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Construction-focused alternative provision: knowledge, conduct and participation for young people at risk of educational disengagement

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses a gap in research about the potential of construction alternative provision (AP) to address skills shortages within the industry and to support young people at risk of disengagement from education. Drawing on Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse, this study reports the results of semi-structured interviews with nine construction AP providers across the UK, offering insights into how AP providers describe the organisation of technical skills, workplace knowledge and behavioural expectations for young people at risk of disengagement from education. The findings also show that providers associated these arrangements with greater engagement, confidence and recognition of construction as a possible occupational field. The article concludes that construction-focused AP should be understood as a diverse and under-researched form of provision that sits between general and vocational education. Rather than offering simple evidence of effectiveness, the study highlights the need for more systematic research into how construction-focused AP organises knowledge, conduct, learner identity and progression possibilities across different settings.

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Alternative provision; skills shortages; young people; school leavers; vocational education

Introduction

Alternative provision (AP) refers to the range of educational programmes for school children who struggle with mainstream education (Pennacchia and Thomson 2016). They typically involve children at risk of disengagement being removed from mainstream education to learn vocationally focused skills and knowledge in an alternative learning environment (Callanan and Perri 2020; Thomson and Russell 2007; Trotman, Enow, and Tucker 2019). AP is not a new feature of the UK education landscape, and earlier work has highlighted the long-standing diversity of provision and the difficulty of categorising it (Daniels et al. 2003). As Power et al. (2024) note, there is a diverse landscape of AP programmes varying in nature and range from full-time academic support to part-time vocational and therapeutic interventions. These are delivered by

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schools, charities and private providers in a mix of settings, including schools, colleges, training centres and with a mix of public, private and charity funding (Power et al. 2024). One established form of AP in the UK is the pupil referral unit (PRU), which is maintained by local authorities and provides education for children who cannot attend mainstream school because of circumstances including illness or exclusion (Welsh Government 2018). PRUs form only one part of a much wider and more varied AP landscape (Power et al. 2024).

The decision to place a pupil in AP is usually made by a school, a local authority, or a multi-agency panel, often because the pupil is at risk of exclusion or is struggling to meet the demands of mainstream education (Malcolm 2025; Power et al. 2024). Pupils in AP often face multiple vulnerabilities such as poverty, care experience, additional learning needs (ALN) and emotional or behavioural difficulties, which make them less likely to succeed in traditional academic settings (Hickey, Pauli-Myler, and Smith 2020; Jalali and Morgan 2018; Malcolm 2018). The number of children attending AP programmes in the UK is increasing. For example, in England, 58,540 pupils attended local authority-funded AP placements during the 2024/2025 academic year, an increase of 23% from the previous year (Department for Education 2025). In Wales, 3,014 pupils attended Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) provision in 2023/2024, reflecting an increase of 12% from the previous academic year (Welsh Government 2024).

While AP programmes are generally designed to re-engage learners rather than to provide a pathway into future careers, many include vocational elements, such as work experience and skills in specific industries, like construction. These vocational elements may offer opportunities for re-engagement and early exposure to construction-related learning. They also create a possible connection with industry concerns about recruitment, skills shortages and the public image of construction (Brooks and Stephen 2021; Callanan and Perri 2020; CIOB 2023; Pollard et al. 2022). However, little research has examined the potential role of construction-focused AP in relation to these issues. Despite some useful studies into school engagement in the construction industry (see Brooks and Stephen 2021; Galea et al. 2020; Ling and Wun Kai Ho 2013) existing research has been very limited and largely aimed at attracting high-performing pupils who aspire to a professional career. The value of AP in construction therefore remains unexplored, and in contrast to vocational educational and training (VET) (which is much more structured and vocational in nature), there has been little research into the value of AP in specific industries like construction. Indeed, even outside the specific context of construction, Power et al. (2024) argue that there is currently no systematic evidence of the effectiveness of AP interventions in reducing exclusion or in providing worthwhile educational experiences.

The aim of this article is to examine how construction-focused AP providers describe the knowledge, practical skills, forms of conduct and workplace expectations made available to pupils. Drawing on interviews with AP providers, this article uses Bernstein's (1990) theory of pedagogic discourse as a sensitising analytical framework for examining these accounts. Bernstein's framework is useful because it enables analysis not only of the knowledge described by providers, but also of the boundaries and relations of control through which that knowledge is organised in different AP settings. Questions about the knowledge, conduct and future possibilities made available through AP sit at the heart of concerns that it may operate as a 'dumping ground' for low-achieving pupils and

reproduce perceptions of limited futures (Bernstein 1990, 2000; Mills, Renshaw, and Zipin 2013). Specifically, two research questions are explored:

Research question one: What construction-related knowledge and practical skills do providers report making available to pupils, and through what pedagogic arrangements?

Research question two: What forms of conduct, social norms and workplace expectations do providers report as embedded within construction-focused AP?

The article first reviews research on construction-focused AP and its position between general and vocational education. It then explains the use of Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse and describes the research design and analysis. The findings examine providers' accounts of construction-related knowledge, practical skills, conduct, and workplace expectations across differently organised settings. The article concludes by considering what these accounts can and cannot establish and by identifying priorities for further research.

A critical review of construction AP research

Despite persistent calls for the construction industry to make itself more attractive to school leavers in response to skills shortages, little research attention has been paid to the role of AP in widening participation and recruitment. There has, however, been some related research on programmes in which construction training providers work with mainstream schools to engage pupils in construction-related learning. For example, Loosemore and Bridgeman (2017) describe a construction-focused programme delivered in a mainstream school that encouraged pupils from underrepresented groups to consider careers in the construction professions. Similarly, Carnemolla and Galea (2021) detail targeted programmes to encourage women into construction through school-based work experiences. Research on Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways is also well established (for example, see Manap, Sakinah Hassan, and Shahifah Syahrom 2017; Morgan, Raidén, and Naylor 2008; Pan, Chen, and Zhan 2020). However, construction-focused AP has received significantly less research attention.

AP occupies an ambiguous position in the educational landscape, variously described as innovative, fragmented, or even a 'bewildering array of projects' (Te Riele 2007, 54) and lacking in evidence to support its effectiveness (Power et al. 2024). Earlier work by Daniels et al. (2003) also highlighted the long-standing diversity of AP provision and the difficulty of systematically classifying it, underscoring that AP is not a new phenomenon, but a complex and evolving field. While typologies, such as those offered by Power et al. (2024), attempt to bring coherence to this debate by categorising AP into various models ranging from 'academic', 'arts-based', and 'nature-based' to more vocational types, important questions remain about what different forms of AP make possible for learners, and how this varies across settings.

A persistent criticism in the AP literature is that it may not necessarily challenge social and economic disadvantage and, in some cases, may reproduce it (Mills, Renshaw, and Zipin 2013). There is also concern that some forms of AP may limit, rather than widen occupational futures available to working-class young people (Polidano and Tabasso 2014). This raises important questions about AP and whether it offers meaningful educational opportunities or, at times, reproduces the inequalities it is intended to address. Conversely, Allan (2014) found that when vocational AP

aligns with a young person's interests and provides academic support, it can encourage school engagement and employability. However, Allan (2014) presents these potential benefits as dependent on consistent, integrated support and improvements in non-academic or occupational outcomes. Polidano and Tabasso (2014) highlight the contextual value of AP, explaining that AP learners locate knowledge in real-world practice, which improves self-confidence and responsibility through work. However, Polidano and Tabasso (2014) also warn that students in AP do not generally perform as well academically as their mainstream peers and are less likely to pursue higher education. This raises questions about whether AP channels working-class youth into predetermined and limited futures.

The tension between widening and limiting young people's occupational possibilities is particularly important in construction-focused AP. Bruno, Twarog, and Grant (2016) highlight how AP can prepare socio-economically disadvantaged young people for working in industry by establishing important industry networks which connect them to job opportunities. Callanan and Perri (2020) also argue that AP can be effective because pupils who struggle in mainstream education can learn that they have other skills needed to work in an industry like construction, such as manual dexterity, physical stamina, hand-eye coordination, and a willingness to work at heights. However, this should not be read as a simple argument for steering marginalised young people into construction. The concern about 'limited futures' refers to pathways in which young people are directed towards narrow occupational routes with limited choice, support or progression (Colley et al. 2003; Willis 1977). By contrast, the point about engagement with construction is that it should be informed, well supported and genuine, which broadens the choices available to young people rather than narrowing them (Allan 2014). While evidence on the effectiveness of construction-focused AP remains limited, there are some indications that, when well structured, linked to academic learning, and connected to young people's interests, it can introduce them to a sector that encompasses a wide range of skilled, technical and professional roles (Bruno, Twarog, and Grant 2016; Taylor 2004). However, the extent to which AP can achieve this remains an open question and requires further empirical investigation.

Although research on construction-focused AP is limited, insights from the broader literature on vocational education can inform this study. For example, Colley et al. (2003) highlight that vocational education not only teaches technical skills but shapes learners' identities, including their emotional and moral orientation, within the culture of their chosen vocation. They found that vocational learning involves more than acquiring technical skills; it can also involve learning the dispositions, values and ways of behaving associated with participation in a particular occupation (Colley et al. 2003). Similarly, Conway and Foskey (2015) highlight that apprenticeships are more likely to be successful when skill development is combined with mentoring and positive relationships, which build confidence and engagement. Understanding vocational learning as identity-shaping and relationship-based shows why construction AP needs to go beyond teaching practical construction skills. Gamble's (2001) work on craft apprenticeships is also useful here. Her Bernstein-informed analysis helps explain how practical, tacit and craft-based vocational knowledge can be understood sociologically through pedagogic relations, evaluative criteria and occupational identity formation, rather than being treated simply as a process of hands-on skills acquisition (Gamble 2001). This is relevant to construction-

focused AP because it provides a way of thinking about practical construction learning as pedagogically organised.

In summary, the literature suggests that construction-focused AP should be analysed neither as an automatic route into employment nor as an inevitable form of containment. Rather, it should be examined as a diverse and under-researched form of provision in which vocational knowledge, learner identity, occupational norms and future possibilities are organised in particular ways. The effectiveness of AP remains highly contested (see Mills, Renshaw, and Zipin 2013; Power et al. 2024), and more theoretically informed research is needed to examine its role in creating opportunities for young people and in meeting industry skills needs, particularly in construction. To this end, the following section discusses the value of Bernstein's (1990) theory of pedagogic discourse to address these critically important questions.

Theory

Bernstein's (1990) theory of pedagogic discourse is useful for analysing construction-focused AP because it provides a way of examining how educational settings organise knowledge, social order, learner identity, and future possibilities. Bernstein is useful here because his concepts of classification, framing, and recontextualisation make it possible to examine construction-focused AP without deciding in advance what kind of provision it is (Bernstein 1975, 1990, 2000). The important question is not simply whether AP removes young people from mainstream education or introduces them to construction, but how knowledge, control and participation are organised within particular settings. This includes the boundaries drawn between school and occupational knowledge, who decides what is taught and how, and how construction practices are reshaped for educational purposes. Seen in this way, AP may open up new forms of participation and future possibility, but it may also narrow them. Bernstein therefore helps keep that tension open as something to be investigated empirically rather than assumed from the outset.

Descriptive studies of AP highlight its diversity and the difficulty of categorising provision (Pennacchia and Thomson 2016). Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic discourse provides a way to examine how different pedagogic arrangements define and legitimise particular forms of knowledge, conduct and participation. The organisation of both knowledge and conduct is particularly visible in construction AP, where pedagogy regulates not only the acquisition of technical skills but also safety, workplace norms and participation.

The concepts of 'classification' and 'framing' were developed in Bernstein's earlier writings, particularly those collected in *Class Codes and Control*, Volume 3 (Bernstein 1975), and they remain central to his subsequent theorisation of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein 1990). Classification and framing provide the main analytical tools for examining variation in construction-focused AP. Classification concerns the boundaries between categories of knowledge, people and settings, whereas framing concerns control over pedagogic communication, including the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of learning (Bernstein 1975, 1990). These distinctions matter because the programmes in this study cross boundaries that are more clearly separated in mainstream schooling. Academic learning may be combined with construction tasks; teaching may take place

in classrooms; workshops may be on construction sites; and knowledge may be transmitted by teachers, vocational tutors, and apprentices or construction workers. The presence of these different settings and actors does not necessarily mean that control over learning has changed. Classification and framing allow us to ask whether it has.

Recontextualisation adds another important distinction. What pupils encounter in construction-focused AP is not construction work transferred unchanged into an educational setting. Workplace practices, safety requirements, qualification expectations and occupational norms are selected and reorganised so they can be taught (Bernstein 1990, 2000). This matters because programmes that appear similar on the surface may make quite different forms of construction knowledge available depending on what has been selected, how it is organised and who controls transmission.

Pedagogic discourse brings instructional discourse together with the regulative rules through which learning is organised (Bernstein 1990, 2000). In construction-focused AP, this means that construction knowledge, workplace practices, safety requirements and occupational expectations are selected and reshaped into forms that can be taught. Construction therefore becomes a pedagogic version of workplace practice rather than workplace practice itself. This matters because technical learning is not separate from learner conduct and participation. Learning to measure, use tools or complete a construction task takes place through expectations about safety, responsibility, authority, teamwork and legitimate participation. What is selected and how it is organised may be influenced by educational institutions, qualification requirements, safety regulations and industry expectations (Diaz 1983). The interests of learners and the expectations of industry therefore do not map neatly onto two different pedagogic domains; they meet within the same pedagogic practice.

Gamble (2001, 2004) work on craft apprenticeships is useful here because it shows that practical vocational knowledge is not simply acquired through doing. Craft knowledge includes tacit understandings, judgements and standards of competent performance that have to be made available through particular pedagogic relations (Gamble 2001, 2004). This is relevant to construction-focused AP, where activities such as measuring, using tools, or completing a practical task involve more than technical competence. Gamble's analysis therefore helps us examine practical construction learning as an organised pedagogic process rather than simply as hands-on experience.

This openness is important to Bernstein's non-deterministic account of educational transmission. Classification and framing can take stronger or weaker values, and their effects cannot be inferred from the form of provision alone (Bernstein 1975, 1990). As Rochex (2011) argues, reproduction and the possibility of change are both contained within the relations through which pedagogic practice is organised.

Moore's (1984) distinction between categories of transmitters is useful here. Construction knowledge may be taught by teachers, vocational tutors, construction workers or apprentices, but the involvement of industry practitioners does not in itself mean that control over learning has shifted. A school or AP provider may still determine what is taught, how it is organised and what counts as successful performance. The important question is therefore not simply who is present, but who has control over the pedagogic process.

These concepts are used here as a theoretical language for interpreting providers' accounts rather than as categories assumed to exist directly in the interview data

(Moore 2006). The interviews allow us to examine how providers describe the organisation of knowledge, conduct, settings and pedagogic relations, but not to establish how learners experience these arrangements or to reconstruct the wider fields through which pedagogic discourses are produced. The analysis is therefore deliberately focused on the aspects of Bernstein's framework that can be connected to the empirical material. The following section outlines the research design and explains how these concepts were used to interpret providers' accounts of construction-focused AP.

Method

Using purposive and stratified sampling, construction AP providers were recruited from a larger sampling frame of 152 AP providers identified through desk-based searches and interviews conducted as part of the Excluded Lives project a major research project examining school exclusion across the UK. Part of the project involved examining the role of AP in the school exclusion process.

The wider project included interviews with 35 AP providers. For this article, nine interviewees representing nine organisations delivering construction-focused AP were selected from these interviews and from additional direct approaches to approximately 10 construction-focused providers. The final sample was intended to capture variation in organisational sector, location, programme duration and mode of delivery. Table 1 summarises the participants, their organisations and the forms of construction-focused AP they delivered.

Guided by our research questions and by Bernstein's (1990) theory of pedagogic discourse, the interviews explored how providers described construction knowledge and practical skills alongside expectations concerning conduct, safety, participation, responsibility and learner identity.

Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and given the lack of a priori research in this area, the semi-structured format enabled participants to share their personal experiences of working with learners in their AP programmes and to describe the type of AP they delivered. It also allowed for follow-up questions not initially included in the interview schedule, enabling participants to expand beyond the initial wording of the question (Johnson 2016). This approach was also chosen to capture diverse perspectives within a complex landscape of AP provision, and the interviews were conducted online, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were completed between December 2021 and October 2023, by a multidisciplinary team of researchers with construction and education backgrounds.

Following Moore's (2001) interpretation of Bernstein's methodological principles, Bernstein's concepts were used as flexible tools to iteratively interpret rules and practices in construction AP, rather than as fixed categories, ensuring a clear distinction between theory and data. Providers' accounts were treated as empirical descriptions from which possible indicators of classification, framing and pedagogic relations could be developed, rather than as direct instances of Bernstein's concepts. Informed by Clarke and Braun (2017), the data from semi-structured interviews were analysed using a three-stage thematic analysis approach.

Table 1. Sample of construction AP providers.

Participant	Position	Sector	Organisation	Jurisdiction	Type of AP Delivered	Analytical emphasis in provider account	Mode
1	Social Value Manager	Private	Construction Company	England and Wales	Careers advice, careers talks, STEM activities, and construction workshops delivered in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs).	Time-limited, employer-led exposure in school/PRU spaces; possible weakening of the boundary between school and industry, with evaluation centred on participation, safety conduct and career awareness.	Part-time and time limited intervention averaging 20 hours per intervention.
2	Business Development Manager	Private	Groundwork training company	England and Wales	Groundworks training, building activities and driving vehicles on a construction site to pupils from a local PRU.	Site-based practical work with stronger workplace classification; framing appears through control of sequence, pace, safety rules and transmitter/acquirer relations.	Part-time one to three days a week.
3	Apprenticeship Coordinator	Public	Housing maintenance	Wales	Practical construction workshops delivered on plumbing, electrical, and painting and decorating. Young people work alongside current construction apprentices.	Workshop and apprentice interaction; possible realisation of ID/RD through practical task selection, occupational role modelling and evaluative criteria for competent and safe conduct.	Part-time and time limited intervention averaging 20 hours per intervention.
4	Business Development Manager	Private	Construction training organisation	Wales	Practical construction projects to enable pupils to learn construction skills and give something back to their community.	Community project work; boundaries between vocational task, civic contributions, and behavioural expectations are reworked through project-based framing.	Part-time one day a week.
5	Manager	Third sector	Vocational Education Charity	England	Literacy and numeracy training from entry level to GCSE; employability, independent living skills, and mental health training. Carpentry and plumbing construction training. Pupils learn construction skills whilst building accommodation for people experiencing homelessness.	Full-time integrated provision; ID/RD appears in the embedding of construction tasks, academic learning, pastoral support, occupational norms and social-purpose evaluation.	Full-time
6	Training Manager	Third sector	Environmental organisation	Wales	A full-time timetable of AP courses, including plumbing, carpentry, photography, cookery, and bike maintenance. Maths and English skills are embedded in all modules.	Short full-time timetable; framing indicated by module selection, sequence and pace, with literacy and numeracy relocated into practical vocational texts.	Full-time over 6–8 weeks

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Participant	Position	Sector	Organisation	Jurisdiction	Type of AP Delivered	Analytical emphasis in provider account	Mode
7	Senior Youth Worker	Public	Youth Work Intervention	Wales	Vocational and experiential construction opportunities on sites for those marginalised and disengaged from mainstream education.	Youth-work setting with site-based experience; possible reworking of transmitter/acquirer relations through relational support, occupational exposure and expectations of participation.	Part-time one day a week.
8	Head of pre-16 training	Private	Vocational Training Wales	Wales	Students pick a vocational option of sport, media, hair and beauty, construction, motor vehicle, or animal care. They deliver bricklaying, carpentry, painting, and decorating as part of their practical construction training.	Full-time vocational option; Classification between vocational areas and mainstream curriculum is explicit, while framing appears through trade selection, pacing and assessment criteria.	Full-time
9	Headteacher	Not for Profit	Alternative Provision Academy	England	Pupils study English and Maths, employability, and a vocational construction subject which gives them an overview of the different trades.	Full-time academy model combining academic, employability and construction texts; possible ID/RD realisation through sequencing of academic and vocational learning and expectations of learner conduct.	Full-time alongside academic learning.

- (1) Stage one involved familiarisation with the data – the researchers recorded the interviews, transcribed them verbatim and read them repeatedly, making initial notes.
- (2) Stage two involved coding the interview data. Bernstein's (1990) concepts of classification and framing informed this stage, but they were not used as a set of rigid ready-made categories into which the data were placed. Instead, coding moved between theoretically informed reading and close attention to participants' own descriptions of practice. Some codes were developed deductively, particularly where provider accounts pointed to features relevant to classification and framing, such as the organisation of learning spaces, the kinds of construction tasks made available, rules around safety, the pacing and sequencing of activities, evaluative criteria, and relations between transmitters and acquirers. Other codes were developed inductively from the interview material itself. These included accounts of confidence, belonging, community contribution and re-engagement, which were retained when they helped explain how participants represented the pedagogic and social purposes of construction-focused AP.
- (3) Stage three involved returning to the coded data and checking the patterns developing across the interviews. We considered reoccurring patterns across provider accounts, but did not treat frequency alone as evidence of importance. Some codes were kept because they suggested shared features across the sample. Others were retained because they explained less common but still important accounts of how construction knowledge, workplace expectations and learner identities were organised in particular AP settings. Retaining both recurring and less common codes reflected Bernstein's concern with classification and framing, alongside Clarke and Braun's (2017) view of theme development as interpretive work.

Finally, given the size and variety of the sample, we have been careful not to overstate the analysis. The findings are read as provider accounts of what may be happening in these settings.

An example of how coding was undertaken is illustrated in [Table 2](#).

Findings

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What construction-related knowledge and practical skills do providers report making available to pupils, and through what pedagogic arrangements?

The analysis of provider accounts relating to RQ1 identified two themes. Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing were used to interpret how construction knowledge was organised across different settings, including the boundaries between academic and vocational learning and the sequencing, pacing and evaluation of practical activity. The findings are presented as provider accounts of these arrangements rather than as direct evidence of learner outcomes.

Theme 1.1 literacy and numeracy (instructional discourse)

Within the provider accounts, literacy and numeracy were repeatedly described not only as school curriculum requirements but also as texts recontextualised through

Table 2. Example of coding.

Evidence	Empirical indicators in provider accounts	Concept-indicator link	Emergent analytic interpretations
They've found a safe space, they have found it works here, where it didn't in mainstream. They have been able to knuckle down and get their qualifications. The academic side as well which sometimes for these kids is a real chore. Particularly if they are not academic based and they just want to do plumbing or tiling (P5).	Safe space; mainstream/AP boundary; qualifications; literacy and numeracy; plumbing and tiling; practical construction activity; motivation to engage with academic learning.	Space and text indicate classification between mainstream schooling, AP and vocational learning. Selection and sequencing of academic and practical texts indicate framing. Evaluation through qualifications indicates criteria. These indicators suggest a possible realisation of ID/RD in which academic and construction knowledge are reorganised through a more supportive pedagogic order.	Re-engagement with academic learning through vocationally meaningful texts; construction skills, literacy/numeracy and qualification goals are described as mutually connected rather than separate instructional and regulative themes.
They're having a better opportunity than mainstream schools, but I wanted them to feel like I wasn't penalising them for being in a PRU or a special school, I wanted them to feel like they have the same opportunities, and they paid me back for that. They behaved really well, they weren't messing around, they knew they had to wear gloves and glasses and they were quite happy to wear the hard hats, and Hi-Vis (P1).	PRU/special school positioning; same opportunities; behaviour; PPE; gloves, glasses, hard hats and Hi-Vis; safety expectations; conduct in practical work	Here, classification is seen in the boundaries drawn between PRU, special school or mainstream schooling and construction workplace expectations. Framing is seen in the emphasis on safety rules, conduct and relations between staff and learners. Together, these point to a possible realisation of ID/RD in which technical participation is tied to safety, behaviour and occupational identity.	Managing risk and participation in construction AP; workplace safety and behaviour are represented as part of the same pedagogic relation through which learners are positioned as legitimate participants in construction-related practice.

construction tasks. In Bernsteinian terms, these accounts suggest a weakening of the boundary between school knowledge and workplace practice, as English and maths were relocated into activities such as measuring, estimating and costing materials (Bernstein 1990). The framing of learning appeared to vary across programmes. For example, in some accounts, literacy and numeracy remained strongly sequenced within classroom-based provision, while in others they were embedded in practical tasks in workshops, school settings, or site-related activities.

One of the things we try to explain to them is, you need maths, how are you going to cost that wall over there, how much paint do you need, how are you going to build that wall.
(Participant 4)

Participants 5, 8 and 9 provided pupils with a classroom-based construction module and English and maths before practical construction training. This indicates a stronger framing of sequence, where academic or curriculum texts were positioned before practical construction activities.

If they are on a construction-based course, they will do those 'classroom-based' academic courses first thing in the morning, and then they go on to do the more practical side. So, we teach GCSE equivalent, and we teach English and maths. (Participant 5)

Participant 6 described a six-to-eight-week course covering carpentry and plumbing. Literacy and numeracy were not taught as separate blocks; instead they were integrated into the course. This gives a different picture from the classroom-first examples above, with academic and practical work more closely mixed and organised over a shorter period.

Based on all the different projects that we've got, we're trying to fit them into different areas of experience to give them some sort of positive experience that leads to successful reintegration back into school. Construction is going really well. (Participant 7)

Theme 1.2: vocational construction skills, knowledge, and qualifications

Across the sample, participants described opportunities for learners to engage with practical construction activities, although the form, duration and settings of these opportunities differed considerably. These activities can be understood as construction practices selected and transformed for pedagogic purposes. For example, participants 1 and 3 described practical workshops delivered with site staff in schools, including bricklaying, plastering and tiling. These accounts suggest that the boundary between school and workplace expertise was partially weakened through the involvement of industry workers, while evaluative criteria such as accuracy, craft skill and safe performance remained visible.

The bricklayers were really impressed with their skills, with the bricklaying, tiling, and cutting the tiles, because that's an art as well. I think getting praise from the bricklayer, the guy who owns the company, kind of gave them that confidence. (Participant 1)

Participants 2, 4 and 5 described forms of provision linked to live or live-like construction environments, where learners encountered practical work experience and, in some cases, vocational or industry-related qualifications in areas such as carpentry, plumbing, manual handling, abrasive wheels and asbestos awareness. These accounts point to a stronger classification of workplace space than school-based workshops, but still represent pedagogic versions of construction practice rather than unmediated workplace practice. Safety requirements, tool use and task completion operated as evaluative criteria through which learners were expected to recognise legitimate performance.

The [tutor] will cover manual handling, first aid, dumper (truck), CSCS,¹ brush cutter, and strimmer; they are the qualifications. They learn how to drive the machines correctly. (We) teach them the dump (truck), the do's and the don'ts. (Participant 2)

Other participants described workshop-based construction training linked to accreditations or entry-level qualifications. For example, participant 9 delivered an introduction to construction qualification that allowed learners to try different trades. Across the sample, construction knowledge was organised in different ways. Shorter interventions tended to offer initial exposure to construction, while longer programmes were more likely to include qualifications or more sustained practical teaching.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What forms of conduct, social norms and workplace expectations do providers report as embedded within construction-focused AP?

Analysis relating to RQ2 identified five themes concerning conduct, safety, relationships, community contribution and progression. These accounts show how practical construction learning was organised alongside expectations about behaviour, responsibility and participation. Bernstein's concepts were used to interpret how these expectations formed part of the pedagogic relations through which construction knowledge was made available.

Theme 2.1 employability skills

Participants described employability-related and pastoral forms of support that they considered important for learners' participation in construction-focused AP. These included mock interviews, CV support, teamwork, independent living skills and support with anxiety and emotional well-being. Rather than treating these as separate from practical construction learning, the accounts suggest that they formed part of the regulative order within which technical skills were made meaningful. In other words, employability was represented as involving not only competence in tasks, but also dispositions, relationships and forms of self-presentation that providers associated with legitimate workplace participation.

We also offer what we call employability, alongside that, which focuses on things like how to get a job, what we need to know, CV building, and job search. We also offer more bespoke pastoral-type things, such as independent living and how to deal with anxiety. (Participant 5)

Theme 2.2 practical activity, engagement and conduct

Providers represented many learners as having experienced difficulties in mainstream education, including additional learning needs (ALN), social and emotional difficulties, poverty-related disadvantage, school exclusion and, in some accounts, previous offending. They matter analytically because they show how providers understood the learners they were teaching, and how they framed the need for different pedagogic relations from those associated with mainstream schooling. Participant 9, for example, described many learners as having ALN and low socio-economic status, while also stating that the 'common theme is that they've all been kicked out of school'. Participant 1 offered a more forceful account:

They're students who have probably been kicked out of PRUs, but the students that are there – if they were not there, they would probably be in prison. Let's put it that way – they're that extreme. (Participant 1)

Participants often described learners as more engaged during practical construction work and better at meeting expectations. This does not show that construction activity itself improved behaviour. Rather, it suggests that some learners responded differently when expectations were built into the task through safety rules, clear standards and practical responsibility. Participant 1 described learners as 'incredibly well behaved', while participant 4 linked practical work to greater confidence and improved conduct. In Bernstein's

terms, this may reflect a different framing of behaviour from that experienced in the classroom.

They give results which are outstanding, and the schools we work with cannot believe the results that we've had. Now they go back to school re-energised because, in a way, we are used as a bit of a carrot. If you don't turn up to school, you can't come next week. So the school gets respect back. We're encouraging them to go to school ... they're starting to re-engage, that behaviour is getting better. A lot of them have anger issues, a lot of that is reducing ... it's changing their complete outlook because they have a focus and something that they realise they are good at. (Participant 4)

Theme 2.3 community-based activity, responsibility and belonging

Three participants spoke about community-based construction work in relation to learners' conduct, responsibility, and sense of belonging. This was apparent where the task had a clear purpose beyond training. For example, participant 2 described groundworks linked to the redevelopment of a historic site. Participant 5 described a partnership with a local authority in which learners helped build accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. These examples can be read through Bernstein's (1990) idea of pedagogic text. What learners encountered was not simply a construction task, but a task given meaning by its wider purpose. What was being built, who it was intended for, and why it mattered all shaped the learning. The criteria for success, therefore, went beyond workmanship and safety. They also involved showing care and responsibility in work that benefited others.

When we get kids to work in the same area, and the stuff they build, they're stopping, damaging those properties because they build them. They stop their friends from touching them because they built them. (Participant 4)

Theme 2.4 role models and occupational participation

Participants also emphasised the importance of role models from the construction industry. These accounts are significant because they indicate how transmitter/acquirer relations were organised differently from conventional classroom relations (Bernstein 1990). Learners were not only positioned in relation to teachers or tutors, but also in relation to apprentices, tradespeople, employers and former pupils. Participant 1 described learners gaining confidence when working alongside plasterers or bricklayers and receiving praise for their work. Participants 2 and 5 also discussed the value of former pupils employed as apprentices or trainee technicians who were seen as more approachable and able to make occupational futures more recognisable to learners.

I take apprentices with me who are living, breathing role models. There is not much age difference, so they can relate to them. And they can tell them their journey and their story and why they wanted to go into that role. (Participant 3)

Theme 2.5 progression towards construction education, training and employment

Several participants described construction-focused AP as creating possible progression routes into further training, work experience, apprenticeships or employment. For example, participant 1 spoke about helping young people get access to work experience and traineeships. Participant 2 was more direct, describing it as a 'pathway into employment'. These claims need to be treated carefully, though. They show how providers understood the opportunities on offer, rather than proving that these routes led reliably to progression.

We've got a pathway into employment for them. We can lead them into positions, apprenticeships, and, more importantly, straight into employment. (Participant 2)

Discussion

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What construction-related knowledge and practical skills do providers report making available to pupils, and through what pedagogic arrangements?

In relation to RQ1, the provider accounts in this study suggest that construction-focused AP may support some young people who are at risk of disengagement by making forms of construction knowledge, practical skill and workplace-related criteria available in pedagogically organised settings. Provider accounts suggest that construction-focused AP organises construction knowledge, practical skill and workplace expectations through a range of pedagogic arrangements.

Viewing technical competence and workplace expectations together also helps clarify the relationship between construction-focused AP and employability. Some providers described programmes that introduced pupils to industry-recognised practices, qualifications, or further training routes. However, these accounts should not be read as evidence that AP, particularly short-term interventions, provides a direct route into construction employment. The provider accounts suggest that construction-focused AP may create conditions for early engagement, confidence and recognition of construction as a possible field of future participation.

The findings also suggest that literacy and numeracy were not treated by providers as abstract school knowledge alone, but were frequently embedded in practical construction tasks. This matters analytically because it indicates possible variation in the boundaries between academic knowledge, vocational practice and workplace expectations across AP settings. To interpret participants' accounts, we used classification and framing as a language of description to examine variation in the organisation of time, space, pedagogic texts, sequencing, pacing and evaluation. The programmes described in the interview data appeared to cluster around three broad modes, although these should be treated as descriptive features of this sample rather than a general typology of construction AP:

- Off-site provision was described as taking place in specialist training centres, vocational colleges and PRUs. In these settings, literacy and numeracy appeared to be folded into practical construction work, for example, through ordering materials, estimating quantities or pricing a wall. In Bernsteinian terms, this suggests some

blurring of the boundary between school knowledge and vocational practice. That blurring was uneven, however, since the organisation of the task still depended on who controlled the work, its pace and the criteria by which it was assessed.

- School-based provision in which construction modules were positioned alongside academic and therapeutic learning. Here, construction knowledge appeared to be recontextualised within the existing classificatory boundaries of school, while practical tasks provided alternative texts through which pupils could demonstrate competence, participation and engagement.
- Hybrid provision combining classroom learning with practical construction activity, including site-based experiences. These arrangements are especially important for future research because they suggest variation in the specialisation of time, space and text, and therefore in how ID/RD may be realised across different organisational forms of AP.

Following Moore (1984), hybrid provisions should not be judged against an assumption that conventional schooling is the only legitimate form of education. Their significance depends on whether bringing school and occupational knowledge together changes what knowledge is valued, who is recognised as a transmitter and who controls the pedagogic process.

The involvement of construction workers, apprentices or other industry practitioners may weaken the classification between the school and occupational knowledge, but this does not necessarily weaken the framing if teachers or providers continue to control the tasks, sequence and evaluative criteria (Moore 1984).

The provider accounts point to differences in how transmitter categories were classified across the settings. In school-based workshops, industry practitioners were brought into pedagogic arrangements that still appeared to be organised by the school or AP provider. The boundary between teacher and occupational transmitter may have been weaker, but control over task selection, sequencing and evaluation remained relatively strong. Site-based and hybrid provision looked somewhat different. Here, vocational tutors, construction workers and apprentices appear to play a more direct part in transmitting occupational knowledge and judging legitimate performance. Moore's (1984) distinction is useful here. The key issue is not simply whether a transmitter is a teacher or a construction worker, but whether occupational actors are used to support an existing pedagogic text or are able to shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and performance.

Viewed through Bernstein's (1990) concept of recontextualisation, these forms of provision may represent more or less strongly pedagogised versions of workplace practice. In school-based provision, construction activity is more clearly separated from the workplace and organised around educational timetables, curricula and behavioural expectations. Training centre and college provision may reproduce more features of vocational practice, while hybrid and site-based provision may weaken the boundaries between educational and occupational settings. However, even site-based experience remains pedagogically selected, structured, and evaluated. The distinction is therefore not between pedagogic and authentic workplace practice, but between different ways and degrees in which workplace practice is transformed for educational purposes.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What forms of conduct, social norms and workplace expectations do providers report as embedded within construction-focused AP?

In relation to RQ2, the interviews provide insight into how construction AP providers represented the relationship between practical construction activity, workplace expectations and learner engagement.

Participants often set pupils' experiences in mainstream classrooms against their experiences in construction AP. They described some pupils as struggling with classroom expectations but as more engaged when learning was organised around practical construction tasks. These descriptions position young people as a particular category of acquirer for whom providers considered mainstream pedagogic relations to be unsuccessful or inappropriate (Moore 1984). However, the data do not establish whether pupils themselves accepted this positioning or whether their disengagement reflected cultural resistance, unmet support needs or other experiences of schooling (Moore 1984). The provider accounts point to a different form of framing in construction AP. In mainstream settings, some pupils were described as finding the expected rules of participation hard to accept or to keep up with. The construction settings were described differently. Here, expectations around behaviour and performance seemed more visible through the work itself: completing a task, working safely, contributing to a community purpose, or meeting people in the industry. For some pupils, this appeared to give the expectations more substance.

These findings support Callanan and Perri (2020) argument that vocational experiences can build confidence and engagement. However, they should not be treated as evidence that construction-focused AP, particularly short programmes, provide a clear route into construction employment. The data suggest a more modest claim. Programmes of around 20 to 40 hours do not, on their own, demonstrate a pathway into the industry. What they may offer is an early encounter with construction, including its routines, tools, expectations and ways of working. For some pupils, this kind of exposure may help them build confidence, become more familiar with construction, and see themselves as someone who could take part in the industry.

Health and safety provides a particularly clear example of how classification and framing can be used to connect Bernstein's conceptual language to empirical indicators. Providers described site inductions, PPE, risk assessment, tool use, testing, supervision, and behavioural expectations as central features of construction AP. These should not be treated as regulative discourse in a circular way. Instead, they can be interpreted as indicators of framing because they show how the rules of selection, sequence, pace, criteria, and evaluation were made explicit (Bernstein 2000). They also show how classification works. Safety practices help distinguish between school and workplace, pupil and worker, and ordinary classroom behaviour and conduct recognised as appropriate on-site. In this respect, safety can be understood as a pedagogic text. As a constituted pedagogic text, safety is produced through the recontextualisation of workplace regulation, industry practice, qualification requirements and providers' expectations about legitimate conduct. What is transmitted as 'safety' is therefore not workplace practice in an unmediated form, but a pedagogically selected and organised version of it (Bernstein 2000). It provides more than just technical instruction because it also introduces pupils to the social expectations, routines, and forms of discipline associated with construction work. A fuller framing analysis could examine how safety knowledge is selected, sequenced,

paced and evaluated across different forms of construction-focused AP, and how these processes vary according to the degree of control exercised by different categories of transmitter.

The findings, also, allow for a cautious discussion of vocational identity formation. Conway and Foskey (2015) and Colley et al. (2003) argue that vocational learning extends beyond the acquisition of technical competence to include confidence, belonging and the development of occupational identities. In this study, providers described construction-focused AP as giving pupils opportunities to participate in practical work and receive recognition from construction workers and tutors. Pupils also encountered workplace expectations in ways that were more direct and tangible than in mainstream classrooms. These accounts suggest that construction-focused AP may create conditions in which vocational identities can begin to develop.

The findings highlight the need to understand construction-focused AP as both a pedagogic practice and a social project. As Bernstein (1990) suggests, the organisation of time, space and evaluative rules shapes the ID/RD available to learners, and the programmes in this study differed markedly in duration, setting and purpose. Variation in duration, setting and purpose matters because whether AP offers meaningful educational opportunities or risks reproducing disadvantage may depend on how knowledge, norms and expectations are organised and encountered in practice.

These findings reflect the perspectives of the AP providers in the sample and are not intended to represent the full diversity of AP provision. Rather, they offer an analytical generalisation that supports the use of Bernstein's concepts to examine an under-researched area. Future research needs to examine these issues more systematically through classification and framing, including how duration, setting, pedagogical space, task structure, assessment criteria, transmitter/acquirer relations and progression routes shape the possible realisations of ID/RD across several forms of construction-focused AP (Bernstein 1990, 2000). Such work would make it possible to move beyond provider accounts and test more carefully whether, how, and under what conditions construction AP supports re-engagement, expands learner possibilities, or reproduces constrained futures.

Conclusion

Using Bernstein's concepts as a language of description, this study examined provider accounts of how construction-focused AP organises construction knowledge, workplace norms and possible occupational identities. Two key contributions to the advancement of AP research in the field of construction can be identified from the findings. First, the analysis suggests that, within this sample, construction-focused AP may make practical construction knowledge, literacy and numeracy, trade awareness and introductory qualifications available through pedagogically organised practical activity. These should not be treated as separate examples of instructional discourse detached from social order. Consistent with Bernstein's (1990) formulation, instructional discourse is embedded within regulative discourse (ID/RD). Thus, activities such as measuring, cutting, tool use, site induction, PPE, teamwork and risk assessment can be understood as possible realisations of pedagogic relations in which competence, conduct and evaluation are organised together. The evidence presented here,

therefore, points to the importance of examining how time, space, task, sequence, pace, criteria, transmitter/acquirer relations and evaluation shape the form of knowledge made available in AP settings.

Second, the findings suggest that construction-focused AP may, as represented by providers, offer some young people different conditions for participation, recognition and early vocational identification than those available in mainstream classroom settings. The study does not show that construction-focused AP necessarily produces re-engagement, employment outcomes or lasting changes in occupational identity or aspirations. Nor does it show that short interventions can create direct pathways into the construction labour market. Rather, providers described practical tasks, health and safety routines, work that benefited the local community, and contact with tutors or construction workers as ways in which some pupils began to see construction as a field they could enter and participate in. Construction-focused AP may broaden pupils' opportunities when it is well supported, reflects young people's interests and connects with wider educational pathways. At the same time, it may reinforce restricted futures if marginalised young people are directed into narrow vocational pathways.

The findings above should be interpreted with an important limitation in mind. The data derived from interviews with nine construction-focused AP providers and should be treated as exploratory and illustrative rather than representative of AP provision as a whole.

Future research should therefore examine construction-focused AP more systematically through Bernstein's (2000) concepts of classification and framing. In particular, further work should develop clearer concept-indicator links between Bernstein's internal conceptual language and empirical features such as time, space, text, selection, sequence, pace, evaluation criteria, transmitter/acquirer relations and progression routes (Bernstein 1990, 2000). Comparative and longitudinal research, which includes pupil perspectives, would be especially valuable. This research should examine how different forms of AP support re-engagement, expand educational and occupational possibilities or reproduce limited futures. Such research would also help clarify the conditions under which construction-focused AP can contribute to both meaningful educational provision for marginalised young people and a more inclusive response to skills shortages within the construction industry.

Note

1. A CSCS card shows that individuals on a construction site possess the right skills and knowledge for their job (CSCS 2023).

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