching and helping the girls was always consistent and so the girls quickly learnt what was expected of them in these lessons and liked the routine and continuity Rachel's way provided. Rachel would always encourage the girls to offer their thoughts, opinions or ideas when discussing a topic area and would pull together what they said to form the basis of their class notes as Lucy explains,

*"I think it's really good because you learn much more when everyone's involved in the thing, and like...cos if you're thinking on your own, then you've only got one brain, like...if you... you know, you've got like 20-odd brains thinking and like, and shove it all on the board and you can pick bits out that er are important to you and things and order them and...just like write them up in an essay"*

Although the girls valued Rachel and her way of teaching, many of them (mostly the confident chatty girls) continued to show lazy and disinterested attitudes and a poor work ethic. Like in Daniel's lessons many of the girls took the opportunity to chat and apply make-up rather than getting on with the task they had been set,

*Sophie and Kim stroll in (handbags in tow). Sophie sits down and starts to apply her lip balm.*

*Sophie has got her mirror out and is putting lip-gloss on, grooming her hair*

*Rachel moves Kim away from Sophie, she continues to chat with everyone and hasn't done much work. Rachel raises her voice "I don't want you to speak for the next half an hour, I've moved you here so you don't talk to anyone."*

*When Rachel out [of the classroom] chatter, phones out, mirrors out*

*Kim is grooming herself and has got her mirror out every 5 minutes.*

*The girls trickle in and sit down, bags on table, slumped in chairs chatting*

Many of the girls would make minimal effort to even get up to get their folders or a textbook to get started with their work. Anita and Gita in particular would rely on others to pass them the resources they needed,

*Gita and Anita appear to just sit chatting and staring into space for the remainder of the lesson, they wouldn't even have their folders if one of the girls hadn't passed it to them.*

Rachel would always give plenty of notice to the girls when setting homework or giving a deadline for an assignment. All the assignment work was allocated more than enough time in class to complete it and many of the girls had free time in their day to use if they did not manage to finish it in class. Despite this many girls frequently failed to make deadlines or complete homework,

*Rachel collects in the work she set on Thursday. Despite being given the opportunity to complete earlier in Daniel's lesson some still haven't done it- they exchange guilty looks. Rachel asks them to put their hands up if they haven't finished it, the usual suspects raise their hands; Gita, Anita, one of the twins.*

*They [the girls] have to make a leaflet on eating healthy using food label pictures she [Rachel] asked them to bring for homework- glances and mutterings indicate that no-one has brought food labels*

Rachel would not shout at the girls for not completing the work, she would advise them to stop talking and do more working but she would not shout or 'tell them off'. As her lessons followed structure and routine and because the girls always knew what work was to be done thanks to Rachel's list on the board, they would eventually finish their work. Rachel always made sure she didn't start a new unit until all the class had completed the current unit. Similarly, Rachel would not shout at the girls when they arrived late to lesson. Although, this was highly frustrating for Rachel, she would ask for a reason and then continue the lesson, speaking with them later if necessary,

*The twins swagger in late, "Where have you been?" One of them replies casually, "Oh, just walking" Rachel, "Sit down and catch up with the notes you've missed." As she [Rachel] resumes talking through the next bit she will write on the board Winona walks in late "Sit down and leave a space on your paper so you've got enough room to copy the notes you missed later."*

On some occasions the reasons given for lateness, particularly from the twins who were often late were amusing,

*10.45 am [15 minutes late] one of the twins walks in, she says she's been walking [she means walking to college]. Rachel asks where her sister is, she says "She's stuck in the step because it's really icy, she can't move so I just left her there." Rachel and Sarah look at each other in disbelief and laugh*

However, as the second term continued and the behaviour and attitudes of some of the girls did not improve, Rachel (along with the other teachers) often had to remind the girls that they would not be able to complete this course or progress if their attitude to learning and behaviour did not improve,

*Towards the end of the lesson Rachel is talking to the twins about their options for next year. Rachel says how they've done nothing all lesson but sit and chat. They disagree- we have done work. Rachel "It's your attitude, you can't expect to move on or get a job with that kind of attitude of 'I can't be bothered lets just sit and chat.'"*

*[Rachel explains to the twins and some of the girls sat near them about] the interview for the National Certificate "I look at the work you have produced this year and your behaviour. Next year you have to do a lot more independent research and be more responsible. It's an oversubscribed course so you really have to prove to me that you're capable of meeting the standards, because the way some of you have been this year you won't be getting on the course."*

*Rachel: "I am just not prepared to take them on when they have had warning after warning that they have to change their behaviour and attitude."*

Many of the girls were highly defensive about being told they needed to improve as many (like the twins) disputed the fact that all they did was sit and chat. However, as Rachel began to interview those who wanted to progress on to study the BTEC National Certificate in Health and Social Care, despite grumblings, these girls began to make more of an effort to arrive on time and complete work in class time. Sharon (one of the twins) felt that Rachel singled her and Raquel out for being late to lessons but acknowledged that it was because she cared,

*Sharon: "She [Rachel] wanted all the best for us you know, she wanted us to be doing really, really good, so she wanted us to be on time"*

At the end of the academic year all the girls had passed all the units taught by Rachel, including a piece of reflective writing. Many of the girls had achieved Merits or Distinctions.

### **5.5.1.3 Introducing Agatha: "She talks to you as though you are a baby."**

Agatha had taught at the college for a number of years and so had a lot of experience teaching the First Diploma course. She was in her mid-50s with thick shoulder-length brown hair styled in a swept back, flicked out style reminiscent of Cagney and Lacey. She was short in stature and plump around the waist and bust. She wore metal-framed square glasses, and usually dressed in black trousers and wrap-round tops or floaty dresses, black tights and flat knee-high boots. Agatha taught the girls for a double lesson on Wednesday mornings and was also given the responsibility to deliver IT Key Skills for one hour each week. This was a new qualification introduced that year, Agatha had not taught it before and hadn't expected to teach it.

Agatha was not a popular teacher. The whole class dreaded her lessons and felt that Agatha was an ineffective teacher who they struggled to learn from. The girls felt Agatha lacked clarity and often failed to fully explain tasks, the girls struggled to understand what they needed to do and confusion frequently occurred,

*Kim: "She doesn't explain anything. She just shouts at you if you get summat wrong and it's not really your fault."*

*As the girls set off on the task there are lots of puzzled faces, looking at each other- it is evident many don't understand what they have to do*

*[Agatha] then explains that they all have to do P5 and M3 again because none of them did it properly- this was the work set when she was away. The girls look absolutely confused and are asking each other what they have to do*

Agatha's preferred method of delivering course material was to create workbooks or information sheets. Occasionally, she would write notes or spider-diagrams on the white board for the girls to copy down. Like other teaching staff on the course, Agatha would assess the assignment brief outcomes via written essays, group poster and presentation work. When the girls were beginning assignment work Agatha would either write a bullet point list on the board and/or create a plan for them to follow,

*Agatha gives out a hand-out, like an essay plan to show the girls what to include on their posters for their M2 task. There are 4 bullet points which need to be included on the posters. Agatha mainly goes through the equality of opportunity point, she does this in a spider diagram format*



*Agatha shows Sarah how she has put together a table for the girls to complete for this next task. She has listed the differences, the girls have to write down what rights would go with these differences and explain how the nursery staff promote these rights. She tells Sarah how she hopes to get this task completed this lesson, she has made it easier for them so they can finish it.*

Although Agatha attempted to provide the girls with the information they would need to complete tasks, her lessons lacked the structure and consistency that worked well in Rachel's lessons. In an effort to encourage the girls' independent research and study skills, the girls felt that Agatha failed to explain any of the work properly and this resulted in frustration on the girls' part and they often had to ask Agatha to explain the task again, as Lucy explains,

*"Well, she'll give us the most littlest information she can possibly give you. It's like she'll give you these packs of like briefs, she'll give you the brief of what you need to do and go 'There you go!' you know 'Work on that.' And then everyone's like 'What? What?' because it's so different from Rachel who will take time to explain things and then when you ask her to explain something you can tell that it really annoys her, you really can! It's like 'Why do I have to explain this? This isn't part of my job!' and you're like 'Yes it is! You're the tutor! You should like, know!'"*

To add to the confusion, in a bid to try and give the girls more clarity and a structure to follow, Agatha would often give out multiple hand-outs or assignment briefs and so the girls didn't know what to keep or what to get rid of in their folders

*Agatha opens the classroom and begins to give out new assignment briefs for unit 4, she tells them that this is the up to date one and they should throw away any others they have got.*

Furthermore, Agatha often expected the girls to be able to use the sheets or booklets she gave them to complete their work and wouldn't show the girls how to use the class notes and information they had been given from previous lessons. As a result the girls often felt as though they had not learnt about the relevant material they needed to complete the tasks,

*Sarah knows that the girls have covered everything they need to include in this poster in their class notes and stuff they have been working on for the past few lessons. But the way Agatha has delivered it to the class she hasn't clearly linked it to the previous work they have done on the case studies. The girls do poster tasks like this quite often in Rachel's lessons, but 5 minutes into this task they all fall to pieces-they don't*

*understand or have a clue what they have to do. When Agatha gets back [from the photocopier] she goes around the groups and explains what they have to do but there is still a lot of confusion. Minutes later girls are asking Sarah for help because they still don't understand*

*Raquel: "She never explained anything it was like er, 'I want you to do this and that' but it's like sometimes we hadn't even gone over like the work she wanted us to talk about and it's like, and everybody would just be confused, and she didn't, when she was still explaining it's like it still didn't go through to me. It wasn't just me, it was like the whole class"*

However, it seemed it was not just the students who found Agatha's instructions hard to follow. One day Agatha was away on a training course and the lesson was covered by Heather, a health and social care teacher on the National Certificate (A-level equivalent course). Heather was a stark contrast to Agatha,

*[Heather was a] very kind, patient lady, smiling all the time, softly spoken.*

It appeared that the instructions and handout Agatha left were puzzling for both Heather and the girls,

*Heather tells the girls to circle where the task is on the sheet that they will be working on today as she thinks the sheet is a bit confusing*

During this lesson Heather takes some time to explain the task the girls have to do and does have to repeat herself but is patient with the girls. As a result it is a productive lesson and all the girls complete the task. Sarah overhears some girls talking at the end of this lesson,

*The girls comment on how nice Heather was and why couldn't they have her instead of Agatha?*

Coupled with Agatha's lack of clarity, she would speak quite patronisingly to the girls, particularly if they needed help or were struggling to understand a task. The girls hated the way in which Agatha spoke to them and felt she lacked respect for them. Sharon felt she undervalued and undermined the girls in the class as she explains,

*Sharon: "Well, in Agatha's lessons I used to get fed-up. I didn't think she was a teacher I think she just used to talk down to you, she didn't really have any respect. I think you know, she you know, you need teachers that want to actu- that want to you know help*

*you get the best possible grades that you can and I don't think she was like that, she was more a person wanting to put you down"*

This animosity towards Agatha and the way she treated them was felt by all the girls,

*Raquel: "[Agatha] talked down to us like we're not in college. She'll talk really slow to you 'It's not like that it's like this' (puts on voice) 'It's called plagiarism' (laughs) and you know when people talk to you like that? You feel like they're not trying to make you on the same level it's like talking down at you like, she kind of made me feel that sometimes like I was someone who had a problem, like I didn't understand, and that's why I didn't like her"*

*Lucy: "She wants us to act older and mature and it's like sometimes she'll talk to us like we're proper dumb kids"*

*Kirsty: "She'll bite your head off and she treats you like little kids"*

*[Sarah is in the Study Centre talking with Aysha and Nayema] they say how they are dreading the next lesson with Agatha. Nayema says how she is so rude to people when she is telling you what to do, she talks to you as though you are a baby, I don't like her.*

Agatha would often speak to the girls as though they were children even when she wasn't explaining a task,

*Agatha asks the girls to get out their case studies and the handout on needs they were given 2 weeks ago "Well done Sophie you've got yours out" Sophie smiles smugly, Kim mutters something like I have or we all have, Agatha "Well done Kim you've got yours" she moves along the line of tables and says this to a few others. "Oh look at this we've got a full house" she says this in a childish/patronising voice. Many girls roll their eyes and snigger at this*

Many of the girls would turn to Sarah for clarification and explanations of what they needed to do. Agatha would watch and listen as Sarah would try and help the girls (who often felt uncomfortable whilst doing so) and would frequently interrupt to confirm Sarah's explanation or to take over,

*[Sarah is helping] Nayema with [her work] and suggests a table format with PIES (Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Social needs) down one side then a column for each case study, Sarah then shows her how if she reads through the case studies she can find examples of how these are met- use class notes as had done this in a spider*

*diagram 2 weeks ago. Agatha has been listening and watching and asks Nayema "What is a physical need for the nursery children?" Nayema goes quiet and looks down Agatha asks "What is a need?" she continues to look at the table. Sarah suggests that she looks back at the notes and handouts she has on needs, she says she's looked but can't find them (folder with different slots in not ring-binder). Agatha "So this is an organisational problem, we need to find the root of the problem in order to help you." Sarah feels like a spare part as Agatha takes Nayema's folder. Lucy calls Sarah over to check what she has done. Sarah feels very conscious that Agatha watches and listens to how she explains the tasks and feels Agatha has to talk over what she has to say or repeat what Sarah has suggested in her own words.*

*Many [girls] ask Sarah to come over and help them as they say Agatha wasn't any help. Sarah goes over to one of the twins and shows her how to save her picture in picture manager and then tells her to copy the steps from the book as she is writing a user guide for editing an image. Sarah tells her to use numbered bullet points and begins the first point for her. Sarah is aware of Agatha standing behind listening and watching and she says "I wanted her to practise editing an image because she's never done it before; it's better to know how to do it before she starts writing her user guide." Sarah nods her head as Agatha continues to go on about students needing to require these skills and do it for themselves, when she's gone the twin says to me she doesn't understand what she has to do, she hasn't edited an image using picture manager. Sarah explains how it is similar to doing it in word. She [the twin] rolls her eyes towards Agatha*

*At one point Aysha asks Sarah for some help with her spreadsheet, Agatha hovering and as usual takes over, Sarah leaves her to it.*

Agatha would often make comments during lessons for the benefit of Sarah in an effort to prove she carried out good practice as a teacher,

*Students are all still stood waiting outside the classroom. Agatha comes and lets them in she makes a point of explaining in depth why she is late- she was helping a student who had not handed work in*

*A few minutes in [to the task] some girls haven't got case studies Agatha "I'm going to photocopy the case studies for the 4 girls who are missing one of them, does anyone else need me to photocopy them? I will do this once because I wouldn't be offering equality of opportunity, it wouldn't be fair for some and not for others"*

However, this often seemed fake to the girls as Agatha would say it in her condescending manner and so contributed further to their dislike of her. The girls' were not shy in showing their dislike of Agatha,

*Agatha comes in to collect her bag, many girls rolls their eyes and give a dirty look*

As the girls became more confused in Agatha's lessons they became increasingly frustrated with her which often resulted in some of the confident chatty girls (Sharon, Raquel, Sophie, Kirsty, Kim) snapping at Agatha and speaking back to her with a rude or aggressive attitude. Agatha would then be short and snappy with them and so a cycle would begin and continue throughout the lessons where the girls would be angry with Agatha and in turn she would be angry at the girls,

*Sarah overhears Agatha on a few occasions telling students that for P5 and M3 they have to describe the purpose of the legislation and charter they are writing about, 'the purpose!' Sarah can tell that she is getting frustrated with the girls which is causing them to be angry with her*

*Sharon: "First of all she wouldn't even tell you what to do, she'd just give out the paper. Then when you'd ask her politely 'Can you please tell me?', 'Well it says on the paper so just do it' (mimicking Agatha's voice) that's the kind of thing she'd just say. And then when, when you'd talk back to her right, she expects you know, not for you to talk to in that way because she's a teacher"*

Agatha would become increasingly short-tempered with girls who were trying to seek help in less disruptive ways as Asyha explains,

*Aysha: "If you didn't know what you were doing and you asked her she kind of shouted at you erm if you kept asking her cos obviously you didn't understand so that's why you kept asking her, and she got a bit annoyed when you kept asking her."*

On one occasion Agatha completely snapped when she found out some girls hadn't completed work,

*Lucy asks Nayema and Sunita why they didn't get [task work] done last lesson. Agatha overhears and hits the roof, shouts and takes them nextdoor. When Sarah asks them afterwards [about what happened] they admit to being scared of her [Agatha].*

Due to the nature of Agatha's lessons, not much unit or task work got completed. It took the girls weeks to progress through assignment work and the girls felt as though they had been working on certain tasks forever. It didn't help Agatha's popularity when she lost some of the unit task work the girls had completed,

*Agatha then tells the girls she has a confession to make she tells them that she has lost the work that they have handed in, she keeps saying she is really sorry, can't apologise enough, this has never happened to her before in 15 years of teaching. She explains how she is having work done on her house and how she has been moving from room to room and their work has somehow got lost. This does not go down well with the girls, they are angry and look in disbelief at each other. Agatha tells the girls that if they have got work on the computer they need to re-print it, if they have handwritten work she has got records in her mark book for some but for some they will have to re-do it because she hasn't got any record of it. Lots of groans and complaints erupt and Agatha launches into her apology again*

Over the course of the academic year Agatha was scheduled to teach four units. However, the lack of progress the girls were making in her lessons due to difficulties understanding and completing task work, meant they (and Agatha) were falling behind. As a result Rachel and Daniel found themselves doing tasks from Agatha's units in an attempt to get them completed,

*When Sarah gets into the lesson the girls are sat in their groups for Agatha's work. Rachel explains how because they've finished her unit and are very behind in this one, she is going to do the task they started on Wednesday*

*Daniel says how there isn't any point starting a new unit [with him] so they are [the girls] are to work on D1 for Agatha's unit*

As the term continued, Rachel and Daniel became increasingly aware of how the girls felt about Agatha and the nature of Agatha's teaching,

*At the end of the lesson Daniel comments to Sarah how hard it is because they [the girls] really hate Agatha*

*[Rachel is helping the girls with their] tracking unit 4(Agatha's unit). Daniel comes in... [Sarah overhears Rachel and Daniel talking about Agatha] Rachel expresses how angry and frustrated she is, Agatha not doing her job*

*Aysha: "She [Agatha] carried on her unit 4 since September to like er March and she had to do 2 units and Daniel had to help her with the Human Lifespan Development because she was really far behind."*

The feelings and views of the girls in this class were mirrored in some of Agatha's other classes. One of the support assistants, Kathy, who had worked at the college for over 15 years also supported a student in Agatha's lessons. She initiated a conversation with Sarah in the support assistant office about her,

*Kathy asks if anyone has Agatha for health and social care, Sarah replies "My lot have her." She tells Sarah that the students in her class hate her, they can't stand her, they complain all the time that she can't teach, they never get any work done. Sarah agrees and admits "I can sympathise with the girls because she does tend to overcomplicate things and not explain things very well that even I don't understand what she's asking them to do. I know I'm no teacher but from what I see I don't think she is very good at her job, this annoys the girls which frustrates Agatha because she thinks they're misbehaving which in turn aggravates the girls even more." Kathy shakes her head and says "I can't believe it, Agatha used to be such a good teacher, her lessons were fun and everyone used to love them, I don't know what's happened to her." She looks around to check no-one is listening and leans in further and says "I think it's since they've had the new head of department. You see Agatha was best friends with the previous head of department Margot, she retired in the summer and they had a lot of the girls failing the diplomas. So in order to get them all passing the course they would literally do the work for them; they would write notes on the board and they would copy them down word for word for their coursework- they would spoonfeed them everything. Now they've got a new head maybe there's much pressure on her to get them through without doing that..."*

This conversation gave insight into possible reasons for Agatha's teaching methods and manner with the girls. However, Agatha's reputation was not helped by the requirement of her to deliver IT Key Skills lessons. This was a new course and qualification introduced that year to ensure that students on intermediate level courses like the First Diploma had adequate ICT skills in line with government agenda. This lesson was not officially placed on the girls' timetables and took place during a one hour lesson which stated it was Health and Social Care with Agatha. At the beginning of the year Agatha explained to the girls that this lesson would be for IT key skills and many of them were unhappy to be put in for a course and qualification,

firstly they did not want to study and secondly, were not informed at enrolment that they had to undertake it,

*One of the girls loses her temper and asks Agatha why she has to do this because she has already done it at school- she is frustrated. Agatha tells her to calm down and if she wished to discuss something she will go outside now with her.*

The course materials and resources were created by a teacher from the IT department in the form of workbooks and task sheets. The girls were required to complete a portfolio of evidence based on completion of tasks set by the workbooks and task sheets, and sit a multiple choice exam in the spring term. Agatha herself, not being an IT teacher and not expecting to deliver this course, was not familiar with the subject matter and left the girls to work through the tasks independently,

*The class hate this lesson in a very hot room and it's the last lesson of the day so many don't listen and are not focused. The lesson isn't very structured because they are following steps and tasks from a workbook; many don't read the book and don't really know what they are doing. Agatha doesn't go through the workbook with them, she leaves them to do it on their own- many of them just sit and chat or listen to their headphones. The majority of the girls can do what the workbook asks them to do and feel that this lesson is a waste of time because they know how to use a computer.*

However, it quickly became evident that the tasks set were not clearly explained in the workbook and that they lacked consistency with what the demands of the assignment briefs required them to do,

*A few minutes later Agatha tells me how she has spoken to an IT teacher who put the workbook and tasks together and how for next year the assignment brief and workbook should read the same because in the book there are theory and practical tasks. Sarah agrees and points out that often instructions in the book aren't always clear for example it didn't tell the students to save their pictures in picture manager when the next task tells them to edit images using this. She explains how this course was only introduced this year so taking on board problems to change them for next year*

Ironically, Agatha fell victim to the same lack of clarity and explanation the girls experienced during her lessons. Agatha herself could only follow what the workbook and task sheet instructed and was in fact in the same position as the girls, thus a 'blind-leading-the-blind' situation was created. However, rather than acknowledge this (which would have been more



readily understood by the girls) Agatha maintained that she knew what the girls needed to do,

*The girls have been left to work through the workbook for their portfolio- many haven't followed it properly because their work isn't being checked so they don't have a clue about spreadsheets and databases. They haven't been taught how to do it. Sarah says this to Agatha and she replies she just wants them to have a go [at a multiple choice test]. Sarah finds herself becoming increasingly frustrated with Agatha as it is clear that she doesn't really know the answer when she is trying to help Aysha.*

Although Agatha never admitted this, it seemed imperative that the girls completed and passed the IT key skills, as health and social care lessons were at times dedicated to finishing their IT portfolio or practising for the exam. The responsibility of this however, created additional stress for Agatha who would become more short-tempered with the girls in these lessons,

*Agatha, quite flustered logs onto her computer and says to the girls "Why haven't you followed the instructions I left? Why should I bother sorting out the mess over your exam when you can't be bothered to pick up a booklet?"*

It seemed that Agatha lacked the support to deliver this course effectively and that this resonated with other members of staff from different teaching areas,

*Sarah asks Agatha why don't IT teachers teach key skills that way the class would be taught properly. She says there isn't enough time or teachers and that at the meeting she went to she found it reassuring to know that subject teachers like herself were encountering the same problems teaching this.*

Delivery of the key skills course began to take its toll on Agatha and towards the end of the summer term the girls had fallen so far behind in their portfolio work that Rachel offered to come to the lessons to help get them completed. Rachel encountered the same difficulties as the girls (and Agatha) when trying to interpret the workbook tasks,

*In classroom with laptops- Rachel in to help. Agatha has short fuse and is snapping at the girls. Rachel looks stressed and keeps asking Agatha [what tasks mean and what the girls have to do] and says to me that the workbook is so confusing*

These lessons became tense and fractious, Agatha was highly-strung and irritated, the girls fed up and disengaged. When the girls eventually sat the exam and handed in their portfolios

Agatha too appeared exhausted and drained of any desire to engage the girls any further with it,

*9.15 am Agatha comes in with an armful of work- she addresses the girls but many continue with their conversations as she talks over the top of them. She explains how she has got their IT key skills portfolios back and some of them have not passed because they haven't completed or done the work to the standard required... Agatha continues giving back work, the girls continue to talk amongst themselves- Agatha looks almost defeatist and doesn't bother to try and get their attention.*

It was unfortunate that Agatha was put in a position where she had to deliver a course she had no knowledge or experience of teaching. It clearly took up more time and energy than she anticipated and created a stress on her that transferred into her lessons and her approach with the girls. All the girls did, however, pass their IT key skills and the health and care units Agatha taught at Merit level.

## **5.6 Section summary**

This section has sought to illuminate and detail the first analytical process of this research. I have presented my research data in the form of a storied narrative which aims to provide the reader with an insight into the focal college and the experiences of the focal students. The analytical decision was taken to story the data from the HSC class and student interviews as this provided the most rich and powerful data set that could best address the aims of the research. The story not only represented the data and made it accessible to the reader, it also served as an analytical aid, highlighting how students negotiated meaning via their participation in the classroom and college practices.

By storying the data set I was then able implement the next analytical step of coding the data and generating themes which emerged from the narrative. These themes are then explored, analysed and discussed in the following chapter.

## **5.7 Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis involves drawing out the overarching themes which emerge from the data. This is achieved through a systematic process of coding the data (Langdrige, 2004). Thematic analysis allows a researcher to draw upon a range of different types of information in an organised and systematic manner which provides increased understanding and interpretation of the data. Thus, it enables the researcher 'to more easily communicate their observations, findings and interpretation of meanings to others' (p. 5 Boyatzis, 1998). The themes which then emerge from the process of coding the data can then be presented and discussed in relation to previous literature and theories (Langdrige, 2004).

Thematic analysis comprises the second analytical stage of this research where the emergent themes are analysed and explored (see the following chapter for this) with reference to the story constructed and presented in the first analytical stage.

### **5.7.1 Coding and theming the data**

The story of Hillcroft College enabled me to organise and present the experiences of the focal students and directed my focus to the most powerful set of data, the HSC class. This provided the focus of the thematic analysis however, as I knew my data so intimately (being researcher and college employee) I was able to draw upon observational data from some of the other classes which could contribute to the coding and organisation of the themes and subsequent discussion.

Coding data from qualitative research involves 'sifting through the data, making sense of it and categorising it in various ways' (p.145, Darlington and Scott, 2002). Coding requires human involvement as researchers scrutinize and interact with their data and ask analytical questions (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). It involves the use of descriptors according to the meaning within the text rather than because a word or phrase frequently appears (Langdrige, 2004).

I found the framework offered by Langdrige (2004) the most useful and easiest to follow in terms of coding my data. He proposes that a thematic analysis involves 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order codes; researchers begin at the basic descriptive level of coding, working upwards in a systematic manner to a more interpretive level. 1<sup>st</sup> order codes are the start of the analytical process whereby the data are organised and categorised at the most basic and descriptive level. 2<sup>nd</sup> order codes require more interpretation and involve super-ordinate codes that may encapsulate the overall meanings of descriptive codes or may themselves serve as additional codes. Finally, 3<sup>rd</sup> order codes involve moving from initial descriptive level coding to a more interpretive level. At this stage the researcher is able to consider relevant theoretical ideas which can aid the interpretation of data and inform the generation of themes. Langdrige (2004) emphasises the importance of the analysis remaining grounded in the data rather than forcing the data to fit into a list of codes.

I began my 1<sup>st</sup> order coding by reading and re-reading my data, equipped with a pencil to make brief notes in the margin which would form my initial descriptive codes. I then read through the data again with different coloured highlighter pens to categorise those 1<sup>st</sup> order codes which I felt overlapped or were connected somehow. Following this I was then able to begin organising my data in a more interpretive way which allowed me to identify common themes linked to the theoretical underpinnings of this research. I found that bioecological

systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) provided the most useful structure for organising the themes which emerged. Framed within the micro, exo and macro context I could then interpret and explore my data in relation to the theoretical frameworks discussed in chapter 3. See appendix 16, p. ccxxxiv, for the codes and themes which emerged from my data.

### **5.8 Chapter summary**

This chapter has sought to detail the analytical processes I undertook with my research data. As the focus of this research is on the experiences of the students and the practices of the college, I felt the use of a story narrative would best present this and provide a source of reference for the following thematic analysis. The decision was made to undertake a thematic analysis of the data, aided by the narrative, as this would best fulfil the research aims of:

- Exploring the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- Exploring, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.
- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and apply theory to, teaching and learning in sixth form college.

The thematic analysis will enable an exploration of how the students negotiated meaning and engaged in the practices within the college site and will allow an examination of the proximal and distal factors shaping their learning experiences. The next chapter provides my theoretical interpretation of the story, using additional data where necessary, to support the analysis. The following discussion is structured according to the themes which emerged from the story.

# **Chapter 6 Discussion: Exploring the practices of Hillcroft College and the experiences of the students**

## **6.1 Analytical focus**

The theoretical underpinnings of this thesis has argued for a distributed understanding of identity and therefore behaviour. It has positioned each individual student in the centre of a series of nested systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) all of which interact to generate the lived reality of individual students studying within SFC. Students' participation in SFC is viewed and understood in terms of the communities they are situated within and the practices which construct those communities. Moreover, the data collection has been guided by an epistemology which locates people within their contexts and considers the meaningful interactions they engage in.

With regards to analysis, this complex social reality offers many avenues of opportunity from the more distal macro influences to the more proximal, micro-processes. As this thesis has limits imposed upon it, choices had to be made about the analytical focus. The choices made were guided by the notions of community and the practices valued which enable participation in that community. From this the analysis focuses on the practices established within the college community and the smaller micro-community of the classroom and how this shapes student learning.

In so doing it serves to meet the following research aims:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- To explore, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.
- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and construct theory, surrounding teaching and learning in sixth form college.

In this chapter I aim to explore the everyday practices of Hillcroft College and the experiences of the focal students. In doing so I will frame my exploration within the bioecological model which will allow for consideration of the personal and contextual factors which shape and influence student experience of, and participation in, their college studies. Within this CoP and Vygotskian theory will enable an understanding of the practices and learning relationships established. This analysis follows on from the story of Hillcroft College in the previous chapter

and should be read with this in mind. Additional examples taken from observational and interview data (6 Health and Social Care students) are also used.

I will firstly focus on the micro-system of the students, their personal identities shaped by their family background and prior learning careers (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001) and how this influences their current participation and experience at college. I will then move on to examine the exo-system focusing on the teaching and learning relationships established and the practices which inform these. Lastly, I will consider the macro-system consisting of government policies and initiatives and how these feed into and shape the practices of the college. Due to the distributed approach taken by this research, it is likely that in places themes will overlap.

### **6.1.1 Micro-system: The learner identities of the students**

The individual identities of each student are shaped by many personal factors; family background (economic, social and educational status), gender, religion, ethnicity, personal beliefs, educational journey and qualifications. These factors continually interplay and influence an individual within their micro-systems and determine the choices they make and the learning trajectories they take. This is supported in the literature presented in chapter two (Gorard and Smith, 2007, Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, James and Biesta, 2007, Selwyn et al, 2006). According to CoP theory, identity can be defined as a sense of self which emerges within and across multiple communities through belonging to and engaging with the attendant valued practices (Wenger, 1998). This multimembership of communities is an inherent aspect of a students' identity and reflects the different areas of their life such as home, college, leisure and so on. The work of identity involves continual renegotiation by an individual in order to maintain their identity across boundaries and contexts, but also to enable reconciliation to the many communities they may simultaneously belong to. Therefore, each of the students had established individual learner identities as a result of their participation (or in some cases, lack of) in previous educational communities, but also as a result of the influences comprising their micro-system.

Many of the Health and Social Care students demonstrated a shared identity in terms of their gender, socio-economic status and their prior educational experiences. Firstly, they were all 16 year old females and secondly they were all from working-class families where none of their parents had studied beyond compulsory school age. Kirsty's mother worked in a shop and Kim's worked as a dinner lady at Hillcroft College. Both Kirsty and Kim had siblings and lived with their mother. Aysha's parents were from Pakistan. Her mother suffered from a heart condition and spoke very little English; she stayed at home as a 'home-maker' and her father worked as a taxi driver. Aysha was from a large family, five brothers and one sister and often

had extended family members such as her grandmother or auntie coming to stay at her house for long periods of time. Aysha's older brother and sister attended Alexandra College. They went on to study at university and have forged careers in pharmacology and law respectively. Lucy's parents had gone straight into employment when they left school at 16, her mother now works as a secretary at the local university and her father as an engineer. Sharon and Raquel's father was a builder who had established his own company, their mother worked as a behaviour support worker in a school.

Moreover, the girls shared similar experiences of school. Each of them had attended local schools close to their homes. Aysha lived in a predominately Muslim community and attended a primary and secondary school located at the heart of this community. Lucy lived in the rural outskirts of the town and attended her village primary school and The Valley secondary school into which all the rural primary schools fed. Kim, Kirsty, Sharon and Raquel lived in various housing estates close to Hillcroft College (around 3 miles from the town centre), they all attended various nearby primary schools and all went on to study at Croft Side High School.

All of the girls reflected on their time at primary school. Those who could remember judged it to be a positive experience and shared memories which they were fond of,

*Kirsty: "I had a teacher called Mrs. Gregory, I always remember that, I don't know why (giggles)... I think it was in year 3 cos I remember I always used to spill my milk and she would give me some more (giggles)."*

*Sharon: "When I was in Lower Grange I used to be in the choir. Yeah in the choir! And I was in there for about 2 years or something like that... yeah it was a good choir."*

Lucy was the exception to this. Resulting from complications during her birth, Lucy was diagnosed with a condition called dyspraxia which primarily affects her movement and co-ordination abilities. Lucy's dyspraxia overshadowed everything as she grew up and impacted significantly on her school life. Lucy's memory of primary school reveals how from an early age, her dyspraxia dominated her time at school,

*Lucy: "I remember like doing art and stuff. I used to kind of cry, because I couldn't draw anything! So, it's like, um um my teachers used to help me draw things."*

Lucy struggled to think of any fond memories or positive experiences at primary school,

*Lucy: "hmmm well my teachers were really nice to me. Erm, but like people [other children] at school weren't nice to me... I used to just be like on my own and they didn't really talk to me much."*

Her dyspraxia and associated difficulties with co-ordination and speech meant that Lucy was different from the other children and she often felt isolated as other children did not want to be her friend. When Lucy moved onto high school her educational experience failed to improve,

*Lucy: "I was like in a special needs form, erm... everyone er used to like take the mick out of our form because, saying that, it's you know, these horrible words like names for it and like things like that so, like we all used to get taken the mick out of and it was like a form and everyone thought it was kind of form for like dumb people, and the like all the other forms didn't even want to be associated with us very much."*

Lucy's high school experiences were governed by negativity as a result of her dyspraxia. Lucy actually enjoyed learning and her lessons at school and liked her teachers. Lucy could understand the valued practices of her classroom community but was unable to fully participate because of the difficulties presented by her dyspraxia. The segregation and challenges to participating in her lessons (especially her difficulty with handwriting) meant that Lucy was viewed by her peers as different and she became a target for bullies. Her placement in an SEN form group and lessons separate from mainstream classes, meant that she was assigned an identity by other pupils (Crafter and de Abreu, 2010) who considered her to lack intelligence and the personal attributes desired to 'fit in' with their friendship community.

Aysha had also found it difficult to fit in at school and struggled to make friends. Aysha was born with several health complications which resulted in a heart defect, facial disfigurement and a visual impairment in her left eye. Aysha's childhood was spent in various specialist hospitals across the country receiving treatment which meant she missed a lot of school. This had a profound effect on her learning as she essentially missed the basics of literacy and numeracy and never really got a full understanding of these subject areas. Throughout her school career Aysha battled with major self-confidence issues because of her appearance and her belief that she was stupid because she struggled to understand and to perform academically,

*Aysha: "It's [her health] effected my school and my education because I missed like loads of school when I was down when I was supposed to be in infants but actually I*



*was down in hospital a lot of the time. So I missed out on the things that, like a normal person would know but I can't, I don't know them cos I obviously missed out."*

Aysha, like Lucy also had limited friends and she lacked the confidence to approach others. Her frequent absence at primary school stemming from her health problems meant that Aysha was always on the margins of her school community in terms of participating in lessons and establishing friendships. This peripherality meant that as Aysha continued through the education system she struggled to identify with and establish not only the skills needed to participate academically but the skills and confidence to form friendships.

None of the girls reported happy or positive experiences of secondary school. For Aysha and Lucy it was for reasons primarily connected with their disabilities and being unable to have a friendship group into which they could fit. For the other girls (who all attended the adjoining Croft Side High School) their reasons were linked to the restrictions and regulations enforced by the school rules which prevented them from expressing their personal style,

*Kirsty: "If you had pink socks or summat and they could see [teachers], they would be like 'Why've you got pink socks on?' Or your hair bobble or summat, they'd moan about it. And then when I was in year 7 they were moaning at me cos I wore make-up, so I just didn't like them."*

*Sharon: "I didn't really like high school. Because of the uniform, they had you know, they were really strict you know, everything had to be on, and if you had a bit of your shirt stuck out then you know you'd get a detention or something like that, you'd be in isolation if you had red hair. I can remember being put in isolation because I had bits of red hair."*

Sharon, Raquel, Kim and Kirsty all experienced an inability to connect with the valued practices of their school, especially those which focused heavily on their appearance; dictating what they could and could not wear. A students' willingness to engage with their education depends upon how connected they feel to their educational community. For these girls the uniform polices of their school was a practice devoid of any meaning for them and contributed to their lack of engagement in both their classroom and school communities. This disengagement permeated into all aspects of their school experience thus, non-participation became one of the only practices they could understand and connect to. For Sharon, Raquel, Kim and Kirsty their position as marginalised learners at school prevented their full participation and contributed to the construction of their learner identities. Identities which would make engagement in their later college studies difficult.

Each of the students arrived at Hillcroft College with a learner identity shaped by many of their negative experiences of school. For varying reasons each of the focal students were placed on the periphery of their school community; for some this was due to an inability to engender meaning from the valued practices and form connections to the school community resulting in behaviours which were resistant to participation. For others like Aysha and Lucy they wanted to participate and become full members of their classroom and school communities. They tried to negotiate their practices so they could access full membership however, other influences at play within their micro-systems including health and issues related to their differing disabilities prevented this. For Lucy, her removal from mainstream classes made it difficult for her to negotiate the multiple communities of SEN and mainstream pupils and prevented her from establishing the friendships she yearned for. As such, Lucy remained a peripheral participant in CoP terms, struggling to identify with the pupils which comprised her mainstream and SEN classes.

All of the focal students were happy to leave school and were excited at the new opportunities and prospects they believed would be offered at SFC. They were looking forward to embracing a college education which they felt would enable more freedom and choice than school. Despite some shared similarities in terms of family background and educational experiences, each student had begun their learning career framed within their unique and individual micro-system, their prior learning experiences underpinning their ability to identify with and participate in the educational community at Hillcroft College. The significance of their prior experiences and attendant influences will help to understand their subsequent learning behaviour and practices.

Each of the students had forged their learner identities but as the trajectory of their learning journey moved into SFC they were faced with the problematic reality that they were already deemed to be failures in educational and political terms. Each of them had failed to achieve the desired five A\*-C GCSEs, including the failure to achieve a C grade or above in English and maths. In qualification terms they were 'poor' and their educational progression limited. This positioned them as unsuitable students for A-level study, the qualification typically associated with SFC. However, they had secured enough 'capital' in the GCSE grades they did obtain to secure a place at Hillcroft College on a vocational course; BTEC Level 2 Health and Social Care.

As these students began their studies at Hillcroft College it became evident that the educational capital they possessed not only shaped their identities as learners but would have implications upon their participation in the learning practices valued within the college.

### **6.1.1.1 Educational capital**

I use educational capital as a collective term to incorporate and combine the idea of human, social and identity capital offered by Schuller (2004). These different forms of capital interlink and serve to shape both the learner identities and educational trajectories of the students in this research.

The human tenet of educational capital refers to the attainments or achievements gained in educational terms. The most obvious determinant for it would be the level and number of qualifications a student gains. Higher levels of qualifications with high grades are viewed as more valuable and desirable in educational, economic and political terms. However, this research considers learning to be more than the process of acquiring knowledge, more than a grade on a piece of paper indicating a qualification. Learning involves the ability of the student to connect and engage with the valued practices of their institution, to participate in learning opportunities and establish good learning relationships, indicating the social and identity strands of educational capital. A student may be able to do all this and lack in achieving desirable qualifications however, it does not mean they have not gathered educational capital from the learning practices and relationships they participated in. Just because a student does not pass an exam or a course does not indicate that no learning has taken place as confirmed by the research findings into college drop-outs by Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2001), 'because a building is not marked on a map, it does not necessarily mean it does not exist. Similarly, because a qualification has not been achieved, or a course completed, it does not follow that no valuable learning has taken place.' (p. 137).

Moreover, being part of a family network which understands and promotes participation in education or where family members have experienced academic success and achievement, means that an individual retains and has unlimited access to a wealth of educational role models and support. The micro-systems of each individual student in addition to the qualifications they gain are indicators of their educational capital. For example the student who may be struggling academically (for whatever reason) has the support and encouragement of parents or older siblings who have completed studies at SFC and/or HE, to guide and help their academic skills. They are also able to prepare the student for the academic demands expected of them and help accordingly with homework and so on. For the student who is the first in their family to study beyond compulsory schooling, they cannot look to the repertoire of educational experience within their own family members to help them prepare or make sense of their learning experiences and demands. This was the case for many of the students in this research as they became the first members of their family to embark on further education beyond the age of 16 and so this avenue of educational capital

was off limits to them. This represents a meso-system disconnection between the micro-systems of the students and their exo-system as comprised of the education and employment of their parents.

The students in this research all struggled with participation in school and in qualification terms they are regarded as failures. Despite their peripheral trajectories (Wenger, 2010) the students were provided with enough access to their educational community to understand and value the importance of education in the wider world. This helped to construct a learning identity which sought progression within education as a means of securing a good career and desirable lifestyle. Probably through a combination of exposure to government rhetoric surrounding the economic benefits of skills and qualifications, and encouragement by their families to obtain a career and future better than their own, prompted the students to pursue and gain increased educational capital.

All of the focal students in this research had relatively little educational capital. The usual A-Level route to SFC was denied to them due to their lack of academic skills and desirable GCSE qualifications. Despite their prior education failings and dislike of school, all of the girls understood the value of education and they all wanted to attend college after school. They all expressed a strong determination to continue their education,

*Sharon, "Always wanted to go to college!"*

*Kim: "I always wanted to come to Hillcroft College"*

*Lucy: "Well I knew that didn't want to get a job because I didn't feel like I was ready for that yet... [I thought college would] be able to like expand my knowledge a bit."*

When asked if they had considered getting a job after school all the girls firmly disregarded this option. Given that they had all come from working class backgrounds and had achieved very little in qualification terms, this attitude is understandable. Arguably, their futures were less certain and much harder if they failed their education. Going into low skilled employment would not bring them the careers and associated economic earnings they all strove for and which many of their parents did not have. This further illustrates macro-system influence of widening participation within further education and training (this is discussed later in this chapter).

Research literature supports the view that aspects of educational capital such as no or low levels of qualifications particularly in literacy and numeracy, is linked to economic and social status. Low skilled or educated adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on low

incomes, experience poor health and early morbidity (Schuller et al 2004, Field, 2005). This is in contrast to those from more privileged homes who have more educational opportunities, greater access to financial resources, academic and/or employed role models and occupational knowledge (Schoon, Martin and Ross, 2007).

The curriculum on offer within the BTEC could offer a progression route for these students which would enable the accrual of more educational capital, providing a stepping-stone to the next level of qualification (Bathmaker, 2001). Although many of the students considered their previous educational experiences at school to be negative, education was still a meaningful enterprise for them to engage in and they could understand the benefits that their participation would bring. This demonstrates the impact of the wider macro influences shaping the educational choices and routes of the students and the significance of situating the students within the context of government rhetoric and societal expectations and values surrounding educational achievement.

Despite their lack of educational capital in terms of both qualifications and full membership to their school communities, the students did not view this as problematic and identified themselves as able to succeed where their parents had not. They managed to achieve the necessary entry requirements to attend Hillcroft College which placed them in a favourable position in terms of the local college hierarchy. The students identified themselves as possessing a reasonable amount of self-worth to justify their place at Hillcroft rather than at Grange Moor (previously the Technical College) and knew their limits when it came to studying at Alexandra College,

*Sharon: "I got an interview at Tec but I really didn't wanna go there because it's not my kind of college to go to."*

*Kirsty: "I went to look round Tech but it were like, it were really scruffy and I didn't like it."*

*Aysha: "I thought Alexandra was really hard. So I thought I'm going to struggle there...and Tech I didn't like, so Hillcroft was my only option and I like the atmosphere down at Hillcroft College."*

*Kim: "I see Tech like anyone can go there and I don't want to go there, and Alexandra is just too brainy for me (giggles) I thought I'd go here [Hillcroft College]"*

Hillcroft College offered the girls an educational trajectory which would preserve their self-worth and yet could provide a level of study suitable for them. Hillcroft maintained a good

reputation and the girls did not feel ashamed or embarrassed to study there, something that they believed they would have felt had they gone to the Tech. Hillcroft's mission of providing inclusive and supportive education to enable all learners meant that the girls had a chance of successfully increasing their educational capital. Clearly, the educational community offered at Hillcroft College appealed to the students. Mirroring the findings of Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000), it held a relatively high status in the local area and provided a strong learning culture linked to successful qualification achievement and progression to HE. This posed an attractive prospect for these students. They had been on the periphery of their school communities and sought to be full members of a college community which would enable them to succeed in contrast to the failings they experienced at school. This further illustrates how the wider educational values within the exo and macro systems of the students contributes to how the students perceive themselves as learners and the educational trajectories they wish to follow.

The alternative of Grange Moor was not an option any of the students considered. Hillcroft offered an educational community which was considered to be both prestigious and accessible to them and their abilities. The provision of many vocational BTEC courses at Hillcroft College meant that the girls could complete an intermediate or level 2 year of study which would allow progression onto advanced/level 3 courses. Comparable with the literature discussed in chapter two surrounding GNVQs, the BTEC course provided a programme of study in which the students were less likely to fail in. None of the students would be considered as highly academically able and the coursework approach to assessment within the BTEC was appealing in terms of the student's capabilities and the opportunity to succeed.

Arguably, these students like the ones in Bathmaker's (2001) study, can be considered as fragile learners stemming from their experiences at school. Although they retained and identified enough self-worth to justify Hillcroft as their place of study, they had not been successful learners and lacked the skills and confidence to enable participation in successful learning. The BTEC course offered them a second chance and an opportunity to be successful learners.

Placed in a micro-system where they retained little economic or educational capital, the focal students' choice of subject area was arguably influenced by their ability to identify and connect with a course that encapsulated notions of female roles and careers.

In a society where education and job prospects are unsure for young people with a repertoire of low educational capital where learning and achievement does not come readily, it is far easier for the students to connect with their female gender roles. As the process of essentially

*being* female and fulfilling a female orientated role is something which they are not bound to entirely fail in. Some students had prior experiences of caring for others within their family which contributed to them feeling that a caring role was something of which they were capable. The students understood and identified with the female identity in terms of providing care and nurture and so the subject which could provide the means of pursuing this was Health and Social Care. All the students expressed ambitions to have a job where they could care for and look after others, and this was arguably a common rationale for them to study Health and Social Care. Their lack of qualifications and absence of alternative programmes of study or work opportunities, meant that the students came to utilise their female identity as a form of capital to gain entry to the course and the classroom community on offer.

Enrolment on the Health and Social Care course enabled the students to develop their educational capital whilst remaining in the confines of a subject which advocated traditional female traits with which they could readily identify. In support of this, Correll (2001) suggests that gender differences in job preferences and aspirations originate from cultural beliefs about gender, which differentially shape males' and females' perception of their own competence at career related tasks. Furthermore, Eccles et al (1999) found that the values attached to relevant job characteristics provided predictors of young people's careers aspirations for example, value placed on helping others predicted plans to enter human service or health related professions. As Aysha expressed,

*"I wanna do nursing and erm Health and Social Care is knowing and caring of the service users."*

Skeggs (1988) states that the historical legacy of caring based courses establishes caring as a useful social skill which can be transferred between family life and the labour market. 'That caring is inextricably linked with femininity and familial ideologies means that the take-up of these courses is most likely to be by women' (p.136). This is confirmed in a research report conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Economics for the Department of Education (2011) which highlights how subjects such as Health and Social Care and Child Care are taken exclusively by female students; 97.1% compared with 2.9% male (in applied A-level courses). This illustrates how the wider, cultural macro-system permeates female students' identity as subjects involving care are considered to be a gender specific activity.

The BTEC First Diploma in Health and Social Care offered a gender specific course, which in terms of the capital the students had, meant they already possessed knowledge and understanding of female roles and expectations in relation to the BTEC course and future job prospects. With CoP theory in mind, the students could identify with the course and the

community of students which comprised it. They could utilise their identities as females to negotiate and engage with the course content and could understand it to be a meaningful enterprise which they could participate in.

However, despite the strong connection to their female identities, this did not always aid participation in their studies, in some cases it prevented it. As Wenger (1998) argues, an individual's identity incorporates the past and future whilst they are engaged in negotiation of the present therefore, prior identities may influence participation in new practices. This is evident for many of the students in this research; arriving at Hillcroft with learner identities shaped not only by their gender but by their marginal position in their school community and their lack of educational capital. Many of the students had aspirations and dreams of one day having highly valued, reputable careers within the health and social care sector, yet they struggled to identify with the college practices and the learning practices within the Health and Social Care course which would enable this.

### **6.1.1.2 Aspiration Vs Participation**

Research reveals that teenage career aspirations are linked to future jobs and career development (Eccles et al, 1999 and Eccles, 2009). Ashby and Schoon (2010) distinguish expectations from aspirations as 'expectations describe what one thinks will happen, aspirations capture what one would like to happen' (p.350). Despite their limited educational capital all of the focal students expressed career aspirations,

*Kirsty: "I've always wanted to go to college cos I either want to be a paramedic or a midwife."*

*Sharon: "I want to be a dietician you know in my future. And I thought that you know carrying on with my education would be a better option than to just go to a job."*

*Kim: "I want to go to uni. I want to be a social worker."*

Whilst these personal aspirations provided the driving force for many of the students to continue in education, they were not realistic or aligned with their current skills or capabilities. All the students acknowledged that in order to pursue their desired careers they needed to complete a college and university education. Like the students in Atkin's (2010) study, the students held a vague understanding of how to achieve their aspirations and knew that it would involve university:

*[Sharon] wants to be a nutritionist asks me what she needs to have to get on that kind of course at uni. I tell her to check out [name of uni] uni website to look at the course*



*entry requirements to give her some ideas. She asks whether she would need to do biology A-level, I say no but would think she would need science at GCSE.*

Atkins (2010) suggests that educational policy makes the false assumption that these types of students on low-level vocational programmes have low aspirations. This macro policy rhetoric encourages the belief amongst young people that they can do anything and encourages the rehearsal of unrealistic aspirations without understanding how they might achieve them. This is exemplified in the excerpt from Kim's interview:

*S: What do you want to do when you leave college?*

*K: Go to uni. I want to be a social worker.*

*S: Oh do you? Any ideas of what uni?*

*K: [Name of university], I don't want to go far.*

*S: Why don't you want to go far?*

*K: I don't like being away from home. I get homesick. Do you need science to go and study to be a social worker?*

*S: Probably not, I would say-*

*K: Do you think I should do it or not?*

*S: Erm, your best thing is to look at the website at the courses to see what the entry requirements are but generally you have to have your English and your maths for any degree course and then I would imagine to get on social work course you would need 3 A-levels, so you would have your BTEC-your health and social care so I would imagine if you get merits overall in that you should be ok.*

*K: I'll do that, I don't really want to do science. But if I need it, I'll have to do it won't I?*

*S: Erm I don't know how you can go about changing your options now, you might have to go to guidance...have you ever been to guidance?*

*K: shakes head.*

Kim had clearly 'bought in' to the belief that she could go onto study at university, yet she had never researched this possibility, she didn't know what type and level of qualifications she needed, she had never spoken to a careers advisor and didn't know where the advisors were located in college. As Atkins (2010) argues, this suggests that educational policy

reinforces unrealistic aspirations but fails to support these students to generate the educational capital required to enable achievement of these aspirations.

For many of the students, their lack of educational capital meant they struggled to fully participate in the valued practices of the college and as such were placed on the periphery of their educational community once more. They struggled to engage in the practices expected of them and as valued by the teaching staff and the college as a whole. Many of the students would arrive late and unprepared for lessons, they would sit and chat amongst one another for most of the lesson rather than using the time to complete the work they had been set. Very few of the students could connect with the tasks with the subject resources (handouts etc.) given to them and many would rely on the teacher to tell them exactly what they needed to do, as was the case in Daniel's lessons. Many of them lacked the reading and literacy skills to complete written work to a high standard.

Given that all of the students had participated in education since the age of five, it would seem that many of them had failed to identify with the learning practices, particularly in secondary school and so didn't know *how* to learn. In achievement terms all of the focal students were failures and the discomfort of lacking the desired intellect endured from school to college. Students like Aysha and Lucy had the reassurance and support from their families and in some cases had experienced some educational achievement (Lucy obtained a B in GCSE Health and Social Care) that sustained their feelings of self-worth and belief that they could do the course.

Students like Kim, Kirsty, Sharon and Raquel had undergone learning experiences which they could not understand or identify with, resulting in vulnerability when they were exposed to challenging learning situations in the classroom. Their feelings of discomfort and vulnerability when faced with a task they believed they had neither the intellect nor ability to fulfil, negatively influenced their levels of self-confidence and self-worth and consequently their learner identity. In an attempt to preserve and protect their identity these girls resorted to the only practices they knew and that more importantly were valued among their peers.

Demonstrating how their notions of female identity served to hinder their participation, the field notes give numerous examples of the girls, in particular Kim, spending large amounts of lesson time preening themselves; brushing their hair and applying make-up. In dedicating time to this practice, one explanation might be that these girls were conducting damage-limitation in a bid to protect their personal identity which was threatened by their struggles to participate in the learning environment. As young females their appearance mattered and

formed a significant aspect of their personal identities; it was also a practice they could do and unified them with fellow peers who felt and did the same. Moreover, investment in their appearance was easy for the students to do, it involved little risk or challenge. In a society where they are considered to be educational failures and in an institution where they do not know how to be successful students, these girls implemented the only practices they knew. Their eye-liner and lip-gloss literally and psychologically formed a defensive shield around their personal identities.

In addition to the time dedicated to their personal appearance, many of the students displayed non-participative behaviours. The field notes reveal examples of the students sitting with headphones on listening to music, talking to each other and reading magazines.

Despite their physical presence in the classroom setting they were reluctant to expose their inadequacies and attempt to fully participate in the learning practices for fear of 'getting it wrong'. For varying reasons, non-participation was all they knew from school. Far better to look good and fit in with your friends than attempt to take part in a learning practice you are unsure of and in which you are likely to fail at. The students found many of the college and learning practices unfamiliar which meant they were unsure of how to participate demonstrating that where practice is unfamiliar participation is less likely (Turner and Tobbell, 2016). The students continued to rely on the familiar practices from their previous learning communities which in some cases were non-participatory practices in the form of resistant behaviours such as reading magazines, sitting with headphones on listening to music, lacking motivation to begin set tasks, rather than engaging in new practice.

These findings are mirrored in the research of adult literacy and numeracy learners (Tett and Maclachlan, 2007). For these learners (and the girls in this study) the 'powerful force of their ascribed identities as non-capable learners during their schooling blocks the possibility of them creating an alternative image of themselves as capable, competent learners' (p.152). Rogers (2003) maintains that a person's identity as a learner depends upon their conscious recognition of, and belief in, their ability to learn. For those with negative experiences of compulsory education, they struggle to align their construction of themselves as capable learners in structured educational contexts.

Stemming from this, many of the students identified their mere physical presence in the college constituted the desirable practice of 'being a student.' Being there on campus and in lessons is what 'counted' regardless of the fact they were unable to engage and connect with the learning practices and opportunities (not unlike their peripheral participation at secondary

school). Similar findings were found in Bathmaker's (2001) research where the importance of being physically present as a student in the campus environment made the students feel like insiders to the college culture regardless of the fact they had difficulty identifying with and engaging in the learning practices of the college.

Arguably, the students were caught up in a struggle as they tried to negotiate meaning in a new educational community where they wanted to succeed. They could recognise the advantages and gains to studying at Hillcroft as this could enable their aspirations to be reached. However, having never felt fully connected to an educational community before the negotiation of their membership presented a challenge. In an effort to gain some centrality of membership the students utilised what capital they possessed in terms of the identities they had constructed as female learners and tried to embody an image of what they considered a student to be; this involved enrolling on their course and appearing physically present in the college environment.

### **6.1.1.3 *Micro-system summary***

Analysis of the micro-systems of the students reveals how student biographies in terms of family background and educational histories interact and contribute to the construction of a learner identity. In spite of their negative prior learning experiences and lack of educational capital the students positioned themselves as learners worthy of the Health and Social Care course and Hillcroft College, suggesting that they retained enough self-confidence in their abilities and aspirations to pursue SFC. It also demonstrates the implicit influence of the government skills and qualification agenda and how this macro feature feeds into and shapes the micro systems of the students, as the accounts of the focal students indicate their preference for a college education as opposed to a job. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates the powerful connection between identity and participation and how the inability of many of the students to transform or adapt their learner identity prevented successful participation in the valued practices of the college and the classroom.

This presented a problematic concept in relation to the students' aspirations. The college teaching staff were then faced with the task of trying to engage and connect these students to the valued learning practices which would enable them to achieve and progress educationally. They needed to be shown *how* to learn in the college environment. Central to enabling the students to participate in their learning was the college practices and the relationships the students established within their classroom community.

### **6.1.2 Exo-system: The college practices**

The process of engaging in practice according to Wenger (1998), is where an individual can experience the world and their engagement in it as meaningful. Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life and the meanings that the students construct surrounding their educational environment are important as it is these that will influence their participation.

Accordingly, those students who are 'successful' are able to access teaching and curriculum and become a full and recognised member of the SFC community, engaging in the desired practices expected from their teachers in order to succeed. However, the meanings constructed and understood by the students hold the key to their ability to 'successfully' participate in their SFC community, because without meaningful learning there can be no understanding and without understanding there can be no meaning. This suggests that it is not enough to look at the knowledge and skills which constitute the students' learning curriculum or the instructional methods offered within the classroom. More importantly are the meanings that the students construct around their learning experiences which influences the nature of their participation within their SFC community and which in turn shape their learning trajectories.

Hillcroft College implemented and promoted practices to both entice students and engage them in the learning environment they provided. Research into educational transition demonstrates the importance of learners feeling welcome and secure in their new learning communities as it is anticipated that in doing so it will enable engagement and full participation in their learning (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013 and Dziubinski, 2014). Hillcroft College endeavoured to be an attractive and appealing place for learning in terms of its physical characteristics and the services it offered students.

Hillcroft College enjoyed the advantage of being located on a campus that offered space; space for each subject area, space for studying (computer rooms, guidance centre, study centre), outside space for sports and recreation (fields) and indeed free space for students to park their cars-provision which the other local colleges did not provide. Not only did the campus provide physical space, the physical characteristics of the buildings were modern and aesthetically attractive. Further to this the study facilities on offer such as the computer rooms, study centre and library were modern and comprehensive and appealed to the students. Many of the students commented how they preferred the look and feel of Hillcroft College in comparison to the alternative of the 'Tech'.

Added to the physical attraction of the college campus, Hillcroft College invested time and money into establishing and maintaining links with feeder secondary schools and the provision of open evenings and transition days. These were an opportunity to 'sell' the college and the courses on offer to prospective students and the market-driven, business model that the college pursued was evident in these activities as it essentially competed for students. The college created a 'meet and greet' area with refreshments, produced glossy brochures and course leaflets, subject departments ensured their display boards were colourful and informative and that subject staff were readily available in person to discuss options and answer queries. This investment was a successful recruitment strategy as all the focal girls commented on their experiences of this,

*Aysha: "I think they [Hillcroft College] supported me and when I went down to the open day they told me what I could and couldn't do and I spoke to a careers advisor."*

*Lucy: "We [Lucy and her parents] kind of decided that because they'd [Hillcroft College] been more helpful to us than the Tech, cos we also went on one of their open days as well and they didn't really give us much information, and it looked so much more cleaner."*

*Kirsty: "I thought it were a lot better because when I first went in there were people standing at the door giving you information and stuff and they told you where to go, and then you could go and ask people about subjects and stuff, so it were a lot better than the Tech."*

The students were placed at the centre of these recruitment strategies and this made them feel valued and wanted. For students like Lucy and Aysha the college provided support for their respective disabilities in the form of access to a student support assistant in their lessons and regular time with a specialist teacher. Hillcroft's mission of providing an inclusive learning environment to all students was a powerful attraction for many students who feared the prospect of enrolling at the Tech. Not only were the campus and staff appealing to students, the culture of SFC which Hillcroft College embodied contributed to the appeal of studying at college compared to school. Literature highlights how students studying within post-16 education enjoy the more informal and adult learning environment it provides (Ecclestone, 2006, Gorard and Smith, 2007, Sailsbury and Jephcote, 2008, Hodgkinson and Bloomer, 2001, Dziubinski, 2014). This research mirrored these findings. Many of the students expressed their relief at not having to wear a school uniform and the freedom to dress as they wanted. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) suggest that uniform rules enforced in secondary schools are often problematic in terms of the quality of the relationship between teachers and students. If teachers are expected to enforce uniform rules which students are constantly and actively

trying to resist (like in the cases of Kim, Kirsty, Sharon and Raquel) it is likely to create a more contentious relationship with teachers and students may not learn from these teachers as a result.

As evidenced in the narrative of Hillcroft College, the focal students appreciated the more relaxed adult atmosphere. Referring to teachers by their first names enabled a more personal connection and the students also felt that most of the teachers treated them with respect, something which was lacking in their secondary school experiences. This according to Dziubinski (2014) enabled a more equal power balance between students and teachers and thus a more secure learning environment.

The learning culture available at Hillcroft College represented a meaningful educational setting for the students, membership of which was highly important to them. The fact that they had secured a place on a course there was a relief as they did not have to face the prospect of studying at the Tech, which represented a community that they perceived to be of low status and which they did not want to belong to or be associated with. In contrast, Hillcroft represented a high status institution and arguably securing a place there had increased their self-confidence as learners as they were considered able enough to undertake a place on the course.

This provision of lower level courses at Hillcroft College can be traced back to the introduction of incorporation (discussed in chapter one) and demonstrates how as an institution Hillcroft had branched out and recruited a variety of learners with varying abilities. It also demonstrates how important recruitment of students was to the functioning of the college as indicated by their market and business model approach to ensuring student numbers were secured. This recruitment practice of offering free plastic carrier bags with the college logo containing glossy brochures, pen and key ring, meet and greets with staff and tours of the campus, made the students feel wanted by the college. They wanted to be members of the college community just as much as the college wanted them as members. Having always been placed on the periphery of their education in the past, this recruitment practice positively influenced their identities as learners no longer marginalised within the educational community but welcomed and accepted as they were-lacking in educational capital. The recruitment practices employed by Hillcroft College were successful in motivating the students to engage with enrolment on their chosen course. However, the reality of the everyday college and classroom practices began to make their participation as full members of the community problematic. One example of this can be seen in the free periods students had on their

timetables and the expectation that these would be used for independent learning and study time.

The students' initial delight at having free time was short-lived as the structure of their timetable meant that they could not exercise the freedom they anticipated. Their 'free' time was out of their control and this sometimes created a source of frustration if their free time did not coincide with their friend's. In some cases like Kirsty, the amount of free time on her timetable proved to be unnecessary and she would have preferred to either be in lesson or at home. All of the students acknowledged and understood that the free time on their timetable should be dedicated to study however, many of them like Kirsty, admitted to not utilising this time for completing work:

*Kirsty: "I was just like messing around and going to see my mates and stuff"*

*Sarah: "What do you tend to do when you've got a free period?"*

*Kim: "Talk to my friends really"*

They knew that as college students a key expectation and requirement was to be an 'independent learner' however, they did not know *how* to be like this. As discussed earlier, many of these students had never engaged or participated fully in their school education, they were not experienced learners. They did not know how to organise, plan and prioritise their studies according to time-scales. They had never had to do it at school and nor were they expected to. In many examples, this was reinforced by the teachers of the course. In one lesson after Daniel had explained the different tasks the girls could choose to work on Sophie asked,

*"Aww great can we go and do it in the library? Daniel says no, whatever they choose to do, they do it in class."*

In many respects Daniel's response was understandable and logical. Given that many of the students lacked the motivation, work ethic and indeed ability to work independently in the library, it was quite certain that had he let them leave the class he would have found them minutes later drinking lattes in the canteen. Far better to keep them in the class where he could monitor their progress and offer help.

This notion of being an independent learner was one which all of the students associated with *being* a college student despite many of them lacking the necessary experience of skills to be like this. The issue of promoting independence was a contentious one. Given their academic



abilities and the level of course they were studying (GCSE equivalent) trying to engender independent study skills was difficult given that many of the students struggled with using a contents page or an index to find information in a text book. Rachel recognised this and attempted to demonstrate and equip the students with the necessary skills and would structure specific aspects of tasks to develop their independent skills. The excerpt below illustrates how Rachel would disseminate information and guide the students in what they were required to do:

*Rachel writes notes on the board for them to copy down about the benefits of different health services for individual needs. She then refers to the girl in the case study (the task the girls had been working on was identifying the factors affecting the health needs of a girl in the case study) and what health services she would need, the benefits and what could get in the way of achieving this. She does the example of smoking she draws a table on the board and asks the girls for ideas to fill it in. Their task is to use 4 factors affecting her health and draw up an action plan with short, medium and long term goals. Rachel has done them tables to fill in or they can write it up in their own way.*

This was in contrast to Agatha who expected the girls to be able to work within certain levels of independence by using the handouts she produced. Although the creation of the handouts were supposed to act as a guide and a source of help to the students in completing their tasks, they were often written and presented in ways which meant the intended help was inaccessible to the students. Agatha's handouts used language the students were unfamiliar with and often assumed the students had retained information previously given to them rather than recapping to remind them. The girls often struggled to understand Agatha's lessons and their behaviour was often misinterpreted by Agatha to be that of laziness or disinterest when in reality it was frustration at attempting to understand and participate in the learning process and getting it 'wrong' every time.

The concept of independent learning represented an unfamiliar practice to many of the students which therefore made their participation in their learning less likely. With this, the differences in the learning practices offered by the different teachers highlighted the difficulty the students encountered when trying to negotiate meaning and participation across the different classroom communities where valued practices were different. This is explored in more depth in the discussion of learning relationships in the next section.

Underneath the perceived façade of college offering independence, choice and freedom the reality was that in many ways Hillcroft College promoted practices which had been a central feature of their school lives, the most prominent of which was attendance. Although the

decision to enrol and study at college was the students' own choosing, they could not pick and choose when to come into lessons. They were provided with their timetable and at the beginning of the academic year and were obliged to sign a student contract agreeing to follow the college's rules, procedures and expectations. Within this, a central tenant was the college's attendance rules. All students were expected to attend all their lessons and if they could not they were to follow absence procedure by either informing and/or providing college with evidence of their absence and signing out if they had to leave early. Each week the college's attendance system would produce a percentage indicator of each student's attendance with 85% or above indicating good attendance. This percentage was calculated using the information from registers taken in lessons. Students' attendance figures were lowered not only by absences but by the number of late marks they accrued. Teachers and personal tutors would regularly monitor attendance and encourage punctuality amongst students.

This drive for attendance monitoring despite reflecting procedures that are in place and expected by employers in the working world and of course for safety and evacuation reasons, made college feel like school for the students. They believed they were at college as a matter of personal choice, which in many ways was true; they had chosen their course, they wanted to study it therefore they wanted to be there. If they chose to leave or not to regularly attend lessons then that was their right to exercise their will. However, non-attendance and regular lateness for lessons was regarded very unfavourably and could result in sanctions or punishments via the college's disciplinary procedure. This could then have ramifications for future education or employment references. This resonated with school culture where students' every move was accounted for and freedom was limited; something that students did not anticipate would happen at college,

*Sharon: "I think it's a lot like school... cos I actually think it's a bit more strict than school, cos I can remember just walking into school and I'd be late and I'd be like 'Sorry I'm late' and just go onto something else and they'd [school teachers] be ok. But when you're at Hillcroft College and you're late they go on about it for about 5 minutes, so yeah I think it's a bit more strict."*

Sharon's view was felt among many of the students who felt that it was unnecessary for teachers to excessively reprimand lateness. It could also be argued that if their school teachers had expected students like Sharon to be late to lessons then Sharon had never learnt the value or importance of punctuality.

Also teachers like Daniel did not model or promote punctuality. Daniel was often late to lessons (often without apology or explanation) and would frequently leave the class for anywhere between five and fifteen minutes at time with no forewarning or justification. As illustrated in the story presented in the previous chapter, Daniel represented a teacher who many of the students liked, respected and felt they could identify with because of his attitude and approach to teaching. It can be suggested that his lack of regard for punctuality and attendance represented a disparity between rules and behaviour. In the eyes of many of the students Daniel was held in high regard; if he openly behaved in ways which were in contrast to the attendance policy why couldn't they?

The attendance policy implemented at Hillcroft College represents the reification feature of CoP theory. This procedure shaped the community of Hillcroft and represented a valued practice. However, for many of the students in this research the attendance procedure did not constitute a meaningful practice. Possibly stemming from a combination of never learning or participating in attendance practices at school, identification with a member of teaching staff (Daniel) who did not observe the procedure and not understanding the importance and meanings attached to the procedure from the perspective of the college, meant that the attendance policy created a barrier to participation. Like the uniform policies many of the students had experienced at school, Hillcroft's attendance policy made them feel like children having to account for their every move which incited the feelings of resistance they had experienced at school. Some students continued to be late or absent to lessons and showed no apology for this action,

*The twins swagger in late, "Where have you been?" one of them replies casually, "Oh, just walking" Rachel, "Sit down and catch up with the notes you've missed.*

*Sophie and Kim stroll in [late] (handbags in tow) Sophie sits down and starts to apply her lip-balm.*

Furthermore, some students were not just two minutes late to lesson on some occasions were fifteen or twenty minutes late, often causing disruption to the flow of the content being delivered by the teacher and frustration at having to repeat information. This suggests that the attendance practices of the college influenced the possibilities for teacher-learner relationships (this will be explored further in the next section).

In defence of the college and the teachers, punctuality and attendance are desirable and necessary practices in terms of education and future employment. The attendance procedure also comprises the wider macro-system imperative the college needed to follow in terms of

retaining student numbers and ensuring students successfully completed their courses. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) argue that post-compulsory education in the UK can be viewed as part of an audit culture where student retention rates and qualification achievement are unproblematically viewed as a measurable outcome of the quality of educational provision. These indicators are central to the funding of Hillcroft College and the reputation assigned to them in the local community and underpins their marketing, recruitment and attendance policies.

Arguably, the significance of the learning relationships which the students established within each of their micro-classroom communities served to shape their learning experience and participation and contributed towards completion of their course.

### **6.1.2.1 Learning relationships**

The relationships established within the context of learning comprise a significant part of student's learning experiences. The relationships these students had with their previous teachers varied; some held fond memories of kind teachers who helped them at school whereas others produced negative accounts of teacher relationships where participation was disabled. Referring back to Schuller (2004) and the concept of social capital as the relationships which exist between individuals or groups of individuals, many of the students retained little positive social capital from their previous learning relationships.

Field (2005) and Tett and MacLauchlan (2007) propose that participation in post-compulsory education is a means of generating social capital because it impacts upon the learning relationships formed. Field (2005) goes on to suggest that 'social capital is important for learning, and learning is important for social capital' (2005. p.110). This suggests that the students needed to establish good learning relationships with their teachers, as in doing so their participation could be facilitated and enabled.

A central aspect of the learning process are the relationships which enable the learning to take place. Vygotskian theory advocates the importance of enabling relationships with more capable others, given that the social and the cognitive are inextricably linked. In this sense the relationships established between the students and teachers are pivotal to the learning experiences and subsequent learning achievements.

Forming relationships with teachers in an educational setting is an inevitable prerequisite for learning. Teachers are the both containers and deliverers of knowledge and the students are the recipients. This of course is a simple definition, as bio-ecological and CoP theory posit,

learning is a reciprocal process contingent on person, context and time. Learning involves the learner as much as it does the teacher (Hoogsteder, Maier and Elbers, 1998).

This reciprocal process in addition to the establishment of interpersonal relationships was important to the focal students. This made them feel valued as a young adult and on more equal terms with their teachers,

*Sharon: "I've got a really nice teacher, you know she speaks to you like you're on her level."*

Connection with a teacher on a more personal level is a motivating factor in learning and is supported in the literature (Sailsbury and Jephcote, 2008, Sailsbury, Jephcote and Roberts, 2009, Dziubinski, 2014). The focal girls associated a 'good teacher' with their ability to form an interpersonal relationship with them,

*Kirsty: "I think he's [Daniel] is the best teacher in Health and Social Care, cos it's like, he's just, I don't know, he understands you... he has a laugh with you as well, you're learning at the same time but you can still have a laugh."*

*Raquel: "Daniel he's just, he's a good teacher, he's like, he's just a funny guy, like he lets you get on with it... you don't feel like he's being too strict or he's not helping you, he's, he just does it right."*

A good teacher is difficult to define as it is a subjective and personal measurement. According to the focal students their judgment of whether the teachers were good relied upon, for the most part, the relationships they formed with them. In Vygotskian terms successful learning is where, through scaffolding by a more capable other, the learner is able to perform the necessary requirements of the task alone and is able to internalise the required actions, hence their passage through the ZPD is enabled. This analysis positions ZPD as an enabling practice in terms of participation in learning and recognises that it is dependent upon, and emergent from, a relationship and therefore is not always inevitable.

The focal girls unanimously felt that Daniel was a good teacher because they experienced a positive relationship with him, something which many of them lacked experience of from school. Daniel had a laid-back approach in his lessons, he was open and friendly with the students, chatted with them and joked with them. The students liked the independence they could exercise in his lessons and felt as though he promoted their learning in a way that they were in control of,

*Sharon: "I think Daniel is really good... he lets you get on with it and he's a laid back kind of person, so you know you just do, you get along with it. You know I find that lesson good, you just get on with it."*

As both researcher and staff member I often questioned whether the students actually learnt in Daniel's lessons. To complete the tasks in Daniel's lessons, Daniel would list on the white board what needed to be done and the students would often copy the relevant material from the text books. In situations where a student didn't understand or was confused about what they needed to do, he would often show them what to copy or in some cases would do it for them,

*Aysha hasn't drawn some of the body parts in the correct place on her diagram for one of the tasks. Instead of consulting a book she takes a guess and draws them where she thinks they go, when Daniel checks he ends up drawing them on for her. He finds the pages in the textbook and tells her what to copy down for the re-sub on one of her other tasks. He does this with many of the other girls.*

*He [Daniel] works his way around the classroom, he is mostly telling them what to do and what to copy from the textbook. Some aren't really engaging, they just sit back and let him tell them.*

In the student's eyes however, Daniel was a good teacher as they established a positive relationship with him and his lessons posed little risk or challenge to them personally. There was no fear of 'getting it wrong' because they felt Daniel was approachable and treated them with respect. Arguably, the students experienced little difficulty in his lessons because, as the field notes illustrate above, Daniel often showed them exactly what they needed to copy from the textbook in order to complete assignment tasks. Daniel devoted very little class time to standing at the front delivering information or writing notes. Once he had explained the task he would work his way around the room checking on the progress and helping the girls individually,

*Daniel goes around the class chatting and helping*

When asked, the focal students felt that they were learning in Daniel's lessons (See Kirsty, Raquel and Sharon interviews appendices 8, 10 and 11). I found this difficult to believe but could understand why they felt like this. The relationship they had established with Daniel enabled them to feel like a full and valued member of the classroom community, something which many of the students had not experienced before. Despite feeling enabled in terms of feeling accepted, it is questionable whether they benefitted from much learning as in ZPD

terms many of them were not able to complete the tasks independently. It is disputable whether this was because they could not do it or because they did not want to do it. The case of Daniel demonstrates that a good interpersonal relationship does not necessarily constitute a good learning relationship where successful passage through the ZPD is enabled. Arguably, Daniel did not implement many scaffolding practices associated with enabling the ZPD as he directly told the students what to do.

However, the absence of a good interpersonal relationship with teachers can also have implications for learning. In examples of where students struggled to connect with their teachers they also struggled to learn. This is none more evident than in Agatha's lessons. The students felt that Agatha belittled them, speaking and treating them like children and felt that she generally lacked respect for them. This was in contradiction to how she expected the students to learn in class, unlike Daniel who would literally show and lead the girls step by step, Agatha expected the girls to be independent learners, as Lucy explains,

*"It's like she'll give you these packs of like, like briefs, she'll give you the brief of what you need to do and go, 'There you go!' you know 'Work on that.' And everyone's like 'What? What?'... it's like half the things that she's meant to do, I think she doesn't do because she thinks we're older enough to do it ourselves. But then again she wants us to act proper older and mature and it's like sometimes she'll talk to us like we're proper dumb kids."*

Agatha's teaching practices resided within the use of the assignment handouts and briefs and exemplifies the CoP concept of reification, by which she produced artefacts to give form and meaning to the teaching and learning in her classroom. Although these artefacts (assignment handouts and briefs) held meaning for Agatha who believed they were a useful learning tool to aid independence, for the students they were often meaningless as they struggled to understand their content or to use them to complete their work. Referring back to the story in chapter five, another teacher also struggled to interpret and understand the instructions Agatha had included in one of her handouts. This demonstrates the disconnection of meaning Agatha's use of artefacts produced and how it served to disable the independent learning of the students.

The notion of independent learners was a contentious one. As discussed earlier, the culture of SFC promotes the ideal of the student as a more mature independent learner. In response to this Agatha tailored her lessons accordingly, providing what she believed to be useful scaffolding strategies that would promote this in the form of assignment booklets and handouts. In accordance with the assumption that as college students the girls should embody

independent learning practices she expected them to be able to use the materials she produced to be independent learners. In reality, this was a major underestimation of their abilities and resulted in confusion for the girls. This was coupled with the difficulty the girls encountered in trying to establish any kind of positive relationship with Agatha as she often spoke and treated the students in a patronising manner.

*Raquel: "[Agatha] talked down to us like we're not in college. She'll talk really slow to you 'It's not like that it's like this' (puts on voice) 'It's called plagiarism' (laughs) and you know when people talk to you like that? You feel like they're not trying to make you on the same level it's like talking down at you like, she kind of made me feel that sometimes like I was someone who had a problem, like I didn't understand, and that's why I didn't like her".*

The students displayed quite resistive behaviours to participating in Agatha's lessons which often manifested itself in rudeness, which in turn (and understandably) frustrated Agatha. Despite her years of teaching experience, Agatha was unable to deliver the knowledge and understanding the students needed to complete assignments, and despite trying to adapt how she delivered the content of her lessons she was still unable to connect with them,

*Kirsty: "She does not like connect with you, she won't- she dunt understand you like if I say 'I don't understand it' she'll be like 'Well what is there not to understand?' and it's like 'The whole of it!' she'll bite your head off and treats you like little kids."*

This mistaken assumption of students' ability was also confirmed in the research of Dziubinski (2014). Within this it was found that the responsibilities students are expected to take for their own learning and progress can 'leave them feeling less secure than at school and in need of closer teacher guidance and direction than perhaps the [FE] college realises' (p. 468). This suggests how important it is for teachers to take the time to understand the capabilities of their students and tailor lessons accordingly as in doing so a learner is enabled to pass through the ZPD and learn. This of course is easier to state than implement given the time constraints teachers have to deliver the curriculum within and the varying abilities of the students.

Rachel appeared to strike a balance between establishing a good interpersonal relationship with the students and an enabling learning relationship. Rachel was well liked and respected by all of the students. She was caring, understanding and approachable and the students were able to connect with her on a personal level. Rachel also understood their capabilities much better and provided a learning relationship which enabled them to connect with the task



and meet learning outcomes. Arguably, Rachel could be likened to a mother-figure as she provided a nurturing approach but she was firm and would reprimand the students if they were persistently late, chatting or not getting their work done. Where a learning relationship is concerned Rachel provided teaching which enabled successful guidance through the student's ZPD as they understood how she delivered the lesson content. Rachel was sensitive and adaptable to the students' abilities and understandings and employed scaffolding strategies appropriately to enable their learning as Lucy explains,

*"Her [Rachel] lessons are really good because she'll give us the information that the other teachers give us but then she'll go into more depth about it, like explain what you have to do... she's more helpful to us and like guides us more into things."*

Rachel often tried to involve all the students in discussions and valued their views and input, Lucy particularly liked this,

*"I think it's really good because you learn much more when everyone's involved in the thing, cos if you're thinking on your own, then you've only got one brain... if you have 20-odd brains thinking and like shove it all on the board and you can pick bits out that are important."*

This suggests that within Rachel's classroom community the students felt central to the learning process and their contribution was valued, thus enabling fuller membership and participation. It also demonstrates the ZPD emerging from the group of students and exemplifies the idea of a social and reciprocal learning process not only between student and teacher but between student and student. The excerpt from the field notes below illustrates how Rachel would ensure the students had all the information they needed to complete the task and encouraged their contribution to this to ensure understanding,

*Rachel writes notes on the board for them to copy down about the benefits of different health services for individual needs. She then refers to the girl in the case study and what health services she would need, the benefits of this and what could get in the way of achieving this. She does an example of smoking, she draws a table on the board and asks the girls for ideas to fill it in... [the girls] can then write it up in their own way.*

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the differences in the learning practices offered by the different teachers illustrates the difficulty the students encountered when trying to negotiate meaning and participation across the different classroom communities where valued practices

were different. Each teacher offered different scaffolding practices which were often in contrast to those offered by their colleagues. This in itself is not unusual as it is inevitable that each teacher will have developed his/her own individual teaching practices over time. Arguably, his/her practice will have been shaped and informed by the course curriculum and learning outcomes that students are required to achieve on the course.

Similar to the literature surrounding GNVQs presented in chapter two, the course content was structured according to a series of learning outcomes for each unit of study. Each unit was assessed via coursework which consisted of pass, merit and distinction criteria in accordance with the learning outcomes. Reification is again evident here in the tools and procedures used to assess the learning of the students. The Health and Social Care department developed assignment briefs and handouts (see appendices 12, 13 and 14) which described and explained each level of task and provided a tick box and comments box for the teacher marking it. For each unit of study the students had folders with their assignment brief and work they had completed. Each of the teachers would collect these folders at the end of each lesson and bring them again at the start of the next one. The performance of this practice meant the students never learnt to be responsible for organising and storing their work and remembering to bring it to lessons. This valued practice lacked meaning for many of the students in terms of being independent and responsible learners and subsequently they failed to engage with it. This was acknowledged by the teaching staff, as they wanted to encourage independence and responsibility in the students but the reality that faced them would be lost and forgotten work with limited time for catch up opportunities. The safer option was to collect the students' work to ensure it was all in place at the end of the year when portfolios were put together and assignment criteria checked and moderated.

The course and assessment structure of the BTEC course was much like those presented in the research surrounding GNVQs in that a 'tick-box' approach dominated the structure of the lessons to ensure students met the learning objectives. In employing this approach it is questionable how much meaningful learning took place. Certainly students were able to recite certain pieces of legislation and case studies of neglect or misconduct in the field, they could list good and bad communication skills. However, it is questionable as to whether they would be able to put this into practice themselves if they were working within the field of health and social care. Although this BTEC course was classified as a vocational qualification there was no work placement opportunity available at this level of course; the opportunity for this was offered at level 3. Literature (Bloomer, 1998) demonstrates that learning is more meaningful when putting into practice what is being taught. This suggests that the 'tick-box' approach to teaching meant that learning focused on the constituent parts of the assignment briefs and

assessment criteria as teachers strove to deliver all the curriculum within a limited time whilst ensuring students met the learning outcomes. Stemming from this it can be argued that the curriculum content and assessment can impact the learning relationships formed with teachers as learning outcomes took priority over the meaningfulness of the learning itself. Each of the H&SC teachers implemented different approaches and teaching practices in delivering the curriculum. Daniel's lessons often consisted of him instructing the students with exactly what they need to do or directing them to the relevant sections of the course textbook,

*Every now and then a girl shouts for Daniel to check work. He works his way around the classroom, he is mostly telling them what to do and what to copy from the textbook.*

As discussed earlier, his approach enabled the students to establish a good interpersonal relationship and resulted in them feeling like central and active members of the classroom community. However, in terms of their ZPD this kind of practice did not enable or promote independent learning and it is questionable how much deep and meaningful learning actually occurred. Daniel's lessons were structured to ensure that each student followed the assignment brief step by step to ensure all the criteria were completed in a systematic way - again demonstrating the process of reification evident in the teaching and learning practices. The excerpt from the field notes below reveals the reasons behind this teaching practice:

*I ask Daniel how he taught the module last year as he said that it took a whole year to teach it. He explains that last year was the first time he taught on the diploma course as he normally teaches at a-level, he thinks he misjudged what they knew and took for granted and assumed they knew stuff when they didn't. So this year I tried to do it so it was clear cut, defined, everything was there for them to follow and it's worked better because most of them have finished the unit.*

This suggests that despite the lack of progression through ZPD for the students, Daniel recognised their level of skill and capability and adapted his lessons accordingly. This meant that the students didn't feel like failures they felt enabled and understood which was important for their confidence as learners at SFC.

Agatha tried to avoid the arguably 'spoon feeding' approach offered by Daniel. As illustrated in the story from the previous chapter it was suggested by another member of staff that Agatha had implemented this approach in the past but that this was no longer a practice she could use:

*Kathy: "...You see Agatha was best friends with the previous head of department Margot, she retired in the summer and they had a lot of the girls failing the diplomas. So in order to get them all passing the course they would literally do the work for them; they would write notes on the board and they would copy them down word for word for their coursework- they would spoonfeed them everything. Now they've got a new head maybe there's much pressure on her to get them through without doing that..."*

Agatha attempted to utilise lots of scaffolding practices to enable students passage through ZPD but most of her attempts were unsuccessful as students struggled to engage and identify with her and her practices as a teacher as the excerpt below shows:

*9 am Agatha gives out a handout, like an essay plan, to show the girls what to include on their posters for their M2 task. There are 4 bullet points which need to be included on the posters, Agatha mainly goes through the equality of opportunity point, she does this in a spider diagram format- how the two settings from the case study meet equality criteria.*

*I [Sarah] know that the girls have covered everything they need to include in this poster in their class notes and stuff they have been working on for the past few lessons. But the way Agatha has delivered it to the class she hasn't clearly linked it to previous work they have done on the case studies. The girls do poster tasks like this quite often in Rachel's lessons, but 5 minutes into this task they all fall to pieces- they don't understand or have a clue what they have to do. When Agatha comes back she goes round the groups and explains what they have to do but there is still a lot of confusion.*

Agatha tried to encourage the student's independence to ensure a deeper level of understanding was obtained as well as fulfilling the objectives of the assignment briefs. However, her encouragement often assumed the students knew how to study independently, and as discussed earlier in this chapter it is clear that many lacked the experience and knowledge of this desired practice. Ironically, in this instance the students needed Agatha to show or guide them step by step in their learning (as Daniel had recognised) as exposure to this practice would eventually enable the students to become more independent in their learning and therefore participation in Agatha's lessons would have been easier. This modelling approach although reminiscent of the 'spoon-feeding' practices Agatha wanted to avoid, was necessary at first as this would have built up the knowledge and skills of the students and perhaps enabled more successfully passage through the ZPD in her lessons.

Rachel appeared to recognise the need to guide the students more explicitly in the valued practices of independent learning and assignment writing. The data gives numerous examples, such as the one below, where Rachel ensures the students have all the necessary information and shows them how to structure their assignment in line with the assignment brief objectives,

*She writes a paragraph which defines [creative and therapeutic activities] and sums up what it is and tells them they have to include this and examples of different activities*

Rachel's practices enabled more successful passage through the ZPD for the students as the year went on many of the students could complete the tasks she set more independently demonstrating engagement with this practice. The poster task taken from the field notes below illustrates how the students were actively engaged and implementing independence for this assessment:

*9am Lots of activity as I enter the classroom, the girls are getting out the posters and huddling in their groups and chatting. (Posters on factors which influence individual's health needs). Rachel tells the girls they can go to the library or study centre if they need computers to carry on typing up notes for posters- not enough laptops in this classroom.*

*11.50am The groups continue with posters; have to be finished by 12.30. As this draws near lots of rushing tidying and helping others finishing touches. All 5 posters are numbered and put on the wall.*

Although governed by the criteria set in line with the learning objectives of each unit, Rachel endeavoured to go beyond the systematic approach to completing them by modelling and supporting the learning practices valued in the college community such as independent researching and assignment writing. Rachel represented an enabling learning relationship whilst maintaining a good interpersonal relationship with the students.

Unfortunately, Agatha was unable to establish a successful learning or interpersonal relationship with the students. The teaching of the IT Key Skills curriculum contributed to this and presented a further barrier to the students forming any kind of meaningful or positive relationship with Agatha. As described in the narrative in the previous chapter, through no choice of her own, Agatha was set with the task of teaching an unfamiliar subject with unfamiliar curriculum. The course was newly introduced that year so even IT teaching staff could not always provide support to her in delivering the lessons. The students saw the course as pointless and meaningless to them and couldn't understand why they had to do it when

fundamentally they all knew how to use a computer. Some were angry that they were not informed when they enrolled that the course was compulsory.

The introduction of the Key Skills qualification provides further evidence of how the educational policy and qualification makers located in the wider macro system, influences the exo system of Hillcroft College and the micro system of the classroom communities as it shapes and impacts the learning relationships formed.

As learning relationships are not necessarily between student and teacher but between student and student, the establishment of this sort of relationship was arguably at the expense of those formed with the teachers as they involved practices in contrast or opposition to those valued within the classroom and college as a whole. The students' identities as females was meaningful to them, and as discussed earlier provided a powerful basis for identifying with other students in the class. This contributed to the formation of friendships and a social community within the class with many of the valued practices focusing on appearance. The field notes give numerous examples of this:

*9.15 am Sophie and Kim arrive- make-up bags and mirrors out, spend most of the lesson on this*

*Some of the girls, sat applying make-up and grooming*

The participation in these practices was valued amongst the students as a community of females however, would result in reprimand from the teachers as lesson time was not considered the suitable place for doing this. Instances like this would again make the students feel like they were at school being 'shouted at'. This demonstrates the conflicts which can occur within and between the different communities the students were members of at Hillcroft College. Their friendship community was important to their identity however, some of the practices which centred on appearance were not practices valued in the learning community of the classroom. In situations where the students felt vulnerable or lacking confidence in what they needed to do, which was particularly evident in Agatha's lessons. Many displayed joint feelings of discontent and demonstrated resistant behaviours to participating or engaging in her lessons. These behaviours included applying makeup and generally sitting and talking to each other rather than attempting to engage in the work set. In these situations the students had a stronger identification with each other as disaffected learners which was more meaningful to them than the learning Agatha was trying to instil.

From what I observed it is my interpretation that Rachel was the more enabling teacher. The learning experiences she offered in her lessons were more meaningful and understood better by the students and they began to engage in some independent learning practices. However, most of the students perceived Daniel to be the best teacher, indicating how important interpersonal relationships are to students who have not had this previously and have been on the periphery in terms of participating and interacting with other members in their educational community.

I feel it is important to emphasise that the descriptions of the Health and Social Care teachers are those represented and expressed by the focal girls and as documented in the field notes. My intention is not to point the finger at 'good' and 'bad' teachers, but to highlight how inherently social the learning process is, as the relationships established play such a pivotal role in students' experiences and perceptions. Learning relationships are complex and are a product of an intricate web of factors. As bioecological theory suggests, learning is more than an outcome, it is a process occurring over time, activity and person. The students in this research established different learning relationships with their respective teachers and the extent to which they felt enabled was based on their individual feelings as a result of that relationship. Whether they felt enabled or disabled all the girls passed the Health and Social Care course, hence in qualification terms the relationships provided the desired outcome for both students and teachers.

### **6.1.2.2 *Exo-system summary***

Analysis of the exo system as represented by Hillcroft College as an educational institution, reveals how the recruitment and marketing practices implemented positively influenced the students and contributed to their motivation to engage in further study after school (remembering that this research was conducted at a time when further education post-16 was not a compulsory route). SFC represented a meaningful learning culture that the students could identify and wanted to be members of. The students associated the culture and practices of Hillcroft as a means of success and achievement of their future career aspirations. Hillcroft's recruitment practices made the students feel wanted and welcome in the educational community they so desperately sought. However, the students encountered challenges to maintaining full membership within this stemming from their lack of educational capital. Many experienced difficulties engaging in independent learning and maintaining punctuality and attendance in lessons.

The more proximal exo system practices located within the classroom setting demonstrates the significant influence of learning relationships on student experience of college and their learning. This analysis drew upon Vygotsky's theory of ZPD as a way of exploring how the

different learning relationships formed with different teachers enabled participation in learning practices. Unsurprisingly, the teaching practices of each teacher varied however, analysis of these revealed that curriculum structure, content and assessment underpinned many of the practices, shaping opportunities for the formation of enabling learning practices and participation for the students. This analysis suggests that the curriculum of the BTEC First Diploma course is problematic in terms of enabling progression through the ZPD, as in ensuring criteria relating to the learning outcomes of each unit of study are achieved, there were limited opportunities for students to develop independent learning.

Some teachers provided more enabling learning practices than others, and it was revealed that where students could establish an interpersonal relationship with their teacher they felt enabled as learners. Often when students felt disabled by the learning practices it stemmed from the teacher not being able to recognise and adapt to their abilities, particularly where the issue of independent learning was concerned. With the exception of Rachel's lessons, the extent to which students successfully passed through ZPD can be questioned. However, in terms of outcomes all the students completed the course and achieved the qualification. This supports the view that the macro and exo system focus (i.e. college and national government) on outcomes as an accurate measure of learning is problematic. Fundamentally, many of the student's learner identities remained unchanged as many of the practices located within the college classroom were unfamiliar to them and this often prevented or made their participation difficult. Further challenges to participation were encountered as students attempted to negotiate between and across existing communities firstly, the classroom communities provided by each teacher and their practices and secondly, the social community the students established as they formed relationships with each other as friends. These differing communities often valued contrasting practices which influenced the extent to which students could engage.

The differing approaches taken by the teachers illustrates how teaching practices and subsequent learning relationships are shaped by the implicit influences of the wider macro system as curriculum is designed by examining bodies alongside government department for education. Analysis of the exo system reveals the inextricable link between the macro and exo system and how this shapes the micro setting of the classroom in terms of teaching and learning practices. The next section explores further the distal influences of the macro system and the effect it has upon the practices at Hillcroft College and the learning experiences of the students.



### 6.1.3 Macro-system: The implications of policy on practices

The utilisation of a bioecological framework allows for a consideration of the wider influences on college practices and student experience. Exploration of the macro-system in which the college was embedded enables a deeper understanding of the reasons behind many of its practices and an understanding of student motivation to study.

It is well evidenced in both the literature and government policy that the purpose of further education is to provide learners with 'economically valuable skills' (Leitch, 2006 p.2) in order to promote national economic growth, thus enabling competition in globalised markets (Foster Report 2005, Leitch Report 2006, DfES 2005, Jephcote and Abbot 2005, Jephcote, Salsbury & Rees 2008, Spenceley 2006). In pursuit of not only skills but social cohesion and social justice (DfES, 2005) national government delivered policy initiatives to ensure all young people remained in education and training until the age of 18 in order to gain qualifications and therefore skills to contribute to the national and global economy.

The government drive to increase the amount of qualifications achieved by learners and improve the skills of the future work-force is not a new rationale. As discussed in the literature review, this policy rhetoric has been in circulation for decades under successive governments (Pring, 2005, Avis, 2009) and positions the post-16 education sector to specifically address the needs of the economy (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). This focus on creating employable individuals to meet the needs of the economy permeates down to the individual micro-systems of students. All of the focal students viewed college as the stepping stone to university and the careers they aspired to have within health and social care. The skills discourse of the government promoted and shaped the students' aspirations to progress within education. All of them viewed education rather than leaving school to get a job as the path they should choose and this decision was often supported by their families,

*Kirsty: "Like my mum, she pushed me, like to do stuff, but I'm glad she has in a way, cos I wouldn't like to end up in ASDA and stuff like that so. Like some of my friends that have just left school and now they were like 'Oh, I'm just gonna go get a job, and I were like 'You don't want to that.'"*

*Sharon: "I had a talk with my mum and she just said you know, she wants cos you get certificates and stuff innut, and she wants me to be in education right, and you know what I need to do."*

Supported by their families, it seemed that many of the students were instilled with a sense of wanting to do and achieve better than their parents and secure a more prosperous career; college offered the first step in this direction. Framed within a political climate which strives

for young people to be better qualified, the way in which the post-16 sector is funded has implications for how institutions function and operate. Stemming from shifts in educational policy under the Conservative administrations of the late 1980s and early 1990s (see incorporation in chapter 1), many SFCs began to structure themselves in accordance with quasi-market principles. These principles are still in operation today and evident in Hillcroft College.

The basic premise behind marketization was to reduce costs and improve efficiency through competition between colleges and the publication of results to increase the quality of education (Smith, 2007 a). Hillcroft College, in line with the other local providers, were at the centre of a market-approach to education, employing entrepreneurial strategies and practices to compete for students. As indicated in the previous chapter, Hillcroft College embodied a corporate identity, and devoted a large amount of money, time and resources into 'selling' their 'product' (courses and qualifications) to prospective students. Glossy posters, brochures and leaflets emblazoned with the college's mission statement and visions unified in the college colours were visible everywhere on open evenings. Arguably, a large amount of money was spent on the appearance and modern functionality of the campus buildings to create an overall college image that was attractive to students. However, the college did allocate resources and staff to promote inclusive learning opportunities; the Study Centre, the specialist teachers and student support assistants. Thus, Hillcroft College could market itself as a place of study for students of all abilities, attracting students for their provision of vocational courses offered at levels 1-3, and those students following the more typical SFC route of A-Levels. They were able to position themselves in the middle of the local college hierarchy which was a favourable position to be in terms of student numbers and finances secured.

Funding is vital to any educational institution however, for SFCs like Hillcroft it was essential that they secured as much money as possible particularly as they receive less funding than the school sector and do not benefit from schemes such as the VAT refund which schools can claim (see chapter one). By securing and retaining student numbers Hillcroft College could secure its finances.

There is much research in the literature which discusses the managerialist practices at play within the post-16 sector which stems from the way in which it is funded (Smith 2007 b, Spenceley 2006, Spours, Coffield & Gregson, 2007, Avis, 2003). The performance culture of post-16 education is entrenched in discourse associated with marketization, managerialism and performativity promoted by national policy at macro-level and which influences

institutional practices at exo-level. These practices were evident at Hillcroft College both in terms of staffing structure and curriculum delivery.

All members of staff were allocated to a department or services team headed by a line manager or head of department who was held accountable to the assistant principals (four in total, each holding a different remit of responsibility from teaching and learning, safeguarding to finances and estate management). Not unlike other colleges researched in the literature (Smith 2007 a, Spours, Coffield & Gregson 2008, Boocock, 2014, Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001) Hillcroft College engaged in a policy of 'benchmarking' and 'criteria chasing' (Boocock, 2014 p. 352) as they endeavoured to meet performance indicators set by national government in terms of targets, outcomes, audits, funding and inspections to name a few. The college utilised a tight-knit, well organised Senior Management Team (SMT) consisting of the principal, vice-principal, four assistant principals, and two personal assistants responsible for the daily support of the senior managers and administration tasks. As a researcher and member of staff I bore witness to the physical presence of the managerialism culture within the college as a new Senior Management Suite was built (at a cost of £250,000) to accommodate the SMT on the site of a popular and well-used student social space known as 'the street' (as described in the story which can be found in chapter five).

The creation of the SMT Suite prompted me as both researcher and staff member to question whether the amount of money spent on this would serve to benefit the students directly. It seemed that far from positively contributing to student's needs it acted to firstly, remove a much-used student social space and secondly, to create a physical segregation between the students and SMT as the suite was positioned in such a way that it looked-down upon the communal walk-way that was the 'street' and was accessed up via a small staircase. Students were also quickly asked to move-on if they were seen loitering or socialising outside the SMT Suite as they would have done when it was the 'street'. In accordance with this Smith (2007 b) questions whose interests are served and needs best met by operation of quasi-market principles, suggesting that the funding methodology within post-16 education prompts adept colleges to prioritise the interests of the college over student needs therefore promoting a market discourse over an educational discourse.

Further evidence of the market discourse that Hillcroft College implemented can be seen in the attendance monitoring policies it operated. It had to secure a financial return based on the number of students enrolled on courses (funding was based upon the number of students enrolled by a certain date in October of the first term) and in order to maintain its status as a 'good' college in terms of OFSTED inspections and in the opinion of the local community, it

had to produce results in the form of students gaining good qualifications. The responsibility of the performance and audit culture rests predominately upon the teaching staff and research has explored the pressures and workloads experienced by teachers with regards to this and the already difficult demands they have to both teach the curriculum and develop students' skills and self-confidence (Jephcote, Sailsbury & Rees, 2008, Avis, Spenceley, 2006).

These pressures were experienced by the staff at Hillcroft College. The data illustrates in particular how the curriculum and qualification framework, created and prescribed by macro-government policies and agendas, does not allow the college enough time to fully satisfy the needs of the students. This was discussed earlier in the analysis when it was revealed how the curriculum of the BTEC First Diploma shaped the teaching practices of the teachers and impacted upon the opportunities for teachers to form enabling learning relationships with students. The Health and Social Course was taught and continually assessed via coursework in the space of an average academic year September-May (nine months). In this short amount of time teachers needed to try and establish relationships (both interpersonal and learning) deliver curriculum, assess and feedback on work and promote students' personal (self-confidence) and academic development (via reflective writing and portfolios).

Time, or lack of it was a dominant feature within many subject areas, particularly within GCSE courses where students were re-sitting English or Maths or both. Many of the girls from the Health and Social Care class were studying one or both of these additional GCSES and the pressures that the teachers felt were transferred to students in lessons. One teacher in particular, Chloe, teaching GCSE maths, often delivered her lessons in an urgent, panicky style, constantly reminding students that she was delivering a qualification in one year rather than two as Lucy explains,

*"I had like a maths teacher that rushed everything because she had to because it was like a one year course and she was like two years in one year course thing, so she had to like rush, I mean everything!"*

Chloe was always sharp and filled with a sense of urgency. The pressure she felt to get so many students through the course was clear. The amount of content she delivered prevented her from establishing any kind of interpersonal relationship with the students in her class and so, in turn prevented her from establishing good learning relationships as there was not enough time to enable students to consolidate what they had been taught in one area as the next lesson they would be moving on to something else. This lack of time also meant that Chloe expected and needed the students to be proactive learners in their free time i.e. completing their homework and revising. Many of the students in her class either felt

completely disengaged by the subject and her teaching or struggled with the demands of the work or both, that very little homework got completed. This added further to Chloe's frustration.

Whether she realised it or not, Chloe's response to the lack of student participation and engagement in the subject was negative. It seemed she did not have the time to be able to offer a more positive and supportive approach, probably because she was consumed by the drive to get students through the course, as the statistics associated with this would reflect on her performance as a teacher,

*She [Chloe] recaps the previous lesson's work but no-one can answer her when she asks to convert a % to a decimal. She is stern "No-one can answer this? We did it last lesson. You need to be revising you need to get 68% on your exam to get a C. None of you will get that at this rate."*

*As Sarah walks in Chloe says to her there are exams going on today, it makes her feel nervous about her classes; she hopes they pass.*

Chloe endeavoured to be a caring teacher but was oppressed by a system which places high value on pass rates. Chloe offered numerous catch-up and extra help sessions for students in the Study Centre however, her sense of urgency always seemed to act in ways that would 'turn off' students despite her intentions being well meant. The pressures Chloe felt as a teacher of GCSE Maths manifested itself in behaviours and attitudes she could not hide from her students. Many other teachers felt these same pressures but did not display them as publically as Chloe.

The data highlights many instances where teachers struggled to deliver the curriculum in a suitable time-frame more appropriate for the students. At some point each teacher had to rush through the content of their lessons in an effort to deliver all the requirements of the course. Within the H&SC course Rachel and Daniel taught some of Agatha's units as the students were not progressing quickly enough in the time available to them.

It seemed that teachers were unable to have time at the beginning of the academic year to get a comprehensive picture of each student's abilities and enable a period of time which would allow for the development and refinement of personal and academic skills that would enable a fuller position of participation in the college learning community. The two weeks at the beginning of September termed as induction was nothing more than relaying college rules and expectations to students and a few 'ice-breaker' games before the 'real work' began,

*Kirsty: "It were alright because we didn't get straight to work we got to know each other in the class and stuff, we did like fun games."*

Understandably, it was important to ease nerves, get to know other students and settle into classes however, it seemed that the college dedicated very little time to enabling staff to really equip students with the specific skills and abilities and even knowledge for their course. Here would have been an ideal opportunity to model and demonstrate the independent study skills and assignment planning and writing that would be required for the course. However, this was something that was virtually impossible to offer as course content and structure, as determined by the qualification and exam boards, required courses to be taught within time constraints; a year in the case of the Health and Social Care course studied by the focal students.

A further result of the college's efforts to uphold macro-policy was the introduction of an IT Key Skills qualification for all students studying for level 2 courses (apart from those studying IT). The college needed to equip the students with the necessary skills required by the government and the economy however, it lacked the funding and resources to provide staff with IT knowledge and expertise. It essentially became 'dumped' upon teachers from other subject areas to deliver the course, like in the case of Agatha. The students in Health and Social Care resented having to study for IT Key Skills and despised the lessons. Their poor learning and interpersonal relationship with Agatha coupled with a course structure and delivery which did not enable engagement or participation from the students resulted in a lesson dreaded by both teacher and students. In data and performance terms, all the students achieved this qualification (after much input and direction from feedback given by IT teachers on the students' portfolios of evidence) and this reflects favourably on the college. Although it was doubtful whether the students were any more efficient or knowledgeable in IT than they were at the beginning of the course, their completion of the qualification meant in theory they were in receipt of some of the necessary skills desired by government and needed for the economy.

This further highlights how the government focus on skills rhetoric and qualification outcomes as accurate measures of learning are problematic. As discussed in the previous exo-system section, the design, content and assessment of the BTEC course meant that although learning outcomes were achieved by the students, the extent to which deep, meaningful learning took place is questionable as many of the student's learner identities remained unchanged as unfamiliar practices such as independent learning created difficulties for their participation. In the face of challenges to participation in the valued practices of the classroom and college,

many students reverted back to the only practices they knew from school, disengagement and resistance.

Atkins (2010) suggests that the educational opportunities referred to in government rhetoric are a reflection of the domination of economic policy and market forces over the education system. As explored earlier within the micro-system section, government policy presents an appealing image to the types of students enrolled on low-level vocational courses, one of obtaining skilled, technical and professional work, which Atkins (2010) argues is 'entirely unrelated to the low-pay, low-skill drudgery which is much more likely to become reality' p. 259). This macro government rhetoric gives students, like those in this research, false hopes and expectations in relation to their aspirations. This rhetoric fails to recognise that these students have high aspirations and does not provide programmes of study which generate the required educational capital to enable achievement of these aspirations. Therefore, the type of vocational qualification, like that offered by the BTEC First Diploma, can only be considered a 'stepping stone' (Bathmaker, 2001 p.96), giving only enough educational capital to move onto the next level of vocational study rather than securing highly skilled, highly paid employment.

### **6.1.3.1 Macro-system summary**

Analysis of the macro-system demonstrates how political and economic imperatives of central government underpin post-16 education policy. Embedded within this is a rhetoric which focuses on increasing the skills and qualifications of young people. Arguably, this is specifically targeted at those young people like the students in this research, who lack educational capital in terms of achievement in qualifications. The focal students 'bought into' this idea that further study would fulfil their ambitions and aspirations to achieve and progress into a professional career. With this, their choice of course and institution was important. As explored earlier in this analysis (micro-system), a vocational programme of study was better suited to the students' level of educational capital. Furthermore, they could identify with the content found within the H&SC course as they sought to progress into female orientated careers within this field.

In terms of institutional choice, as a SFC, Hillcroft offered a learning culture and environment associated with status, prestige and progression to HE which appealed to the students. Clearly shaped by macro-policy interventions initiated by incorporation in the early 1990s and which continue to exist via the drive for marketization and funding, Hillcroft College provide a range of courses for students of varying abilities. As such, the students wanted to study here rather than the local GFEC.

Despite the vocational programme of study offered within the BTEC First Diploma providing the only viable option for these students, this analysis confirmed previous findings (Bathmaker, 2001, Atkins, 2010) that this type of course provides a pre-determined educational trajectory as students only accumulate enough educational capital to continue on to the next level of study, they are not equipped to find employment in highly skilled and highly paid jobs. Furthermore, the curriculum content and assessment measures of the BTEC qualification often prevented opportunities for meaningful learning and impacted upon the learning relationships students formed with their teachers.

Analysis of the macro-system has revealed how effective the nested systems approach offered in bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is in exploring and illustrating the distributed and interlinking influences of the macro, exo and micro systems on student learning and experience at SFC. It is evident how the macro-system has shaped and informed the practices of the college exo-system and the classroom micro-systems embedded within the college exo-system. It also reveals how in turn this influences the micro-system of the students, shaping their identities as learners and their possibilities for participation in the college learning environment.

#### **6.1.4 Chapter summary**

The basis of this analysis follows on from the story of Hillcroft College in chapter five. It has revealed how consideration and exploration of the proximal and distal factors in operation within and between the micro-systems of students, the exo-system of the college and macro-government policy have enabled an insight into the practices of Hillcroft College and how this influences and shapes the experiences of the students within it. The discussion in this chapter reveals how each of the systems (micro, exo and macro) are interrelated, constantly acting upon and shaping each other. The macro-system of government educational agenda and policy filters down to shape and inform the exo-system practices of the college which in turn influences the teaching practices of the teachers and the relationships established with the students. This subsequently impacts on students' learning experiences and achievements. These wider interrelated factors and practices embed themselves within the micro-systems of students and serve to shape their learner identities and educational aspirations.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory has provided a framework in which CoP and Vygotsky's theory of ZPD are embedded and utilised to explore student engagement and participation in the classroom and college learning practices. This analysis has revealed that learning in SFC should not be viewed in isolation. It is a socially constructed meaning-making process which is influenced by the student (their beliefs, religion, family background, prior educational experiences and qualifications), the activity (classroom and college practices) and



the context (personal circumstances, government educational and economic objectives). Prior to starting their course, the students had forged a learner identity which has, and is continued to be, shaped by this notion of person, activity and context.

The next chapter will offer conclusions and contributions this research has made as well as recommendations for educators, policy makers and future research endeavours within this field of study.

# Chapter 7 Conclusions and contributions

## 7.1 Thesis review

This research sought to explore the everyday practices within a SFC and the experiences of the students within it. The aims of this research were:

- To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity.
- To explore, from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how these influence student experience and learning.
- To explore and understand student experience of sixth form college and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it.
- To contribute to, and apply theory to, teaching and learning in sixth form college.

In common with all research, these aims have been met to some extent. Despite the scope of research and analytical opportunities available in a PhD thesis, the complexity of the educational context of SFC and the literature surrounding it, has meant that I have provided a 'snap shot' of activities and the practices which shape them. Furthermore, I do not propose that the students, teachers and practices embedded with the focal college represent all SFC institutions and those studying and working within them. In doing so, I would like to emphasise that I do not propose to generalise my findings or offer my theorising as fact. My intention throughout this research was not to judge and criticise the college or the teachers, rather, it has sought to explore an area of post-16 education which thus far has been under-researched, and enable an understanding of the differing factors which shape student learning within SFC.

It is also important to acknowledge my presence in the research process. My position as an insider determined both what data I recorded and how I recorded it. I was an active staff member within the research field and so often had to rely on the use of head-notes during break periods or after lessons to record events I had observed. Despite great efforts to record this with accuracy, my memory is not infallible and inevitably some activities or conversations were overlooked. I endeavoured to gather my data as impartially as possible however, given my close working relationships with both students and staff it was difficult to avoid embedding my own perspectives within the data. Upon re-reading the data sometime after the field-notes had been transcribed I felt that my own views and opinions, particularly the frustration I felt towards Agatha, were contained within parts of the data. I freely acknowledge that the data as it is presented and analysed reflects my interpretivist epistemology. As a researcher and staff member of the college I could not easily extract myself from the research process.

However, I did take time to engage in reflexive practices in the form of a research journal and confidential discussions with my supervisors both during and after data collection. Stemming from this I made a conscious effort to ensure my data analysis focused on the activities that were observed rather than my own thoughts and made the decision to story the data in third person rather than first person narrative.

Furthermore, I feel it is also important to acknowledge that due to the sheer volume of data I gathered, I had to be selective in the extracts I used in order to best represent the richness of the data within the word confines of the thesis. I tried to focus the story of Hillcroft College in a way which best represented its practices and the experiences of the students within it, as such I have inevitably overlooked other valuable aspects of the data. The choices I made in terms of constructing the story served to illustrate the everyday 'goings-on' within the college and the focal students' lives and in doing so I tried to remain faithful to the data. The data were recorded, analysed and discussed through the ontological and epistemological lens I adopted as a researcher. The subjective and qualitative nature of this research coupled with my position as an insider, means I have been inextricably linked to each part of the process.

The ethnographic methodology employed and subsequent narrative and thematic analysis has enabled a deep exploration of the research aims, which I believe could not have been achieved had other methods been used. I have focussed my research aims and in so doing, contributed to the existing body of literature within SFCs, albeit it with the caveats discussed above.

### **7.1.1 Contribution to the literature**

I began this research journey with a determination to contribute to an area of post-16 education which was under-researched in terms of exploring the views and experiences of the learners within it. SFCs are the second largest provider of post-16 education in the UK after GFECs (AoC, 2015). According to SFCA (2014) compared to GFECs and SSFs, SFC students perform better in exams (obtaining higher than average point scores) and higher numbers of SFC students progress onto HE and university. Despite the expansive provision available at SFCs for students of varying abilities, there is little contemporary research that directly focuses on it as an institution. There is even less which explores the experiences of students studying on a vocational course as this research is usually conducted within GFECs where these types of courses are more often associated.

This piece of research attempts to bridge gaps in the literature in a number of ways; firstly, it provides contemporary research in terms of SFC as an under-researched post-16 institution, secondly it focuses on students undertaking a vocational programme of study and not those studying for A-levels which are regarded as the staple provision of SFCs, and lastly, it

attempts to present the learning experiences from the perspectives of the students, placing them at the focus of the research, rather than the political and economic imperatives which have dominated this area of study in the past. I do not disregard these imperatives as they have served to construct the educational environment of SFCs and subsequently the experiences of the students who study there. As my research journey has unfolded, I have come to realise and accept that there is no escape from the macro influence of government educational policy. Not only is it ever-present, and in the case of post-16 education, ever-changing, it produces important ramifications for providers and the students at the centre of it. Nor do I disregard the importance of research which seeks the views and experiences of teaching staff however, I felt it important within this study to position the views and the voice of the students at the centre of the research.

My chosen theoretical underpinnings provided an understanding of the data in accordance with my interpretivist epistemological assumptions and enabled the research to contribute to both the literature and theories of learning. The following sections will briefly summarise how the findings of this research has met its intended aims.

#### ***7.1.1.1 To explore the teaching practices and college practices and how these influence student learning and identity***

Essentially, these practices were underpinned and informed by macro processes stemming from within government educational policy and qualification decision makers. Fundamentally, SFC practices are governed by funding formulas therefore, it is important for them as institutions to provide courses and qualifications for a range of learners to secure maximum student numbers and finance.

Hillcroft College offered the prestige and status associated with SFC study whilst maintaining an inclusive ethos and mission statement which provided for, and attracted, learners considered to be low achievers (learners who were the focus of this research). Its marketing practices successfully recruited and motivated students to engage in further study (bearing in mind that at the time this research was conducted, further study post-16 was not compulsory). The focal students had acquired enough educational capital in terms of qualifications to enrol at a desirable college and this increased their self-confidence in terms of being learners worthy to be students at SFC.

The everyday practices across the college and within the classroom served to both enable and disable student participation in learning. Students felt enabled when teachers treated them with respect and as adult learners. This made them feel valued and therefore, fuller participation in the learning community was enabled. This involved teaching practices

considered to be non-challenging or threatening as these were learners who lacked educational capital in terms of positive educational experiences and relationships and high achievement in qualifications. This research found that teachers who promoted practices which made the students feel involved in their learning and provided positive interpersonal relationships enabled the students to feel like full, legitimate members of their classroom community.

However, the central college practice valued across all classroom communities was that of independent learning. This was problematic for the students as they lacked previous knowledge, skill or experience of this practice therefore, when teaching practices demanded this their participation was often disabled. This suggests that for many of these students their learner identities remained unchanged or transformed as they were unable to fully participate in this practice. Moreover, it had ramifications for the practices of the teachers in terms of enabling passage through the students' ZPD and subsequent educational progression.

#### ***7.1.1.2 To explore from the perspective of the students, the relationships formed between students and teachers and how this influences student experience and learning***

Due to the lack of literature within SFC compared to other educational sectors, I felt it was important to focus on the perspectives of the students, therefore, these findings represent my interpretation of the students' views on the learning relationships they formed.

The relationships the students established with teachers were a powerful force in determining whether or not participation in the valued learning practices were enabled. Central to students feeling legitimate and central participants in their classroom community was the formation of interpersonal relationships with their teachers as this then enabled the formation of a learning relationship. The findings indicate that where teaching practices were unfamiliar to the students (such as independent learning) and no opportunity was given to form an interpersonal relationship, participation in learning was disabled.

The different relationships the students established with their teachers were underpinned by the valued teaching practices of each respective teacher. This was often problematic for the students as they found it difficult to negotiate the differing practices across and within their differing classroom communities. Teaching practices were often informed by the BTEC curriculum content and assessment which meant that some teachers focused on systematic practices which ensured students achieved the criteria for learning outcomes, rather than trying to equip them with the skills needed for independent learning. As such the concept of independent learning was somewhat paradoxical as teachers wanted to promote this. Some

tried to do this more than others, and some were reasonably successful at trying to encourage it. All the teachers employed differing scaffolding practices to encourage independent learning to enable students to pass through their ZPD however, these findings suggest that for many students this did not happen despite all the students passing the course. A combination of the limited educational capital the students retained in terms of knowledge, skills and experience and a curriculum with little scope to promote independent practices meant that for many students their learner identities remained unchanged and they were unable to adapt their skills in order to implement independent learning. In order for the students to gain these skills they needed to be directly modelled by the teacher, they needed to be guided and shown step-by-step what they needed to do. Some teachers mis-assumed that students had some of these skills and those that recognised the deficiency were restricted by time to enable this. Therefore, it is questionable whether successful passage through ZPD was enabled. This poses significant questions for providers and practitioners as the students achieved the qualification but the extent to which deep, meaningful learning took place and whether they could implement independent study is debatable. This prompts the question as to whether these students really have the skills and knowledge for the next level of study? If not will their level three study be a similar repetition of their First Diploma at level 2?

### ***7.1.1.3 To explore and understand student experience of SFC and to gather their perspectives on participation and access to it***

As a SFC, Hillcroft was placed in a local hierarchy with other institutions but assumed a favourable position in-between the alternative highly academic SFC and the lowly regarded GFEC. As a typical SFC, Hillcroft offered an appealing adult learning culture for the students that they believed would enable achievement of their aspirations. It was viewed as a positive place for further study which would enable progression. This was somewhat true as Hillcroft prided itself on being able to offer a supportive and inclusive learning environment (initiated primarily by incorporation of 1992 with associated market-led practices still in force) and so the students retained a level of self-value as they were able to enrol at a SFC rather than the GFEC which they all held in low regard. Consequently, their access to their desired learning institution was enabled.

This research is fairly unusual in that the focus is on students on a vocational programme of study within SFC rather than GFEC, as is frequently found in the literature. The students in this research were not 'typical' SFC students in the sense that they were not high achievers studying for SFCs' 'staple product' of A-levels. Despite their low academic achievements, the students didn't harbour low aspirations, and arguably 'bought into' government rhetoric which reinforced that investment in skills and qualifications would lead to employment with associated financial benefits for them as individuals and the nation's economy as a whole.

Arguably, the students in this research had vulnerable and fragile learner identities stemming from their prior learning experiences. Their lack of educational capital in terms of qualifications and positive school experiences including relationships with school teachers meant that many of the valued college practices were unfamiliar to them therefore, participation in many of the learning practices were problematic. For full participation to be enabled, practice needs to be meaningful and for many of the students this was not the case. As discussed earlier, if teaching practices assumed that students were able to employ independent study when they could not, this had implications for full participation. Similarly, college practices which centred on punctuality and attendance made the students feel like children at school and 'turned them off' therefore affecting their engagement.

However, the student's identities as young, females were very meaningful to them and enabled the formation of peer relationships within the classroom. This often involved practices which focused on their appearance and essentially 'being female' as this was a practice that was meaningful to them and which they were not bound to fail in, (as they were considered failures in educational terms). This investment in the practices associated with their female identities also served to disable participation as they were in contrast to practices valued within the classroom. Application of make-up was not an activity which teachers deemed appropriate during lessons.

The findings of this research suggest that many of the students struggled to achieve full, legitimate membership of the college and classroom communities. Instances where students could form a good interpersonal relationship with their teacher and where the teacher did not undermine their confidence as learners, participation was enabled and students did not feel marginalised. However, this was contingent on the relationships formed with teachers and their respective practices, and as discussed earlier, many teaching practices were arguably restricted by the vocational curriculum and the lack of educational capital the students retained, therefore, successful participation in learning was not always enabled.

Nonetheless, the accounts from the focal students demonstrate that they believed SFC was the right choice of learning institution and were motivated and engaged to 'be students' within it, even if in reality they encountered challenges to participation.

#### ***7.1.1.4 To contribute to and to apply theory surrounding teaching and learning in SFC***

This research has revealed how teaching and learning are inextricably linked to macro education policy and curriculum design. To understand teaching and learning a distributed approach needs to be taken which considers the person, activity, context and time.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory has been effective in demonstrating this and for providing a framework to situate and understand the differing influences on students' learning experiences. This framework has illustrated the powerful and inextricable link between the multi-layered environments in which students are situated. Within this it was clear to see how the college affected student identity and itself was affected by wider macro-policy imperatives from the government. Exploration of the micro-systems of the focal students prompted a consideration of their learning histories and careers and helped to understand how their life and prior educational experiences shape them as learners and contribute to the formation of their learner identities. This then affects the extent to which they can negotiate their participation in SFC.

Previous research literature within post-16 education acknowledges the influences of micro activities in shaping the learner identity of students however, this research goes one step further, illustrating and linking the activities of the exo and macro systems on the learning experiences of students.

This study has contributed to CoP literature as it supports a view that positions learning as a social process where learners participate in the valued practices of a given learning community. CoP provided a powerful tool for exploring students' engagement and participation in their studies and offered explanations of their participatory behaviour in terms of their membership in the college learning environment and how they negotiated meaning based on the college practices and the relationships they formed with teachers. Here this research has demonstrated the intricate link between the learner identity of the students and participation. Where college and classroom practices were familiar and understood by students', identification was enabled and they could participate as legitimate members. Where practices were unfamiliar and/or lacked meaning, students struggled to identify and participation was disabled.

Moreover, the research has suggested that Vygotsky's learning theory and concept of ZPD is a useful tool in understanding the nature of learning relationships. Findings from this study suggest that these kinds of vocational learners require more input and direction to enable successful passage through the ZPD. The course design and assessment structure had ramifications for the extent to which ZPD could be enabled by teachers.

### **7.1.2 Recommendations**

I believe recommendations can be drawn from my research findings which will serve to inform educational policy makers and SFC providers. I am mindful that despite my close links to SFC and the data I gathered, I do not claim to be an 'expert' in the field and so I carefully frame



my recommendations as suggestions and not necessarily solutions. I feel the best way to represent these suggestions is to situate them in terms of macro, exo and micro levels.

At the macro-level, policy makers need to acknowledge a theory/theories of learning (such as that of Vygotsky and CoP) in their educational policies and initiatives and reconsider the curriculum content and delivery of courses within this. Vygotskian and CoP principles situate learning as a social and interactional process contingent on the learning relationships formed. The curriculum does not fully account for this and teachers are faced with a somewhat constant drive to create more successful learners in terms of qualifications and skills, within a short time-frame. Teachers need more time to really enable successful learning through effective learning relationships and a curriculum not overloaded with content. Teachers either need more time to deliver courses as they are currently structured or follow a curriculum that is more concise in content and which will enable a more thorough delivery within the remits of current course periods. Furthermore, teachers need to be able to devote their time, energy and subject passion into teaching and supporting learners, rather than target chasing.

The coursework approach which the BTEC curriculum offers is well suited to the types of learners enrolled on these programmes. However, the structure of the learning outcomes and assessment means that learning becomes a systematic process focusing on achieving pass criteria rather than involving deep or purposeful learning. A curriculum which offered a coursework approach with less content would allow the teachers more flexibility to develop the skills necessary for the students to develop and progress.

At the exo-level it would be useful for colleges to focus on the development of basic skills and the self-confidence levels of the students as learners during induction or transition periods. Fun ice-breaker games have their place within this along with explanations of the rules and regulations of the college. However, they represent a somewhat superficial element of the induction process and don't really serve to ease academic transition from school practices to college practices. This research highlighted how the culture of SFC expects independent learners and this can cause a somewhat problematic concept for students who struggle to adapt to this. The transition from secondary school to college is significant for students as they attempt to adapt and negotiate the practices of their new educational environment. Induction or transition periods would be far better served in developing students' sense of agency and autonomy as this will enable them to participate more successfully as independent learners and enhance their educational capital.

This research has revealed how educational capital, prior learning experiences and learner identity all determine the extent to which participation is enabled. It is important for SFC to recognise how different BTEC learners are in terms of these factors and to allow teachers the time to equip them with the necessary skills to participate more fully and more independently in the SFC culture. This however, as discussed earlier, is difficult to implement due to course structure, assessment measures and time constraints.

Stemming from this at a micro-system level situated in the classroom context, teachers need to understand the abilities of their students and promote classroom practices which serve to encourage participation. This is something which could be addressed and established during induction but given the problematic concept of time this is not as simple as it seems. Moreover, these research findings suggest that learning is enabled when teachers can form a good interpersonal relationship with students.

### **7.1.3 Further research**

There are a number of further research opportunities available as a result of this research. These are summarised as follows:

- ◆ Research which focuses on both student and teacher identities and their respective participation in SFC practices.
- ◆ Further exploration into educational capital and how it shapes learner identity and educational participation within SFC.
- ◆ Further exploration of the factors which influence the formation and maintenance of effective learning relationships within SFC.
- ◆ Research focusing on student transition from secondary school to SFC and how it shapes student learning experiences.
- ◆ Research focusing on the transition of level 2 BTEC learners onto level 3 courses and the extent to which their learner identities transform.
- ◆ Research which examines the learning trajectories of students within the vocational curriculum
- ◆ Further research into the role of aspirations and how this influences learner identity and educational trajectory.

From this I would strongly advocate research which considers the students in equal measures to the teachers and the structure of SFC, as this has been a feature lacking in much of the research.

### **7.1.4 Concluding thoughts**

This research has revealed the inextricable link between students' learning, life and identity and how this serves to inform and shape their experience of SFC education. One positive

aspect gleaned from this research is that despite many differing factors operating within and upon the lives of students, SFC is a route students *want* to take and is a route that offers students of varying abilities success and achievement.

As I reach the end of my research journey SFCs continue to dominate educational news in terms of their struggles to secure adequate funding to enable the wide ranging and successful provision they offer. It appears that in addition to appearing on the margins within educational research and literature, SFCs are placed on the financial margins in terms of adequate funding compared to other sectors. This needs to change. By enabling more adequate funding SFCs could then invest in the allocation of time to promote and guide the academic practices many students (particularly those on vocational courses) lack. Provision and support for vocational learners is more important now than ever, as post-16 education is compulsory to the age of 18 and publications such as the Wolf Report (2011) openly criticise the provision of vocational programmes at level 3 in SFCs. This will not be the first nor the last call made by a researcher to educational policy and curriculum makers to better understand the complexities of teaching and learning and to respond more effectively to the needs of the students in terms of initiatives and curriculum it produces.

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