

Curriculum and Culture: Ethnography of Class Reproduction in Czech Vocational Education

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Abstract

Curriculum in vocational education and training (VET) in the Global North has been increasingly determined by narratives of employability for the workplace of the 21st century. This overt connection between VET and the labour market draws attention to its role within contemporary capitalist societies and the social class relations inherent to those societies. This dissertation studies one dimension of these relations – the reproduction of social class. The study poses two questions: first, whether and if so, how VET curriculum mediates social relations to production constitutive of social class; and second, what cultural practices students develop around this curriculum, and therefore ultimately, whether and how they take up the particular relations to production made available to them. The study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Jean Anyon and Paul Willis, which have long engaged with such questions, and applies their analytical tools to the current VET context, where they remain largely underutilised. Employing an ethnographic approach, this dissertation focuses on a single VET classroom of car mechanic students in the Czech Republic, and involves 40 hours of observation during school classes, 15 hours of observation outside of classes, semi-structured interviews with 20 students, and 15 hours of unstructured, informal conversations with 8 teachers. The study identifies a close correspondence between the curriculum and working-class relations to production and describes the cultural practices through which, despite elements of resistance, students largely accept this curriculum. The meanings attributed to those practices highlight the school as a space in which particular class relations and interests in the wider capitalist society are mediated. The findings also describe how the current reconfigurations in VET, driven by its alignment with the labour market, shape the routes of class reproduction and, more generally, the lives of working-class youth within vocational education. Finally, this dissertation underscores the importance of studying class reproduction in education not only through the content of the curriculum, but also through the partly agentic practices around this curriculum.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, growing attention has been given to the relationship between vocational education and training (VET) and emerging narratives about the 'needs of the workplace in the 21st century', which have increasingly shaped its agenda. Being set within the hegemony of neoliberalism, what constitutes relevant learning in VET has been increasingly determined by notions of competence, employability and instrumentalism (Avis, 2012). This led to complex and often seemingly conflicting developments in VET. On one hand, the VET curriculum has been undergoing the process of vocationalism; become focused on just-in-time, industry-relevant, and outcome-oriented learning, which led to a move of the focus from knowledge to behavioural competencies and localised enactment of skills and a rise in work-based education (Hyland, 2014; Allais, 2012: Jordan, 2003; Butler, 2000). Simultaneously, the current discourses of knowledge-based and value-added economies (Avis, 2019) appear to be leading to a more integrated mix of theoretical and general subjects in VET curriculum and a qualification that provides access to higher education (Cedefop, 2020).

As several scholars have argued (e.g. Avis, 2016, 2019; Down & Smyth, 2012; Butler, 2000), although these developments may appear contradictory, the overt and apparently self-evident connection between VET and the labour market reflects an underlying rationale: VET is set to operate primarily as a supplier of labourers for contemporary capitalist societies. The developments in VET, therefore, reflect a deeper logic of addressing the needs of capital. As Avis (2016) and Butler (2000) argued, this calls for a systematic analysis of capital relations within the current VET. This dissertation aims to focus on one inherent dimension of these relations: the reproduction of social class. Although the theoretical employment of social class and its reproduction has been largely absent from educational research since the 1990s (Collins, 2009), the overt linkage between VET curricula and capitalist political economy makes it essential to re-engage with the construct of social class conceptually. Moreover, as class inequalities continue to grow globally and within nations (Reay, 2023), there is a social justice and policy imperative to empirically study their mechanisms within the current education systems.

The purpose of this research is to explore how social class is reproduced through the VET curriculum. An extensive body of research on both the prescribed and enacted VET curricula suggests that the recent developments, particularly the shift towards competency-based models, contribute to social class reproduction by restricting working-class students' access to theoretical knowledge necessary for broader social and intellectual participation (e.g. Wheelahan, 2007; Nylund et al., 2017). Building on this research, this study assumes that to understand social class reproduction, it is valuable to engage not only with the structure of the curriculum, but also with how it is taken up by the students – an area that has received relatively little attention in current VET scholarship (Avis, 2019).

The ongoing reconfigurations in VET curricula raise many questions in this respect. For instance, how do VET students who have traditionally identified as manual rather than intellectual (Delay, 2022) respond to the increased mix of general subjects in the VET curriculum? Or, given that working-class students' counter school cultures have historically been grounded in a rejection of school in favour of work (Arnot et al., 2004), what happens when work-based education renders the school itself structured around the norms and logic of the workplace? What meanings underpin students' engagement with all these aspects of the curriculum, and to what extent are these responses, referred to in this dissertation as cultural practices, reproductive of social class?

To answer these questions, this dissertation employs a critical ethnographic approach to study a single VET classroom, final-year car mechanic students in the Czech Republic. Through participant observation and interviews, the research aims to gain insight into the everyday life of the classroom to understand both the top-down ways in which the curriculum possibly mediates social class relations and the bottom-up cultural practices that shape whether and how this curriculum is taken up by the students. By focusing on this single case, the study seeks to illustrate how current transformations in VET can unfold in the daily realities of school life. In doing so, it aims to shed light not only on the mechanisms of social class reproduction in education but also on the broader contours of contemporary capitalism and the lives of working-class youth within it.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The Literature Review outlines the current scholarship, identifies research gaps, and introduces the theoretical framework and the empirical context of this dissertation. The Methodology chapter describes the research design, ethical considerations, and the research site. The Findings chapter presents the results of the research, and the Discussion chapter explores their implications outside of the research site. The Conclusion summarises the study and its contributions.

2. Literature Review

This chapter begins by mapping out the current research on VET, its curriculum, and its role in social class reproduction. After identifying key gaps in this research, I turn to earlier traditions in curriculum studies, particularly neo-Marxist approaches, to explore their theoretical insights into understanding social class reproduction through curriculum. After arguing for the relevance of these approaches for addressing the identified research gaps, I present the theoretical framework and research questions of this dissertation. The chapter concludes with an overview of the Czech VET system and a rationale for selecting this context as the empirical setting for the dissertation.

2.1 Current Research on VET, Curriculum and Social Class Reproduction

In this dissertation, I focus on VET within the context of secondary education. Existing research in this field has largely focused on examining who enrols in VET and the types of employment they subsequently enter (Walker, 2015). This body of work consistently shows that, in countries of the Global North, VET is mostly chosen and attended by students characterised as from lower social classes, disadvantaged backgrounds, or of lower socioeconomic status (e.g. Beicht & Walden, 2015; Sevilla & Polesel, 2020; Wang & Guo, 2018), who then typically transition into blue-collar, low-paid, and precarious forms of employment (e.g. Ludwig-Mazerhofer et al., 2011; Wang & Wang, 2022; Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005). While this body of research rarely engages explicitly with the concept of social class reproduction, it nonetheless provides substantial evidence that such reproduction takes place in VET in the Global North, as it is attended mostly by working-class students who subsequently mostly take working-class jobs.

This process of class reproduction is largely a function of VET's position within the hierarchical structure of the education system and this system's alignment with hierarchical labour structures in capitalist societies. Because VET occupies a lower status relative to academic secondary and higher education, it channels students predominantly to lower-status occupations (Avis & Orr, 2016; Young & Hordern, 2022). This channelling, however, involves far more than the transmission of

specific knowledge and skills for these occupations. As Frykholm and Nitzler (1993) argue, and as was supported by subsequent research, the reproduction of social class through VET is also characterised by processes such as socialisation, identity formation, and becoming. The reason VET graduates tend to enter working-class occupations cannot be reduced to their mastery of particular skills or knowledge required for those occupations; rather, it also reflects their broader dispositions and attitudes that lead them to pursue certain occupations and to acquire these skills and knowledge in the first place. Although these dispositions and attitudes emerge within the wider unequal social structures that constrain the opportunities of working-class students, it remains important and valuable to engage with these students as active agents and meaning-makers rather than outcomes of system forces or human capital repositories of skills and knowledge.

Over the past three decades, sociological research into the dispositions and attitudes underlying social class reproduction in VET has been highly interested in how students construct their vocational identities. There have been studies probing into the complex reasons for the choice of VET, which mainly employed the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and particularly the concept of habitus to understand these choices as expressions of one's classed social position (e.g. Altreiter, 2021; Delay, 2022; Morrison, 2008; Dormeier & Giang, 2012). Other research, drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives, explored how students make sense of their identities when enrolled in VET or transitioning into the labour market (e.g. van de Weerd, 2023; Down & Smyth, 2012; Walker, 2015; Hjelmér et al., 2010). Together, these studies emphasise that, in part due to the limited opportunities and recognition afforded to them based on their class positions, VET students largely think of themselves in practical and manual, rather than intellectual terms, frame their positions through a language of deficits, and are attracted to wage labour not only out of economic necessity but also as a source of recognition.

While this research is essential for understanding why working-class students enter VET, the identities they develop and maintain, and how these identities contribute to their transition into working-class occupations, it rarely engages with the substance of VET itself. What is it within VET that makes it appreciated by the working-class youth, and what aspects of VET shape the development of particular identities? Treating VET's content as fixed and given not only limits our

understanding of mechanisms of class reproduction, but also narrows our capacity to imagine alternatives for its organisation. Echoing the arguments of the New Sociology of Education in the 1960s (Whitty, 1985), there is a need to move beyond seeing the curriculum as a taken-for-granted 'black box' and instead ask what kinds of schooling working-class students receive.

Over the past two decades, the need to critically engage with VET curricula has been increasingly taken up in response to policy discourses promoting instrumental conceptions of knowledge, particularly through the promotion of competency-based curricula. Drawing on the approaches of the New Sociology of Education, especially Bernstein's analytical framework for analysing the organisation of knowledge and its discursive logics, this body of work examines mainly the prescribed (Ledman et al., 2018; Wheelahan, 2007; Nylund et al., 2017; Simmons, 2009) but also enacted (Eiriksdottir & Rosvall, 2019; Tarabini et al., 2022) curricula. It shows that the mentioned trends lead to a narrowing and restriction of curricular content. Specifically, they result in a focus on occupational socialisation and practical skills, which excludes students from access to theoretical knowledge that would allow for broader forms of social and intellectual participation, and positions them to 'do' and 'adapt' rather than to 'think' and 'imagine'. As a result, students are prepared for working-class labour market occupations, and their cultural and social positioning within the working class is reinforced as well.

While this analysis of the curricular content is essential for understanding how VET reproduces social class, it generally does not engage with the question of whether, and how, this curriculum is actually taken up by the students. Learning, whether as the acquisition of dispositions or as a more holistic process of becoming a worker within an apprenticeship, is inherently a product of the social and cultural processes in the classroom (Colley et al., 2003). It can also only take place if students accept and engage with the curriculum; as Johnson (2020) argues, the transmission and agreement to the curriculum by students is not guaranteed. A classic example is provided by the work of Willis (1981), who shows that egalitarian intentions in the curriculum can be undermined by the cultural practices that reinforce working-class subordination. Given the importance of these social processes in shaping how the curriculum affects students, there have been persistent calls

within the literature for more in-depth empirical exploration of the cultural practices surrounding VET curricula (e.g. Avis, 2019; Jordan, 2003; Watson, 1993).

Despite its importance, research in this area has been relatively limited since a brief period of interest in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Finn, 1987; Hollands, 1990; Bates, 1991). More recently, two notable studies have engaged with the intersection of VET curricula, class reproduction, and students' cultural practices. Thompson (2011), using a Bourdieusian framework, examines the Entry to Employment programme in England, and specifically how the learners, despite aspects of resistance around punctuality and attendance, largely accept the curriculum's deficit framing of their positions, and the fact that to be a successful learner means developing a particular workplace habitus including discipline, appropriate appearance, and interpersonal skills. Pun and Koo (2018), drawing on cultural reproduction theory in their study of vocational education in China, explore how students' working-class identification and cultural forms of resistance and confrontation emerge from the contradiction between the structural realities of globalised production for which the VET curriculum prepares students, and the neoliberal promises of middle-class life. These studies offer rich insights into the current cultural mechanisms of social class reproduction through the curriculum; however, apart from research focusing specifically on gender (e.g., Niemi & Rosvall, 2013; Jorgensen, 2015), this area remains underexplored in current scholarship.

To understand how these cultural practices of social class reproduction through curriculum can be conceptualised and studied, I now revisit some of the pivotal research on this topic that took place in the 1970s and focused on primary education. My intention is not to provide an overview of the rich work of the sociology of the curriculum at that time (see Whitty, 1985), but rather to introduce the neo-Marxist theory tradition that underpins the theoretical and conceptual framework of this dissertation.

2.2 Neo-Marxist Perspectives in Curriculum Studies

Emerging alongside the New Sociology of Education's focus on curriculum as a means of social reproduction in the 1970s, neo-Marxist approaches started exploring how the interests of dominant groups in capitalist societies are translated into the curriculum, and how this curriculum reproduces the labour power needed by capitalism and in turn replicates the class-based social structure (Whitty, 1985). Two main approaches have developed inside the neo-Marxist tradition.

The first approach, the so-called correspondence theory approach, was mostly situated in the United States and operated with schools primarily as a cultural superstructure to the determining economic structures of reproduction (Apple, 1981). A pivotal work in this approach was that of Bowles and Gintis (1976), who show how the social relations embedded in school curricula correspond to those in capitalist production, particularly with respect to the habits and personality traits expected in different labour positions. Similarly, Anyon (1980, 1981) shows how the social relations embedded in the curriculum mirror the relations of production through their connection to epistemic relations. While focusing on issues of authority, sources and uses of knowledge in schools serving different social classes, Anyon demonstrates how these educational practices mediate the knowledge relations characteristics of the labour division. While Anyon engages with what she calls non-reproductive possibilities and introduces some elements of resistance of teachers and students, both her work and that of later U.S. critical curriculum writers continued, similarly to Bowles and Gintis, conceptualised the curriculum primarily as a means of socialisation (Whitty, 1985).

The second strand of neo-Marxist work focused on schools and curricula not as a socialising influence, but as sites where labour divisions are reproduced through cultural processes that have some degree of autonomy from the economic sphere. Several works sought a Marxist analysis of capitalist relations that could allow for human agency and consciousness (Au, 2006), and a pivotal development in this line of scholarship emerged from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS): the work of Willis (1981). By looking at the "messy business of

day-to-day life" (Arnot et al., 2004, p. 37), Willis portrays the school as a battlefield, a site where the reproduction of labour divisions occurs through contradiction and conflict. His central argument revolves around the description of what Collins (2009) terms as 'winners losing': working-class boys' development of oppositional, 'anti-school' practices, which ultimately guide them into working-class labour positions. It is therefore not a false consciousness imposed by the curriculum, but rather the boys' active resistance to school knowledge through which their class reproduction takes place. Willis also shows that this resistance is not only class-based, but also gender-based; the boys' performances of masculinity become entangled with the mental/manual labour divide in capitalist economies, leading them to reject intellectual work valued and proclaimed by the school in favour of manual labour.

Work in both strands of the neo-Marxist theory has faced criticism. Correspondence theories were mainly criticised for neglecting the internal dynamics of the classroom and its role in reproduction, which was an omission Willis's work is supposed to address (McGrew, 2011). However, as Oakes (in McGrew, 2011, p. 247) argues, the existence of such classroom relations does not invalidate the idea that there is a correspondence between curricula and capitalist production relations; rather, it complicates the mechanisms through which this mediation plays out in the reproduction. Apple (1988) similarly argues that correspondence theories remain valuable as a foundational framework for understanding the objective realities of the curriculum. Willis's work has been critiqued from multiple angles: for romanticising the boys' oppositional practices (Walker, 1986), for methodological issues (Walford, 2024; Bessett & Gualtieri, 2002), and – alongside the broader CCCS tradition – for its narrow focus on White, working-class men in industrial settings (Griffin, 2011; Watson, 1993). Despite these limitations, Willis's work made a substantial theoretical contribution by being able to successfully theorise the class-reproductive aspects of cultural practices, which is exemplified by the fact that Willis's theoretical arguments became central in studies of culture in education during the 1980s (Griffin, 2005). Both strands of neo-Marxist approaches therefore offer valuable conceptual and theoretical tools for the study and articulation of the class-reproductive aspects of curricula within the labour divisions in capitalist societies.

The political and economic developments that have shaped VET in many Global North countries have rendered the empirical findings of these neo-Marxist studies less directly applicable to current VET in those contexts. As Walker (2015) argues, the globalisation of production has reshaped the youth labour market and dismantled the once-predictable school-to-factory trajectories that characterised the times of Willis's research in the UK. Similarly, Arnot et al. (2004) highlight how neoliberal educational reforms led to restructured authority systems and the rise in credentialism, which have transformed knowledge relations in schools. Lastly, the decline of the manufacturing industry and the rise of the knowledge economy have disrupted the traditional association between masculinity and manual labour (ibid). These shifts complicate the direct applicability of both findings on class relations mediated by the curriculum and Willis's findings about masculinity and industrial job prospects as a basis for school disengagement. It is therefore valuable to reapply these theoretical lenses to see how they can assist in understanding social class reproduction in education today. Although there is a substantial body of theoretical Marxist scholarship on VET (Avis, 2016, 2019; Rikowski, 2001; Field, 1991; Xinmiao, 2024), empirical research applying this perspective remains limited. In the following section, I outline how this theoretical lens is applied in this research.

2.3 The Theoretical Framework of This Dissertation

Building on the identified need to study the cultural practices surrounding the curriculum in order to understand its role in social class reproduction, and drawing on the theoretical usefulness of neo-Marxist frameworks for such analysis, this dissertation adopts a theoretical framework grounded in the neo-Marxist tradition. Specifically, it integrates Anyon's correspondence theory approach (Anyon, 1980) to study the classed social relations of production that are mediated by the curriculum, alongside the cultural neo-Marxist tradition, particularly the approach of Willis (Willis, 1981), to explore the cultural practices that surround this curriculum and contribute to the reproduction of social class.

Anyon's work is employed because it offers a framework for linking the curriculum to the classed structures of the social relations to production. Defining class as a complex set of developing relationships to the production of goods, services and culture, Anyon (1980) then links those relationships to the types and uses of knowledge in schools and its pedagogical messages implying a specific epistemological standpoint (e.g. where does the knowledge come from or what can a person do with it, etc.) (Luke, 2010). Anyon (1980) conceptualises three aspects of individuals' relations to the process of production. The first relation is to a system of ownership. Within the analysis of school curricula, it is essential to recognise that individuals can possess symbolic capital, socially recognised forms of knowledge about the production process and socially legitimised skills that enable participation in dominant scientific, artistic, and other cultural practices. A curriculum that grants access to this form of capital does so mainly by connecting knowledge to its underlying conceptual principles and situating it within broader systems of meaning.

The second relation concerns the relationship to authority and control at work, with working-class positions typically lacking mechanisms for controlling the content, pace, and structure of work, with legitimate decision-making usually residing primarily in supervisors rather than in workers or broader regulatory frameworks. The curriculum is therefore evaluated on the basis of who controls its content – mostly the schoolwork and the rules in the classroom that accompany it – and, if it is the teachers, how they justify them. The third relation concerns the relationship to work itself; the kinds of activities that constitute one's productive activity. Working-class labour, while it may consist of planning or decision-making, is typically characterised by routine, mechanical tasks that are fragmented components of a larger process and follow predefined procedures. In contrast, middle- and upper-class work requires conceptualisation and creativity. The curriculum is then evaluated based on the nature of the schoolwork with regard to these concepts.

As noted earlier in this chapter, and as was acknowledged by Anyon herself (Anyon, 2009), this approach, while useful for uncovering the correspondence between curriculum and relations of production, mostly lacks the theoretical tools to account for the cultural meaning-making and individual agency in co-creating or resisting this mediation. To account for these processes, the dissertation draws on the theoretical approach of Willis (1981). Willis conceptualises cultural

practices as creative collective reworkings of material and objective conditions and broader discourses within the political economy and explores those practices as imbued with meaning and political significance and as acts of identity-formation in relation to gender, class and ethnicity (in Griffin, 2011, p. 246). This theoretical approach therefore provides a framework for understanding the extent to which students' meaning-making and cultural practices contribute to the reproduction of their working-class positions.

This dissertation, therefore, does not adopt an Anyon-inspired analysis to study the correspondence between the curriculum and the working-class relationship to production as an account of deterministic socialisation. Rather, it treats the analysis as an account of the objective reality of the school curriculum around which the class-reproductive cultural practices of meaning-making then emerge. The dissertation is therefore interested in the application of these two theoretical frameworks to account simultaneously for two processes. First, the top-down articulation of how the relations of capitalist production shape the VET curriculum. Second, the bottom-up formation of cultural practices around this curriculum, which shape the extent to which the curriculum is accepted, and therefore ultimately, whether and how the working-class students take up the particular relations to production they are given access to. The research questions are:

- Does the curriculum contribute to mediating social relations of class, and if so, in what ways?
- What cultural practices do students develop in response to the curriculum? What meanings do these practices have for them? And do those practices contribute to the reproduction of social class, and if so, in what ways?

2.4 Overview of VET in the Czech Republic

These questions are posed within the Czech VET system. This setting was chosen not only due to its relevance as my cultural context, but also because it offers a compelling empirical setting for this

study for three reasons. First, the structure of the Czech secondary education makes it a particularly suitable context for examining the experiences of working-class youth within VET. At age 15, students in Czechia choose between three secondary education tracks: academic (attended by about 25% of students), technical (45%), and vocational (30%) (Korbel & Münich, 2021). The vocational track is structurally different to the other two as it lasts three years instead of four, and its completion does not allow direct access to tertiary education unless students pursue an additional two-year continuing education program. Unlike the technical track, the vocational track is more specialised, includes less academic content, and includes practice classes. The track is also predominantly attended by students who can be characterised as working-class (Zeman & Gargulák, 2024; Korbel & Munich, 2021), which reflects the generally high level of educational tracking and pronounced socioeconomic inequalities within the Czech education system, which are among the largest within OECD countries (Straková, 2015). Furthermore, as the Czech education system has one of the highest secondary education completion rates within OECD countries (Straková, 2015), VET is attended by a segment of working-class students who, in other OECD countries, would already enter the labour market. The Czech secondary education system therefore provides a valuable setting for examining working-class youth within a clearly defined VET context.

Secondly, in recent years, Czechia has implemented reforms in VET that closely reflect broader international trends discussed in the Introduction chapter. Narratives surrounding the knowledge economy have prompted ongoing revisions to the VET organisation and national curricular frameworks, which aim to delay specialisation, establish a common general knowledge foundation, and promote transferable skills (Serafin, 2025; Malach & Vicherková, 2020). Simultaneously, there have been ongoing efforts to align VET with labour market demands, including institutional calls for increased collaboration between schools and industry (Malach & Vicherková, 2020; Serafin, 2025) and proposals to shift practical training from schools to private workplaces, adopting dual system models similar to those in Germany and Austria (Hoidn & Šťastný, 2023). The presence and timeliness of these reforms make Czech VET an ideal context for exploring how the wider Global North's political-economic trends influence VET and the processes of social class reproduction within it.

Thirdly, the political economy and the discourses surrounding VET reforms in Czechia are shaped by the country's post-communist context and its integration into global capital markets over the past three decades. While Czechia is part of the Global North and has benefited from globalisation, which is evidenced by its shift toward higher-skilled labour market positions, it continues to function as a source of cheap labour for Western economies (Tvrdon, 2010). Consequently, Czechia's experience of globalisation and its impact on capital relations and education differ from that of countries frequently examined in VET research, such as the UK, Australia, and the Nordic states. Despite this, issues of class reproduction and VET curriculum remain largely underexplored in Czech educational research and, aside from Walker's (2015) study, have also received limited attention in the broader Central and Eastern European context. This research gap motivated the selection of Czechia as the empirical setting for the study.

3. Methodology

Critical ethnography was identified as the most suitable methodological approach to address the research questions within the theoretical framework of this dissertation. Critical ethnography builds upon the central principles of ethnography, which is understood as a broad methodological commitment to "study groups and people as they go about their everyday life" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 1). Ethnography is grounded in a belief that this everyday life is continuously created through people's efforts to make sense of their own and others' actions, and that studying everyday practices can therefore offer insights into the broader social meanings with which people enact their lives (ibid). Critical ethnography builds on this general ethnographic approach by incorporating a critical theory perspective into its methodological assumptions. While sharing ethnography's focus on the everyday practices, critical ethnography additionally conceptualises these practices, their meanings and their study as inherently grounded in macro-level structures and the distribution of power in society (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009).

3.1 Methodological Assumptions

Critical ethnography gained prominence with the emergence of the New Sociology of Education as a means for studying schools as sites of social reproduction mediated by human agency. It has since developed inside a range of different theoretical perspectives and has been understood and applied in diverse ways (overview in Jordan, 2003). In what follows, I briefly outline what the methodological commitment to critical ethnography meant within this research.

Axiologically, by studying the micro-level of everyday practices, this research was ultimately interested in how power operates within society, specifically, how political and economic interests under current capitalism shape the construction of meaning within an educational institution. At the same time, and in contrast to older Marxist ethnographic approaches with similar interests (overview in Anderson, 1989), the study recognised that everyday cultural practices have a degree of autonomy from overarching structural forces, and was interested in the creativity inherent to them.

Critical ethnography was thus employed as a means of producing accounts of the social world that, as Anderson (1989) argues, remain sensitive to the dialectical relationship between structural constraints and the relative autonomy of people's practices.

This methodological orientation is tied to particular ontological and epistemological principles. It draws on the three ontological categories proposed by Carspecken (1996); 1) objective realm, a reality external to individuals, which consists of claims that can be made about the world; 2) subjective realm, comprising individual experiences to which each person has a privileged access, and 3) an evaluative realm, which encompasses normative judgements. Epistemologically, accessing all these realms requires engagement with cultural resources, and therefore, ultimately, the macro-structures of power that shape these resources. As Carspecken (1996) argues, the objective realm can only be represented through language, which is itself mediated by power relations and whose relationship to the objective realm is never fixed. The subjective realm is mediated by culturally embedded schemas, making any pure representation of individual lived experience impossible (ibid). Similarly, the evaluative realm does not exist independently of shared cultural frameworks of meaning (ibid).

The ethnographic approach of this dissertation consisted of the use of two research methods, each serving distinct purposes in relation to the ontological categories. First, observation was used to study the cultural practices as objective realities that are external to individuals, but can only be interpreted and represented through pre-existing culturally embedded schemas. The knowledge generated from observation was therefore shaped by my own interpretive lens, making it a product of a reflexive process. Secondly, interviews were conducted to explore the subjective realm; the individuals' experiences and their application of culturally embedded schemas to describe those.

3.2 Research Site

The study employed theoretical sampling, an approach that aims to select a research site with the necessary conditions for applying and developing the chosen theoretical framework (Wilson &

Chaddha, 2009). The study was therefore conducted in a single class within a public secondary vocational school. A single class was chosen as a focus because it provides a manageable and coherent unit for exploring cultural practices within a defined group, and has therefore been a commonly used unit in school ethnographies. A class in a public secondary vocational school was chosen as it is predominantly attended by students from working-class families, as discussed in the literature review, and therefore allows for the theoretical focus on working-class youth.

Since I had no personal contacts within Czech VET, and since I was concerned about the potential difficulty of finding a class willing to participate, I identified and contacted four headteachers who had been described to me by stakeholders in the Czech educational research community as headteachers potentially open to a research project taking place in their schools. I emailed each of them an invitation letter (Appendix A). Only one of the headteachers responded positively, and a class in that school was then invited to be the research site.

The School is situated on the semi-industrial periphery of a smaller town with approximately 10,000 inhabitants. The town is located approximately 50 km from the nearest municipality, and its historically large industrial activity has significantly declined in the past thirty years. The School is closely linked to the town; it has a nickname derived from its location within the city, it is also well-known locally, and its promotional materials claim that it is built on the tradition of apprenticeship in the town. The School has approximately 500 students, and it primarily offers vocational programs, but also a few technical tracks and continuing education courses. The School seems to be generally regarded as a successful VET school in the Czech educational research community, it has been positively assessed by the Czech School Inspectorate, its students won competitions across multiple programs, and it has been recognised and appreciated by the local council. The headteacher and teachers described the School as a high-quality institution, primarily in terms of strong material and equipment resources across all programs, and very low unemployment of its graduates.

I left the selection of the class to be the research site to the headteacher, with the condition that it is a vocational program including at least some female students. The chosen Class were third-year

(final year) car mechanic students. This selection was justified by the headteacher in terms of their excellent material and equipment conditions, and because of the general interest in the program, which admits approximately half of the applicants on the basis of previous academic performance and an interview. Most teachers referred to the Class as one of the best in the School, primarily in terms of a positive social climate, students' interest in education, and the strong manual skills of some of the students.

The Class consisted of 32 male and 2 female students, aged mostly 17 to 19. Most students were white; there were a few Roma students, which became apparent to me over time by observing how other students referred to them. While I did not conduct a formal survey on family background in order to remain unobtrusive and informal, the research works with the assumption that most of the students in the Class come from working-class families. This assumption is grounded in 1) broader patterns of Czech VET being attended by working-class students, from which there is no reason to believe this Class significantly diverges, 2) the headteacher's and teachers' frequent and consistent general characterisation of the student body as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 3) the description of a range of socioeconomic realities of the students by all the actors in the School, such as the fact that many students held part-time jobs to support their families, chose the apprenticeship because the male members of their family worked in similar occupations, and cited pressing financial needs as the key reasons for not pursuing continuing education and instead becoming economically active as soon as possible

Because of this sampling process, the research ultimately centred on mostly white male students in an industrial vocational setting; a focus that has historically characterised the work of the Marxist-based critical ethnographies that informed this study, and whose narrowness has been a subject of substantial critique (Griffin, 2011). The implications of this focus will be discussed later; nonetheless, I wanted to emphasise that it was not the intent of the sampling, but rather a consequence of the gendered nature of most vocational pathways, combined with the practical constraints in school recruitment, which meant there was no opportunity to select a mixed-gender, ethnically diverse class.

The car mechanic program is a three-year apprenticeship that specialises in the maintenance, repair, and adjustment of road motor vehicles, and its graduates are being prepared for employment in car repair shops and technical inspection stations. Upon passing the final exams, they become qualified for the regulated trade of Road Vehicle Repair. The schedule of the Class was divided into alternating weeks of theory and practice. Theory classes were held entirely in the main school building, in conventional classrooms with rows of desks facing a blackboard, with a single teacher leading the instruction. The curriculum during these weeks included general academic subjects (Czech, mathematics, English, chemistry, social science, and informatics) and technical subjects (car diagnostics and car engineering), with academic subjects accounting for approximately three-fifths of the timetable.

Practice classes were exclusively work-based education. For the majority of students, this was organised in the School and held in a workshop owned and managed by the School and located about a 10-minute walk from the main school building. The students were divided into three groups, each overseen by a teacher, and they worked on manual repair tasks on the cars of customers of the workshop. Approximately one-third of the students, a mix of high-performing students and those with family connections in the industry (or both), completed their practice externally, in private car mechanic workshops. This option was possible after their first year in the program, and interested students had to find their own placements. The work they did was expected to align with the School's curriculum, which was monitored through monthly student-submitted work reports. In both School-organised and external practice, students received a small financial compensation for their work, which was dependent on attendance and activity, and ranged from £6 to £50 per month, with private placements reportedly offering slightly higher payments.

3.3 Data Production

Beginning on March 31st, 2025, the data production spanned two and a half weeks, and consisted of two weeks of observation, including informal conversations, and two days of interviews. This

timeframe was shaped by the time constraints of the master's programme and could be characterised as a short-term ethnography. To make the most effective use of this limited time, I took a number of steps. I spent time with the participants both during the full span of official school hours and beyond them, which I believe was particularly instrumental for building rapport with the teachers, as my consistent presence was regularly acknowledged and appreciated by them. Also, in line with Brett et al's (2024) guidance on short-term ethnography, within the practice classes, I focused on specific (groups of) students to foster an immersion into their specific realities, rather than attempting a broader observation of the entire class. This was also instrumental for following Brockmann's (2011) recommendation of maximising interactions within the field, which was most viable with the focus on particular groups in the work-based education. On the other hand, the use of video recording, which is widely advocated in the literature on short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013; Brett et al., 2024), was not feasible due to concerns about intrusiveness and difficulties in securing access.

My role during the observation could be conceptualised as that of a minimally participating observer (Brett, 2024) or a peripheral member (Adler & Denzin, 1998); an observer who interacts with participants as much as possible without becoming directly involved in the central activities in the field. I spent 21 hours in theory classes, 19 hours in work-based classes, 28 hours in spaces with teachers, and 2 hours in spaces with students. The time spent with teachers consisted largely of travel, to see either the external workshops or a car mechanic competition. Notably, there was almost no space outside of education in the classroom and the workshop that teachers and students shared, not even common areas such as the dining hall or corridors used when moving between classrooms. As a result, a major aspect of the fieldwork was a constant negotiation of who I would share space with. Although I generally aimed to spend most of the time with the students, mostly to avoid being perceived by them as part of the teaching staff, this turned out to be challenging as teachers often adopted a caring and protective stance towards me, and routinely guided me to their spaces, which I found difficult to reject to not appear ungrateful or as I was challenging their authority.

I took fieldnotes of the observations and the interactions I had on the site, drawing on the guidance of Emerson et al. (1995) and Miles and Morton (2013). The fieldnotes did not follow a fixed structure and consisted mainly of jottings that described in detail the setting, events, and conversations, as well as moments of silence. The purpose of the fieldnotes was to document anything that appeared relevant to the research topic or seemed significant from my or participants' perspective, with the knowledge that these fieldnotes would later serve as a foundation for identifying patterns and variations in participants' practices.

At the end of the fieldwork, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with students, one teacher and the headteacher. I chose not to interview other teachers, as I had already engaged in extensive informal conversations with them throughout the fieldwork. Students were invited to take part, and those who expressed interest were taken out of the classroom to an empty room. To help students feel more comfortable, they were given the option to be interviewed in pairs. Three pairs chose to do so, and these were students who typically sat together in the classroom and appeared to be close friends. In total, I interviewed 20 students. Five students who were present in the School during the two interview days did not participate; I did not see any shared characteristics beyond the fact that they were all mostly quiet throughout the school day. The interviews ranged from 6 to 35 minutes, with an average length of 13 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded.

The aim of the interviews was to engage in deeper and more private conversations than were possible during my daily presence in the School. The goal was to gain a richer understanding of participants' experiences, the meanings they attach to what is happening in the School and their own actions within those structures, and their broader value frameworks, beliefs, and language they use in relation to education and the car mechanic apprenticeship. Interviews with the teacher and headteacher focused on their perspectives regarding the School, with a specific focus on their reasoning behind the structure of the curriculum and the organisation of teaching. Interviews with students explored their motivations for applying to this particular program, their perceptions and experiences of the curriculum, teaching, and the car mechanic work, and their plans for the future.

3.4 Data Analysis

I wanted to briefly reflect on the processes of transcription and translation as a part of analysis; as interpretive, rather than technical acts. I manually transcribed all interview recordings in Czech and ensured that every word spoken that I could understand was included. Two major types of decisions were made during the transcription. The first concerned the placement of commas and dots to separate streams of thought. These were based on my interpretation of the structure of the participant's thinking and, following Kvale's recommendation (in Tilley, 2003), reflected how I imagined the participant would write their speech in order to avoid rendering a deficit representation of them. The second type of decision involved whether to include speech features, such as 'hmmm', laughter, expressions of surprise, or long pauses indicating reflections. These were included when, based on my interpretation, they contributed meaningfully to understanding the participant's meaning. With the aid of online translation tools, I translated the selected quotes and transcripts into Czech on the basis of my judgment of the most appropriate translation. I also consulted a young bilingual friend living in the UK, particularly for the students' informal language. Nevertheless, certain idiosyncrasies, especially those embedded in youth slang, were inevitably lost in the process of translation.

The analysis largely followed the thematic analysis approach outlined by Emerson et al. (1995). It began with data immersion, starting with the manual transcription and digitisation of the fieldnotes, and continued through repeated readings of the data. This was followed by open coding, carried out manually with pen and paper, with the aim of developing initial analytic insights. The coding process combined deductive and inductive approaches. A deductive approach was primarily applied within the first research question, which was guided by a more structured theoretical framework with predefined categories used to analyse data related to the curriculum. The second research question was approached more inductively; while certain theory-informed concepts, such as resistance or counter-school culture, provided overarching structure, the analysis focused on identifying meaningful patterns and variations in the practices in the Class and how students described their lived experiences and opinions in ways that implied meanings given to those

practices. Both more inductive and deductive coding were interpretive processes, shaped by the theoretical and epistemological orientation of the research and my own positionality. The final stage involved the development of overarching themes and a second round of coding conducted iteratively and manually using NVivo. These themes were then integrated and presented in the Findings chapter in a manner that aimed to address the research questions in the most thorough way.

3.5 Ethics

The research adhered to the ethical principles of educational research outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2024) and the principles of ethnographic research outlined by the European Commission (Iphofen, 2021). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (Appendix B). There were several key areas of consideration.

3.5.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from most participants at the beginning of the research and was continuously assessed throughout the fieldwork. Approximately one month before the research began, the headteacher distributed an information sheet via email to all teachers, students, and parents, outlining key details about the project (Appendix C). On my first day in the School, I presented the research to the teachers of theory and the students, mostly reiterating the points from the information sheet. Time was allocated for an open discussion; the students did not have any questions, and the teachers only asked whether they could read the final dissertation. Although I did not personally present the research to the practice teachers, I introduced myself to individual teachers, and it seemed that they were aware of my role; several even mentioned having discussed the research before my arrival. Printed information sheets were also made available to both students and teachers.

Informed consent was obtained from the headteacher, teachers, and students. Although some students were under the age of 18, parental consent was not sought; instead, parents were given the opportunity to opt their children out of the study by contacting either me or anyone from the School via email or phone. No opt-out requests were received from parents. This approach was supported by several considerations. Firstly, the research topic could be explained in straightforward, clear, and non-abstract terms, enabling students to understand the study and what their potential involvement entails. As Brooks et al. (2014) argue, requesting parental consent for such a clear-cut topic might even seem dismissive of the students' competence and the responsibility they exhibit in their daily lives. This assumption was largely supported during the fieldwork as it became evident that some of the students already lived independently from their parents. Secondly, there was a reason to believe that formal consent procedures may be perceived as alienating to their mostly working-class parents, who, as Iphofen (2021) suggests, may see it as a representative of officialdom. Thirdly, students were already safeguarded by teachers and headteachers, who, as Brooks et al. (2014) argue, routinely make, with a great degree of freedom, decisions on their behalf.

Participants were given one day to complete the consent forms (Appendix D), although most did so immediately. Due to frequent student absences, I sought informed consent from any newly present students as they arrived, providing a brief introduction and explanation of my role in the School, alongside the printed information sheet. All teachers and nearly all students consented to participate in the research. I believe that this consent was constrained mainly by the existing power relations in the School; especially as the headteacher presented the research as something that would happen in the School, rather than as an individual choice. To address this, I emphasised in all communications that I am not affiliated with the School, I am an impartial outsider gathering data to learn something about the School, that there are no consequences for declining participation and that this decision will not be shared with the School. In addition to the formal consent and withdrawal procedures, I also paid attention to any behaviour that may indicate a lack of consent to be part of the study, particularly signs of 'informed dissent' such as responding reluctantly or unwillingly. These signs, which were relatively rare, meant that I refrained from initiating

interactions with the student or the teacher, and when possible, I shifted my focus away from their group during the practice classes.

There were two students who I assumed did not consent to participate in the research. One filled out the consent form positively but left the signature line blank, the other was a student who did not approach me when I invited the students who had missed the initial presentation to speak with me on the second day. The implications of withdrawal or non-participation in school-based ethnographic research have been widely discussed in research ethics (e.g., Atkinson & Delamont, 2018; Smette et al., 2019; Hammersley & Iphofen, 2020). As Atkinson and Delamont (2018) argue, ethnography focuses on collective interactions and cultural practices rather than individuals; the concept of "not seeing" someone or "deleting data" about them is therefore not easily applicable. On the other hand, ending an ethnographic study because two students opt out would make any such study difficult to conduct. Moreover, there is a reasoned belief that the study benefits the participating students and teachers by providing insights into their practices and perspectives within an institution where they spend a significant part of their lives. In this case, the potential harm of the research caused to the two passively non-consenting students was judged to be minimal and outweighed by the broader benefits the research offers. Nonetheless, the lack of consent from the students had several practical consequences: no information about the two students was included in the study, and no fieldnotes were written about them, and if their involvement was referenced in relation to an interaction, they would simply be described as "a classmate". I also refrained from initiating any interaction with them. I was also the only one aware of their non-participation; no members of the School were informed.

A particular ethical consideration was the involvement of external workshop employers, where some students undertook their work-based training. These individuals were informed by the School in advance that I would be visiting them as a researcher. Given that my interactions with them were very informal and brief, typically lasting around ten minutes, I did not ask for a signed consent form, as it felt inappropriate. This feeling was also supported by my earlier interactions with practice classes teachers, most of whom were former car mechanics, who mostly responded to the consent form by asking whether they could simply sign without reading the document,

suggesting I "tick all the boxes" for them, which seemed to reflect a broader cultural perception of official paperwork as an unnecessary bureaucracy. Following Brooks et al. (2014), who argue that in certain contexts, enthusiasm and active engagement can be taken as a form of informed consent, I have used as data insights from external employers who showed interest and enthusiastically engaged in conversation with me about their work and their students. However, I decided not to cite any of them directly in the dissertation.

Finally, prior to conducting the scheduled interviews, all participants were informed that they could end the interview at any time or choose not to answer any questions. I also asked for their permission to audio-record the interviews, and all participants gave their consent.

3.5.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

I removed, as far as possible, the opportunities for readers outside of the School to deduce the identity of the School or the participants. In reporting the findings, the confidentiality of the School was protected through the use of pseudonyms and the exclusion of identifying details. The importance of not disclosing to the general public that the research was conducted in the School was also communicated to the headteacher.

Complete internal anonymity, within the School or among participants, could not be guaranteed. When discussing social and cultural practices and interactions, individuals may be recognisable to others in the school setting. As Smette et al. (2019) argue, this is inevitable as achieving complete internal anonymity would compromise the truthfulness of the portrayal and also would probably be less satisfying for the people described. Additionally, participants possess nuanced knowledge of each other, such as recognising unique behaviours or use of language, which I cannot anticipate. Therefore, while pseudonyms were used for all participants, no unnecessary information was collected or reported in the findings, and all data were translated into English, participants may still be identifiable within their immediate context. Both students and teachers were informed about this possibility.

The guiding principle of the research, therefore, was that all information could be used as data unless doing so posed a risk of harm to someone and information obtained during interviews was not linked to public descriptions of individuals. This principle was also applied to references to gender identity when quoting from interviews, to prevent the easy identification of the two female participants. Particular attention was given to protecting teachers' confidentiality, as they remained in the School, unlike the students, who would leave either in June 2025 or in 2027 if they pursued the continuing education course.

3.5.3 Safeguarding

Several students shared experiences of mistreatment and bullying during one-to-one interviews, involving both peers and teachers. As these disclosures did not appear to cause immediate distress or discomfort, my response was limited to thanking them for sharing and saying that I was sorry they experienced that. One student described a long-standing experience of racism involving a teacher, and I was considering providing contact information for counselling organisations that might offer support; however, I ultimately decided not to do that as I did not have the student's consent to initiate contact outside of the scope of the research.

My presence in the classroom may have unintentionally provoked certain undesirable behaviours from participants. In a few instances, students made racist or sexist remarks while making eye contact with me to see whether I would react. I chose not to respond, as I was concerned about jeopardising the rapport I had established. Given that such behaviours are often associated with white working-class masculine cultures (Arnot et al., 2004), I assumed that my presence was not a significant contributing factor to actions that were already part of the classroom culture. On this basis, I chose not to intervene or suspend the fieldwork. This assumption was largely supported by the interviews, where several students described such behaviour as long-standing and unrelated to my presence.

3.5.4 Reciprocity and Representation

To avoid engaging in extractive research practices, I made small efforts to 'give something back' to the field. I offered to share the results of my research with the teachers and headteacher in September, which they expressed interest in. As a gesture of appreciation for the care I received during fieldwork, I also sent postcards from Oxford to the headteacher and teachers I had worked with most closely. I found forming reciprocity with the students more difficult; however, I believe it may have partly taken shape through the creation of a non-hierarchical relationship in which they were listened to, which is something a few explicitly appreciated.

I also want to reflect on the shift from 'researching on' to 'researching with' as a widely discussed approach to fostering reciprocity in research (von Vacano et al., 2019; Pillow, 2003). I found it challenging to enact this approach in the research. This was partly because I examined the participants' lives through an analytical lens and worldview that differed significantly from their own, and I rearticulated their words into the conceptual language of social science with abstract categories largely inaccessible to the participants (Beals et al., 2020). Reciprocity was further limited by only giving a 'partial truth' (Brooks et al., 2014) about the research aims; while the participants were informed that the study focused on students' family backgrounds and future employment, I did not explicitly disclose that this relationship would be studied through Marxist-based frameworks. I did this because of the negative connotations this term carries in a post-communist context and the lack of understanding of the meaning of its use in academic research; however, this omission inevitably reduced the possibilities for reciprocity within the research relationship.

Lastly, there were aspects of representation that carried the risk of causing harm. This concern is widely discussed in ethnographic research on working-class youth (Rosvall, 2015), where researchers must navigate the representation of social worlds that involve harmful activities, either to participants or to those around them. Such representations risk romanticising these experiences, reinforcing negative stereotypes or distorting participants' self-understanding (Hemmings, 2009). To foster an ethical representation of the participants, the research drew on the insights of

Atkinson and Delamont (2018) and aimed to pursue a thoughtful sociological analysis that acknowledged the complexity of participants' lives.

3.6 Positionality

I would like to briefly reflect on how my occupation of various social positions shaped this research. As in line with the theoretical and methodological framework, the data production and analysis are both understood as reflexive processes, the aim of this section is to provide transparency regarding some facets of my position inherent in those processes. I focus mostly on the relationships and varying degrees of rapport built during the fieldwork and on participants' responses to my presence, each of which influenced the data production. This section is not meant to be presented as a limitation, nor something that could be separated from the research, but as an integral aspect of any ethnographic practice. Lastly, as Clarke (in Emerson, 1995, p.2) notes, participants' reactions to me are a source of learning about the field in itself – I would therefore like to consider this section as a form of introduction to the School.

An aspect of my positionality that felt the most dominant in the field was that of a researcher from Oxford, in terms of being a representative of the elite academy, and as both something imposed on me and something I embodied and performed in different ways. This positionality shaped my relationships with various actors in the school in different ways. It was instrumental in granting me access to the School; the headteacher explicitly mentioned that they had declined other researchers but were enthusiastic about someone from Oxford. This position also appeared significant to the teachers, as it was repeatedly referenced, mostly in terms of their interest and appreciation. I think that because of this positionality, theory teachers seemed to perceive me as someone knowledgeable about education. It seemed that many theory teachers felt judged and evaluated by me, which persisted throughout the fieldwork; almost all of them asked if I could assess their lessons, and some of them appeared nervous, especially in the first few days, about my opinions on what was happening in the classroom. Also, according to some students, some teachers altered their teaching during my presence.

This was not the case with the teachers of practice and the students; I think that being identified as someone from Oxford helped me to position myself for them as someone not knowledgeable about their work. From the students' perspective, my position seemed to be mostly understood as that of an intellectual. I had two particular interactions in relation to this: once, during a break, a student told me I needed to be clever to be a researcher; another time, during work-based education, a student approached me with genuine curiosity about "what it felt like to know I was smarter than all the people here?" While it was clear that this academic intelligence was valued to certain extent by both students and practice teachers, I think it paradoxically helped me to build less hierarchical relationships with them, as, along with the fact that I am a woman, it allowed me to position myself as an intellectual who is not "street smart" and lacks any practical knowledge about cars and manual labour, and therefore is a learner in relation to their work.

My positionality, not only as someone from Oxford, but also as someone who went through academic secondary education, which reflected my middle-class background, also shaped what I paid attention to during the observation. In particular, I found certain behaviours and dynamics of student-teacher relationships to be quite different from what I had previously considered 'normal' in educational settings. I believe it was particularly my educational history and social class that made me attentive to certain elements of the culture, and while these were aspects that an insider might overlook, throughout the fieldwork, I found it challenging to notice moments of silence and stillness.

Lastly, I would like to briefly reflect on my relationships with the students beyond the confines of my academic positionality. As a woman, I felt somewhat outside the masculine performances that seemed important in the field, which appeared to facilitate easier access to students. I also believe I was able to create a degree of distance from the School and officialdom, largely because I was only a few years older than the students, and because of my appearance, including my pink hair, piercings, and tattoos. There were specific moments when I explicitly distanced myself from the School, such as when a student asked in front of the class if I would report them for vaping in the classroom (to which I said no), or when it was difficult for me to hide my amusement from some of their jokes in

classes. Perhaps as a result of that, many students seemed to view me as someone they could trust, which was evident during interviews; when, for example, teachers' photocopying disrupted the session, some students chose to stop talking. Others explicitly asked me not to share what they had told me with their teachers. It was nevertheless clear that I was not an insider to the Class in any substantial way and that I was perceived first and foremost as a stranger by the students.

4. Findings

This chapter begins by outlining the key aspects of the teachers' overarching educational approach. I then analyse how the curriculum within this approach mediated different relations to production. Finally, I explore the cultural practices students developed around this curriculum and the meanings these practices were imbued with.

4.1 Teachers' Conceptions of Education

As many studies within the class reproduction scholarship have argued, it is not only students who are agentic actors within the process of class reproduction, but teachers as well (Au, 2006); they often resist and challenge education's reproductive functions and develop practices that have the potential to be transformative. The scope of this dissertation did not allow for a comprehensive study of these practices in depth that would give them justice, and, as a result of that, neither of the research questions positions teachers as agentic actors behind the curriculum itself. Nevertheless, this chapter introduces some particular insights into how teachers understood the aims of the education process and their role within it. This overview serves as a foundation for understanding the context in which the curriculum developed, and the broader trends in VET that manifested in the School.

All the teachers said that they enjoyed working at the school, and while they usually mentioned that teaching *certain students* could be challenging, they generally found their work meaningful and emphasised that teaching is a profession that not everyone can do. The curriculum was typically described as stemming from care; for their students, the students' needs, and the car mechanic trade itself. With regard to the trade, all practice teachers were former car mechanics who pursued teaching in order to pass on their expertise to the next generation of car mechanics. Some also voiced concerns about the current trends in the trade, especially the tendency of some car mechanics to prioritise routine checks over comprehensive vehicle maintenance and complex repairs. In terms of the care for the students, both theory and practice teachers consistently spoke

about their students in positive and compassionate ways, often referenced the challenging family and socioeconomic circumstances the students face, and described students' interests as valuable in their own right. Lastly, when it came to the care for students' needs, it was evident from teachers' accounts that their approaches were conceptualised around a commitment to equipping students with the knowledge and skills that were deemed essential for their future life and employment.

The teachers' visions of their students' future employment were complex and differed both across different teachers and within accounts of individual teachers at different times. One of these imagined futures was that of an independent car mechanic in a workshop setting, who enjoys a great degree of autonomy and decision-making and applies conceptual thinking and creativity to diagnose vehicle issues. Within this vision, teachers also often critiqued the separation between theory and practice, emphasising that manual work cannot exist without theoretical knowledge, highlighted the complexity of the car mechanic work, and portrayed it as a trade.

The second imagined future presented was that of a car mechanic work position that demands little more than a willingness to do manual labour, with minimal need for broader competencies. This was, for instance, implied by James, one of the teachers:

I: "If you were to imagine a model apprentice, like a top student, what would they look like?"
J: "I'll answer you with a question that the technical director of [a car manufacturer] asked me not long ago. He called me and said that they needed apprentices. I asked what the requirements were. He said that the main thing is that they can work with their hands; the rest is completely irrelevant. 'We'll pay for their further training [...] just give us a human being who wants to work with his hands, that's a rarity these days.' So, if we're talking about vocational education for those car mechanics, you can see here, this is what an international company requires." (James, interview)

Later in the interview, James also said that most car mechanic employment positions consist of routine maintenance and inspection tasks, such as oil changes, tire replacements, and combustion checks. The third imagined future described by teachers was that of a versatile worker equipped with broad technical competencies applicable across various industries. This work was portrayed as requiring skills such as critical thinking, technical reasoning, manual dexterity, and technical imagination.

These different imagined futures, and the teachers' care for preparing students for them, resulted in various ways of how the education in the School was conceptualised. On one hand, teachers had a broad notion of the kind of education the students needed to receive. Theory subjects such as Czech, mathematics, English, or chemistry were often described either as fundamental 'basics' for any individual or as needed for entrance exams to continuing education programs. Students were generally encouraged to apply to these programs, and during my stay in the School, the theory classes focused on entrance exam preparation. This encouragement was grounded in teachers' belief that obtaining Maturita, the academic secondary school certificate, at the end of the continuing education program would increase students' options on the job market and/or enable them to secure a better job. This was emphasised not only in conversations with me but also to the students in various theory classes. It also emerged in conversations among teachers and the headteacher, who at numerous times discussed, with a regretful stance, that some high-achieving students accepted job offers from the employers where they completed their practice classes, rather than continuing their studies.

On the other hand, when considering the actual work the students would undertake upon graduation, teachers' accounts drew mostly on the specific expectations of particular employers and their own experiences of the nature of car mechanic work. This was reflected in the ways certain theory subjects were framed; for example, the curriculum of informatics and civics classes was justified in terms of its relevance to the practical, day-to-day responsibilities of a car mechanic, and the subjects of car diagnostics and car engineering were presented as essential technical knowledge directly relevant to the demands of the work of a car mechanic.

The aim of preparation for specific work was especially evident in practice classes. For example, offering the option to complete practice classes with an external employer was intended to give students the most realistic insight into the industry. Also, school-based practice classes were consistently framed simply as 'work'. This was evident in the headteacher's and teachers' explanations, who emphasised that to prepare the students for the realities of the workplace, the practice classes were designed to replicate a real work environment as closely as possible. It also was

part of everyday language; both in conversations with me and in interactions in the field, practice classes were regularly referred to as work by the practice teachers, for example:

"[...] ask him why he did not come to work today" (Matthew, talking to a student whose brother was absent from the practice classes)

"I didn't know it was implants, so I told the student: 'take off the headphones, you cannot wear them at work. '" (Gary, in conversation with me)

Multiple aspects of practice classes reflected this connection to work. The classes were entirely work-based and took place in a school workshop that accepted only external car repair orders, which was a recent shift from the previous model that combined work on external orders with teaching on models. This aimed to expose students to a greater variety of tasks they are likely to encounter in their future car mechanic work. Practice teachers also emphasised that it was important that students engaged not only in car repair tasks but also in related customer service activities, such as car washing. Also, efforts were made to ensure the material conditions reflected current industry standards as closely as possible and, according to one of the teachers, the school aimed to establish a partnership with a specific car manufacturer who would support the practice classes by providing up-to-date equipment and instructional materials aligned with the latest industry trends. Practice teachers were also not referred to as teachers, but rather by a term that could be translated as master or instructor. Lastly, practice teachers usually described their approach to students as treating them like colleagues; as equals and adults.

4.2 The Curriculum

What form, then, did the curriculum take within this educational conception? The analysis of whether, and in what ways, this curriculum contributed to mediating social relations of class is structured around Anyon's (1980) three dimensions of relations to production as outlined in the dissertation's theoretical framework. Given the significant distinction between theory classes, which were school-based, and practice classes, which were work-based education, I chose to analyse them separately at this stage, and a synthesis of these findings follows in the Discussion chapter.

4.2.1 Theory Classes

In the theory classes that I observed, the curriculum offered limited opportunities for students to access symbolic capital, as the schoolwork was characterised by and pedagogically mediated as a set of discrete facts or procedures, with limited focus on its underlying conceptual principles or connections to broader systems of meaning. In civics, for example, lessons typically involved students reading through presentations on a range of topics and copying down information such as the location of the European Parliament, the rates of various taxes, or the different types of insurance. This was usually followed by worksheets that asked students to recall specific factual information from the material they had transcribed. On occasion, the teacher posed reflective yes or no questions to individual students, such as whether they think insurance is important or view membership in the European Union as beneficial. In informatics, each class focused on creating Excel spreadsheets using a single built-in function, with instructions explaining what that specific function does.

Most of the other theory classes were, at the time of the research, largely focused on preparing students for the entrance exams for continuing education or the final exams. This typically involved completing exercises or tests, with answers checked afterwards. These assessments generally focused on recalling factual information or procedures, which were rarely embedded within broader conceptual principles or systems of meaning. In Czech classes, for example, the work mainly consisted of spelling exercises, which were then checked as right or wrong answers, and justified by a list of general grammatical rules. In mathematics, the schoolwork consisted of solving problems, primarily equations, with the teacher demonstrating correct solutions on the board, which stemmed from the application of a list of predefined mathematical rules, whose origins were not addressed. In car engineering classes, students completed tests on identifying car and engine components and recalling factual information about their functions. The teacher then typically reviewed these tests by listing the correct answers, occasionally accompanying them with practical examples and stories, such as describing what happened to his own car when a particular component was missing. Car diagnostic classes focused on preparation for oral final exams, with

each session focused on a specific topic (e.g. drive systems or inspection procedures), and mostly involved the teacher asking students to recall factual details or car mechanic procedural steps regarding the topic. Chemistry classes, although not focused on exam preparation, followed a similar format; students completed worksheets on factual information such as the names and functions of local waterworks, which were then reviewed by the teacher as right or wrong answers.

There were instances when the curriculum provided access to socially legitimated knowledge that would allow students to contribute to the dominant scientific practices, particularly in car diagnostics classes. In these instances, the teacher introduced principles from chemistry and physics relevant to understanding diagnostic processes and offered knowledge about why and how certain phenomena occur, moving beyond the empirical situation and towards more conceptual understanding. The symbolic capital that could be accessed through these instances was, however, limited by the fact that this theoretical content was typically introduced in response to issues of practice and was primarily framed in terms of its relevance to those empirical situations in manual car mechanic work. While the curriculum, therefore, at times provided access to socially recognised knowledge and thus, symbolic capital, this knowledge was not explicitly pedagogically posited as valuable beyond its immediate practical application.

The curriculum also mediated a relationship to production largely defined by mechanical work that requires minimal conceptualisation or creativity, as the schoolwork mainly consisted of the execution of largely predefined procedures. This was evident, for example, in informatics classes, where students were given step-by-step instructions to be followed to complete Excel spreadsheets using various functions, with limited opportunity for creative engagement with the task. Particular relations to work were also mediated by epistemological standpoints implied in other theory classes; across all subjects, knowledge was consistently framed as something to be received, accepted, mastered through immersion and memorisation and in the case of the technical subjects, applied to the physical work of car mechanics. During theory classes, teachers usually talked about students having to "realise", "memorise", "know", "know how to do" or "know the principles of" something and being able to "do", "describe" or "recognise" something. Evaluation focused on students' ability to recall information, follow procedural steps to produce specific outcomes or

deduce factual answers from general principles. Aside from an English essay on the advantages and disadvantages of electric cars, schoolwork generally did not explicitly encourage creativity or variation in student responses. Similarly, although students were occasionally positioned as knowers independently of the School by being invited to share personal experiences related to cars, this knowledge was used to arrive at a single, predetermined correct answer to a teacher's question. This epistemological stance and the corresponding relationship to work were also implied in some of the explicit communication of theory teachers. For example, during a discussion on car modification, the teacher emphasised that:

> "My dad and my teachers always told me - if it was so amazing, someone would have done it by now, no one is waiting for [me] in 2025, all those generations of car mechanics waiting for me to come up with something." (teacher in a car diagnostic class)

This epistemological position also carried implications for the structures of control and authority within the curriculum. The teacher was typically positioned as the authority on the classroom content, as he or she decided what constituted relevant and valuable schoolwork and knowledge. Although there were occasional instances where students could choose among different tasks – for example, in Czech classes, the schoolwork depended on whether the students wanted to prepare for entrance exams to continuing education – there was generally little negotiation of the curriculum with students. Similarly, classroom rules regarding students' movement and behaviour were largely determined and enforced by individual teachers. These rules were rarely negotiated with the students and were typically justified in self-evident terms, for instance by the notion that "this is not how you behave in school". In the case of schoolwork, the teachers' rationale usually rested on its importance for final or entrance exams or its relevance to future employment as a car mechanic. The students, therefore, lacked mechanisms for exerting legitimate control over the content and structure of their schoolwork and the rules governing the space in which the schoolwork was assigned. Decision-making resided primarily with the teachers, who justified their decisions by their interpretation of broader societal and institutional expectations, such as the norms of behaviour in school or the knowledge and skill requirements of a car mechanic occupation.

It is difficult to assess what theory classes typically entailed outside the context of exam preparation, as this was the primary focus in half of the classes I observed. However, there was no substantial reason to believe that the social relations produced by the curriculum differed significantly, especially those related to ownership and to work, for several reasons. First, when asked about the impact of examination on their teaching, teachers generally stated that it did not alter the content of their instruction.

Secondly, the pedagogical processes described earlier were also implied in how theory teachers conceptualised their role and the nature of theory classes. In discussions about the purpose of theory classes, they consistently talked about students as recipients of information. They also used similar language to the one they employed in the classes, while positioning themselves as someone who "teaches about", "explains", "provides information", or "gets something into the head of the students". The teacher's authority and control over schoolwork and a more passive epistemological stance of the students during theory classes were also implied when one of the teachers, James, during my first day at the school, argued that:

> "We cannot have theory classes only, we have children who want to create something, make something, do something fulfilling, not just sit and listen." (James, in conversation with me)

Thirdly, these social relations were also reflected in the students' dominant pedagogical images of the theory classes' curriculum. As the following excerpts illustrate, students typically described the content of theory classes as something to be learnt, understood, or memorised, often as a list of discrete facts, rather than as part of broader conceptual frameworks or systems of meaning. Students also positioned themselves as someone whose role is to obtain information, often with the aim of its application to manual tasks, rather than as conceptual thinkers or active agents in the creation or critique of knowledge:

> "I never had to study, it was enough for me if I enjoyed it, so even if I was on my phone, I perceived it, and I remembered it anyway." (Michael, interview)

> "Well, it would be best if theory was linked to practice, so that you have something on which you explain it right away, not just through drawing on the blackboard, because I really don't

understand... if I can't look at it, I can't see how it works, then I won't understand it." (Samuel, interview)

"I thought that we would learn the composition of brake fluid, coolant, oil, fuels, various things, and so on, and instead of that, we learn the composition of the atmosphere... We already did that in elementary school." (Patrick, interview)

Similarly, students related to theory teachers as knowledgeable authorities who explain how things are done to students, with students expected to follow this guidance. Lastly, the absence of tasks in theory classes that engaged students as creative creators was highlighted by a student, Oliver, during our conversation about his aspiration to become an entrepreneur. He emphasised the importance of critical and logical thinking, and when asked whether he uses these at school, he responded:

"There were sometimes things like they gave us an assignment and you could solve it in any way you wanted, but mostly... I mean, for some people it was maybe harder, but for me it was too easy." (Oliver, interview)

The teachers' accounts of theory classes and their roles within them, and the students' images of these classes, therefore, suggested that the described social relations in the curriculum were not a function of the specific exam preparation period but were likely stable.

4.2.2 Practice Classes

The curriculum of the practice classes primarily consisted of mechanical and fragmented, and often routine tasks. Typically, groups of four to six students worked alongside one teacher on a single car each day, sometimes continuing work on the same car over several days. The schoolwork was usually based on instructions provided by the teacher that were at the level of tasks such as measuring, replacing, cleaning, adjusting or positioning something. These practices largely adhered to standardised procedures. Many of the tasks were also repeated across different vehicles, and the repetitive nature of some of the work was evident from teachers' remarks, such as "you're doing it for the hundred and fiftieth time, and the hundred and fiftieth time it's no use" or "I can't stand behind your back when you do basic things, you've already done this on the rest of the cars". Teachers' instructions generally did not extend to tasks that fell outside mechanical, standardised

procedures and that would require creativity or conceptualisation. The responsibility for these more complex tasks, including breaking them down into smaller steps and guiding students through them, remained with the teachers.

The curriculum in practice classes also offered limited access to symbolic capital. Even when teachers provided explanations, it tended to remain at the level of adressing the immediate, practical problems; when students struggled with a task, the teacher often took over and completed it themselves while the students observed, or he offered more detailed guidance, such as shifting from an instruction like "change the tire disk" to "you have to hold both ends and put it between those things". This is not to suggest that all the work was purely physical or devoid of decision-making; students occasionally engaged in problem-solving, such as figuring out how to position vehicles so that a measurement system would function correctly, or using resources like YouTube videos to guide them through tasks like adjusting headlights. Such instances of figuring things out, however, remained closely tied to the immediate manual tasks and did not involve engagement with conceptual principles or wider systems of meaning.

These relations to ownership and to work were also reflected in students' images of practice classes. Several students described enjoying these classes because, in contrast to theory classes, they "did not have to use their heads". For some students, this notion was linked to physically demanding, hands-on work; others added that while some thinking was still required, particularly knowledge of procedures, it was not as intellectually demanding as theory classes. With a few students, our discussions explicitly turned to the nature of the instruction and the fact that teachers typically provided clear, step-by-step guidance, as evident, for example, in accounts of Patrick and Jakob:

I: "When you mentioned remembering and thinking... in the practice classes, how much do you... I don't want to say how much you think, but like, how much is it about you coming up with something?"
P: "Well... well, not much. Once I was working on a car and [the teacher] told me to take this apart here and that here, so I took it apart and then I took something else apart because it was in the way, so that the thing could go in and out, and then he yelled at me for working too fast. And if I only do a little bit of the part, he said why am I working so slowly." (Patrick, interview)

I: "[...] how much in those practice classes do you have to come up with something, like what will be done?"
J: "Well, I don't think it's much. We usually have a lot of repairs that I've done a lot of times, like changing the oil. I've done that a lot of times, so I don't even think about it anymore, and I just do it like... from memory... you know."
I: "And with some repairs you haven't done many times?"
J: "Well, I usually do that with the teacher, so he gives me a lot of advice, but otherwise I haven't done anything that I would be completely alone with, that I would have to think about. When I'm alone sometimes, I look at my phone to see how someone else is doing it." (Jacob, interview)

The way students talked about the practice classes, therefore, does not suggest that the curriculum generally required conceptualisation or creativity, or that it offered access to symbolic capital that would situate the work and knowledge required for it within broader conceptual systems.

Lastly, the teachers had control and authority over the work being carried out, and often exercised control over the students' movement, particularly when students left their assigned groups to chat with peers in other groups. The work was also usually not negotiated with the students, who, therefore, lacked legitimate mechanisms of controlling the content, pace and structure of work, which was exacerbated by the fact that the work was often fragmented, and therefore did not allow for autonomous planning of the tasks. The way the work was done was usually set by the teacher without a rationale, or, occasionally, with the justification that such tasks mirrored what students could expect in their future workplaces, for example:

Joshua (changing tires and complaining to Jeffrey, the teacher): "I'm sick of this"
Jeffrey: "Pff, 'sick of this', twenty cars will come to your service station for tires, and what will you do then?"

Ultimately, the primary driver of the type of work students were doing – the customers – was also reflective of the fact that the school workshop aimed to replicate as closely as possible the real work environment. The expectation of what the future workplace would be like was also mobilised in explanation of the lack of explicit rationale for certain practices. This was, for example, the case of the recurring theme of why practice classes began as early as 7 a.m. Matthew, one of the practice teachers, explained:

"The students always ask why practice classes start so early in the morning. I tell them it doesn't matter; once you're employed, your boss will set the schedule, and you'll have to follow it. That's it." (Matthew, in conversation with me)

A few students took on informal leadership roles during practice classes – when the teacher assigned tasks, in his absence, these students would often delegate work to peers. There were therefore students with more control than others; nevertheless, it was the teacher who, mainly through instructions on what would be done, ultimately maintained the primary legitimate control over the content, structure and pace of the work, which the students, within this relationship, mostly lacked.

It is difficult to assess the curriculum experienced by the students who completed their practice classes at external workshops. However, there was no indication that the relations to production the curriculum mediated differed significantly from those in the school setting. For example, when asked to compare the school-based and externally based practice classes, most students said there was no major difference, and few students mentioned having more responsibility as the supervisor did not check their work afterwards, unlike in the School. Ultimately, given that the School practice teachers came from industry and aimed to replicate those conditions, it is reasonable to assume that the relations to production mediated by the curriculum were largely similar between the School and external workshops.

4.3. The Cultural Practices

What cultural practices did students develop in response to this curriculum? And what meanings were imbued in those practices? Given its prominence in Willis's (1981) theory and the subsequent scholarship in class reproduction, the analysis unfolds from the concept of counter-school culture. I then discuss the practices of resistance and the possible meanings they had for the students. Whether and how these practices collectively contributed to the reproduction of social class is further explored in the Discussion chapter.

4.3.1 Complicating Counter-School Culture

The students I interviewed generally expressed positive views about the School. While some of them raised specific critiques, such as wishing theory classes were more focused on car mechanics or practical, "real-world" content, or expressing dissatisfaction with the practices of specific practice classes teachers, even these students spoke about an overall sense of happiness with the school. When asked to imagine an ideal school day, most students proposed only minor changes, such as a later start time, fewer disruptions from classmates, or increased group work, and said that they were generally happy and would not alter anything fundamental about the School. Students articulated interest in the School even when interviewed in pairs, suggesting such sentiments were acceptable to share in front of classmates.

This pattern was necessarily formed within the context that of the twenty students interviewed, approximately two-thirds of the Class were those present at the School during the two days when the interviews were conducted. These students were, therefore, arguably among the most pro-school, as they attended it. Nevertheless, the cultural practices observed did not suggest that either the culture of the Class as a whole or any subgroup of students would overtly and consistently challenge the School's dominant values, such as the curriculum, rules, or the pursuit of school achievement.

For example, in theory classes, engagement with the content, through commenting, asking questions, or providing correct answers, generally appeared to be seen as desirable, as nearly all students actively participated in such practices. There was also no overwhelming opposition to teacher authority; when individual students, for example, disrupted the class by making noises, other students often stepped in to calm them. Similar dynamics were present in practice classes, where schoolwork not only seemed of interest to students but furthermore, success in it appeared to carry considerable importance. For example, not being able to complete tasks in the practice classes was often accompanied by emotional reactions and swearing, and met with critical comments from the classmates. These cultural practices demonstrate a generally shared commitment to the School and its values, which renders the concept of a counter-school culture

less applicable when describing the Class's practices. This finding aligns with those reported in research on VET students over the past decade (e.g. Thompson, 2011; Rosvall, 2015; Jorgensen, 2013).

4.3.2 Practices of Resistance

The absence of a counter-school culture does not mean that the School and its curriculum were uniformly accepted by the students. Rather, various forms of resistance were evident, with all students in the Class participating in at least some of them. By practices of resistance, I understand any practices that were in some way oppositional to the School. These practices did not seem to be performed with an explicit intention to be rebellious, disruptive or confrontational, but rather seemed to represent subtle practices through which students daily carved out space for themselves within the institution.

Students engaged in resistance to the School in general through frequent absenteeism, regular lateness to school or individual classes, or the widespread use of phones and headphones during classes in place of engaging with the schoolwork. Those practices occurred with similar frequency in both theory and practice classes, although phone use was less common in the practice classes.

I observed other practices of resistance more frequently during theory classes. They were often part of verbal humour and related to the content of the curriculum. These included, for example, students being vocal about not understanding what was going on, making remarks about being "too dumb" for the task, and referring to themselves and their classmates jokingly as intellectuals or an intellectual elite. Students also regularly replied with intentionally incorrect or clearly non-informative answers in a joking manner, such as: "What is an infrastructure?" – "A type of structure." or "What does a throttle do?" – "Throttles." or (asking about the usage of single and double Ns in Czech) "How many N's are in the word 'ranné'?" – "Four." These kinds of responses occurred so frequently that over time, nearly every theory class teacher's question seemed to be an invitation for a competition over who could deliver the quickest humorous answer.

Students developed similar practices in relation to teacher authority. One common form of this was a frequent parodic appropriation of the teacher's role, often through sarcastic policing of peers, for example, commenting "Do you think you can be late and nothing will happen?" in response to a classmate's late arrival to class, responding mockingly to a teacher's scolding with "Yeah, [classmate's name], stop that." or replying "You mean *Mister* [teacher's surname]." to a classmate's comment "[Teacher's surname] just called me." Students also ironically exaggerated compliance with the teacher, such as replying "Yes, it makes *giant* sense" when asked whether it makes sense to insure oneself, or responding to "Please put the phone down" with "Yes, it's a devil's box." Students also engaged in disruptions, such as speaking loudly with classmates, making various noises, throwing objects at peers, or using a bubble maker during class. Even after three years at the School, students appeared to still be testing the boundaries of how disruptively they could act in a class with each teacher.

There were also forms of resistance specific to practice classes, which tended to be more subtle than those observed in theory classes, generally, fewer students engaged in them, and humour was not their central aspect. Resistance instead manifested in a generally non-proactive approach to work, such as carrying out the assigned tasks slowly, not returning equipment to its proper place, not cleaning the workplace, or not informing the teacher when a task was completed and instructions on next steps were needed. Students also frequently walked over to chat with peers in other groups and often used the layout of the workshop to position themselves out of sight of the teachers, such as behind cars or machinery, while chatting with classmates. In a few instances, occupation of these spaces also served for students to pretend not to be present in the workshop when called upon by the teacher. Similar practices of a non-proactive approach to work were also echoed in nearly all accounts provided by external employers about "students these days" in their workshop.

Notably, there was no clear division between students engaging in practices of resistance in theory and practice classes; those who were most frequently absent or disengaged in theory classes tended to do the same in practice classes. Similarly, the students who assumed leadership roles in practice classes were also the most engaged in theory classes, and they were also the students who asked their classmates to calm down when they disturbed the class. Therefore, students were not divided

between those engaging in practices of resistance in theory and those in practice classes, but rather between those who engaged in those practices more or less in the School generally.

4.3.3 Meanings of Practices of Resistance

In the case of some students, the practices of resistance seemed connected to the fact that they already held employment, and, as a result, knew that they do not need to engage with the School whose logic was to primarily prepare students for securing employment. This dynamic was apparent in specific moments in the classroom; one such instance involved Thomas, a student who lived independently from his parents and worked in a car repair shop after school:

Teacher (pointing to the exercise): "You have it all done?"
Thomas: "No."
Teacher: "And you won't finish it?"
Thomas: "I'm way too lazy to do that."
Teacher: "You're not planning to pass the exams very successfully, are you?"
Thomas: "Rather not."
Teacher: "So, straight to the work process... although, you actually already have a job, don't you?"
Thomas: "Yeah, I do, this is really just holding me back."
Teacher: "Well... I get it, you need income, right..."

This was also apparent in the accounts of other students, who implied that they saw no need to engage with the School's values *because* they already had secure employment. For example, during a practice class, Lucas discussed the upcoming entrance exams for continuing education with his classmate:

> "I don't care whether I pass them, it's just my parents that want me to try, I don't need the certificate, it's just a paper, I already have a job lined up, and I'll learn everything there, with machines and stuff. " (Lucas, in a conversation with a classmate)

Furthermore, several different meanings seemed to imbue the practices of resistance specifically in theory classes, where such practices occurred more frequently. During interviews, students usually expressed a preference for practice classes and when asked about what they felt the most confident in, all students pointed to the practical classes and the work involved in them. Three distinct ways

of talking about the difference between theory and practice classes might help to shed light on the meanings behind the practices of micro-resistance in theory classes further.

Firstly, many students described themselves primarily as manual and as people who prefer working with their hands *over* engaging in thinking. The enjoyment of practice classes was often framed as stemming from the opportunity to align this self-perception with the nature of the work. Since I have already discussed this narrative in relation to the curriculum and the notion of "not using one's head," and as similar accounts have been well-documented in previous research on VET students (e.g., Delay, 2022; Jørgensen, 2013), I will not expand on it.

The second narrative framed the enjoyment of practice classes as stemming from their position as spaces of activity and productivity, in contrast to theory classes. Similarly to the descriptions of Niemi and Rosvall (2013), students described themselves as doers, and when asked what is it that they enjoyed about practice classes, several students stated that they like to toil, and two students explicitly said they struggle to articulate this in more detail. Students also spoke with enthusiasm about watching a car transform under their hands or about the constant motion in practice classes, where one works "without stopping". Almost all students also, at some point, referred to theory classes literally as "just sitting down". The meanings that permeated practices of resistance in theory classes were therefore partly those of resisting the classes' failure to involve students in actively producing something they would find meaningful.

The third narrative was that of a contrast between theory and practice teachers. In these accounts, practice teachers were described as more informal and treating students in a less hierarchical way. Oliver, one of the students, described the difference in the following way:

> "There's a difference because most of the practice teachers are just... they're mostly normal people who went to work, they're not, you know, people with university degrees, they're on a more friendly level rather than a school level." (Oliver, interview)

Another student, Daniel, explained:

"There's a difference [in the approach of theory and practice teachers], but I don't mind it, because it's in the workshop, so it's a little different... how to say it.... it's just a bit different, a little more on the basis of some kind of job, so they treat us more like their colleagues." (Daniel, interview).

I will explore this narrative and its implications in more detail later, because while some students attributed these contrasts to the distinction between theory and practice teachers, a larger portion of the Class referred to these contrasts in terms of differences between their current teachers and those they had in primary school. The narrative therefore may not only help explain the varying levels of resistance in theory versus practice classes, but also shed light on the meanings behind the overall prevalence of such practices within the School more broadly – a topic I now turn to.

4.3.4 Meanings of the Absence of Counter-School Culture

Given that research on young working-class men in educational settings has historically focused on descriptions of counter-school culture (Arnot et al., 2004), it is crucial to explore the meaning-making that may underpin the apparent absence of this culture in the context of young working-class men in this school. Two key narratives offer insight into this issue: the way students described their current school in contrast to their primary school, and their accounts related to the pursuit of credentials.

Most of the students said that they enjoyed the School because it differed from their experience of primary school. In many cases, this was their immediate response when asked how they were doing at the beginning of the interview. This contrast was commonly framed through the description of the School as more "chill", a term that typically referred to either friendly, informal, and more egalitarian relationships with teachers or to the absence of academic pressure and workload. The following excerpts from interviews with students illustrate these accounts.

"The teachers are more like, how to say it, more friendly, like they talk to the students differently than in elementary school, in elementary school everyone took it very seriously, here they take it

seriously too, but when we talk about something, sometimes we then switch to a different topic, so it's kind of relaxed [...] when I talk to [car diagnostics teacher] about something, it's clear that he's on the same level as us, he doesn't feel like he's above us, or anything like that." (Michael, interview)

"It's better than in elementary school, where I had to keep studying, I always had some homework, here we hardly have any, or only exceptionally, and it's really better for me in terms of my mental health, it was really exhausting for me there, we did math tests all the time [...] here it's great, there's more freedom... I really like it." (George, interview)

I: "What's the difference then? Between theory classes here and your elementary school?"
Samuel: "It's like... you communicate with the teacher differently."
Jack: "Yeah. You've probably heard that we'll talk with teachers and they say for example that 'something is fucked up', you know, it's more homely, we understand each other, there's a better relationship with the teachers." (Samuel and Jack, interview)

Some students also explicitly appreciated aspects of the School specific to VET, such as the fact that practice classes simulated a real work environment. This was, for example, again the case of Samuel and Jack. When discussing what they would like to change about practice classes, I asked about my interpretation of their suggestions:

I: "So do I understand it right that the distinction between theory and practice classes does not make sense for you? Like would you appreciate it if, for example, you had a car diagnostic class and then went straight to the workshop to do it on the real car?"
Jack: "No, no, it definitely makes sense that they prepare us for the working hours, that we come to the practice classes in the morning as if we were going to work -"
Samuel: "- yeah, right from 7a.m. -"
Jack: "- yeah, so at seven, we arrive, we go to the changing rooms, we change, wash our hands, and go working." (Samuel and Jack, interview)

These accounts of both explicit and implicit contrast with primary school seem to suggest that the very aspects student resistance was formed around in primary school – teacher's authority, pressure on academic performance, and academically focused learning – were absent or reconfigured in the School, which appeared to underpin the students' overall alignment with the School, including the curriculum.

Secondly, approximately three-quarters of the students applied for the continuing education program. This included nearly all of those who had completed their practice classes outside of the

School, despite almost all external employers expressing a preference for their students to enter employment in their workshop immediately rather than pursuing continuing education.

When I asked students why they applied, most responded that it was to obtain Maturita, the academic secondary school certificate. Nearly all students presented this as the sole and self-evident reason, often with a tone suggesting they found my question surprising or unnecessary. Because of that, I generally did not probe into the topic further. On the few occasions I did, students typically explained that the Maturita provides them with more opportunities employment-wise, as illustrated by the case of Liam:

> "I guess... I don't know how to explain it. I just think that with Maturita you have more options then if you just have the apprenticeship certificate. That you can be more successful if you have it." (Liam, interview)

Similarly, Lucas explained that he chose not to apply to the continuing education program because he didn't need the opportunities that the Maturita, which he referred to here as a paper, would offer him:

> "I have a job lined up, they'll hire me there, they're even waiting for me. I'll have 70k net. What's the point of having some kind of a paper?" (Lucas, interview)

While some students explicitly stated that they *wanted* the Maturita, many others framed their motivation in more external terms, using phrases like "it would be good to have it" or "I should have it". Several students also explicitly said that they applied to continuing education because their parents wanted them to have the certificate. This sense of external expectations was also reflected in some of the interactions in the class, for example, when Daniel informed his practice teacher that he would be absent due to the entrance exam by remarking sarcastically he "won't be here tomorrow, as I must prioritise the advancement of my academic pursuits." or when Lucas repeatedly explained to his classmates he didn't need the certificate – which implies a need to assert that position in response to a broader discourse.

The pursuit of continuing education was therefore, for most students, framed as a reluctant response to general expectations and/or a step towards improving their opportunities in the labour market. Their accounts implied that continuing education was not seen as having a value in itself besides the credentials it provides. These accounts suggest that it may be the students' desire for secure employment, expressed through a desire to obtain credentials, that provides a culturally acceptable way to be engaged with the School, particularly in relation to the academic subjects which are central to the entrance exam and the Maturita.

4.4. Summary

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that the curriculum of both theory and practice classes mediate relations of production that could be characterised as that of a supervised worker – someone who does not have control over the content, pace and structure of work, whose work is largely routine, mechanical, consisting of fragmented tasks, and following predefined procedures, and who lacks access to socially legitimated knowledge about the production process or knowledge that enables participation in dominant cultural practices. Although certain aspects of the curriculum, especially within some theory classes, deviate from this pattern, these exceptions are limited and do not significantly disrupt the overall structure and pedagogical messaging of the curriculum.

Secondly, the findings describe a range of practices of resistance embedded in the students' culture, from absenteeism, lateness, and disengagement, to a range of disruptive behaviours and humour. The findings also explore the meanings attached to those practices, particularly narratives of practicality, productivity, and informality, which possibly underlie resistance in theory classes. Those widespread practices, however, cannot be meaningfully conceptualised as a counter-school culture. The meanings attached to the absence of this culture are discussed, particularly in relation to the value of credentials the School provides and the contrast of the School to primary education in terms of more friendly, informal, and egalitarian relationships with teachers and the absence of academic pressure and workload.

5. Discussion

Did the curriculum and the cultural practices that surrounded it reproduce social class? And if so, then in what ways? And what can this reveal about the world outside of the classroom, such as the current reconfigurations of VET and the mechanisms of class reproduction in education?

The curriculum in the school contributed to mediating social relations of class by closely corresponding to the working-class relations to production, in all three aspects by which those relations were defined: system of ownership (particularly ownership of symbolic capital), authority and control at work, and the work itself. All classes mediated these social relations, regardless of whether the teachers' goal was to prepare students for work as car mechanics, to provide 'basic' knowledge, or to prepare students for entrance exams into continuing education. Therefore, both consequences of the narratives of VET's instrumentalism for preparing workers for the 'needs of the workplace in the 21st century' – vocationalism and a more integrated mix of general subjects – seem to result in a curriculum which mediates working-class relations to production. One might argue that students encounter different relations to production in continuing education, where most of them applied. However, continuing education primarily prepares students for the academic secondary school certificate examination, which, aside from Czech and English essays, mirrors the format of the entrance exams they were already being prepared for during the fieldwork. There is therefore little reason to believe that the curriculum in continuing education mediates substantially different relations to production.

What makes this curriculum class-reproductive is that it is largely accepted by the students. While there were various practices of resistance in the classroom – and they should not be dismissed, especially as some of them signaled students' awareness of some of the school's ideologies, for instance, the fact that the aim is to be able to gain employment that some of the students already held – these practices were limited, and did not fundamentally challenge or disrupt the class-based social relations mediated by the curriculum.

The absence of a more fundamental counter-school culture cannot be abstracted from broader class relations. The meanings students attached to their engagement with the school highlight it as a classed cultural space; whether it is the description of teachers as "people like us" or the rejection of academic performance pressures, which, in stark contrast to the desire to toil and be productive, has to be understood as a reaction to the culturally specific aspects of such academic learning (Teese, 2000). Similarly, students' attraction to the practical, their appreciation for being prepared for a real job, and their valuing of being treated as adults and colleagues by teachers reflect the classed orientation towards adulthood, practicality and productivity which has been described in the scholarship on young working-class men for a long time (Arnot et al., 2004). With regard to those aspects, VET stands in contrast to the primary education the students experienced, and since it recognises students' classed practices and identities, the engagement with its curriculum, as Jorgensen (2013) argued, can itself be understood as a form of class resistance to the mainstream education system.

The students' cultural practices must also be understood in relation to the economic interests under current capitalism. The legitimacy of the school and its curriculum stems largely from its continuity with the world of work: the fact that it prepares students for employment and that it provides credentials, or at least prepares students for further education that leads to credentials, which are essential for securing their desired work. The findings of this dissertation echo Rosvall's (2015) argument that the neoliberal reconfigurations of the capitalist labour market, which produced the model of a self-inventing worker who must accumulate credentials, result in working-class young men's desire for recognition through becoming workers no longer giving rise to a significant counter-school culture, as it might have in the past.

These systems of interest also extend to the work of teachers. Although only a peripheral focus of this dissertation, it is important to acknowledge that teachers' efforts to prepare students for employment which, due to the hierarchical structure of the education system, is mostly working-class (Avis & Orr, 2016), ultimately contributes to the reproduction of social class. Whether it is through simulation of work environment in the practice classes or through the teaching of job-specific knowledge and skills in theory classes, within the context of contemporary

capitalism, VET teachers' genuine care and desire to act in the best interest of their students translates into forms of curriculum that mediate working-class relations to production.

Many of the cultural practices described are not explored for the first time, as evidenced by the references to prior studies throughout the Findings chapter. Similarly, although Anyon's framework has seen limited application in recent research, some of the core findings, such as the curriculum's failure to provide access to symbolic capital, have already been well established in the literature (e.g. Wheelahan, 2007; Nylund et al., 2017). This dissertation contributes to the field by extending the findings of these studies, interpreting these findings through the lens of class reproduction, studying them within a new socioeconomic context, and integrating an analysis of the social relations mediated by the curriculum with students' cultural practices, which has been a limited practice in the scholarship on VET. This was instrumental for offering both structural and agentic accounts of class reproduction, but also for highlighting the interplay between the two. For instance, the intent to treat students as colleagues within the realities of the workplace leads to a curriculum that mediates working-class relations to production, and simultaneously fosters students' acceptance of this curriculum, as it grants them recognition through being treated as adults.

I also believe the findings of this dissertation underscore the value of the Neo-Marxist theoretical frameworks of Anyon (1980) and Willis (1981) for studying VET within the wider class structures. These frameworks were especially useful as they allowed the work to engage with the micro-level classroom practices in a way that allows for the contextualisation of those practices within the wider social relations in contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, while, as Avis (2016) pointed out, some scholars have argued that the processes of individualisation and self-responsibilisation render the concept of class reproduction obsolete, the findings of this research suggest otherwise. It is precisely the individualised pressure to obtain credentials and prepare for employment that informs social meaning-making and collective cultural practices within educational institutions – practices to which the theoretical framework of reproducing one's relations to production provides a strong interpretative and explanatory lens.

The major limitation of this dissertation is its omission of how class reproduction is mediated through different facets of identities, most importantly, gender. This was due not only to the constrained scope of the dissertation but also to the limited time spent in the field. In this regard, my experience aligns with Pink and Morgan's (2013) insight that the short-term nature of an ethnography constrained the ability of observation to capture the everyday life on the site, particularly those aspects that were less visible or unspoken. This was a particular limitation as youth cultures have been identified as challenging to penetrate (Hemmings, 2009). Partly because of that, I found it challenging to make sense of the different performances of masculinity in the classroom, and I did not feel confident to rigorously represent them in writing. Moreover, the limited engagement with the two female students in the class did not provide a strong enough foundation to consider them meaningfully as a reference group for examining gender relations in the class. My decision to set aside a coherent discussion of gender was also informed by the existence of detailed research on masculine cultures in VET and their intersections with curriculum (e.g., Jørgensen, 2015; Niemi & Rosvall, 2013; Colley et al., 2003). Nonetheless, by largely omitting gender from its discussion, this dissertation inadvertently contributed to a representation of class reproduction that primarily reflects the practices of white men within industrial settings.

This gender dimension of social class reproduction in contemporary VET merits closer study in future research. In light of the gendered nature of many class-reproductive cultural practices (Arnot et al., 2004), it is important to examine how current reconfigurations of VET curriculum shape the cultural practices of women, both in female-dominated VET programs and in industrial fields that are traditionally male-dominated. Are these practices class-reproductive, and if so, in what ways? Another avenue for future research concerns the practices of resistance. VET appears to occupy a paradoxical position: on one hand, it seems to serve as a form of class resistance to mainstream education; on the other, numerous practices of resistance are embedded in students' everyday school life. Further research is needed to understand the meanings these different forms of resistance carry and to explore their non-reproductive potential. This, among other things, calls for ethnographic approaches that make it possible to engage with students who are often absent from the school. Finally, there is a broader task of developing ways to study class reproduction in VET

without framing teachers, and students and their cultural practices in deficit terms, while still genuinely pursuing more socially just forms of VET – an endeavour to which the framework of this dissertation could offer only a limited practical contribution.

6. Conclusion

Grounded in the need to situate current transformations in VET within the broader capitalist relations in society, this dissertation focused on one key dimension of these relations: the reproduction of social class, specifically through the VET curriculum. The approach to studying this reproduction was informed by a gap in existing scholarship – namely, the limited attention given to the class-reproductive dimensions of students' cultural practices surrouding the curriculum. Accordingly, the dissertation sought to study not only the top-down ways in which the curriculum may mediate social class relations, but also the bottom-up ways in which this curriculum is taken up by the students.

Employing a critical ethnographic approach to the study of a VET classroom of car mechanic students in the Czech Republic, this dissertation describes the correspondence of the curriculum to the working-class relations to production, as well as the cultural practices through which students largely accepted this curriculum. The students therefore mostly took up the working-class relations to production they were given access to in the curriculum, and those cultural practices, in combination with the particular curriculum around which they developed, were thus largely class reproductive. The meanings students attributed to these practices highlight the wider social relations of class in which those practices emerged: the classed cultural dynamics present in the VET curriculum, the ways these dynamics are intertwined with students' class-based identities, and the structure of interests in contemporary capitalism. The findings therefore highlight the school as a space where particular class relations and interests in the wider capitalist society are mediated.

Research that would focus on class reproduction through both the structure of the curriculum and the cultural practices around this curriculum has been scarce; this dissertation contributes to this scholarship and shows the importance of this focus for understanding the class reproduction that takes place within educational institutions in contemporary capitalism. The dissertation also contributes to the field by describing what the current reconfigurations in VET mean for the practices and the meanings attached to them by working-class young men who have traditionally participated in it, and by exploring how the processes of class reproduction are being rashaped

within these reconfigurations. While describing these processes of class reproduction, the dissertation also sheds light on the contours of contemporary capitalism and the lives of working-class youth within it.

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Appendix A: Invitation Letter

Department of Education

Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford

Karolína Letochová

karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Curriculum and teaching in Czech vocational education

Ethics Approval Reference: EDUC_115759.

Dear [Head teacher name],

In recent years, I have been researching Czech secondary education in my (not only) academic work. SOU Ohradní has been known to me as one of the best secondary school in the Czech Republic. Now, in my work, I am focusing on vocational education and it would be a great privilege for me to visit your school as part of my research.

I am a masters student at the University of Oxford, supervised by Benjamin Hart. In my research, called Curriculum and Teaching in Czech Vocational Education, I will be looking at what the vocational education curriculum is, what types of knowledge are included, how it is taught, how students interact with it, and what students and teachers think about it. It also aims to understand if and how are student's views affected by their parents'/guardian's occupations.

By participating in the research, your school would be contributing to the understanding of Czech vocational education from the perspectives of the those who actually create it and take part in in. The aim of the research is to inform the expert and public discussions currently taking place about what vocational education should focus on – whether it should be more about practical or theoretical knowledge, the role of technology, and other topics. This research is not about evaluating the practice of the school in any way, and I'm not trying to make any judgements about the teaching or the school itself or change how and what teachers teach.

The research would take place in any classroom where all students are 16 or older. The research is so-called ethnographic study. That means that the school's commitment would be to allow me to spend time with one of the classes, ideally for the whole month of April 2025. Most of the time, I'll just sit quietly at the back of the classroom, observing without interrupting. During breaks, I might ask the students or the teacher a quick question if something from the lesson or workshop is not

clear to me. At the end of the month, I would like to invite teachers and students who are interested to have an interview with me, so I can learn more about their views or experiences.

Unfortunately, I cannot offer any financial or other compensation for participating in the research. However, I would be happy to present the results of the research to you, the students, teachers, and possibly parents, if there is interest.

The University of Oxford has strict ethics procedures on conducting research with teachers and students, consistent with current British Educational Research Association guidelines. Before beginning the research, I would inform parents/guardians about the research and offer the students and parents/guardians the opportunity to refuse to participate. Throughout the research, students and parents/guardians will be able to refuse to participate at any time. If the teachers, or if many of the students refuse to participate, the research would not take place.

All participants, including students, teachers and the school, would be anonymised in all research reports. The data collected would be kept strictly confidential, available only to my supervisor and myself and not used other than specified without the further consent of all involved being obtained. I have enclosed copies of the information for parents/guardians and students with this letter.

If your school would like to take part in the study, or you need more information about what is involved, please contact me.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Karolina Letochova

Appendix B: CUREC Approval Letter



Education (Educ) DREC

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

Applicant: Karolina Letochova

Principal Investigator: Benjamin Hart

Department: Education

Study title: Curriculum and knowledge: how is the working class reproduced through vocational education in Czechia
(Version: 1.0)

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1157590

Dear Benjamin Hart,

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered by the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 6 Mar 2025, 14:03

Opinion End Date: 5 Sep 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team. Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer

Appendix C: Information sheets

Department of Education

Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford

Karolina Letochova, MSc student

karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Curriculum and teaching in Czech vocational education

INFORMATION SHEET FOR **TEACHERS**

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_115759.

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

1. Why is this research being conducted?

The research aims to understand what is being taught in Czech vocational curriculum and, more importantly, what teachers and students think about it. It looks at questions like: What kind of knowledge is being taught? How do teachers teach it? What do teachers think about the content, and what do they believe vocational education should focus on?

The goal of the research is not about evaluating the school or making judgements about the teaching. I'm not trying to change how teachers teach, and the findings will only be shard anonymously, therefore not with the school name.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

To gain a deeper understanding, this research focuses on a specific classroom in a Czech vocational secondary school. Your school has been invited to take part because it seems like a good place to learn about vocational education. Since the study looks at the daily life of one class, all the teachers who work with that class are invited to take part.

3. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

The research is planned to take part over a month in April 2025. It will take place at school or other places where the students learn during school hours. The researcher would like to spend this time

observing the class, she will therefore just sit quietly at the back of the classroom, watching what is going on without interrupting. During breaks, she might ask you or some of the students a quick question if something that happened during the lesson or the workshop was not clear to her.

Towards the end of the month, the researcher would like to talk for a longer time with the students (either individual or in groups) from the classroom and the teachers that teach this classroom to discuss more deeply about their views and experiences. It is your decision whether you want to have an interview with me, and there are no consequences if you choose not to do so. Also, if you're okay with it, the interview would be audio recorded to make it easier for the researcher to analyse it, but if you'd not, that's completely fine, too.

4. Do I have to take part?

While the interviews are optional, I would also like to ask if you are okay with being part of the rest of the research. It is entirely your choice, and it is absolutely fine if you decide not to take part—there is no pressure and no negative consequences. You don't need to give a reason; just let me know, either now or at any point during the month I'm at the school. If you do decide to take part, you can still ask to withdraw any information you've shared up until the end of May 2025.

If you choose not to take part, I won't observe during the times you're teaching the class. If you teach a significant portion of the class's schedule, the research won't take place at the school at all.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

The report from this research will not include the name of your school or classroom, so no one reading it will be able to figure out who you or your students are. I'll also use fake names (pseudonyms) for everyone, so when I describe what happens in the classroom or what you share during interviews, I won't use your real name.

However, because I'll be describing the classroom in detail, people from your school might recognise you based on my description. This means the findings won't be completely anonymous for those inside the school.

However, as a researcher, I am bound by the fact that any research outputs cannot harm anyone specific at the school. The research will therefore not present any information that could potentially have negative consequences for any individual at the school. I will also try to present all the information you tell me during the conversation or interview in such a way that no reader of the research can associate it directly with you.

6. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefits to you from taking part in this research. However, it could help people more understand what is being taught in vocational education and what teaches think

about it. There is a lot of discussion in the media about what vocational education should look like, but the teachers' opinions are often left out. By being part of the research, you would have chance to share your thoughts about the curricula anonymously, and what you say could be seen by people who make decisions about how vocational education works and what should be taught.

7. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

I'll take notes on what I see in the classroom, like what's happening, what you're learning, and how you interact with what the teacher says. These notes will be typed up already using the made-up names for everyone and kept securely on my computer. If we do an interview, the audio recording will be typed up within two days and then deleted. All documents will be stored on the researcher's university account storage for three years and only she will have access to them. If the researcher leaves the university in the three years, the data will be stored with her supervisor.

8. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

I'll be using the results of this research in my master's thesis, in academic articles, or at conferences. My master's thesis will also be stored at my university's library system. If you're interested, I'd love to share what I find with you, your colleagues and/or your class—either through a presentation or handouts.

Like I mentioned before, no one outside of this school will know the name of the school, your name, or your students' names. Your real name won't be used anywhere, and while if the research is read by someone from a school that might recognise you from the description, I'll make sure nothing I write could cause any harm. Everything you tell me during the interview is private, and I won't share it with your colleagues, classmates, or parents without making sure you stay anonymous and you the information cannot be traced back to you.

To make sure I represent what you say accurately, I'd like to ask for your permission to use your exact words (quotes) in any reports or presentations.

9. Data protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

10. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

11. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Karolina Letochova, karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk or Benjamin Hart benjamin.hart@education.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on 01865 616480.

12. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Karolina Letochova
Department of Education
Norham Gardens 15, Oxford OX2 6PY

karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Department of Education

Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford

Karolina Letochova, MSc student

karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Curriculum and teaching in Czech vocational education

INFORMATION SHEET FOR **STUDENTS**

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_115759.

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important to know why the research is happening and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and feel free to talk about it with others if you want. If anything is unclear or if you want more details, ask us. Take your time to decide if you want to be part of the project.

1. Why is this research being conducted?

The research aims to understand what is being taught in Czech vocational education, and, importantly, what teachers and students think about it. It wants to answer questions like whether what you're learning is too focused on theory or practice, how you prefer to be taught in the classroom, what kinds of jobs the school is preparing you for, and whether your opinions about the school are influenced by what your parents/guardians think or do for a living.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

To gain deep understanding, the research wants to focus on one specific classroom in Czech secondary vocational school. You are being invited to join because your school seems like a great place for the researcher to learn more about vocational education. As the researcher wants to study one classroom, all of the people from that classroom are invited to take part.

3. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

The research is planned to take place over a month in April 2025. It will take place at your school or other places where you learn during school hours. The researchers would like to spend this time with your class to better understand what you're learning. Most of the time, she will therefore just sit quietly at the back of the classroom, watching what's going on without interrupting. During breaks,

she might ask you a quick question if something that happened during the lesson or the workshop was not clear to her.

Towards the end of the month, the researcher would love to talk for a longer time with students (either individual or in groups) from the classroom to discuss more deeply about their views and experiences. It is totally up to you if you want to take part in these interviews – there is no pressure, and nothing bad will happen if you choose not to. Also, if you're okay with it, the interview would be audio recorded to make it easier for the researcher to analyse it, but if you'd not, that's completely fine, too.

4. Do I have to take part?

While these interviews are only for volunteers, the researcher would also like to ask if you'd be okay with being part of the rest of the research. Is is completely your choice, and if you decide not to take part, that' totally fine – there's no pressure or negative consequences. You don't need to a give a reason; you can just let me, your parents, or your teachers know, now or anytime during the month. If you do take part, you can also ask to withdraw any information you've shared before the end of May 2025.

If you decide you don't want to take part, that would mean that I won't focus on you while I'm observing the classroom, and I won't ask you any questions during breaks. If a lot of people from the class decide not to take part in the research, the research won't happen, and the I won't spend any time here.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There is a chance that when we talk about your school experience, you might bring up things that feel stressful or uncomfortable. If that happens, it's important that you can stop the interview at any time, skip any question, or choose not to talk to me at all.

The report from the research will not mention the name of your school or classroom, so no one reading it will be able to figure our who you, or your teachers are. I will also use fake names (pseudonyms) for everyone, so when I talk about what happens in the classroom or what you share with me during the interviews, I won't use your real name. This means that in most cases, your teachers and classmates won't know what you told me.

Therefore, it would not be possible for an outsider who reads about the research results to find out in which school I did the research and who I spoke to. However, this is not 100% true if someone from that school is reading the research. For example, if I describe what is happening in class or in the hallway in the research, it is possible that someone will recognize you from my description because they know you. In this respect, not all research results are fully anonymous. At the same time, however, it is true that I, as a researcher, cannot write the research results in a way that could harm any individual from the school. The research will therefore not present anything about anyone

from the school that could have any negative consequences for them. At the same time, it is also true that I will try to present the information that you tell me during a conversation or interview in such a way that no reader can associate it with you.

6. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefits to you from taking part in this research. However, it could help people more understand what students are learning in vocational schools. Importantly, the research focuses on what students actually think about it. There's a lot of talk in the media about what vocational education should look like, but the students' opinions are often left out. By being part of this, you'd have the chance to share your thoughts about school anonymously, and what you say could be seen by people who make decisions about how vocational education works and what should be taught.

7. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

I'll take notes on what I see in the classroom, like what's happening, what you're learning, and how you interact with what the teacher says. These notes will be typed up already using the made-up names for everyone and kept securely on my computer. If we do an interview, the audio recording will be typed up within two days and then deleted. All documents will be stored on the researcher's university account storage for three years and only she will have access to them. If the researcher leaves the university in the three years, the data will be stored with her supervisor.

8. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

I'll be using the results of this research in my master's thesis, in academic articles, or at conferences. My master's thesis will also be stored at my university's library system. If you're interested, I'd love to share what I find with your class—either through a presentation or handouts.

Like I mentioned before, no one outside of this school will know the name of the school, your name, or your teachers' names. Your real name won't be used anywhere, and while if the research is read by some of your classmates that might recognise you from the description, I'll make sure nothing I write could cause any harm. Everything you tell me during the interview is private, and I won't share it with your teachers, classmates, or parents without making sure you stay anonymous.

To make sure I represent what you say accurately, I'd like to ask for your permission to use your exact words (quotes) in any reports or presentations.

9. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

10. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

11. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Karolina Letochova, karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk or Benjamin Hart benjamin.hart@education.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on 01865 616480.

12. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Karolina Letochova
Department of Education
Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford
karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Department of Education

Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford

Karolina Letochova, MSc student

karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Curriculum and teaching in Czech vocational education

INFORMATION SHEET FOR **PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_115759.

The child you have in care is being invited to take part in a research project. This information sheet will provide information about why the research is happening and what it will involve. If anything is unclear or if you want more details, ask us.

1. Why is this research being conducted?

The research aims to understand what is being taught in Czech vocational education, and, importantly, what teachers and students think about it. It wants to answer questions like whether what the students are learning is too focused on theory or practice, how the students prefer to be taught in the classroom and what kinds of jobs the school is preparing them for. The research is also interested in whether the students' views were somehow influenced with what do you do for a living; from other research, we for example know that students who were introduced into manual labour from their parents when they were a child have build a sense of relationship with manual labour that then leads them to vocational education.

2. Why was your child invited to take part?

To gain deep understanding, the research wants to focus on one specific classroom in Czech secondary vocational school. The child is being invited to join because the school seems like a great place for the researcher to learn more about vocational education. As the researcher wants to study one classroom, all of the people from that classroom are invited to take part.

3. What will happen to the student if they take part in the research?

The research is planned to take place over a month in April 2025. It will take place at the school or other places where the students learn during school hours. The researchers would like to spend this time with the class to better understand what they're learning. Most of the time, she will therefore just sit quietly at the back of the classroom, watching what's going on without interrupting. During breaks, she might ask the students a quick question if something that happened during the lesson or the workshop was not clear to her.

Towards the end of the month, the researcher would love to talk for a longer time with students (either individual or in groups) from the classroom to discuss more deeply about their views and experiences. It is totally up to the student if they volunteer to take part in these interviews – there is no pressure, and there are no consequences if they choose not to. Also, if the student is okay with it, the interview would be audio recorded to make it easier for the researcher to analyse it, but if he or she'd not, that's completely fine, too. In relation to their family, only a question about parental/guardian occupation will be asked, there will be no other questions asked about the family's situation, his or her relationship to parents, etc.

4. Does the student have to the part?

While these interviews are only for volunteers, the researcher would also like to ask if the child'd be okay with being part of the rest of the research. If he or she decides not to take part, that' totally fine – there's no pressure or negative consequences. They don't need to a give a reason; they can just let me or the teachers know, now or anytime during the month. If they take part, they can also ask to withdraw any information they've shared before the end of May 2025.

If they decide they don't want to take part, that would mean that I won't focus on them while I'm observing the classroom, and I won't ask you them any questions during breaks. If a lot of people from the class decide not to take part in the research, the research won't happen, and the I won't spend any time here.

If you are against your child taking part in the research, please let me (or the teacher) know, either now, or anytime during the month I will be in the classroom. Similarly, you can also withdraw any information they've shared before the end of May 2025. There are no negative consequences if you decide to withdraw your child from the study, and you do not have to give any specific reason for that.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There is a chance that when students talk about their school experience, they might bring up things that feel stressful or uncomfortable. If that happens, it's important that they can stop the interview at any time, skip any question, or choose not to talk at all.

The report from the research will not mention the name of the school or classroom, so no one reading it will be able to figure out who the students or their teachers are. Fake names (pseudonyms)

will be used for everyone, so when describing what happens in the classroom or what is shared during the interviews, their real names won't be used. This means that, in most cases, their teachers and classmates won't know what they said.

While no one's identity will be apparent to readers from outside the research output, this is not 100% true for potential readers from within the school. For example, if the research describes what is happening in a classroom or hallway, it is possible that someone will recognize the student from my description. In this respect, all research outputs are not fully anonymized. However, as a researcher, I am bound by the fact that any research outputs cannot harm anyone specific from the school. The research will therefore not present any information that could potentially have negative consequences for any individual at the school. Similarly, I will try to present all information that a student tells me during a conversation or interview in such a way that any reader of the research can associate it with that person.

6. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefits to students from taking part in this research. However, it could help people better understand what students are learning in vocational schools. Importantly, the research focuses on what students actually think about it. There is a lot of talk in the media about what vocational education should look like, but students' opinions are often left out. By taking part, students would have the chance to share their thoughts about school anonymously, and what they say could be seen by people who make decisions about how vocational education works and what should be taught.

7. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

The researcher will take notes on what happens in the classroom, such as what is being taught, what students are learning, and how they interact with what the teacher says. These notes will be typed up using made-up names for everyone and kept securely on the researcher's computer. If an interview is conducted, the audio recording will be transcribed within two days and then deleted. All documents will be stored on the researcher's university account storage for three years and only she will have access to them. If the researcher leaves the university in the three years, the data will be stored with her supervisor.

8. Will the research be published? Could the student be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The researcher will be using the results of this research in their master's thesis, in academic articles, or at conferences. My master's thesis will also be stored at my university's library system. If students

and/or teachers are interested, the researcher would love to share the findings with the class—either through a presentation or handouts.

As mentioned earlier, no one outside of the school will know the name of the school, the students' names, or the teachers' names. Real names won't be used anywhere, and while some classmates might recognize a student from the description, the researcher will ensure that nothing written could cause harm. Everything shared during the interview will be kept private, and it won't be shared with teachers, classmates, or parents/guardians without ensuring anonymity.

To make sure the researcher represents what is said accurately, they would like to ask for permission to use exact words (quotes) in any reports or presentations.

9. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

10. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

11. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Karolina Letochova, karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk or Benjamin Hart benjamin.hart@education.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on 01865 616480.

12. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Karolina Letochova
Department of Education
Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford
karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Appendix D: Consent Forms

Department of Education

Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford

Karolina Letochova, MSc student

karolina.letochova@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Consent to take part in Curriculum and teaching in Czech vocational education

(students)

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC_115759.

Purpose of Study: The study aims to understand what is being taught in Czech vocational education, and what teachers and students think about it.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to think about it, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point (until 30/05/2025), without giving any reason.	☐
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐

I understand that I will not be identifiable to people outside the school from any publications. I understand that I might be identifiable to people from inside the school, but only in cases when this information can not cause any harm. ☐

Use of quotations: Please choose one option: ☐

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**

b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. ☐

I agree to take part. ☐

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

Department of Education

Norham Gardens 15, OX2 6PY Oxford

Karolina Letochova, MSc student

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Consent to take part in Curriculum and teaching in Czech vocational education

(teachers)

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC_1157590.

Purpose of Study: The study aims to understand what is being taught in Czech vocational education, and what teachers and students think about it.

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