

Widening Participation: Identity, Difference & Inequality

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AVETRA 2009**

Aims

- ▶ To interrogate the values, perspectives and meanings that shape WP policy discourses and practices in higher education
- ▶ To examine the discourses at play in relation to access to vocational education and training in higher education

Aims

- ▶ To consider the ways that research, policy & practice might be brought together to interrogate some of the taken-for-granted assumptions, meanings and practices that might exacerbate rather than challenge exclusions and inequalities in higher education
- ▶ To draw on my research to illuminate these points and to bring to life some of the complex struggles around access and participation at play

Social differences & inequalities

- ▶ Research has exposed that educational aspirations and choices are significantly shaped by social differences and inequalities
- ▶ Related to problematic hierarchies and divisions in higher education including academic/vocational and knowledge/skills

Key questions

- ▶ Policy – explicit commitment to WP to those groups who are under-represented in HE
- ▶ Closer analytical attention raises questions about what forms of higher education are being made accessible, to whom and in what ways.

National economic competitiveness

- ▶ Participation in learning – mechanism to tackle social exclusion and to improve national economic competitiveness
- ▶ Overshadowing concerns with social equity and justice in education (Morley 2000: 230).

Individual, flexible learners

- ▶ Lifelong learning policy constructs a 'knowledge society' of individual and flexible learners
- ▶ A key problem is seen as lying with those who lack the aspirations and skills to capitalise on the range of learning opportunities freely available to all.

Understanding access & widening participation

- ▶ Jones and Thomas (2005) outline three contrasting approaches to access & WP:

1. **academic**: emphasizes attitudinal factors such as 'low aspirations' – activities to raise aspirations are prioritized and these are located on the peripheries of universities with 'little or no impact on institutional structure and culture' (Jones and Thomas 2005: 617).
2. **utilitarian**: focuses on attitudinal factors as well as lack of academic qualifications – the 'double deficit model' – emphasizes the relationship between higher education and the economy
3. **transformative**: focuses on the needs of under-represented groups in higher education

(Jones and Thomas 2005: 627).

Conceptualising access & WP

- ▶ WP is contested and discursive
- ▶ WP policy and practice – produced through competing assumptions, values and perspectives
- ▶ WP is intimately connected to social relations, contexts and struggles over power – for example who has access to knowledge and meaning-making and what are the politics of recognition at play
- ▶ WP is embedded within structures and organisations that are gendered, racialised and classed – and an increasingly hierarchical and differentiated HE terrain

WP subjects & subjectivities

- ▶ Subjected to WP policy: 'disadvantaged and with potential', WP – tied to the politics of identity and inequalities
- ▶ The competing discourses of class, gender and race "that prevail within educational policy at any particular time will directly influence and shape the forms of practice that are subsequently undertaken within schools", colleges and universities (Archer, 2003, 21).

Archer, L. (2003). Race, Masculinity and Schooling: Muslim Boys and Education. Berkshire, Open University Press.

Impact of policy focus on economy

- ▶ The centrality of the economy in policy debates on education and training has had two major impacts;
 - 1) to increase the demand for education and training, particularly among people with *high* skills
 - 2) to generate increased inequality in the distribution of education and training opportunities' (Watson 2003: 39).

Watson, L. (2003). Lifelong Learning in Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training.

Survival of the fittest

- ▶ espouses 'survival of the fittest' and unleashes competition among individuals, among institutions and among nations, freeing them from what are construed as the burdensome chains of social justice and social responsibility. Populations are administered and managed through the production of a belief in each individual in his or her own freedom and autonomy (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007: 4).

Davies, B. and S. Saltmarsh (2007). "Gender economies: literacy and the gendered production of neo-liberal subjectivities." Gender and Education 19(1): 1 – 20.

The focus of neoliberalism

- ▶ on the disciplining/ed individual who engages continuously in the project of self-improvement
- ▶ the individual must make sure that s/he can 'get ahead'
- ▶ Access to HE becomes a central tool of neo-liberal self-disciplinary mechanisms
- ▶ Individual has responsibility to participate in learning – to gain credentials to enhance their employability
- ▶ Individual learners must continually respond to and be responsible for meeting the requirements of a changing, dynamic and unstable global market

Effects of neo-liberalism on WP

- ▶ erases collective sensibilities and social responsibility
- ▶ Social inequality secondary to individual mobility
- ▶ Individuals 'consumers' of, and equal players in, the free market of lifelong learning and HE

Effects of neo-liberalism on WP

- ▶ Ignores the ways that identities are implicated in complex social inequalities
- ▶ Reduces education to a technology of self-improvement for individual workers and consumers competing in a global market
- ▶ The neoliberal reconstruction of 'exclusion' – firmly asserts responsibility to the individual named and identified as 'excluded' or 'disadvantaged'.

Discourses of derision

- ▶ Individuals from under-represented groups must take responsibility to change their aspirations, dispositions and values (Gerwitz 2001).
- ▶ Ignores – necessity of transforming education institutions – to seriously address deeply embedded structural inequalities and discursive misrecognitions
- ▶ Complex inequalities intertwined with longstanding cultural and discursive mis/representations – produce discourses of derision (Ball 1990) and pathologised subjectivities (Skeggs 2004).

Alienation

- ▶ The current lifelong learning strategy is likely to fail if the narrow skills-driven approach which alienates potential learners continues to be pursued. There is already a healthy resistance to participation from many who regard the education on offer as middle-class and alien, and without any attempts to address the reasons for such resistance, and to ensure that educational opportunities offer positive and relevant experiences and benefits, many of those who are intended recipients of lifelong learning are likely to continue to resist it (Leathwood 2006: 52).
Leathwood, C. (2006). Gendered constructions of lifelong learning and the learner in the UK policy context. *Gender and Lifelong Learning: Critical feminist engagements*. C. Leathwood and B. Francis. Oxon, Routledge.

Safeguarding



Our overriding priority is to ensure that as we expand HE places, we ensure that the expansion is of an appropriate quality and type to meet the demands of employers and the needs of the economy and students. We believe that the economy needs more work focused degrees—those, like our new foundation degrees, that offer specific, job-related skills. We want to see expansion in two-year, work-focused foundation degrees; and in mature students in the workforce developing their skills. As we do this, we will maintain the quality standards required for access to university, both *safeguarding the standards of traditional honours degrees and promoting a step-change in the quality and reputation of work-focused courses*. (DfES 2003: 64, emphasis added). DfES (2003). *The Future of Higher Education*. London, The Stationery Office Ltd.

Process of self-exclusion

- ▶ Choice for the majority involved either a process of finding out what you cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion.

Reay, D., J. Davies, et al. (2001). "Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, 'Race' and the Higher Education Choice Process." *Sociology* 35(4): 855 – 874.

Concepts of Power & subjectivity

- ▶ Expose relations of inequality and misrecognition that are often so subtle and insidious that they are largely overlooked in everyday practices
- ▶ Power operates on multiple levels
 - contested and negotiated
 - continually shifting across contradictory discourses and relations
- ▶ All individuals are implicated in power relations as situated subjects
- ▶ Enacted in discursive fields that position different individuals in different ways across a range of social differences (as well as institutional status and authority)
- ▶ Identity formation – made and remade through everyday practices and in relation to difference and recognition.

Identities constructed through difference

- ▶ Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modulations of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion Above all ... **identities are constructed through, not outside, difference** (Hall, 2000, 17).

Hall, S. (1992). Introduction: Identity in Question. *Modernity and Its Futures*. S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Polarising discourses

- ▶ The normal, the worthy student and the acceptable processes of admission are legitimized by references to the abnormal, the unworthy the unacceptable (Williams, 1997, 25).

Williams, J. (1997). *The Discourse of Access: The Legitimation of Selectivity. Negotiating Access to Higher Education: The Discourse of Selectivity and Equity*. J. Williams. Buckingham, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Admissions practices

- ▶ National Arts learning Network funded study of admissions to Art & Design undergraduate degrees across England
- ▶ With Jackie McManus
- ▶ 6 case study institutions
 - Interviews with 10 admissions tutors
 - 70 observations of selection interviews

Influences

- ▶ Nina, a Black working class young woman from a poor inner city area, applying for a Fashion Design BA, was asked at the beginning of her interview about the influences on her work:

Influenced by hip-hop

- ▶ Interviewer: What influences your work?
- ▶ Nina: I'm influenced by Hip-Hop?
- ▶ Interviewer: Hip-Hop or the history of Hip-Hop
- ▶ Nina: The History of Hip-Hop

Rejection

- ▶ Body language of interviewers changed – suggested they disengaged from Nina
- ▶ They asked her what she would like to design and she answered that she was interested in designing sports tops.
- ▶ After Nina left, the interviewers immediately decided to reject her.
- ▶ Discussion of how to record this on their form:

Weak

- ▶ Interviewer one: Why should we say we're rejecting her?
- ▶ Interviewer two: Well she's all hip-hop and sport tops
- ▶ Interviewer one: We'll say that her portfolio was weak.

Unfashionable, immature, lacking confidence

- ▶ Before the interview, Nina's portfolio had not deemed it as weak.
- ▶ Nina's clothes were noted as not fashionable
- ▶ Interviewers said she lacked confidence
- ▶ They were dissatisfied with Nina's intentions to live at home whilst studying – sign of immaturity.

All part of the experience

- ▶ The white middle-class male candidate interviewed immediately after Nina, was from an affluent spa town, expensively dressed and cited famous artists and designers amongst his influences.
- ▶ In the interview discussion, he confirmed that he would 'definitely be leaving home because it is all part of the experience.'
- ▶ The young man was offered a place in spite of having considerably poorer qualifications than Nina, including having failed GCSE Art.

Embodied misrecognised subjectivities

- ▶ Nina not recognized as a legitimate subject of art and design studies because she cited a form of fashion seen as invalid in the higher education context.
- ▶ Nina embodied Black racialised ways of being, which were seen as signs of immaturity and lack of fashion flair.
- ▶ Her intentions not to leave home were read off as signifying her inappropriate subject position.

Processes of recognition

- ▶ The male, middle-class, white-English candidate knew how to cite the discourses that would enable him recognition as a legitimate student subject.
- ▶ The admissions tutors' judgments shaped by implicit, institutionalized, disciplinary and racialised perspectives of what counts as legitimate forms of experience and knowledge.
- ▶ Classed, gendered and racialised formations of subjectivity (embodied and performative) profoundly shape selection-processes.

Professional & Institutional subjective constructions...

- ▶ Such judgments are made in the context of struggles the tutors themselves are involved in with relation to their own institutional, embodied, performative subjectivities.
- ▶ This is tied in with the derogatory discourses of 'dumbing down' and 'lowering standards' and the desire to be recognized as 'world class'.

Struggles over status & prestige

- ▶ This is implicitly underpinned by debates about knowledge and skills and work-based, vocational provision as marked out as less prestigious than courses and institutions seen as academic and high status.

Measured against traditional models

- ▶ **Success of individuals and of schools, FE colleges and HE institutions is still measured against traditional models:** all school children being examined at the same age, regardless of their preparedness; A-levels in traditional 'academic' subjects being the most acceptable for entry into many universities, 'vocational' routes seen as suitable only for those who cannot achieve in 'academic' routes. Full-time under graduate study, preferably away from home, is the most valued and many employers only recruit graduates with high A-level scores from their shortlist of traditional universities (Copland, 2008: 4).

adversity to the history of art

- ▶ In the following quote, the admissions tutor justifies decision not to accept a candidate on the basis of her perceived adversity to the history of art
- ▶ rejected despite the quality of her work –was not poor
- ▶ Yet, the possibility of her being 'averse to writing' – raises concerns about her ability to cope with the dissertation

Averse to writing

- ▶ Well, the critical studies of the course is roughly twenty per cent of the degree. So if someone comes along who is averse to writing, that could be a problem. (...) the girl I was telling you about that came yesterday, who shot herself in the foot, by saying how much she hated doing art history. And it wasn't poor, the work. But because of her reaction to it, you know that this is somebody who is going to have to struggle mightily to get through a degree, particularly when it comes to the dissertation. Somebody who is that averse to it that she hates it. There really is no point in trying to do this. What I look for in the writing is to see whether they are being analytical (...) what you are hoping to find is that there is a thinker there.

- ▶ Teresa Lillis: academic writing practices privilege 'the discursive routines of particular social groups whilst dismissing those of people who, culturally and communally, have access to and engage in a range of other practices' (Lillis, 2002: 39).

Ideal forms of literacy practice

- ▶ Exposes the subtle ways that certain candidates might be constructed as lacking the appropriate potential
- ▶ Yet the judgment made against an ideal form of literacy practice
 - learned and acquired through sets of cultural, social and linguistic capital
 - available to those from higher socio-economic and white racialised backgrounds.

Meaning & being

- ▶ The conventions surrounding the production of student academic texts are ideologically inscribed in at least two powerful ways: by working towards the exclusion of students from social groups who have historically been excluded from the conservative-liberal project of HE in the UK and by regulating directly and indirectly what student-writers can mean, and who they can be (Lillis, 2001: 39).

Exclusions

- ▶ This emphasis – serves to exclude certain social groups at 2 key levels:
 - ontological (who is constructed as having potential and ability)
 - epistemological (what forms of potential are validated through the selection processes) levels.
- ▶ Profoundly connected to the legitimization of particular forms of subjectivity
- ▶ Highlights the complexity and politics of processes of selection.

Reinforcing divisions

- ▶ My key argument: WP is implicated in exclusionary practices
 - repositions those historically marginalized and misrecognised as the Other in higher education sites
- ▶ Connected to struggles over status and being seen as world-class in higher education
 - privileges research rather than teaching as the primary measure of quality, worth and value
- ▶ In such struggles, divisions between vocational and academic forms of education are reinforced
 - students from privileged backgrounds – benefit from access to high-status, elite forms of HE
 - Students under-represented – concentrated in lower-status forms of provision – tend to face disadvantages in the labour market

Reflexivity

- ▶ Possibilities for developing strategies of WP underpinned by transformative approaches
 - focus on institutional practices, structures and cultures
 - concept of 'reflexivity' as an important form of inclusive practice, which centres on issues of equity and justice.

Reflexive practice

- ▶ The individual reflects critically on her practices
- ▶ Situates her practices within wider sets of social relations, including relations of power and inequality within disciplinary fields and institutions.
- ▶ Makes implicit judgments *explicit* in selection processes, so that unequal relations become visible to those responsible for making equitable decisions.
- ▶ Equity at the centre of such decision-making

Judgments about what (& who) counts

- ▶ Eg. Nina highlights – processes of selection are tied to implicit value judgments about what counts as knowledge and who is recognized as a knowing subject with potential

Judgments about what (& who) counts

- Such judgments are racialised and tied in with epistemological frameworks that value particular forms of knowledge
- (which are of course contextualized in relation to discipline and subject – in Nina's case the epistemological framework is defined by arts and fashion disciplinary practices and assumptions)
- ▶ A first step in developing inclusive approaches is to raise levels of awareness about the ways that judgments are made about selection, through the practices of reflexivity.

Interrogation of discriminatory judgments

- ▶ Reflexive practices – place Nina's work and qualifications next to her answer in the interview about influence of hip-hop
- ▶ Requires the admissions tutor to interrogate her discriminations against hip-hop as an inappropriate form of influence
 - ask herself if these judgments are informed by privileged values about what counts as knowledge and experience
- ▶ Nina's potential can be re-evaluated having scrutinized the discriminatory values that might unfairly exclude her from being recognized as a student with talent and potential

Institutional practices, values & cultures

- ▶ Must move beyond individual approaches to *institutional* practices – fully integrated into the ethos, principles and values of the institution itself
- ▶ Main work of WP in HE is seen as most important in relation to outreach
- ▶ Universities central to the process – must transform practices of HE (e.g. pedagogical and assessment practices)

Ethical & inclusive

- ▶ Requires – ITE & CPD – place the operations of inequality and exclusion at the centre of the curriculum
- ▶ Those in decision-making positions assert their authority in *ethical and inclusive* ways
- ▶ Broaden scope of WP away from neo-liberalism and towards social justice
- ▶ Economic concerns are important & institutions must keep economic considerations in the frame
- ▶ Economic considerations should not be main and foremost driver of education and the distribution of educational opportunities.

Challenging divisions

- ▶ Imperative – integrating reflexive practices & re-positioning equity as primary concern – truly *widens* rather than *increases* educational participation – across the full richness of lifelong learning opportunities, including the vocational and academic
- ▶ Challenge divisions between hierarchical forms of knowledge and provision, and reformulate what counts as knowledge and who has access to meaning-making

Responsibility

- ▶ “(...) we argue that the responsibility of reflexivity should be placed on those in the most powerful positions in society (particularly as the policy of lifelong learning usually places most responsibility on the least privileged groups in relation to discourses of derision and deficit)”

Burke & Jackson (2007) *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning: Feminist Interventions*. London: Routledge

Reconstitute practices

- ▶ Economic crisis – offers new ways of doing and understanding – context of hope and possibility
- ▶ Small steps – reflexive stance towards our everyday practices
- ▶ Resist forms of neo-liberal regulation
- ▶ Work collaboratively – resisting modes of individualization

Reconstitute practices

- ▶ WP much more than issues of admission and entry
- ▶ Problematised and re-constitute our practices in all dimensions of our work – inclusive pedagogies, assessment and quality frameworks, approaches to educational leadership and management