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The paradox of BKSB assessments and functional skills: the experiences of 'disengaged' youth on an employability course in a further education college

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ABSTRACT

Self-governance and responsibilisation are integral to Basic Key Skills Builder (BKSB) assessments and Functional Skills qualifications. However, very little is known of its neoliberalist effects and the governance practices of tutors teaching disengaged youth taking Functional Skills as part of the overall employability certificate. Adopting a case study approach within a large further education (FE) college, qualitative research was conducted over two academic years (2013–2015) with tutors and students enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, an employability course designed as a Raising of Participation Age (RPA) re-engagement provision to engage former NEET and disengaged youth in FE. Drawing on Foucault's theory of governmentality for analysis, key empirical findings revealed chaos, controversy and contradictions inasmuch as exposing the problematic ways in which course tutors implemented BKSB assessments and Functional Skills. Evidently, BKSB and Functional Skills operated as powerful, governance mechanisms of management ordering students according to their capabilities whilst simultaneously bringing students face-to-face with their individual shortcomings. The paper concludes that although in principle the participants were positioned in a setting which could ideally offer them a through-way from pre-vocational studies to university or apprenticeships, in actual reality this opportunity was not granted for many participants. This was exacerbated by the fact that this qualification held lowered academic status. It is on this basis that I argue for a revamp and restructure of the educational framework so that it integrates and position pre-vocational courses as the first formal rung of qualifications.

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Introduction

> "So the NEET intervention team might have a student that's sort of been sitting at home for six months. They've just been picked up . . . so then we pick up those young people, do our stuff with them on the course and then after 17 weeks, they'd hopefully progress . . . " (Interview with Aggy, September 2014).

We are told by the British government that leaving the English education system at the age of 16 with few or no academic qualifications can be detrimental to young people's future prospects, increasing the risk of social exclusion and increasing marginalisation from education and employment at a crucial stage in life. This is especially the case for youth who are not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) for sustained periods during their formative years. Many have left school with low GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) grades or no school-leaving

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qualifications (Tomlinson 2013) and are already positioned as 'hardest to reach' in official discourse (DfES 2004). From the point of view of the Department for Education and Skills, NEETs and those lacking in educational qualifications cause political concerns in that they undermine the political ideals of responsible citizenship and prospects for national economic growth.

Consequently, the government has introduced policies and strategies such as the NEET intervention teams mentioned in Aggy's narrative, aimed at increasing youth participation in post-compulsory education and training opportunities in the workplace. Strategies to increase youth participation in post-compulsory education go back to the 1970s at least, as seen in the development of the Youth Opportunities Programme for example. A contemporary strategy was established through the Education Skills Act (2008) which introduced the Raising of Participation Age (RPA) policy of extending compulsory education to 17 and 18-year-olds. It suggests that participation in post-16 education and training offers youth the opportunity to gain higher qualifications and become members of a skilled, qualified workforce that contributes to the national economy. Implemented in England in 2013, the RPA policy stipulates that young people are required to remain in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17. In 2015, this participation age rose to their 18th birthday (DfES 2012). Another strategy promoting the skills agenda involved the publication of stories of infrequent individuals who move from rags to riches perpetuating the meritocratic idea that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough (Coffield et al. 2008).

The assumption of RPA was that a prolonged period in education or training would improve young people's qualification achievement, facilitate the acquisition of skills, and also improve financial prospects (Simmons 2008). Individuals were held responsible for their lack of qualifications and reduced levels of participation in further education, key reasons why they may face difficulties in securing access to an increasingly competitive education sector and labour market. By focusing on individual shortcomings, complex, wide-ranging structural factors which perpetuate social inequality and impact youth transitions to higher levels of study and employment were neglected. Yet, the route to inclusivity and improved life chances announced in RPA is not straightforward. This is especially the case for NEET and disengaged youth who are mostly drawn from working-class backgrounds (Atkins, 2009). Despite the challenges raised by structural inequalities, the government has continually pushed for raised participation levels. By implication, the further education (FE) sector is expected to play a key role in producing future workers with the credentials, knowledge and skills necessary to compete in the modern economy. Colleges are consequently expected to develop closer links with industry and the local economy.

Although there is a range of previous academic literature on working-class youth in the education system, actual research studies on pre-vocational and Level 1 students on employability courses are limited. Though useful, these studies were largely conducted pre-RPA when students were under no obligation to participate in post-compulsory education. This evidently highlights an existing gap in current research in the post-RPA era. Very little seems to be known as to whether the RPA offers a second chance opportunity for marginalised youth. In so doing, this study explores pre-vocational learners' educational experiences and whether RPA has positively influenced the possibilities for students with low academic qualifications to progress to higher levels of study or employment.

In this article, I firstly provide a brief focus on RPA and marginalised youth, followed by a focus on the government's employability agenda and how it relates to the Level 1 Achieving Skills employability course. Thereafter I provide a description of the research methodology employed in this article. Following this, I present three key findings and draw on Foucault's theory of governmentality as an analytical framework for critical analysis. Lastly, I argue that BKSB and Functional Skills are key examples of educational systems which have iatrogenic effects, shown in the exclusionary discourses and institutional practices that reproduce social inequality and disadvantage for most marginalised youth trying to access essential provision and higher levels of study and training within this competitive college sector.

Background context

RPA and marginalised youth

Often, we have been told that the attainment of academic credentials facilitates higher academic and economic outcomes (Bynner 2004) and even though this may be the case in various situations, increasingly, current research underscores complexity and the opposite reality. In actual fact, nowadays there is a continued over-supply of well-qualified workers (Simmons and Thompson 2011; Allen and Ainley 2010), yet many of them were working in low-skilled occupations such as kitchen/catering assistants and waiters/waitresses (Office for National Statistics 2014). These findings bring into question RPA rhetoric, as it suggests that qualifications do not always guarantee access to high-skilled occupations.

Moreover, the labour market vulnerabilities increase for young people from poorer backgrounds; a situation which is particularly exacerbated by the fact that marginalised youth tend to be enrolled on courses on the lower rung of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Atkins 2009) instead of the higher-level study programmes that might offer better chances for students to achieve greater academic and economic gains. It is important here to clarify that employability courses such as the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course are entry level and known as a pre-vocational qualification. Entry level is the most basic form of qualification and usually provides an introduction into education for those looking to enter formal education. This means that the employability course is positioned outside the formal rung of qualifications. In England, there are eight different levels of education that indicate the rating of notional difficulty, ranging from entry level up to level eight on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Once students on the employability course successfully pass, in principle they could access Level 1 qualifications, the first formal rung on the numbered system of qualifications that lead to access to vocational courses in college.

However, researchers such as Atkins (2009) discovered that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be enrolled on low-level courses which hardly provides opportunity for improved social and economic positioning (Atkins 2013; Wolf 2011). Essentially it meant that former NEET and disengaged youth therefore also tend to have restricted access to higher-status modes of knowledge within many educational settings (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011). Research evidence thus exposes the varying ways how marginalised youth has differential access to knowledge and subsequent restricted opportunities within academic settings (Simmons 2008). It therefore raises doubt over the extent to which young people with no or low school-leaving qualifications enrolled on pre-vocation courses, could benefit from participation in post-16 education and the employability agenda.

The employability discourse

The employability discourse has progressively become dominant in post-industrial economies including the UK, where the workforce is expected to have improved qualifications and social skills in order to hold their own in an increasingly competitive and knowledge-driven economy. Other than the development of technical understanding and subject knowledge, key employability skills include numeracy, literacy, social skills, creativity, personal attributes such as communication and interpersonal skills, problem-solving, self-presentation, team-working and values (HEFCE 2013). Moreover, the government white paper, *21st century skills: realising our potential – individual, employers, nation* (DfES 2003) highlights employability as a national strategy aimed at ensuring that individuals have the right skills to be employable in a globalised knowledge economy. Similarly, the European Union introduced education policies that reflect a more flexible labour market in response to the challenges of globalisation, portraying the idea that an investment in human capital through qualification attainment and skills development could improve employability (European Commission 2007). On this basis, both national and international policies

reflect a relatively new type of discourse that prioritises employability and shape the contemporary employment landscape.

Against this backdrop, UK policies such as RPA are ostensibly drafted as a mechanism to facilitate a global, knowledge-driven economy. This political motivation was directly linked to the notion of a global economy, a key influence that has played a profound role in establishing the global markets over the past 30 years. In turn, the effects of globalisation can be seen in the deindustrialisation of employment which resulted in an increasing spread of more flexible, precarious labour markets as well as growing forms of income inequality and work. As a consequence, nowadays more people face a precarious existence without any job security, undertaking short-term labour without any assurance of employment benefits received by the by those in employment (Standing 2011). Highlighting the issue of the precarious nature of employment, the UK Government skills strategy white paper, cautions that the idea of having a job for life is no longer possible within a global economy. Instead, it is more realistic to talk about employability for life.

Essentially the RPA course that I examined was part of a broader, national employability strategy intended to instil a work culture in the youth workforce prepared for the current competitive, changing economic and labour market. It is anticipated that through participation in the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, discourses on employability are mobilised in the wider terrain with a central aim of constructing a pliable and adaptive worker. Emphasising lifelong learning and investment in human capital (referring to an individual's skills-set, capacity, education, qualifications and personal attributes which influence their earning potential), the individual is held responsible for becoming adaptable and flexible to become and remain employable. Training courses aimed at developing employability are therefore expected to produce a workforce that is job ready. This means they are educated and qualified, literate and numerate, as well as having social skills that can be transferred into a workplace. Employability programmes tend to be generic rather than job-specific and focus on the supposed transferable skills needed by an individual to make them 'employable'. Supposedly, employability skills are teachable.

Level 1 Achieving Skills Course and broader employability agenda

The Level 1 Achieving Skills Course is an RPA re-engagement provision aimed at developing employability skills for former NEETs and disengaged youth deemed to be on the margins of society. The curriculum constitutes an employability certificate and additional qualifications in numeracy, literacy and personal development. Students are expected to engage in work-related training to gain knowledge and understanding of the workplace, as well as focusing on their communication, literacy, numeracy, self-presentation and interpersonal skills. This course aims to develop vocational knowledge and expose students to workplace behaviour, whilst focusing on students' social identity and personal attributes, focusing on confidence building, self-esteem, independent learning and CV writing skills to get students job ready.

However, various studies found that for many young people from working-class backgrounds, issues of social identity and societal expectations can also influence their relative chance of obtaining different types of employment (Simmons and Thompson 2009). Youth on employability schemes are often perceived as lacking certain behaviours and attitudes. In fact, further research has also found that the absence of certain behaviours, attitudes and social skills may also indicate why some youth may struggle finding employment (Atkins 2009). It is therefore hardly surprising that the employability mandate includes a focus on self-presentation and social skills. In view of this, the employability curricula emphasise that much of the 'learning' students expect to undertake will also involve socialisation into the workplace, including a consequent focus on social and functional skills necessary to enhance employability (Atkins 2013). This emphasis can be seen in qualifications that are advertised as helping young people to develop the key personal skills, qualities and attitudes required by employers as well as helping students progress in education.

Hence, through engagement in lifelong learning, individuals are expected to develop in the required areas so that they do not have to face such disadvantages – at least in principle (Simmons

2008). For this reason, RPA is considered to be a key political and economic strategy aimed at delivering employability skills to NEET youth and those lacking in qualifications. Employability courses therefore play a central role in FE. They are designed to improve 'employability' by teaching a combination of vocational training and social skills to be used in everyday life and in the workplace. However, how is this particular employability curriculum delivered at The Site and does this provision achieve its stated aims with students on this course?

Methodology

Case study

Empirical research was conducted at a large general further education (FE) college in the East of England, named The Site. The use of a case study design was an appropriate research strategy, enabling me to accentuate the narratives of complexity and marginalised experiences for most participants on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. Through adopting a case study approach, I was able to provide a detailed report based on contextual influences that may construct narratives and operational practices within The Site. This approach enables a selection of 'information-rich' cases (Ayry et al. 2010) and also provides scope for an intensive description and analysis of a research phenomenon that is place and time specific (Berg 2004). However, case studies invariably lack reliability and open up the possibility of subjectivity and prejudice (Ayry et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the research aim was not to produce research findings that could be considered representative or generalisable. Instead, what I address is the issue of transferability (Lincoln and Guba 1985) as it is hoped that the study will provide a rich and deep representation of educational issues within a specific FE college as they exist at a particular moment in time when the study was conducted.

Sampling and research participants

It was essential to choose a sampling method that would select research participants with a particular set of characteristics and experiences of the study programme. Participants were thus sampled 'purposively'; using criterion sampling as the chosen sampling strategy as it enabled predominant focus on participants that have direct involvement with this particular course. Purposive sampling is a technique that is characteristic of case study methodology and provides maximum insight and understanding on the research topic (Ayry et al. 2010). Purposive samples are often premised on the concept of 'Theoretical Sampling' as introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to describe the selection of participants who represent the important characteristics considered as being of central importance. However, any selection of non-random sampling strategies is open to bias and may not necessarily reflect substantial diversity (Babbie 2012). Nonetheless, by its very nature a criterion sample offers critical insight and depth into a research issue that advances knowledge and understanding on a research matter. Hence, the criteria for selection of participants in my study were: Students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course; Core staff in the above team; Senior staff that have direct involvement with the course and type of learners.

Students self-selected to participate in the study and all course tutors agreed to be interviewed. The students who participated in the study were predominantly White British, with the exception of two black female students and one white male student of Polish origin. These students were aged 16–18, the majority having low or no GCSE grades. An analysis of student records indicates that several students were referred by the NEET intervention team, who were authorised by the local authority to refer and assist NEET young people with suitable forms of educational provision. The remainder of the student cohort either self-referred or were signposted by mainstream vocational courses for the purposes of improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

Data collection and analysis

Empirical research was conducted with seven course tutors and 26 students from the 2013–14 and 2014–15 cohorts. I used multiple methods of data collection: the fieldwork consisted of 130 hours of classroom observations with two student cohorts, two student focus groups, nine staff interviews and ten semi-structured interviews with students. In the light of the large volume and the rich qualitative data gathered through the fieldwork, a thematic framework was required. I adopted a manual thematic coding procedure which involves the use of an interview schedule and classroom observations to elicit descriptive and explanatory accounts of how and why government and institutional policies and practices impact overall student levels of participation, achievement and progression within and beyond the education system. The interviews were transcribed in full and then each transcript was read alongside a framework of all major themes and sub-themes that were outlined within the interview keys. Whilst reading the transcripts, new themes and sub-themes that emerged during interviews were listed together with the original interview keys. This created a complex index of all the major sub-themes that arose throughout the fieldwork and data analysis. In the Critical Discussion, Foucault's theory of Governmentality appropriately served as analytical tool, examining conduct, governance and power dynamics on this course.

Empirical findings

A close examination of research findings on the delivery of BKSB assessments and Functional Skills qualifications at The Site revealed three key themes: self-governance and 'responsibilisation' of marginalised students; controversy and contradictions in staff practices and lastly, Functional Skills and the mandate for students to socially develop.

Self- governance and 'responsibilisation' of marginalised students

Self-governance and responsibilisation are etched in the design of BKSB assessments and Functional Skills qualifications. These governance principles are made visible right at the outset when students undertake online BKSB Diagnostic Assessments, a fully interactive system designed to track student's Functional Skills levels in English, Maths and ICT from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 (https://www.bksb.co.uk/about/functional-skills/). Principally, BKSB facilitates self-governance in that it enables students to self-mark the online assessments in English and Maths, whereupon a percentage score is awarded which automatically produces an interactive Individual Learning Plan (ILP). This personalised assessment of an individual's literacy and numeracy skills is designed to highlight any skills-gap, as well as directing them to appropriate online resources which they need to access in order to fill those deficiencies. Fundamentally, individual responsibility is squarely placed on students to address these individual shortcomings, regardless of whether they agreed or had computer access to online resources at home.

Furthermore, my classroom observations on the Level 1 Achieving Skills employability course revealed critical insight into the everyday reality for students undertaking BKSB and Functional Skills on the course. Stationed at a computer in the classroom, under close supervision from the tutor and learning support practitioner (LSP), students were instructed to access the official BKSB website hosting the online assessment. Initially, students grumbled and there were high levels of apprehension about having to do Maths and English assessments, but despite this, tutors reiterated the importance for them to sit these assessments as steps towards the attainment of the overall employability course. The students' complaints gradually became less apparent as they continued with the assessment task, whilst the teaching staff were patrolling but also frequently assisting where necessary. Given the overall slow pace, the online assessment took much longer than the lesson time, and some students requested assistance with the self-marking process. In the end, everyone received their assessment result, which consequently triggered the ILP and percentage

score indicative of the student's level of Functional Skills. The substantial majority of students scored low and joked about it; perhaps out of embarrassment or affinity. Either way, the empirical data showed that Functional Skills was institutionalised on the course and tutors ensured that students engaged with the process, with or without their tutors' active support.

Interested in gaining the students' views on the course, almost all of them raised the issue of Functional Skills Maths and English. In one of the student interviews, David stated:

> This course . . . it's mostly about Maths and English really, isn't it? You don't get to do anything hands-on . . . We focus on Functional Skills Maths and English a lot. My aim is just to get on the catering course here . . . and get my grades up. I've got a D-GCSE grade in Maths and an E grade in English. I got better grades in other subjects though . . . Here you sit Functional Skills Maths and English exams. I don't like that, it's like you are back at school. This course feels like school, but a college school (Interview with David, 27.11.2014).

David's narrative identified the strong focus on Functional Skills Maths and English on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. Aspiring to do a catering course, he complained about the lack of hands-on-learning opportunities and the prioritised focus on Functional Skills Maths and English on the course. David's GCSE profile on the student database, presented a relatively good set of GCSE grades for various subjects, including Maths. Nevertheless, he recognised that his GCSE Maths and English grades were below the C-grade; hence his reported need to improve on these grades. However, in doing Functional Skills and the way it is designed, the diagnostic focus mapped in the ILP confronted him with the areas of literacy and numeracy skills which required work. This specific focus on his individual shortcomings, together with the requirement to sit and pass the exams in both Maths and English in order to attain the overall employability qualification, perhaps explains why David believed that the course felt more like school than a college course. Still, participants were told that they needed to work on identified shortcomings in order to become employable.

Controversy and contradictions in staff practices

A closer examination of the course team's practice revealed that there was a distinct deviation from staff protocol concerning BKSB assessments. Although the tutors still used the BKSB to track Functional Skills levels from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 in order to identify skill gaps, it soon became apparent that the tutors also used the diagnostic assessments to override the college's GCSE policy. Perhaps here it is important to acknowledge that the college policy states that when students have already attained at D grade in GCSE Maths and or English, then students automatically qualify for entry onto GCSE provision. By implication, this opportunity to re-take GCSEs in these subjects, likewise extends to students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course when they meet the GCSE entry requirements.

However, my empirical data revealed controversy: even though various students have attained a D-GCSE grade and therefore in principle should have been enrolled in GCSE classes, the course team unnecessarily subjected them to BKSB assessments and used these results to override the college's GCSE policy. It could be that the course team perhaps felt they had superior knowledge of the students' capabilities or a sense of over-protection. Either way, it gave rise to a circumstance whereby some students met GCSE entry standards, nevertheless the tutors questioned their capacity to manage the academic pressure associated with GCSE provision. Shedding light on this practice, Nina, the Faculty Manager of this course reported:

> So those who do GCSEs have joined a cross-college class . . . the students still need that higher level of support. Some of them are getting a little lost in those classes, because the classes are bigger than our group sizes. So if someone has got their D grade and we have done our thorough diagnostic assessment and where we have determined for example that English is going to be too much or Maths is going to be too much at GCSE, we've done the Level 2 Functional Skills instead, but they can progress in English beyond that.

Nina speculated that students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course could 'get a little lost' and 'GCSE classes are bigger' than what they were accustomed. As a consequence, tutors decided to

significantly restrict their students' access to the college wide GCSE provision that was delivered by a separate Department. In her account, Nina gave the impression that eligible students were indeed granted the opportunity to do GCSE English and Maths. Yet, a review of the database for GCSE enrolment has confirmed that the tutors applied their discretionary judgements and hence socially controlled access to GCSE provision. This therefore partly explained why only seven out of 46 students (15%) on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, were enrolled for either GCSE English or Maths. Strikingly, eligible students such as Lindy, Zette, Adam and David missed out and the tutors' governance practices resulted in these students being enrolled with peers on Functional Skills English or Maths instead.

As a direct result, these participants lost out on a critical, second chance opportunity to retake GCSEs and an attempt to achieve a C-grade or above, which would therefore give them an actual chance at gaining access to higher levels of vocational courses and apprenticeship provision within The Site. I say this, because another key finding published elsewhere, exposed the gatekeeping function of GCSEs and significance of higher GCSEs as the gateway to higher levels of study and training at The Site (Cornish 2017). This harsh reality played out in Zette's trajectory: she could have been on the GCSE English course as she met the D-GCSE grade entry requirement, but tutors instead enrolled her for Functional Skills. She had a F-GCSE grade in Maths, voiced her need to retake this GCSE, but found she did not meet the entry requirement. Yet, hypothetically speaking, even if she did have the D-grade in Maths, it was questionable whether the tutors would have allowed this opportunity in any case, based on their previous reaction in the circumstance concerning the GCSE English. Understandably, Zette reportedly felt disillusioned and frustrated, because she has discovered that despite having Functional Skills qualifications, GCSEs were preferred on vocational courses at The Site. Without a D-GCSE in Maths, she therefore could not obtain a place on the Level 2 Health and Social Care course. As a matter of fact, the course's destination data disappointedly revealed that Zette was one of the 75% of students who became NEET once she completed this employability course.

Against this background, staff practices in relation to BKSB assessments and Functional Skills, facilitated gatekeeping and further marginalisation of many students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. This led me to agree with Simmons and Thompson (2011), though at the time of writing he referred to his study on E2E provision, they plausibly theorise that it was both sad and ironic that the study programme designed to help some of the most disadvantaged young people to find work in some ways contributed to their continued exclusion given its restrictive curriculum.

Functional Skills and the mandate for students to socially develop

Additionally, my empirical findings discovered the problematic way in which the course tutors used BKSB assessments and Functional Skills to enforce the government's employability agenda regarding social skills development. Admittedly, a focus on social skills, interpersonal skills and self-presentation are key employability skills emphasised in the government's employability mandate (HEFCE 2013). We also know from an earlier section in this paper, that scholars such as Simmons (2008) and Atkins (2009) have discovered in their research that a lack of social skills could hinder a young people's prospects in obtaining employment. Which consequently provides a reasonable explanation for the course team's resolute focus on their students' social and interpersonal skills. However, when it comes to the enforcement of this social skills agenda aided by Functional Skills, the fieldwork data exposed tension and paradox. Evidencing this work practice, tutors Kirsten and Aggy explained:

Aggy: Yeah, some students have got some qualifications but they're very low grade, so like E's and D's, F's in English and Maths especially. I get quite a few kids come through that have been home-schooled. So, they haven't been to school . . . but that also has implications because their social skills are non-existent.

Kirsten: And that's the problem, even doing Functional Skills Level 1 with them, that they might be academically Level 1, but you can't keep them for the social reasons. So sometimes with our course you have to go back down to Entry 2 because you need them for that longer time until Functional Skills Level 1, for them to socially develop. Once they've done Functional Skills Level 1, you've got to get rid of them. So you have to put them at a lower level academically so you've got more time to build them up. Do work experience with them, get them out on social events, things like that (Joint interview with Kirsten and Aggy, June 2015)

Noticeably, both tutors' accounts constructed a deficit representation of students on this Level 1 Achieving Skills course. Reportedly, some students have 'very low GCSE grades' and ostensibly have 'non-existent social skills', justifying this practice of putting students 'at a lower level academically, so you've got more time to build them up'. They used Functional Skills to facilitate this purpose. However, these two tutors revealed a practice, whereby they were deviating from standard BKSB procedures; specifically, for those students judged to need social skills development. In these instances, these tutors would disregard various students' GCSE grade-level, arranged they sit a lower-level online BKSB assessment and accordingly assigned them on a lower-level Functional Skills qualification. This, despite the reality that some of the higher achieving students should have been on a higher Functional Skills level or GCSE course, but were denied this opportunity in the process. Whether the students on the course were aware of such practice, were unclear, perhaps because the tutors had oversight of the paperwork and computer activity at college. Yet, what is certain is that the tutors used this deficit ideology regarding various students' reported lack of social skills, as justification for veering from standard BKSB practice.

It also soon transpired during the different staff interviews, that it was not only Aggy and Kirsten, but that it was common practice amongst the course team to enforce a prolonged period of study on various students, reportedly so that they can 'socially develop'. The resultant prospect of students either spending a longer time in college or leaving education with lower-level qualifications, were considerations surprisingly absent from most tutors' narratives. One thing that was certain, was that the course team's work culture in how they used BKSB and Functional Skills, created complexity and had detrimental effects on a group of students who were already marginalised in the education system.

Critical discussion

This paper provides a close focus on BKSB assessments and Functional Skills qualifications, recognising the significance of policies, conduct and power in the delivery of the employability agenda on this Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. Fittingly, Foucault's (1978) theory of neo-liberal governmentality introduced an approach to the study of power that recognises the governing of the conduct of individuals or of groups as directed by the government. Thus, in contrast to a disciplinarian form of power, governmentality takes the definition of government as the exercise of organised political power by a state who design systems and mechanisms of management and administration which allowed for the identification, ordering and control of populations (Foucault 1978). Evidenced in my data, BKSBs, ILPs and Functional Skills were constructed as powerful, governance mechanisms of management for the purposes of self-governance, social control, surveillance and the ordering of students according to their capabilities. Foucault (1978) used the concept of governmentality referring to conduct, or an activity meant to shape, guide or affect the conduct of people. Exercising great power, tutors on the course ostensibly believed that they had legitimate authority adopting a fluid interpretation of BKSB assessments and Functional Skills. They felt they knew best, regardless of whether eligible students missed critical opportunities to re-take GCSEs or were entered on lower-level qualifications which could result in a prolonged period of study or others leaving college with lower qualifications. Through the tutors' conduct, it demonstrated work processes of governmentality. Here, Foucault's (1991) theory on the 'conduct of conduct' has particular

prominence, because it recognises the contributions of others, in this case, the course tutors, who were responsible for governance, regulating participants' trajectory and access to limited, albeit essential, mainstream provision and vocational training opportunities within The Site.

Researchers who have adopted Foucault's theory of governmentality use the concept of a decentred state to argue that the state no longer governs people in a top down manner. Rather, governance is less centralised and spread more throughout the entire social body and is conducted by the citizens themselves (Fejes 2008). In this respect, Foucault (1991) refers to the 'conduct of oneself', where a sense of self-governance is the driving force. My key findings illustrated how the students were expected to participate in the employability agenda by undertaking the online BKSB and ILP so that they can attain the Functional Skills qualification and possibly the overall employability certificate. Neoliberalist in its design, BKSB and ILPs visibly displayed students' individual shortcomings and expected them to take responsibility tackling these deficiencies through further work. Self-governance was pivotal and students were expected to undertake work on their being, which extended into areas of literacy, numeracy and social skills, all in line with the employability rhetoric. In so doing, neoliberal governmentality establishes a new form of homo economicus, 'the man of enterprise and production' (Foucault 1978, 147), positioning the individual as the 'entrepreneur of himself', the source of (his) earnings' (ibid.: 226).

Thus, within neoliberal discourse, individuals are construed as the bearers of 'human capital' (skills, abilities and knowledge) made up of innate and acquired elements (ibid. 226–227). Furthermore, governmentality extends to the active consent and willingness of individuals to participate in self-governance (Foucault 1978). Cultivating active consent and willingness, through RPA, youth are therefore urged to develop their own human capital, investing in education and constantly learning new skills. However, scholars such as Tomlinson (2013) cautioned and emphasised that youth are competing in a stratified education system and insecure labour markets, which would therefore affect an individual's capacity to attain personal ambitions for improved academic and economic goals. Even so, the dominant discourse on education aligns with the knowledge economy rhetoric that higher levels of educational attainment and skills training are obligatory for successful competition in the knowledge economy (Exley and Ball 2014). It was therefore hardly surprising that my data illustrated that most of the student participants reportedly stated their need for higher GCSEs and improved qualifications, which perhaps explained why they were prepared to undertake self-governance tasks in line with the Functional Skills qualifications. It thus emphasises the point that discourses on employability are mobilised in a broader terrain of governance, whereby citizens are produced through their interactions with various forms of governance (Fejes 2008).

Nuances of governmentality thus underpin the employability agenda on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, working together with different systems and mechanisms of management to develop RPA youth who are resourceful, adaptable and who possess a range of social skills and attitudes which could benefit the economy. However, here it is necessary to state that in no way does my data suggest that the students were docile. On the contrary, they had agency and although they were limited in what they could really do about their circumstances, participants such as David and Zette have critically reflected and voiced their feelings about the course and their experiences within the setting. Similarly, most of the students grumbled during assessment tasks, but the tutors played an active role in patrolling, assisting and cajoling students to ensure compliance with the required work in lessons. In using Foucault's (1991) theory on the 'conduct of conduct' as analysis, it exposed the varying ways in which key governance systems, activities and practices were principally used on this course to socially control and promote self-governance amongst students.

Consequently, governance practices and current academic conditions within. The Site mostly hampered the extent to which several participants with less skills, abilities and knowledge were able to improve on previous academic failure. Bearing in mind the neo-liberal rhetoric and employability agenda, my data exposed tension and contradiction: it revealed that although most participants have demonstrated individual efforts participating in the employability curriculum; however, they have encountered gatekeeping practices that resulted in most students' lack educational

opportunities and diminished access to higher levels of knowledge and qualifications within The Site. Most participants struggled to gain access to GCSE provision and transitioning to higher levels of study in this college. Thus, although in principle the student participants were positioned in a setting which could ideally offer them a through-way from pre-vocational studies to university education or apprenticeship training if they so wanted, in actual reality this opportunity was not granted for many participants. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Level 1 employability qualification held less academic relevance within the setting.

Undoubtedly, the situation was further compounded by the fact that this pre-vocational course was positioned outside the formal rung of qualifications on the NQF. The academic divide between pre-foundation learning and mainstream provision was built into the design of the qualifications framework and thus instituted an academic barrier which resulted in the social exclusion and marginalisation of youth with lower or no school leaving qualifications. It is on this basis that I argue for a revamp and restructure of the educational framework so that it integrates pre-vocational courses and hence categorise it as the first formal rung of qualifications. Therefore, closing the academic divide but also the positioning of pre-vocational courses within the educational setting. However, alongside this process, it is crucial that quality academic standards of education and teaching practices on pre-vocational courses are enhanced so there is greater credibility when students use their qualifications to access the relevant education and training provision. Through my fieldwork, the data provided critical insight into classroom life and teaching practices, which mainly indicated that although teaching took place on this employability course, it occurred on an ad hoc basis: warehousing practices (Cornish 2018) and social welfare duties (Cornish 2019) were prioritised, resulting in ambiguous and mostly negative outcomes for most participants on the course. Taking into consideration Bourdieu's (1974) theory and criticism of the meritocracy discourse, it identifies structural inequalities embedded within the ways in which numerous social and institutional arenas work together to influence the real chances available to marginalised students. This issue highlighted the central argument of several academic researchers who claim that given the low-quality education provision currently on offer for marginalised students enrolled on low-level courses, these students were not prepared to form part of the high-skilled workforce (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011).

Conclusion

This article draws on empirical research which was conducted to examine the educational experiences of disengaged youth and the extent to which they were able to benefit from the 'second chance' rhetoric announced in RPA re-engagement provision. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions, my empirical findings indicated that many participants actively participated and believed that the employability course could offer them a second chance to improved academic outcomes. However, stringent controls were enforced, and a combination of government, institutional policies and educational practices made relatively realistic aspirational goals unobtainable for most participants within The Site. Thus, despite their individual aspirations, most participants faced severe academic conditions and multiple structural factors which placed them in direct competition with better-qualified students for access to essential education provision at The Site.

Principally RPA promotes participation and the opportunity for post-16 youth to attain higher educational qualifications. However, in practice, many student participants experienced constrained participation and exclusion from essential provision. Distinctly, a lack of educational credentials amongst marginalised youth significantly disadvantaged their capacity to make a transition into a competitive education and training sector. The paper showed that the current college system makes it difficult for these participants and similar students with poor grades to accrue the necessary GCSE capital and achieve the type of academic success the students valued – one that could yield better opportunities tailored to their individual academic and employment goals. For the time being, these students were expected to participate and attend college, engaging in a restrictive provision

that not only required longer periods of study, but also expected them to do so in a situation in which academic conditions were precarious. Consequently, there was great ambiguity as to whether these goals would in fact be accomplished in the current climate.

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