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Negotiating tensions between the high-performing and socially just college: A consideration of the discursive construction of youth in English college governing boards

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The English further education (FE) sector caters for young learners who are regularly defined as at risk due to a range of economic and social challenges, as transitions from youth to adulthood become more protracted, and inequalities amongst young people and between generations persist and deepen. At a time when policy places increasing responsibilities on governors and leaders to balance college performance and cost-effectiveness against FE's long-standing social justice mission, this article analyses how this tension plays out through the discursive construction of young learners by two English college governing boards. We use a critical discourse analysis approach to connect how young learners are 'talked into being' through the micro-level processes of governing within the wider context in which college governing operates. We argue that, despite a wider drive for governors to interact with learners, their understanding of learners is dominated by data, through which young learners in particular are constituted as *a* risk rather than *at* risk. We explore the discursive constructions of young learners that ensue in this data-dominated context, and the social practices governing boards use to manage the risks posed by young learners. We highlight the different positionings of governors and college senior managers within these constitutive practices, arguing that the ways young learners are discursively constructed is revealing of a central tension in college governing practices—that between the high-performing and the socially just college.

Keywords: further education colleges; governing; social justice; youth

Introduction

Further education (FE) colleges in England have a wide-ranging remit. Historically, their core activity involved providing technical and commercial education to adult workers. Since the 1950s, their purpose has diversified and in the twenty-first century includes courses that range from basic skills to higher education (HE), serving young students, adults and older learners. Their dominant role at the present time is to provide the education, skills and training to cater for both predicted and actual labour market shifts (HM Government, 2017), amidst concerns over low productivity and heightened global competition (Avis, 2009). Yet colleges also have a long-standing

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social justice mission, which has ebbed and flowed through policy commitments since the college sector became independent of local authority control through incorporation in 1992, but remains a tacit assumption of the sector (Thompson, 2009; Hodgson *et al.*, 2018; FETL, 2020). It forms part of an ecological framing of colleges as institutions which serve their local communities and connect with numerous other civic institutions (Hodgson & Spours, 2009), but this mission acts in tension with other missions, particularly training and preparation for the labour market, which are much more explicit.

In this context, college governing boards occupy a demanding position. English FE colleges are independent corporations and charities. Each college corporation sets the rules on board composition, which must include staff and student members, and usually includes the college principal (although this is not a requirement). These positions are unpaid and voluntary (DfE, 2019a). Governors are collectively accountable for the decisions and performance of the college, and expected to ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness. They are required to have diverse knowledge and awareness of college work, ranging from teaching and learning and equality and diversity, to the development of strategy and risk management. They are expected to understand the communities the college serves and have local and regional labour market intelligence, as well as engage with college learners in a range of contexts including student voice activities (AoC, 2015).

This article considers how college governing boards negotiate tensions between the high-performing and socially just college. The construction of young learners is a discursive site where this tension to balance different imperatives comes to the fore in the work of college governance and leadership. Yet we know little about governors' role in shaping college mission amidst ongoing tensions between demands to be both high performing and socially just, and the relationship between governors, governing practices and learners remains under-explored. There is limited recent research on the work of governors, particularly in the college sector. Any in-depth investigation dates back to an ESRC-funded project in the 1990s (Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Gleeson *et al.*, 2011), since which time the responsibilities of governors have changed significantly. This article seeks to address this gap by asking:

1. How are young learners discursively constructed in the governing practices of colleges?
2. How are those involved in governing—governors and college staff—positioned within these social practices?

The article begins with an overview of the FE landscape in relation to young learners and college governance. We then outline the conceptual tools and methodology, followed by a presentation of data that considers the social practices through which governing boards construct young learners. We use critical discourse analysis to connect how young learners are 'talked into being' through the micro-level texts of governing within the wider context in which colleges and college governing operate. We argue that, despite a wider drive for governors to interact with learners, their understanding of learners is dominated by data, through which young learners in particular are constituted as representing a risk to the college. We explore the discursive constructions of young learners that ensue in this data-dominated context, and the social

practices governing boards use to manage the risks posed by young learners, which include modifying measures of student success and constructing youth imaginaries which foreground deficits. We highlight the different positionings of governors and college strategic managers within these constitutive practices, to argue that the ways young learners are discursively constructed is revealing of a central tension in college governing practices, which emerges from the demands to produce an organisation that is both high performing and socially just.

Younger learners in English FE

The FE sector in England plays a central role in the education and training of young people. The importance of this role increased following the 2008 Education and Skills Act, which raised the education participation age, so that young people can no longer leave school at 16, but must continue in education, training or employment with training until the age of 18. In addition to working with a potentially larger cohort of 16–18-year-olds, colleges have been permitted to enrol 14–16-year-olds since 2013 (ESFA, 2020), offering alternative 14–16 provision and running secondary schools. Colleges offer diverse qualification pathways, including vocationally related qualifications, occupational traineeships and apprenticeships, academic A-Levels, and entry level and Level 1 qualifications. In a competitive, marketised environment for post-16 provision, colleges find themselves playing a key role in the education and training of the 60% of young people who do not follow an academic pathway of A-Level qualifications (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). In the 2017/18 academic year, colleges catered for approximately 738,000 16–18-year-olds (AoC, 2019a), 193,000 of whom were required to retake English and Maths at Level 2 whilst at college, because they had not achieved a 'good pass' grade (AoC, 2019a). As these data indicate, colleges cater for young learners with educational careers that are more likely to involve setbacks and repetition (Raffe, 2011), and they bear the brunt of national and global trends of precarity and inequality (Hamilton *et al.,* 2014; Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

   During the 2010s, colleges' work with young learners was affected by significant reviews and reforms, creating 'notable instability' (Dominguez-Reig & Robinson, 2019: 10). These included: the Wolf Review of Education for 14–19-year-olds (2011), the Richard Review of Apprenticeships (2012), the Sainsbury Report on Technical Education (2016) and the associated Post-16 Skills Plan (DBIS and DfE, 2016), as well as plans for (re-)engaging 16–24-year-olds in education, training and work (HM Government, 2011) and the launch of a new National Careers Service (DBIS, 2011). This context is an important backdrop for framing FE's mission to be civically engaged and socially just, partly through provision that includes vocationally oriented pathways as well as academic routes, and partly through the re-engagement of young people who have become disillusioned with school (Avis, 2009).

FE governing bodies and the tension between high performance and social justice

The leadership and governance of colleges therefore takes place within a context of multiple reforms to 14–16 and 16–19 education, and these are just two of many areas

of change facing colleges, which governors need to engage with and understand. Since the 2011 Education Act, college governors have held greatly increased responsibilities for the success of their college. They are expected to 'hold the senior leadership to account for delivering the college's mission and for ensuring the college serves the needs of its learners, employers and communities' (DBIS, 2014: 2). They oversee the college's financial performance and must ensure financial sustainability and solvency (DfE, 2019a).

The Code of Good Governance (AoC, 2019b) highlights ten areas of responsibility for governors, dominated by concerns over the construction of a sustainable financial strategy, particularly since the introduction of a regime applying commercial insolvency laws to colleges in England (DfE, 2020). Yet the guidance also contains wider questions about the provision of high-quality, socially inclusive education, including strengthening the responsibility for governors to understand the needs of the communities the college serves; agreeing a mission, strategy and ethos for the college; ensuring systems are in place for the effective facilitation of student voice; and fostering exceptional teaching and learning. Governors are portrayed as balancing different imperatives here, adhering to macro-level regulatory demands whilst maintaining a focus on a more implicit social justice mission, which requires them to translate national policy in ways which minimise negative consequences and maximise opportunities for the local context the college serves (Gleeson *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, since governors are often recruited for their professional experience and business and audit expertise, these areas may be their main contribution, while questions of social inclusion and social justice are left in the hands of college leadership.

In all this work, there is an uneasy relationship between the apparent autonomy of FE colleges, with governors key to internal regulatory functions perceived to be necessary for autonomous organisations (Clapham & Vickers, 2017), and a complex and evolving national regulatory context (DBIS, 2014; DfE, 2019a). Colleges and their governing boards must answer to an array of bodies, each with their own priorities, including the UK Department for Education, inspectors (Ofsted, the FE Commissioner), financial bodies (the Education and Skills Funding Agency, the colleges' banks) and Local Enterprise Partnerships, which decide and advance local economic priorities. Moreover, the first port of call for many of these external bodies in assessing college effectiveness is to analyse performance data, which explains the datafication of college governance practices (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Williamson, 2019).

FE college governance is therefore a space of considerable tensions, not least through the way colleges are situated in local, regional and national contexts, each with differing priorities (Hodgson & Spours, 2009). It is a space where diverse missions, priorities and values circulate and collide, which Thompson (2009: 30) characterises as the 'uneasy nexus of policies relating to social inclusion and global competitiveness'. The language of social justice is rarely used directly (FETL, 2020), rather it is gestured towards through discussions of serving local disadvantaged populations; offering second and third chances at education; and promoting the dignity, respect, rights and autonomy of all groups, particularly those who face wider societal disadvantages (Gewirtz, 1998; Avis, 2009). Without necessarily articulating this clearly, colleges are involved in the politics of redistribution and recognition (Fraser,

1998): the redistribution of goods such as knowledge, skills and infrastructure to local communities, and the recognition of particular cultures and identities, and the needs, barriers and opportunities that arise locally and how these are shaped in unequal ways. However, this makes social justice work in colleges difficult and precarious.

Youth 'at risk' and college governance

The construction of young learners is a discursive space where this tension to balance different imperatives comes to the fore in the work of college governance and leadership. Youth are a source of government anxieties over productivity and global competitiveness. Dorling (2014) notes that young people are more likely than older groups to be in precarious work, characterised by low pay, poor pay progression, fewer employment rights and multiple insecurities. At times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/21 and the UK's response, youth are particularly affected, with the Resolution Foundation (2020) reporting young people as more likely to have lost jobs, been furloughed or had their pay reduced. In this context of youth 'at risk', the Social Mobility Commission (2019) identifies colleges as playing a key role in providing a stepping-stone to gaining a higher qualification for the most disadvantaged students.

For college governors, this key role can quickly turn young people from being *at risk* to representing *a risk*. Colleges receive much scrutiny for their abilities to alleviate productivity issues and cater for local and regional job markets. Colleges are expected to 'help young people develop the skills they need to do the high-paid, high-skilled jobs of the future' (HM Government, 2017: 5), with young people positioned as the flexible and productive employees of the notional Fourth Industrial Revolution, where automation is predicted to change the shape of jobs and labour markets (Avis, 2018). This human capital framing of FE's mission promotes a particular view of social justice, narrowly understood as avoiding the traps of poverty and exclusion through acquiring skills for employment (Avis, 2009). Rather than a focus on wider structural trends, such a view of social justice legitimises a focus on skills education tailored to economic needs, whilst responsibilising individuals to keep themselves out of poverty. Here, a narrow view of the high-performing college reigns, which foregrounds the role of FE in economic competitiveness, and can be captured and evaluated through data on student recruitment, retention, outcomes and destinations (Ozga, 2009). For governing boards, these data are crucial not just for their assessment of how well a college is serving the student community, but also for the way such data are used by external inspection regimes and funding bodies. These data are positioned as telling the story of college work and are used as an early signal of the need for intervention in cases of 'under-performance' (DfE, 2019b).

The discursive construction of young learners by college governing boards

To analyse how young learners are discursively constructed through the social practices of governing, we draw on Fairclough's (1993, 2001, 2013) approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA embraces a wide-ranging transdisciplinary body of research (see Waugh *et al.,* 2015 for an overview), with a central shared concern to

study the relations between discourse, power, dominance and social inequality (van Dijk, 1993). Fairclough's work understands social practices as 'more or less stable and durable forms of social activity, which are articulated together to constitute social fields, institutions, and organizations' (Fairclough, 2001: 2). These social practices mediate the relationship between social structures and social events. Fairclough (2001: 5) proposes that 'social agents produce events in occasioned and situated ways, but they depend on social structures and social practices to do so – the causal powers of social agents are mediated by those of social structures and practices, and vice-versa'. Fairclough's approach involves the analysis of 'discursive events' (Fairclough, 1993: 136), which are understood in an encompassing sense to include both texts and the enactments of discourse in specific social contexts, which are captured through ethnographic methods (Fairclough, 2001, 2013).

We understand governing to have a 'highly textual character' (Fairclough, 2003: 21), adopting Fairclough's interpretation of 'text', which includes written documents, talk and interaction. Fairclough's approach to and understanding of 'discourse' is reflected in the analysis below, where we use CDA's focus on power relations to highlight how the discursive construction of youth is dominated by the senior management team (SMT) in the college governance space. We analyse a set of repertoires that are present in the discursive construction of young learners, and used to seek legitimacy, produce agreement or disagreement, and make decisions. CDA offers a means of denaturalising the 'common-sense' aspects of these discursive constructions, unpicking underlying assumptions and claims, to highlight how these are contingent and embedded in power relations (Fairclough *et al.,* 2004). Discursive constructions can include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries—representations of how things might, could or should be (Fairclough, 2001). The significance of discourses as imaginaries is that 'imaginaries may also come to be inculcated as new ways of being, new identities' (Fairclough, 2001: 6).

The college governance space is one where learners are more likely to be talked about than talked with, and a discursive lens allows us to consider how young learners are 'talked into being'. We analyse how college governing boards 'imagine' young learners, and the discursive strategies employed to accomplish this. As we illustrate in our analysis, governors' understandings of learners are mediated by senior college staff, who communicate what they perceive to be crucial information about learners. But this is not a neutral process; throughout these social practices, younger learners are imagined in particular ways. Participants can set, alter and challenge dominant discourses, and thus the construction of learners is revealing of some of the tensions inherent in the (re)production of college mission, values and priorities.

Methodology

The data in this article are part of a UK-wide study of the processes and practices of governing in FE, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Key to the project is a methodology that facilitates an understanding of 'boards in action' (Cadbury, 2000). Board meetings were filmed throughout one year (2019), creating novel data of this relatively unseen space. This article considers data from the two English colleges in the study. While devolution means that processes

differ across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, nevertheless FE colleges in all four countries find themselves in a relatively similar position of having to pursue a mission of social inclusion while also developing relationships with employers at the local and regional levels (Hodgson *et al.*, 2018).

College One is a multi-site FE provider serving coastal and rural areas of England, which are further and higher education cold spots. It caters for approximately 16,000 learners across its sites, programmes and provisions. The majority of its work centres on the delivery of vocational qualifications, although 11% of the college's work involves higher education programmes. The college also runs a secondary school, which enrols young people aged 14–16. Students come to the college from areas that rank highly for economic, social and/or educational disadvantage, and with higher than national average unemployment. During 2019 the college was both Ofsted 'Outstanding' and received an 'Outstanding' rating for its financial health.

College Two is a big general FE provider situated in a large urban area in England. It caters for approximately 22,000 learners, including a substantial proportion from minority ethnic groups. Although it offers A-Levels and foundation and Bachelor degrees, the majority of its provision centres on vocational qualifications. The college runs a school, which caters for young people aged 14–16. It serves areas with above national average levels of deprivation and a higher than national average level of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). It competes locally with other providers of further and higher education. The college is rated 'Good' by Ofsted and has a legacy of debts stemming from college mergers and ongoing competition for student numbers.

The data set includes video recordings and fieldnotes from 12 board meetings, alongside fieldnotes and observations of strategy away days; video recordings and fieldnotes of 7 committee meetings; and agendas, papers and minutes from across these meetings. The following search terms were used to analyse the construction of young learners across the documentation for 19 meetings: 14–16; 16–18; GCSE Maths; GCSE English; young; learner. Younger learners appeared on the agendas of 14 meetings and were most commonly referred to under the following agenda items: updates on strategic plans and risk registers, particularly in relation to income generation and learner outcomes; student welfare and behaviour reports; equality, diversity and inclusion reports; updates on post-Ofsted inspection plans; and discussions of curriculum reform.

In order to consider in more depth how younger learners were 'called into being' through the practices of governing, data instances were compiled into a single document and commentary was added to contextualise what each instance was referring to as part of the flow of the meeting; who was speaking; whether this item recurred across meetings or was stand-alone/infrequent; and whether discussion, challenge or action followed. The analysis of documentary evidence was used to search video data for instances where issues relating to young learners were presented and discussed in board meetings. The quotations and extended vignettes selected for in-depth analysis in the article are representative of wider, dominant themes present in this data set.

In the following section, we present data that address our two research questions. We first consider how governing through data constructs learners in particular ways and orients governing boards to shift their perception of young learners from *at*

risk to *a risk*. We then present vignettes from each college to analyse how young learners are discursively constructed through governing practices, exploring where consensus and contestation arise between governors and senior managers about how young learners should be understood.

Pseudonyms are used throughout to anonymise participants and their institutions. In references to members of governing boards, we distinguish between governors and members of the senior management team of the college, the latter shown as SMT.

Governing through data

The dominant representation of young learners in governing at both colleges was through a focus on learner data, particularly recruitment, attendance, retention, achievement of qualifications and destinations. This coheres with a wider movement towards 'governing through data', which has effected a major transformation in education systems across the global west (Ozga, 2009; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Williamson, 2019). In England, data are a key tool for accountability, used as a shorthand to indicate the health of a college. So, for instance, the Education and Skills Funding Agency uses data as an early predictor of potential concerns in a college (DfE, 2019b). Governing through data is also strongly evident at the micro-level of individual college governance; our analysis of documents for 19 meetings revealed these to be suffused with learner data.

College One

Through its meeting documents, College One positioned learner success as its foremost priority. All other strategic priorities were premised on this and aimed to reinforce it. Targets pertaining to learner recruitment and achievement in particular were included in college strategic measures, as these were ongoing issues for an otherwise high-performing college. This included recruitment of students to the college's 14–16 school, and pass rates for 16–19-year-olds retaking English and Maths at GCSE, where these had not been achieved at a grade 4/C (recognised as successful achievement of a Level 2 qualification) by the end of secondary school. Learner recruitment was included in financial forecasting, and in the budget that was presented at each corporation meeting, and 14–16 under-recruitment was highlighted as an area of financial shortfall:

> Enrolment numbers were more or less as expected with [14–16 provision] down by 77 learners... The shortfall equated to £282k in unrecoverable revenues. A new principal was now in place [at the 14–16 school] to rectify matters. (Meeting papers, England College One, Corporation Meeting 5, December 2019)

Young learners were also a focus in the annual equality, diversity and inclusion report and in the college's self-assessment of its overall performance.

Learners as a potential risk to college performance formed a major element of subsequent discussions at governor meetings. In one committee meeting, the chair prefaced a discussion about student data by explaining:

> This is where we check whether our performance is up to our expectations from the targets that have been set earlier in the year... we look at the key risks that we hold. As you can see, one is about learner numbers and whether we've got enough people coming through the door. Another is about whether we keep them or not and whether they are successful, to make sure that side of it runs ok and then we're held to account on those strategic measures. (Chair, England College One, Committee Meeting 1, March 2019)

Corporation and committee meetings are formal governing environments, which imbue senior staff with authority when speaking about learners with the governing body. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at College One presented the risk register at each corporation meeting, highlighting key causes for concern throughout the year and how college staff were responding to these. Progress was presented against key learner measures through the RAG (red, amber, green) rated risk register at all five corporation meetings observed. Young learners' achievement of Level 2 English and Maths was picked up through the associated 'Return to Green' risk report, where ongoing issues arising from learner data were reported.

College Two

In College Two, data on young learners were present in every corporation meeting through reporting on progress towards funding targets. As with College One, this was an area of significant concern, due to an under-recruitment of 16–18-year-olds, which was identified at all seven corporation meetings as a contributing factor to overall financial shortfalls:

> 16–18 Education and Skills Funding Agency: we are below our allocation by 380 learners which is a considerable drop from last year. This doesn't affect our income for this year but it will for next year. That will definitely drop as the learner target number is set based on returns on student numbers that are done in November. (Meeting papers, England College Two, Corporation Meeting 1, February 2019)

Due to the impact on college income, the recruitment shortfall was also included in agenda items on financial forecasting at each corporation meeting and in end-of-year financial audit reports. A further key issue for College Two as well as College One was the attendance and achievement of young learners retaking English and Maths GCSE. This was identified as an area requiring improvement in the college's recent Ofsted inspection, and progress in tackling under-performance in this area was reported at each corporation meeting:

> This is an update on our post-inspection action plan... I think probably the most challenging aspect of this is the attendance and we talk about that a lot. What I will say is I can't see any significant improvement particularly in English and Maths lessons. (SMT, England College Two, Corporation Meeting 2, March 2019)

Despite plans and action to respond to Ofsted's feedback to improve Level 2 English and Maths attendance and achievement, here members of SMT were unable to report rapid improvements to governors, and this remained an ongoing issue throughout the year.

Discursive constructions of young learners by college governing boards

The above are key instances of how governors' constructions of young learners are mediated through data, indicating how the data are discussed through a focus on risk. In light of this dominant focus on young learners as a risk, the next section analyses the discursive construction of young learners in college governing meetings. We focus on the ways young learners are understood and called into being, and how governors and SMT may be similarly or differently positioned within the discourse.

College One: The discursive construction of 14–16 learners in the college's academy school

College One runs a 14–16 academy school, which caters for young people who have not fared well in a mainstream secondary school environment. This provision is the focus of the exchange in Figure 1, which took place at a meeting of the committee board that oversees the 14–16 school.

Young learners are discursively framed here as an area of college work that warrants praise. While they represent a challenge for the college, here a highly celebratory narrative is constructed. One governor passionately refers to the work of college staff with young learners as 'remarkable', congratulating the college for doing 'exceptionally well'. The chair of governors comments that retention and achievement rates 'look really good'. While their enthusiasm appears to be shared by Andrea (SMT), she uses the opportunity to justify how the college is positioned, putting forward a more cautious description of learner success, which may not meet the standards expected by national inspection and evaluation criteria.

For although the college's work with young learners is praised, it is also discursively framed as precarious. It presents an ongoing potential threat to college performance because of student needs and the nature of assessment in a 14–16 school, which is exam-based, and positioned as an 'inherent risk' because these are young people who may not fare well in exams. Andrea refers to the college's move away from using Progress 8 (introduced in 2016 to measure student progress across eight subjects by the age of 16) as the dominant measure to evaluate student success. This followed an informal discussion with a government minister where it was indicated that 'Progress 8 was not the key metric for 14–16 education in FE providers' (Reported in Committee Meeting Papers, March 2019).

Andrea defends college decisions about different ways to measure success, saying they are 'right and proper' and in the best interests of young learners in the college. This comment is legitimised through the argument that the government does not understand these sorts of learners and what success looks like for them, and instead obsessively pushes its latest targets and measures. The experiences and characteristics of young learners are positioned as ones which other providers have not been able to deal with, which serves to intensify them. Here the long-standing social justice positioning of FE as a provider of second-chance education is applied to the newer area of 14–16 schooling provided by colleges. Young learners are also shaped through ideas and assumptions about what sorts of educational provision they need. This includes provision that is 'personalised', which 'educates for life' and where small class sizes are deemed to be a 'unique selling point'. Through this exchange, governors and a

Eric (Governor):	It's fantastic the growth within [14-16 school]. When you look at the needs of the pupils given that 25% have special needs, 50% are pupil premium and also a high proportion with severe behaviour difficulties, they've done absolutely exceptionally well to cope with those challenges and to deliver at the same time. I think it's remarkable. I think congratulations should be put forward to all concerned. Any other provider would struggle.
Andrea (SMT):	Every other provider has.
Luke (Chair):	Looking at the retention and achievement, they look really good don't they.
Andrea (SMT):	A significant improvement on last year. The achievement rates at [14-16 school] will never match [wider FE and HE college achievement] because they are predominantly exams based and therefore come with an inherent risk and that's the nature of the beast. In addition what I would say is, the removal of Progress 8 [see below] as a key measure is absolutely critical for us because the students who come to us at [14-16 school], we have everything from students who will get 9s [highest grade at GCSE] across the board to students who will not pass a single GCSE and everything in between. And it's our job to personalise that curriculum for them and that's the right and proper approach to take despite the government's obsession with Progress 8 scores. So we're doing what's right for our youngsters and I'm very proud to stand by that. [Small class sizes are] our unique selling point[…]it means they get very much a personalised experience of education. Our view for [14-16 school] has always been we're preparing these youngsters for life not for exams.
England College One, Subsidiary Board Meeting, March 2019.	

Figure 1. Understanding and celebrating 14–16 learners.

member of the SMT together create space for young learners to constitute something other than risk; a more encompassing and context-rich understanding of young learners, through which a clearer social justice narrative can be discerned.

College Two: Relations of contestation and agreement between governors and senior managers about whether younger learners should be constituted as at risk or a risk

The discursive construction of young learners by governors in College Two was differently oriented to College One. Here the focus was on imagining who the college's

young learners were and who they could or should be. Such youth imaginaries are important because, in contrast to the strong focus on learner data, the voices of learners are largely absent from the FE governance space. Although College Two had appointed two student governors, they only attended one meeting during our 2019 observations. Amidst calls for greater interactions between governors and learners (AoC, 2019b), governors were invited to attend college events, or undertake 'learning walks', but this was not embedded practice and governors did not typically interact with college learners. Who learners are is therefore predominantly constructed discursively by governors and senior staff.

While under-recruitment of students represents a major risk to college financial stability, recruiting the 'wrong' sort of students was also constructed as an area of risk in College Two. Deborah, a member of SMT, gave a formal presentation at a corporation meeting on new qualification reforms. The following discussion ensued in relation to the sorts of young students the college could and should attract.

This exchange involved conflicting positions and framings of learners and college purpose. Kamal (a governor) offers suggestions for improving the risk profile of learners in the college, suggesting the college should aim to attract academically successful students with 'good qualifications and GCSE levels'. Senior staff seek to reframe and then rebuff this suggestion. Deborah modifies the governor's language

Kamal (Governor):	The students we get are below par, academically. Those who have good qualifications head for sixth form colleges or school sixth forms and some are very weak in English who are coming to us, weak in maths.
Deborah (SMT):	I understand what you are saying, they come in with a lower starting point, with more challenges, yes that's true.
Kamal:	My point is […] we have to attract good students who come with good qualifications and GCSE levels and they can come to us.
Martin (CEO):	That's not the sort of college we are. If we approached it in that way, we've got significant numbers that don't have those levels we'd be, the city would be, writing off substantial numbers of people. And I don't think *we've* got it wrong, I think the government's got it wrong. I've met with a number of DfE officials and it's scary. They're all fairly middle-class. They've all gone to university. They've got no understanding of FE.

England College Two, Corporation Meeting 2, March 2019.

Figure 2.   Establishing what sort of students are right for the college.

of 'below par' and 'very weak' to 'a lower starting point, with more challenges'—a nod to myriad contextual factors that can shape how students engage with learning. Upon the suggestion that the college should attract more academically able students, the CEO is robust in stating 'what sort of college we are'. His comments depict a social justice mission for the college, tied to serving local communities, who would otherwise be 'written off' from educational opportunities. The CEO redirects the blame away from the college having the wrong students and towards policymakers who are setting the agenda, connecting policymakers' social class positions with what he perceives as their lack of understanding of the diversity of learners who attend colleges.

Yet despite the strength of the CEO's view expressed above, 'common-sense' ideas and stories to imagine young learners featured in the governing space in College Two. At a subsequent governor away day (June 2019), in a discussion about Level 2 and 3 vocational courses, a member of SMT said:

> We've got a real issue with the attitude of young people to learning and work. They don't want to come in on time. They don't want to do exams. They don't come equipped. (Ben, SMT)

In response, a governor conflated these students with media-promoted perceptions of HE graduates:

> I think a lot of students are demotivated because they've got the qualification, they've got a degree and they might be working in McDonald's... should we be telling them you can get 300 quid a week? (Saeed, governor)

Another member of SMT suggested that society's ills were to blame:

> It's definitely a case where there is something there in society... In terms of you've got to work hard to get skills and a successful job. There is an element of get rich quicker rather than putting in real sustained effort. (Farhan, SMT)

In response, a second governor contributed to this discursive framing of younger learners, stating: '*The work tradition is missing... It's an X factor mentality*' (Carl, governor).

Here, *The X Factor* (the once-popular television show where 'ordinary people' audition for the chance to have a 'life-changing' music recording contract, and the associated money and celebrity lifestyle) becomes a metaphorical shorthand for articulating the sort of troubling culture seen to typify some young learners at the college. This culture is offered as an explanation for why college data are as they are. The internal flow of communication here is one of developing consensus between governors and the SMT, and homogenising young learners. No-one interjects to say otherwise, allowing particular youth imaginaries to acquire the status of truth. In this imagined 'X factor generation' there is a missing work tradition, that supposedly used to exist for the staff and governors, itself an imagined discursive construction. This imaginary of 'how things have traditionally been done' becomes a discursive tool for legitimising both critique of younger learners and governor advice, which is geared towards regaining these traditions. This exchange is notable for its concerns with imagined

youth attitudes and cultures, and an individualisation of the problems of youth employment, rather than reference to wider empirical realities of growing work insecurity and generational inequalities, a context where a secure job and perhaps even a job that pays a living wage may no longer be realisable goals for young people (Dorling, 2014; Woodman, 2016; House of Lords, 2019).

Discussion: What does the construction of young learners tell us about FE governing?

Drawing on CDA's concern for the internal relations of discourse, in this section we reflect on how and why consensus and disagreements surface in the construction of young learners in these colleges, and how this relates to the wider context in which governing happens.

In both colleges, constructions of young learners are dominated by governing through data (Ozga, 2009), through which young learners are understood as *a risk* to the college. Young learners are emphasised in particular because they are a key funding stream for colleges, and because particular risks emerge in connection with their achievement. In this data-driven context, we have examined how the colleges 'talked into being' their young learners and sought to mediate the perceived risks they posed. In both colleges, members of SMT played a key role in orienting governors' understandings of learners. In College One, the celebratory narrative about younger learners expressed by one governor is tempered by a more cautious appraisal of learner success articulated by a member of SMT, with caveats describing the continuing risks posed by this learner cohort. Tactics for managing the risks posed by young learners were oriented towards modifying targets and measures of student success. In Figure 1, a member of SMT argued for a more encompassing understanding of learner success in the 14–16 school to replace the Progress 8 measure. Governors accepted this approach and actively contributed to the reframing of young learners as 'at risk' due to characteristics such as special educational needs and eligibility for the pupil premium. College One was also considering lowering its targets for achievement rates of 16–19 learners retaking English and Maths GCSE:

> We said we would have 25% successful in achieving grades 5–9 [in English and Maths GCSE]. I think we need to revisit that because actually it is a challenging ask. It doesn't seem very high but actually some students have tried 3 or 4 times to re-sit and we have less than one year to try and get them through that so we may well be reviewing that. (CEO, England College One, Corporation Meeting 4, October 2019)

This would alter what constitutes a risk on the RAG-rated report, reducing the likelihood of governors viewing young learners as a prominent risk to college performance.

In College Two, governing through data leaves governors with a partial understanding of learners, and these gaps in knowledge and understanding are partly filled through imaginaries of who learners are, and who they could or should be. At the governor away day, college staff and governors together constructed a narrative about young people's attitudinal deficits, which posed a risk to the college. In Figure 2 above, a governor suggestion that the college needs to attract better students is

rebuffed by the CEO in an impassioned monologue that appears to be grounded in beliefs about the social justice mission of the college, which must meet the needs of those who would otherwise be 'written off' from educational opportunities. This (re) imagining of who young learners are and who they could or should be also functioned as a tactic for managing the risks posed by younger learners. By imagining youth through notions of attitudinal deficit, which are a product of a wider youth culture that valorises quick money and minimal effort, staff and governors locate concerns about young learners as being produced outside of the college and as largely outside of their control.

To make sense of the ways consensus and conflict operate across these instances, we return to CDA's analytical approach, which embeds discourse within wider social and political contexts. The data presented highlight the ways in which colleges manage a tension between being high performing and socially just through governing practices. What we see in Figures 1 and 2 are senior members of staff discursively producing what Van Leeuwen (2007) terms 'moral evaluation': a value system with embedded, tacit assumptions about the mission, values and purpose of FE colleges, which underlies the arguments governors and SMT put forward. The idea that FE is for the local community and for those groups who may not always perform well in education is used to justify why the college has altered its outcome measurements (College One) and why a governor's suggestion of attracting higher-achieving students will not be followed (College Two).

The data presented also highlight differences in the positioning of these two colleges. In College One, governors are presented with an example of success, and the strategies in place for maintaining success, including refocusing monitoring of 14–16 learners to allow for a more encompassing understanding of young learners and the challenges they face. They are also willing participants in a more positive reframing of college work with young learners, and it is SMT who are more cautious here and want governors to understand the risks present in such work, even when data are improving.

In contrast, in College Two, governors are seeking to address a problem faced by the college, and there is a stronger emphasis on governors strategising amidst an understanding of young learners as a prominent risk to college performance. This variability in response is, we argue, indicative of the range of pressures, responsibilities and competing demands on colleges, within which governance practices are located, and the different positionings of colleges within this context. College One is rated 'Outstanding' and has a secure financial position, whilst College Two is rated 'Good' and grapples with a legacy of financial challenges and a set of areas for improvement from its Ofsted inspection. Where staff in College Two are complicit in co-constructing youth as deficit, this is strategically used to justify issues they are reporting—such as attendance, destinations and outcomes data—which governors might be troubled by. Youth imaginaries are drawn on to shape these issues as primarily being about a wider, problematic youth culture, rather than specific to the college. Staff position the management of these wider cultural dispositions as largely outside of their control. Through these instances we glimpse the wider policy pressures that shape governor–leadership relations, identifying potential threats to

college social justice work at a time of increased scrutiny of college governance and leadership.

Key to contextualising governance practices around young learners is understanding that governors primarily interact with students as manifestations in data, where data are discussed through the lens of risk assessment. Although governors are responsible for steering the college, and there is policy emphasis on governor voice and autonomy (DBIS, 2014; DfE, 2019a), our data also suggest potential drawbacks to the emphasis on governor autonomy. Where governors are pushed to focus primarily on risk and financial performance—rather than a more balanced engagement between governors and senior staff, based on goals of critical consensus—a focus on changing the types of learners the college attracts may ensue.

Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed how young learners are discursively constructed through the social practices of two English college governing boards. Our analysis sits at the intersections between a youth context, where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are facing a range of challenges, and an under-funded FE sector which faces multiple demands and has a particular role in catering for those young people who have not been well served by traditional academic routes (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). College governing boards are required to ensure the needs of young learners are met, whilst ensuring college performance meets the expectations of a range of regulatory bodies and remains financially viable. In this context, the construction of young learners is a discursive space where a central tension of FE governance is present: that between the high-performing and the socially just college.

We have argued that, despite a wider drive for governors to interact with learners, their understanding of learners is dominated by data. The discursive framing of young people through governance by data transforms young learners from being *at risk*, to representing *a risk*. We explored the discursive construction of young learners in this data-dominated context, and the practices governing boards engage in to understand and manage the risks posed by young learners, which includes modifying measures of student success and constructing youth imaginaries which foreground deficits. We found instances where members of the college management team engaged in deficit narratives of youth, drawing on contextual issues beyond the college, to maintain a defensible position when reporting learner data to the board. However, when there were perceived threats to an implicit social justice mission of the college, there were instances where senior staff rebuffed deficit narratives and reframed the problem as one of policymakers and inappropriate qualification reform.

Through these interactions, the balance between different college priorities is (re) negotiated. Our analysis contributes to understandings of how governing boards balance tensions between competing missions and priorities, and the discursive strategies employed to achieve this complex task. Furthermore, amidst widespread concerns about the effects of datafication processes on educational institutions globally, this article contributes to knowledge of the entanglements between datafication and governing practices in the FE context. It highlights the potential implications of the competing demands placed on governors and college leaders for the provision of a socially

just educational offer for young learners, at a time when established issues of youth precarity and inequality risk being exacerbated as the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic takes effect.

Ethical Guidelines

This research was approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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