Apprenticeship as Social Leveller? A Critical Exploration of Vocational Pathways through a Social Justice Lens

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Abstract

Purpose

This conceptual paper critically explores the role of apprenticeships in the UK as both potential social levellers and mechanisms of social reproduction. Drawing on theories of capital, social justice, and intersectionality, it investigates whether vocational pathways can meaningfully promote inclusion, economic agency, and identity transformation for underrepresented groups particularly within the further education (FE) sector.

Design/methodology/approach

Adopting a theoretically grounded approach, the paper synthesises key sociological and political frameworks, including Bourdieu's theory of capital, Fraser's model of social justice, and Crenshaw's intersectionality. It engages in critical policy analysis of the *Skills for Jobs* White Paper and wider vocational education reforms to interrogate how structural inequities, marketisation, and employer-led models shape the apprenticeship landscape.

Findings

The paper argues that apprenticeships occupy a paradoxical space: while often positioned as inclusive, work-based alternatives to higher education, they risk reproducing existing inequalities through labour market segmentation, variable quality, and credentialism. However, when embedded in authentic employer partnerships, high-quality provision, and relational pedagogy, apprenticeships can function as transformative sites of social mobility, personal growth, and civic participation.

Originality/value

The paper contributes a new conceptual model that frames apprenticeships as potential social justice interventions, rather than solely as economic tools. It also calls for greater investment in FE-based

research, the co-design of policy with learners and communities, and a reframing of vocational education as a space of democratic possibility. This reorientation is vital in addressing persistent inequities and realising the full promise of vocational learning in the 21st century.

Introduction

The role of apprenticeships in the United Kingdom (UK) has undergone significant transformation in recent years, evolving from their historical association with manual trades and vocational marginalisation to being repositioned as central to the national skills and economic strategy. Policy initiatives such as the *Skills for Jobs White Paper* (DfE, 2021), the *Post-16 Skills Plan* (DfE and BIS, 2018), and the ongoing reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy (DfE, 2024a) reflect a concerted attempt to reframe apprenticeships as aspirational, high-quality alternatives to academic routes (DfE, 2025). Simultaneously, global imperatives, including the need for green skills, digital competence, and inclusive economic participation, have intensified attention on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems (UNESCO, 2023).

Yet, despite these policy shifts and the growing emphasis on parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways, the apprenticeship system remains embedded within structures of educational and social stratification (Gessler, 2019). Apprenticeships are often simultaneously invoked as mechanisms for both economic renewal and social justice, positioned as pathways for young people - particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds - to gain employment, skills, and upward mobility (Hupkau *et al.,* 2017). However, empirical studies and sectoral analyses continue to reveal uneven access, differentiated quality, and unequal outcomes across apprenticeship provision (Fuller and Unwin, 2017; Cavaglia, *et al.,* 2020; Smith *et al.,* 2021). This creates a paradox: while apprenticeships are promoted as levellers of social and educational opportunity, they are often experienced as reinforcing existing patterns of inequality and marginalisation. This further demonstrates inequalities within apprenticeship systems as research tends to examine economic, cultural, or identity-related factors in isolation rather than as interdependent. As a result, there is limited theorisation of apprenticeships as holistic social justice infrastructures. Moreover, conceptual work on apprenticeships remains relatively limited compared to empirical and policy-oriented studies, with comparatively little attention given to theorising the relational, identity-forming, and affective dimensions of vocational learning. This leaves a gap for conceptual scholarship that integrates sociological theory and critical policy analysis to explain how apprenticeships function as complex social fields shaped by stratified access to capital, symbolic hierarchies, and intersectional identities.

The social justice potential of apprenticeships demands a critical examination of their function within a deeply stratified education system. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, this paper interrogates how economic, social, and cultural resources shape both access to and progression within

apprenticeship pathways. Additionally, it applies Fraser's (2008) tripartite model of justice (redistribution, recognition, and participation) to interrogate how apprenticeships engage with equity at structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels. The lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) further illuminates how race, class, gender, and geography converge to affect who participates in apprenticeship programmes and how their experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of advantage and oppression. Moreover, this paper foregrounds the concept of the "missing middle" - learners who may possess strong academic profiles (e.g. high GCSE scores) yet opt for apprenticeships over traditional A-Level or university routes. These learners complicate dominant narratives that vocational pathways are exclusively for "low-attaining" students (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018). Their presence in apprenticeship programmes reveals a crucial space of social mixing, unique to the post-compulsory sector, and particularly to further education (FE). FE colleges, often overlooked in educational policy and research, become sites where learners from varying socio-economic and educational backgrounds co-exist, learn, and transition into work and adulthood. This dynamic makes the FE and apprenticeship nexus a perfect site for exploring education as both a mechanism of social reproduction and a potential site of transformation (Thompson, 2019). Additionally, the rise of low-cost, low-quality provision from some private training providers raises concerns about fragmentation in the apprenticeship system and the dilution of its levelling potential. Questions persist around whose interests are served by employer-led models, and whether vocational training is being commodified at the expense of pedagogical integrity and learner outcomes and the dignity of labour (Avis, 2024).

This paper therefore offers a critical conceptual exploration of apprenticeships as potential social levellers in contemporary England. It seeks to interrogate how far vocational pathways can promote social mobility, inclusion, and economic agency, while remaining attentive to the systemic barriers that persist. The sections that follow will theorise the contradictory roles of apprenticeship through a social justice lens, examine the stratified nature of access and provision, and reflect on the transformative possibilities embedded in high-quality, inclusive vocational education. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in TVET and post-compulsory education research by challenging the under-representation of vocational learning in academic discourse and policy evaluation. The analysis is grounded in a desk-based conceptual synthesis (Torraco, 2016), drawing together critical policy analysis, sociological theory, and educational philosophy. This approach allows for the interrogation of dominant discourses surrounding apprenticeships and for the development of a theoretically informed argument that foregrounds relational, ethical, and justice-oriented dimensions of vocational learning. The review draws upon academic, policy, and sector publications published between 2003–2025, identified through searches of Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and key UK policy repositories, prioritising literature that engages with social (in)equality, vocational identity, and apprenticeship system reform. Sources were selected based on theoretical relevance rather than exhaustiveness, consistent with integrative conceptual review methods (Torraco, 2016). No empirical data were collected; rather, the paper integrates existing research to generate new propositions and conceptual insights. It responds to calls

for deeper conceptual engagement in FE research (Bathmaker, 2021), positioning apprenticeships not only as economic instruments but as sites of identity formation, democratic access, and social transformation.

Literature review and conceptual framework

This section draws upon three interrelated theoretical lenses: *Bourdieu's theory of capital*, *Fraser's theory of social justice*, *and Crenshaw's intersectionality* to interrogate the social justice potential of apprenticeship pathways in England. These frameworks provide a multi-layered analysis of how structural inequalities manifest in vocational education and how policy efforts aimed at enhancing equity are shaped by deeper cultural, economic, and institutional dynamics. While the primary focus is on the English system, this discussion is enriched by drawing on international comparative research and recent literature on the digital and ecological transitions shaping vocational education globally.

Bourdieu: Capital and social reproduction

Read through a Bourdieusian lens (1986), apprenticeships operate within stratified social fields in which unequal distributions of economic, cultural, and social capital shape both access to opportunity and the value ascribed to vocational trajectories. While positioned rhetorically as open and meritocratic, higher-status apprenticeships often remain more accessible to learners who can mobilise institutional knowledge, networks, and symbolic legitimacy. As a result, vocational pathways may reproduce existing hierarchies unless these asymmetries of capital are explicitly acknowledged and disrupted. Cultural capital also influences learner identity and aspiration. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (the internalised dispositions shaped by social background) affects how young people perceive vocational routes. Even when high-attaining learners (the "missing middle") choose apprenticeships over academic routes, they may encounter stigmatisation due to entrenched hierarchies that position university education as the more legitimate form of success (Bathmaker, 2017). These symbolic hierarchies are reinforced through policy discourse, media representations, and school-level guidance, often limiting the transformative potential of vocational routes. Consequently, apprenticeships may reproduce rather than challenge the inequalities they are intended to address, unless these forms of capital are explicitly acknowledged and actively redistributed. This requires policy interventions that go beyond access and address embedded inequalities in the quality, visibility, and valuation of vocational pathways.

Brief international contrasts illustrate how institutional design mediates the social justice capacity of vocational systems. Coordinated models, such as those found in Germany (Eichhorst and Tobsch, 2015), tend to institutionalise recognition and progression, while marketised systems, including aspects of the Australian (Smith and Kemmis, 2013) and English contexts, risk stratification and variable quality. These cases are not presented as transferable solutions, but as illustrative contrasts that foreground the political choices embedded in apprenticeship governance.

Fraser: Social justice and redistribution, recognition, participation

Fraser's (2008) multidimensional framework of social justice, comprising redistribution, recognition, and participation, offers a valuable lens for evaluating the extent to which apprenticeships can promote equity. Each dimension highlights a different axis of justice: redistribution addresses economic inequalities; recognition deals with cultural and symbolic marginalisation; and participation focuses on voice and inclusion in decision-making processes. From a Fraserian perspective, apprenticeship policy in England privileges redistribution through employability while underplaying the equally necessary dimensions of recognition and participation. Although expanded access and funding mechanisms seek to address economic inequality, vocational learners continue to experience cultural devaluation and limited influence over the structures that shape their learning. Without attention to how apprentices are recognised and positioned as participatory agents, redistributive reforms risk entrenching rather than alleviating injustice.

Participation, meanwhile, requires that learners, educators, and communities are not merely recipients of policy but active agents in shaping apprenticeship systems. Yet apprenticeship governance in England has increasingly become employer-led, often sidelining the voices of apprentices themselves, educators in FE, and local communities (Hodgson and Spours, 2019). Importantly, Fraser's emphasis on participation becomes increasingly salient when considering the digital and green transitions shaping the future of work. Apprenticeships are central to preparing learners for emergent industries, but only if they are co-designed with and for diverse learners. While green and digital apprenticeships offer new opportunities for innovation, they risk replicating existing exclusionary patterns unless actively designed with equity in mind (CEDEFOP, 2012; McGrath and Ramsarup, 2024). An integrative justice agenda must therefore not only redistribute opportunity but ensure representation and recognition across rapidly changing vocational landscapes.

Crenshaw: Intersectionality

While Bourdieu and Fraser offer macro-structural critiques, intersectionality provides a necessary lens for understanding how individual identities and systemic oppressions interact within the apprenticeship landscape. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality conceptualises how race, gender, class, and other axes of identity intersect to shape experiences of marginalisation and privilege. It challenges single-axis approaches to educational inequality that treat race, gender, or class in isolation. Apprenticeships in England display clear patterns of intersectional disparity. National statistics indicate that Black, Asian and minority ethnic learners are underrepresented in higher-level apprenticeships and more likely to be enrolled in sectors with lower progression and pay (Takala *et al.,* 2025). Similarly, young women are often concentrated in feminised sectors such as health and social care, where wages and long-term prospects are comparatively limited (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Learners with disabilities also face multiple barriers to entry, progression, and retention, despite policy rhetoric around inclusion. Geography further compounds these inequalities. Apprentices in rural or post-industrial areas often face

limited employer availability and poor transport links, which restrict access to high-quality opportunities (Ofsted, 2015). These intersecting factors produce stratified experiences within the same qualification framework, underscoring the need for policies and pedagogies that are responsive to learners' complex social positions. A comparative lens also reveals important nuances. Canada's apprenticeship policies increasingly centre Indigenous learners, foregrounding community engagement and decolonial justice approaches (Beaudry and Perry, 2020). This contrasts with England's more market-led model and provides a potential model for inclusive apprenticeship reform. Similarly, international research on AI and digital transformation warns that emerging technologies may automate low-skilled jobs, exacerbating stratification unless apprenticeship frameworks proactively integrate digital literacy and adaptive skills (Bone, *et al.,* 2025). An intersectional lens also calls for attention to voice and representation. Whose experiences are made visible in apprenticeship research and policymaking? Who has the power to define what a "successful" apprenticeship looks like? By centring lived experience and recognising multiple, overlapping oppressions, intersectionality demands a more nuanced, justice-oriented approach to the development and evaluation of vocational pathways.

The missing middle and the stratified landscape

The longstanding binary division between academic and vocational pathways in England has long positioned apprenticeships as second-tier options, largely reserved for those perceived as 'non-academic' or in need of practical alternatives (Keep, 2009; Fuller and Unwin, 2011). However, recent shifts in participation and policy reveal an increasingly complex learner demographic, particularly the emergence of what could be described as the "missing middle": academically able young people who might traditionally have pursued A-levels and university, but who are now opting for apprenticeships and vocational routes for reasons ranging from employability to debt aversion to practical learning preferences. This shift is quantitatively evidenced by the growth in higher-level apprenticeship participation. In the 2022/23 academic year, 115,200 individuals started a higher-level apprenticeship in England (an increase of 10.2% from the previous year) while starts at intermediate level declined by 14.6% (DfE, 2024b). Significantly, over 40% of these starts were in Level 4 or 5 technical areas, suggesting an increasing alignment between vocational and professional routes. While this may point to diversification, the benefits of such routes are not evenly distributed. Learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in higher-level apprenticeships, particularly in sectors such as engineering, finance, and digital technologies (Battinson *et al.,* 2020). In contrast, learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds remain clustered in lower-paid sectors such as adult care, hospitality, and retail, often enrolled through private providers with weaker quality assurance and less access to pedagogical innovation.

Such segmentation of provision perpetuates what Bourdieu (1984) terms the reproduction of social hierarchies through the differential accumulation of capital. While apprenticeships may purport to offer equivalent routes to economic and social advancement, in practice they remain highly stratified. Access

to elite apprenticeship programmes such as degree apprenticeships with Russell Group universities or large multinational corporations requires not only strong academic credentials, but also social and cultural capital: the ability to navigate application systems, articulate one's strengths in interviews, and often, unpaid internships or prior experience (Bathmaker, 2021). This presents a significant barrier to working-class and minority ethnic learners, despite policy rhetoric of widening participation. Furthermore, the apprenticeship system in England has been increasingly shaped by employer-led models of skills development. The *Skills for Jobs White Paper* (DfE, 2021) emphasises the need for training that is "demand-led" and "responsive to employer needs," often at the expense of learner agency and holistic development. While this responsiveness may strengthen alignment with labour market demands, it risks reducing apprenticeships to functionalist, narrowly defined training models. As Avis (2016) cautions, this market-driven logic encourages a "pedagogy of compliance," in which learners are conditioned for immediate employability rather than broader critical and civic engagement.

The "missing middle" also complicates assumptions about who vocational education is for. FE colleges increasingly report cohorts in which learners who have achieved high GCSE grades choose vocational routes for positive, future-focused reasons. These same spaces also serve those who have failed GCSE English or maths, learners with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), or those who face digital poverty or housing insecurity (Spours, 2019). This convergence of diverse learner experiences is unique to the FE sector, which stands as a rare intersectional educational space. Yet this diversity is rarely supported through sufficient funding, policy coherence, or professional esteem. Between 2010 and 2020, funding for 16–19 education in colleges fell by 14% in real terms, with colleges receiving £1,500 less per student annually than secondary schools (Cribb *et al.*, 2021). This funding disparity contributes directly to constrained resources, overloaded staff, and limited capacity to offer high-quality, inclusive, and aspirational learning environments. The presence of the "missing middle" within the vocational system therefore underscores a critical contradiction: despite growing participation and policy endorsement, apprenticeships continue to be undervalued in the public imagination, and this symbolic devaluation reproduces structural inequalities. Yet there remains significant potential in this complexity. If vocational education can offer a genuinely diverse, high-quality alternative to academic pathways as one that includes both high achievers and those historically excluded then it may serve as a unique site for educational integration and social cohesion. For this to occur, however, there must be a shift away from dichotomous thinking. Apprenticeship participation involves more than skill acquisition; it is also a process of identity formation through which learners negotiate belonging, legitimacy, and aspiration. When educational experiences prioritise narrow employability outcomes, opportunities for subject formation and critical development are constrained. Recognising apprenticeships as relational and identity-forming spaces foregrounds the pedagogical conditions required for meaningful vocational learning.

Challenges and critiques

Structural inequities

Despite the promise of apprenticeships as vehicles for social mobility and skills development, access to high-quality vocational routes remains profoundly uneven. Learners from lower socio-economic status backgrounds, as well as minoritised ethnic groups, are overrepresented in lower-level apprenticeships and underrepresented in higher and degree-level routes (Martin, 2025). These patterns reflect deeper structural inequities within the English education and training system, where learners' educational trajectories are shaped not only by academic attainment but also by geographic location, race, gender, and access to networks constituting what Bourdieu (1986) would term cumulative disadvantages in capital. Apprenticeships that lead to sustained progression and wage returns are not equally accessible. Cullinane and Doherty (2020) found that young people from affluent backgrounds were nearly twice as likely to access degree apprenticeships as those from the most deprived areas. Similarly, ethnically marginalised apprentices are disproportionately channelled into lower-paid sectors such as health and social care, often with limited progression opportunities (Takala *et al.,* 2025). The Department for Education's own statistics show that only 13.5% of apprentices from the most deprived areas progressed to higher-level apprenticeships, compared to 25.4% from the least deprived quintile (DfE, 2024b). There is a growing situation in the UK which exacerbates labour market segmentation, where certain apprenticeship sectors (hospitality, social care, retail) function as holding zones for precarious employment rather than springboards to secure careers (Avis, 2016). Vocational routes in many European contexts, including the UK, risk reproducing patterns of low-pay and low-skill trajectories unless accompanied by strong governance, curriculum standards, and employer accountability. As Fuller and Unwin (2011) argue, a high-quality apprenticeship is not merely about acquiring job-specific skills but participating in expansive learning environments where learners are recognised as developing professionals. The absence of such environments in many low-tier apprenticeships further entrenches inequalities.

Policy gaps and marketisation

The *Skills for Jobs White Paper* (DfE, 2021) offers a bold vision for a more agile, employer-responsive FE system. However, significant tensions between policy aspirations and the structural realities of provision arise. The employer-led model, central to current reforms, places significant power in the hands of businesses many of whom have neither the capacity nor the incentive to support inclusive, high-quality apprenticeship experiences. Without regulation and clear expectations, there is a risk that employer-defined standards reflect short-term productivity needs rather than the broader educational development of learners. Furthermore, the marketisation of apprenticeship provision has created perverse incentives. Providers are funded based on completion metrics and employer contracts, not long-term learner progression. This commodifies apprenticeships, reducing them to credential acquisition rather than transformative educational experiences (Ball, 2017). In such a system, apprenticeships risk becoming what Fraser (1995) would term "affirmative" rather than "transformative"

strategies: superficially redistributive but ultimately leaving underlying structural inequities intact. Credentialism, in this context, becomes a significant threat. As Brown, *et al.* (2020) note, the proliferation of vocational qualifications does not automatically translate into labour market advantage. Without complementary strategies - such as fair wage policies, employer regulation, and progression routes - apprentices may accumulate credentials without real mobility. This problem is compounded by the symbolic devaluation of vocational qualifications. Even Level 3 technical qualifications, which are theoretically equivalent to A-levels, are less recognised by universities and employers as legitimate indicators of talent (Bathmaker, 2021). The *White Paper* also lacks robust mechanisms to tackle geographic disparities in provision. Learners in rural and coastal areas who may already be suffering from poor public transport, limited employer diversity, and digital exclusion face acute barriers to high-quality apprenticeship participation. The current policy landscape, therefore, is marked by a contradiction. On the one hand, apprenticeships are positioned as central to national economic recovery and inclusion agendas. On the other, the mechanisms through which they are implemented reinforce the very inequalities they are meant to overcome. To move beyond this impasse, a reconfiguration of the system is required as one that centres educational purpose, learner voice, and social justice, rather than employer utility alone.

Towards apprenticeships as genuine social levellers

Despite the structural inequities and policy contradictions previously outlined, the potential for apprenticeships to act as authentic vehicles of social mobility remains both conceptually and practically significant. This potential, however, is contingent upon reconfiguring the system in ways that genuinely foreground equity, inclusivity, and learner agency. Rather than positioning apprenticeships as subordinate alternatives to higher education, there is a need to reframe them as distinct and equally valuable routes to social and economic advancement. A crucial component of this transformation lies in developing authentic employer partnerships that move beyond tokenistic engagement. Meaningful collaboration between providers, employers, and learners must centre not only on workforce needs but also on long-term learner development. James Relly and Laczik (2021) indicate that apprenticeships that are designed with co-produced, expansive learning frameworks where employers invest in mentoring, structured progression pathways, and recognition of learner development are significantly more likely to yield sustained wage gains and employment outcomes. Yet only 38% of apprentices surveyed by the Social Mobility Commission (2022) reported access to a workplace mentor, a critical deficit that underscores the need for systemic improvements in relational support structures.

High-quality training and mentoring are essential to counter the "narrow utilitarianism" that often characterises lower-tier apprenticeships (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). Expansive apprenticeships - as conceptualised by Fuller and Unwin (2011) - involve rich learning environments, diverse task engagement, and a recognition of the apprentice as a developing practitioner. Where these conditions are met, apprenticeships can support not just technical proficiency but broader capabilities such as

problem-solving, communication, and reflective judgment which are key attributes for future mobility. Moreover, the embedding of dialogic pedagogies within vocational training can foster the critical thinking and interpersonal skills necessary for navigating contemporary workplaces from college (Biesta, 2010). To act as genuine levellers, apprenticeships must also enjoy parity of esteem with higher education routes. This involves a cultural shift, one that recognises vocational excellence not as a second-best option but as a legitimate and prestigious path in its own right. The expansion of higher and degree apprenticeships has begun to challenge this binary, but access remains uneven, and public narratives still privilege the academic over the applied. Central to this reimagination is the FE sector itself, which occupies a uniquely democratic space in England's education system. Unlike schools and universities, which are often stratified by performance metrics, catchment areas, and league tables, FE colleges remain broadly accessible. They bring together learners from diverse backgrounds, educational histories, and aspirations, offering a site of pluralism, re-engagement, and relational pedagogy. FE institutions can be considered "porous spaces" where rigid distinctions between academic and vocational, formal and informal, youth and adult education are often blurred allowing for more inclusive and transformative learning (Simmons, 2013). This potential is especially vital in a system where many learners arrive in FE having been marginalised or underserved by prior schooling. In such contexts, the capacity of FE to re-centre learners as capable, valued, and aspirational is a form of educational justice in itself (Duckworth and Smith, 2018). By potentially supporting with wrap-around pastoral care - holistic, coordinated support structures that respond to learners' academic, emotional, social, and material needs, often through multi-agency collaboration and proactive, relational engagement (Tupu Evaluation Report, 2022), strong employer links, or pedagogical innovation, apprenticeships can be powerful vehicles not only for mobility, but for the reconstitution of learner identity and purpose. However, realising this vision requires confronting the entrenched hierarchies of knowledge and value that permeate England's educational architecture. It demands an ontological shift from education as a pipeline to employment towards education as a site of capability expansion, as argued by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011). Apprenticeships, when designed and delivered with this expansive vision in mind, have the potential to function not merely as training routes, but as platforms for agency, recognition, and redistribution and in short, as genuine social levellers.

A conceptual model of apprenticeships as social justice interventions

This paper proposes a conceptual model (**Figure 1**) that theorises apprenticeships as complex social fields in which structural, institutional, and identity-based forces interact to shape learner trajectories and justice outcomes. This model is articulated through the following propositions:

- Apprenticeships operate within stratified fields of capital in which economic, cultural, and social resources shape access to high-quality provision, occupational trajectories, and learner identities.

- Social justice in apprenticeships is multi-dimensional, requiring the redistribution of material resources, cultural recognition of vocational identities, and meaningful participation in decision-making.
- Intersectional identity positions mediate learners' access to opportunity and recognition, producing individualised and adaptive outcomes across class, race, gender, disability, and geography.
- FE institutions function as key mediating infrastructures, with the potential either to reproduce inequality or to foster transformative forms of relational, inclusive practice.
- Transformative apprenticeship design is relational and pedagogical, emphasising mentoring, dialogic learning, and capability development, not merely job placement or productivity metrics.
- Apprenticeships can become social levellers when institutional, pedagogical, and policy systems actively challenge normative hierarchies, rather than passively responding to labour market demand.
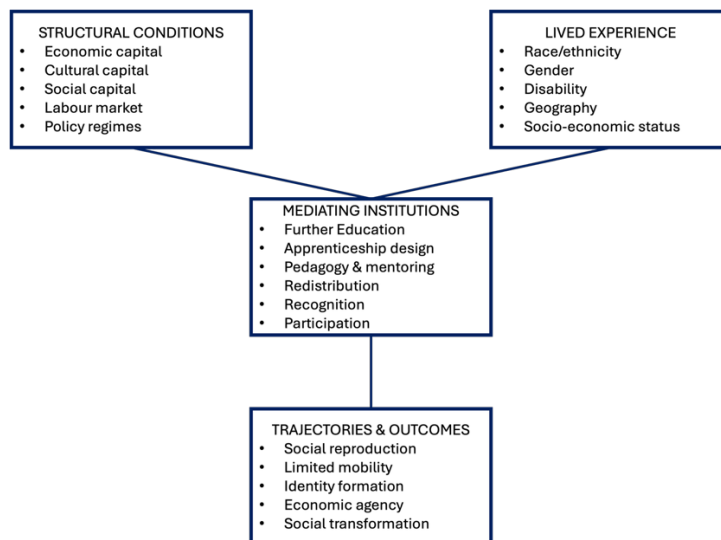

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for understanding apprenticeships as social justice interventions

Together, these propositions conceptualise apprenticeships as dynamic spaces in which justice is negotiated, enacted, and contested, shifting analytical attention from labour-market outputs to the social processes through which identity, agency, and belonging are formed.

Conceptual contribution and future research

This paper has argued that apprenticeships occupy a structurally paradoxical position within the English education and skills landscape, operating simultaneously as mechanisms of social reproduction and as sites of potential transformation. Through an integrated theoretical model, the paper contributes an original conceptual account of how redistribution, recognition, participation, and intersectional identity formation interact to shape justice outcomes in vocational pathways. Rather than treating

apprenticeships as functional responses to labour-market demand, the model conceptualises them as relational, identity-forming infrastructures in which pedagogical practices, institutional cultures, and learner agency are central to the pursuit of equity. The argument advanced here reframes vocational education not as a remedial alternative to academic routes, but as a project that can cultivate capability, belonging, and social agency when designed and resourced with intentionality. This conceptual reorientation illuminates the possibilities of FE-based apprenticeship provision as a vehicle for social levelling, while also highlighting the systemic constraints that limit its transformative potential.

Bringing together Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital and social reproduction, Fraser's (2009) model of social justice, and intersectional insights from Crenshaw (1989), this paper has offered a multidimensional conceptual lens for rethinking vocational learning. These frameworks illuminate how apprenticeships operate not only as economic instruments but as social fields where identity, agency, and recognition are shaped. In doing so, they unsettle the technocratic view of learners as passive recipients of skills, and instead foreground their potential as active, epistemic agents (Avis, 2016). A key contribution of this paper lies in the reframing of apprenticeships as intentional social justice interventions. Rather than positioning vocational routes as remedial or 'second-best' (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2017; 2024), this approach recognises their capacity to foster epistemic diversity, relational pedagogy, and community-based belonging. Such a reorientation demands not just policy reform but a cultural and epistemological shift in how vocational education is valued.

Yet conceptual critique alone is insufficient in a context dominated by data-driven policy logics. The absence of apprentice voice and lived experience in prevailing research and evaluation frameworks is a critical omission. Future research must therefore prioritise longitudinal, participatory, and learner-led methodologies that trace transformation over time and centre apprentices' own definitions of success, identity, and belonging (Fuller and Unwin, 2011; Duckworth and Smith, 2018). Models of co-designed apprenticeships that involves learners, educators, and employers from the outset should be piloted and evaluated for their impact on retention, progression, and learner wellbeing. Similarly, learner-led evaluation frameworks, aligned with Nussbaum's (2011) and Sen's (1999) capability approaches, could shift the narrative from economic utility to human flourishing.

Finally, addressing the entrenched marginalisation of FE and vocational research within academia is essential. This invisibility not only limits the field's influence on policy but reinforces broader inequalities in knowledge production. A more equitable research ecology would amplify FE voices, fund practitioner-led inquiry, and support interdisciplinary collaboration across education, sociology, and economics.

In conclusion, apprenticeships should not be reduced to functional responses to labour market needs. They must be understood and supported as dynamic, socially embedded pathways that can nurture both individual potential and collective justice. To realise this vision, a tripartite commitment is required: political will to legislate for equity, cultural change to revalue vocational learning, and sustained investment in inclusive, relational teaching environments. Only then can apprenticeships fulfil their

promise not just as routes into employment, but as foundations for a more just, participatory, and flourishing society.

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