

Widening Participation: Identity, Difference and In/equality

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This keynote will interrogate the underpinning values, perspectives and meanings that shape current policy discourses and practices of access to and widening participation (WP) in higher education. It will pay particular attention to competing discourses at play in relation to access to vocational education and training in higher education and how those discourses construct learner identities in relation to social inequalities of age, class, disability, ethnicity, gender and race (Burke and Jackson 2007). Research has exposed that educational aspirations and choices are significantly shaped by social differences and inequalities and this is related to problematic hierarchies and divisions in higher education including academic/vocational and knowledge/skills (Reay, Davies et al. 2001; Morley 2003; Reay, David et al. 2005; Woodin and Burke 2008). Although policy makes an explicit commitment to widening participation to those groups who are under-represented in higher education, closer analytical attention raises questions about what forms of higher education are being made accessible, to whom and in what ways. In the UK for example, work-based courses are identified as more appropriate for students from non-traditional backgrounds, in order to safeguard the traditional honours degree (DfES 2003). This paper examines the complex politics of identity at play in higher educational fields and the ways these shape struggles over access and participation in relation to divisions between academic and vocational forms of higher education. It will consider the ways that research, policy and practice might usefully 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 (Burke and Jackson 2007). I will draw on some of data from my research to illuminate these points and to bring to life some of the complex struggles around access and participation at play.

Understanding Access and Widening Participation

Social inclusion and widening educational participation are central concerns in lifelong learning and higher education policy globally. Participation in learning has been identified largely as a mechanism by which to tackle social exclusion and to improve national economic competitiveness, often overshadowing concerns with social equity and justice in education (Morley 2000: 230). Lifelong learning policy constructs a 'knowledge society' of individual and flexible learners, and a key problem is seen as lying with those who lack the aspirations to capitalise on the range of learning opportunities freely available to all.

The discourse of lifelong learning in the UK is one that favours individualism and instrumentalism, embedded within structures and organisations that are themselves gendered, raced and classed (Jackson 2003:366).

Although the hegemonic discourses of WP place emphasis on individual attitudes and are embedded in deficit constructions of individual lack (Jones and Thomas, 2005), it is important not to oversimplify the complex ways that policy gets enacted and produced within localized sites, which are always shaped by micro-politics (Ball, 1987; Ball, 1990; Morley, 1999; Morley, 2000). WP is a highly contested concept, with competing notions at play nationally, regionally and locally. WP is discursively produced within specific political contexts, and currently the neoliberal political discourse strongly frames competing understandings of WP in a range of national contexts, including the English context, where my research is located. As particular students are recognized through HE policy discourses as subjects of WP, for example as disadvantaged and as having potential, WP discourse is inextricably tied to the politics of identity and inequalities of class, ethnicity, gender and race (as well as a range of other differences). Archer points out that 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). Within current HE policy, there is a firm acceptance that the economy and marketplace are at the centre of the project to widen participation as a key policy imperative and this implicates different social groups and communities in different ways, contributing to processes

of subjective construction. For example, the 2003 UK Government White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* begins the section on expansion of HE by stating, “national economic imperatives support our target to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of those aged 18–30 by the end of the decade” (DfES, 2003a, 57). This economic discourse can be traced back to the Thatcher years, with the rise of neoliberalism which aimed to

re-create individualism, consumerism and competition and to remove blocks, barriers and obstacles to the free play of market forces. Equality of opportunity was recast as the individualizing of opportunities, for economic and social enhancement (Arnot *et al.*, 1999, 83)

Jones and Thomas (2005) helpfully outline three contrasting approaches to WP, although the lived reality of widening participation is perhaps far messier than this represents. The first approach Jones and Thomas categorize as the ‘academic approach’. This strand emphasizes attitudinal factors such as ‘low aspirations’. In this approach, activities to raise aspirations are prioritized and these are located at the peripheries of universities with ‘little or no impact on institutional structure and culture’ (Jones and Thomas 2005: 617). The second approach that they outline is the ‘utilitarian approach’, which similarly focuses on attitudinal factors, including again the notion of ‘low aspirations’. The second approach is also concerned with lack of traditional academic qualifications, and is embedded in a deficit understanding of WP. Jones and Thomas thus characterize the ‘utilitarian approach’ as the ‘double deficit model’ (Jones and Thomas 2005: 618) and one that particularly emphasizes the relationship between higher education and the economy. The third approach they identify as ‘transformative’, which focuses on the needs of under-represented groups in higher education. They argue that higher status institutions are more likely to take the ‘academic approach’, less prestigious institutions are more likely to take the ‘utilitarian approach’, leaving little space for transformative approaches to higher education (Jones and Thomas 2005: 627).

In England, as most ‘non-traditional’ entrants to higher education are concentrated in the post1992 new universities, the hegemonic discourse of widening participation is strongly framed by the utilitarian approach and this is significantly influenced by the

‘logic of neo-liberal globalisation’ (Jones, Turner et al. 1999: 238). With notions of the market at the centre of WP policy, the key role of HE is constructed as enhancing employability, entrepreneurialism, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Morley 1999; Thompson 2000; Burke 2002; Archer, Hutchings et al. 2003; Bowl 2003). Neoliberal market oriented approaches significantly shape meanings of widening participation, including what and whom higher education is for (Burke and Jackson 2007). In the Australian context, it has been argued that ‘The main impact of the new economy on education and training has been to: Increase demand for education and training, particularly among people with high skills; and Generate increased inequality in the distribution of education and training opportunities’ (Watson 2003: 39).

Davies and Saltmarsh explain that neoliberalism:

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).

The focus of neoliberalism is on the disciplining/ed individual who engages continuously in the project of self-improvement where it is up to the individual to make sure that he or she can ‘get ahead’. Access to higher education in this context becomes a central tool of neo-liberal self-disciplinary mechanisms, so that every individual has the responsibility to participate in learning in order to gain credentials to enhance their employability, continually responding to and responsible for meeting the requirements of a changing, dynamic and unstable global market. Neoliberalism erases collective sensibilities and social responsibility, rendering social inequality as secondary to individual mobility, firmly positioning individuals as ‘consumers’ of, and equal players in, the free market of lifelong learning and higher education.

Neoliberalism thus takes attention away from the ways that identities are implicated in complex social inequalities and reduces education to a technology of self-

improvement for individual workers and consumers competing in a global market. Although the WP policy discourse makes rhetorical gestures towards eradicating exclusion from the different sites of education and training provision, the neoliberal reconstruction of 'exclusion' is one that firmly asserts responsibility to the individual named and identified as 'excluded' or 'disadvantaged'. Furthermore, the hegemonic neoliberal discourse of access and WP tends to operate around contradictory claims; on the one hand, the claim of the 'classless society' or the 'death of class' and, on the other, the powerful ways that 'class is invoked in moves to draw young people from deprived areas into HE' (Lawler 2005: 798). WP policy is a part of the broader neoliberal technologies of self-regulation in which subjects come to understand themselves as responsible for the production of a self with the skills and qualities required to succeed in the new economy (Walkerline 2003: 239). Issues of structural inequality and cultural misrecognition become hidden in WP policy discourse, and rather individuals are called upon to take up the challenge of accessing the range of products available on the higher education market. Such a challenge is located in a wider neo-liberal project of self-development and improvement through participation in higher education, which is presented as meritocratic and available to all who have the potential to benefit.

However, this is not to say that discourses of transformation and social justice are not still at play to some extent in WP policy, as this quote from the Higher Education Funding Council for England demonstrates:

Widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under-representation is closely connected with broader issues of equity and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups (HEFCE 2006).

The problematic of this excerpt becomes apparent though with close analytical attention to the framing policy text, which places emphasis on individuals from under-represented groups taking responsibility to change their aspirations, dispositions and values (Gerwitz 2001). This emphasis has significantly altered relations between the

individual and the state and has led to a shift from government to governance, ‘signalling a move away from a citizen-based notion of rights associated with a sense of the public, to an individualistic client-based notion of right based on contractual obligations’ (Blackmore 2006: 13). Just as individual students are responsible for their self-improvement, individual teachers and WP practitioners are responsible to raise the aspirations of young, disadvantaged individuals identified as having potential. Aspirations are not individually formed but are relational and interconnected with complex auto/biographies, multiple identifications and social positionings and are discursively produced within schools, colleges and universities as well as other key social sites (Burke 2006; Burke 2006; Burke 2009). What is not considered in the hegemonic discourses of access and WP is the necessity of transforming education institutions in order to seriously address deeply embedded structural inequalities and discursive misrecognitions across intersections of age, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender, inter/nationality, race, religion and sexuality. These complex inequalities are intricately intertwined with longstanding cultural and discursive mis/representations, which produce discourses of derision (Ball 1990) and pathologised subjectivities (Skeggs 2004). In critiquing what she names as the narrow skills-driven approach to WP policies, Carole Leathwood warns that such policies are likely to fail if they refuse to engage with the complex reasons that different social groups might be resistant to education in relation to their negative experiences of learning in formal institutions:

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).

Indeed, those entering higher education from ‘different’ backgrounds are often seen as potentially contaminating of university standards and as a result a key policy strategy is to protect the quality of higher education by creating new and different

spaces for those new and different students (Morley 2003). For example, in the English context, the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, reads:

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 workfocused courses*. (DfES 2003: 64, emphasis added).

In this excerpt, WP is being explicitly linked with concerns about ‘safeguarding the standards of traditional honours degrees’. The text implies that opening access to new student constituencies has the potential to have a negative effect on traditional university spaces, which need to be protected against the entry of ‘non-traditional’ students. It also assumes that the appropriate level of participation for those new student constituencies is work-based degrees rather than traditional honours degrees. This reinforces historical divisions between academic and vocational forms of education and training. This also leads policy in the direction of creating new and different kinds of courses for new and different kinds of students without addressing that these differences are shown to be classed, gendered and racialised by research in the field (HEFCE 2005; Reay, David et al. 2005). In analysing their interviews with working-class students, Reay, David and Ball (2005: 85) explain:

Choice for the majority [of working-class students] 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.

In this way, the WP policy agenda is not able to challenge the status quo or redress the legacy of the under/mis-representation of certain social groups in traditional forms of higher education, which carry with them status and esteem. It is also not able to

shift problematic divisions between academic and vocational and knowledge and skills, which are also tied in with classed, gendered and racialised subjectivities, both of individuals and of institutions. As a result enduring hierarchies, privileges and inequalities remain untouched whilst new forms of unequal social relations are being created (Burke 2002). This logic constructs students from non-traditional backgrounds in very particular ways and leaves notions of deficit in place. Traditional student identity is subtly held in place so that the traditional university undergraduate is re-constituted as white-racialised and middle-classed. The 'WP student' is constituted as 'Other', deserving of higher education access but only to 'other' kinds of courses and institutions.

Subjectivity, Inequality and Difference in Accessing Higher Education

I now turn to some of my qualitative data from recent research to illustrate the points I've made so far and to highlight the ways concepts of subjective construction are useful in exposing the complexities of inequalities and misrecognitions.

The first example is from a research project I conducted with my colleague Jackie McManus, who is based at the University of the Arts London. The research deconstructs the admissions policies and practices of the art and design academy, to examine the practices and perspectives of admissions tutors. The methods included in-depth interviews with ten admissions tutors about their perspectives of the admissions system and process, as well as 70 observations of actual selection interviews with candidates.

The observation data exposes the ways that racialised subjectivities inform admissions tutors' judgments in the selection process. 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:

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

In response to Nina's answer, the body language of the interviewers visibly changed. They leaned back in their chairs and appeared to go through the motions of interviewing 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 interview room, the interviewers immediately decided to reject her. They discussed how they would record this on the form they were required to complete about all applicants:

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.

Yet, when the interviewers reviewed her portfolio before the interview took place, they had not deemed it as weak. Following her interview, the two interviewers recorded on their form that Nina's portfolio was below average, noting also that the clothes she wore to the interview were not fashionable and that she lacked confidence. Nina was dressed very smartly in dark jeans and a cotton top. All of the other (white) female candidates were dressed in similar clothing of tunic, leggings and pumps. The interviewers also noted their dissatisfaction with Nina's intentions to live at home whilst studying, suggesting this was a sign of immaturity. 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. Nina was not recognized as a legitimate subject of art and design studies because of she cited a form of fashion seen as invalid in the higher education context. Furthermore, her intentions not to leave home were read off as signifying her inappropriate subject position. The male, middle-class, white-English candidate on the other hand knew how to cite the discourses that would enable him recognition as a legitimate student subject. Although no explicitly racist statements were made by the admissions tutors, I want to argue that their judgments were 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, which are

embodied as well as performative, profoundly shape selection-processes. 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’. This is implicitly underpinned by debates about knowledge and skills and work-based, vocational provision as marked out as less legitimate than courses and institutions seen as academic and high status.

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 undergraduate 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).

In the following quote, the admissions tutor is justifying the decision not to accept a candidate on the basis of her claim to ‘hate’ the history of art. This candidate, he explains, was rejected despite the quality of her work, which he explains was not poor. Yet, her declaration demonstrated to him that she might be ‘averse to writing’, raising particular concerns about her ability to cope with the dissertation (it must be noted that the candidate would have at least 2 years to develop her writing skills and practices before having to tackle a dissertation). It seems remarkable, that even though she had the right qualifications and her work was judged to be good by the admissions tutor, the decision was made not to select her for the course on the basis of her claim to dislike art history during the selection interview.

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 explains that academic writing practices serve to 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). Her points help to uncover the subtle ways that certain candidates might be constructed as lacking the appropriate potential, when in fact the judgment is being made against an ideal form of literacy practice, that is learned and acquired through particular sets of cultural, social and linguistic capital, most available to those from higher socio-economic and white racialised backgrounds. Lillis explains that:

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).

The emphasis on demonstrating the ability to write in particular ways serves to exclude working-class and Black and ethnic minority groups at both ontological (who is constructed as having potential and ability) and epistemological (what forms of potential are validated through the selection processes) levels. This is profoundly connected to the legitimization of particular forms of subjectivity and highlights the complexity and politics of processes of selection.

The second example draws from my research on men accessing higher education. The research involved in-depth interviews with 39 men participating in access and foundation programmes throughout London, in five case study institutions. I am going to focus now on the theme of respectability, which emerged from the data in relation to the men's gendered and racialised subjectivities.

The men in my study produce their accounts in the context of these wider discourses of widening participation and neoliberalism. This is linked to the discourses at play around masculinity, which are contested across different social sites and cultural constructions. In describing the reasons HE is important to them, they construct notions of an ideal and respectable form of masculinity.

Ali: Because, as you know, basically when you've got an education you are more respected (aged 19, Middle Eastern, middle-class, Science and Engineering Foundation Programme (SEFP)).

There seem to be interesting conceptual connections here with Skeggs' (1997) analysis of formations of class and gender and notions of 'respectability'. Skeggs conceptualizes 'respectability' as deeply intertwined with classed and gendered subjectivities in her ethnography of working-class women undertaking caring courses in further education. The women in her study struggle to be recognized as respectable, continually attempting to distance themselves from working-class identifications but are conscious, she argues, of their classed location. Skeggs suggests that although those in marginalized positions are aware of their marginalization and seek to act in ways that avoid the classifications of others, they are often unable to escape precisely those classifications that position them as different from normalized subjectivities. She explains:

The women in this study are aware of their place, of how they are socially positioned and the attempts to represent them. This constantly informs their responses. They operate with a dialogic form of recognition: they recognize the recognition of others. Recognitions do not occur without value judgments and the women are constantly aware of the judgments of real and imaginary others. Recognition of how one is positioned is central to the processes of subjective construction (Skeggs, 1997, 4).

Skeggs' analysis of working-class women's classed and gendered subjectivities and their awareness of their social locations helps shed light on the men's accounts in this study. The men similarly do not identify with class, some explicitly refusing to name a specific class positioning. Class is a highly contextualized concept and the men

bring different understandings of class in relation to their ethnic and racialised subjectivities across space and time, for example in terms of migration and experiences of diaspora (Brah, 1996). Yet the notion of ‘respect’ features large in a number of the men’s accounts, across different ethnic backgrounds. For Gladiator, who is from an Italian background and describes his class positioning as ‘comfortable’, the constitution of respectability relies on a distancing from physical labour and ‘being common’:

Gladiator: [Being a student] feels good. Because working is not good. Working is very hard and physical, compared to learning. I don’t know, I’ve always had this thing, when I walk along the road, as either being common or intellectual, just the two groups. And I know it sounds horrible, but I don’t like mixing with the common or, I don’t know, choose people. So I’ve always wanted to be in the higher learning class, so being amongst all these students here is great (aged 19, Italian, ‘comfortable’, SEFP).

Gladiator, in defining his social position as ‘comfortable’, implies a strong distancing from working-class masculinity, making a powerful link between learning and being ‘higher class’. His account is reminiscent of Mac an Ghail’s ‘Academic Achievers’ who “appeared to be destined for an ambiguous class position” and who accepted the “‘mental-manual’ division of labour’ identifying with ‘mental’ production” (Mac an Ghail, 1994, 63). Different forms of class ambiguity appear in the men’s accounts, illuminating the complexities of class as a form of identity and as a conceptual tool. Paul, for example, describes himself as socially mobile, as middle-class but from a ‘lower-class’ background:

Paul: As soon as you say to friends - I’m a mature student, full-time - it’s o-o-oh. So they call me an intellectual git now. I feel a bit brainier. Is that the word? Brainier? I feel more intellectual, although it’s only been a week. But yeah, I do feel different. I think there’s a status to being a student isn’t there? What are you? I’m a bricklayer. What are you? Oh, I’m a student. I think there’s a bit of social status there (aged 39, white English, working/middle-class, Access to Social Sciences and Humanities).

Gladiator and Paul strongly associate being a student with being 'higher class'. Participating in HE in their accounts represents social status and is desirable because of their investment in self-improvement and becoming a different kind of a man. This is in contrast to the men interviewed by Archer and Leathwood (2003), who see being a student as incompatible with working-class masculinities. Unlike the men in their study, who largely associated HE participation with "negative, undesirable images of masculinity" (Archer and Leathwood, 2003, 179), the men in my study see HE as a form of self-improvement and subjective transformation and explicitly distance themselves from working-class masculinity. Although positioned across different and competing formations of identity, the men bring into play an imagined hegemonic masculinity in their struggle towards success and respectability. They construct respectable men as university educated, not doing physical work, having a well-paid job, being comfortable but not too wealthy, and having a home and a stable family life.

Changing practices

I have argued that WP is implicated in exclusionary practices, which reposition those historically marginalized and misrecognised as the Other in higher education sites. This is connected to struggles over status and being seen as world-class in higher education (which 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, with students from privileged backgrounds continuing to benefit from access to and participation in high-status, elite forms of higher education, whilst students traditionally under-represented are concentrated in lower-status forms of provision and tend to face disadvantages in the labour market in comparison to graduates with higher-status degrees.

For the final part of my paper, I want to focus on the possibilities for developing strategies of WP underpinned by transformative approaches, which focus on institutional practices, structures and cultures, rather than individual attitudes and deficit. In order to do this, I introduce the concept of 'reflexivity' as an important form of inclusive practice, which centres on issues of equity and justice.

For example let's reconsider admissions practices drawing on reflexivity as a form of inclusive practice. One of the key problems the example of Nina highlights, is that processes of selection are tied to implicit value judgments about what counts as knowledge and who is recognized as a knowing subject with potential. 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). I argue that 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.

Reflexivity requires the individual to not only reflect critically on her practices, but also to situate her practices within wider sets of social relations, including relations of power and inequality within disciplinary fields and institutions. This forces the implicit to become explicit in selection processes, so that unequal relations (e.g. between 'hip-hop' and other forms of fashion associated with 'high culture') become visible to those responsible for making equitable decisions. Equity must be put at the centre of such decision-making, so that the criteria foreground issues of social justice. In such a framework, Nina's work and qualifications will be placed next to her answer in the interview about the influence of hip-hop. However, the admissions tutor will be required to interrogate her discriminations against hip-hop as an inappropriate form of influence and to ask herself if these judgments are informed by privileged values about what counts as knowledge and experience. In doing this, 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.

However, in order for such reflexivity to be effective, this must move beyond individual practitioners' approaches to institutional practices that are fully integrated into the ethos, principles and values of the institution itself. In the UK, arguments have repeatedly been made that the main work of widening participation to higher education must happen in schools and colleges. I disagree. Rather I want to argue that universities have a great deal to learn from the practices at further education colleges and schools and that much of the work is about transforming the practices of higher educational institutions, including for example pedagogical and assessment practices.

Reflexivity as inclusive practice requires that the initial training as well as continuing professional development of academics, teachers and other educational-professionals, place the operations of inequality and exclusion at the centre of the curriculum, so that those in decision-making positions assert their authority in ethical and inclusive ways that address issues of social justice. This of course involves broadening the scope of frameworks for access and WP away from neo-liberalism and towards social justice. I am not arguing that economic concerns are irrelevant and fully accept that institutions must keep economic considerations in the frame. However, economic considerations should not be the main and foremost driver of education and the distribution of educational opportunities.

Integrating reflexive practices formally into our institutional structures, and re-positioning equity as a primary concern in processes of selection, is imperative in developing a widening participation agenda that truly *widens* rather than *increases* educational participation, across the full richness of lifelong learning opportunities, including the vocational and academic. This must challenge divisions between hierarchical forms of knowledge and provision, and reformulate what counts as knowledge and who has access to meaning-making. In the long-term, this involves dismantling policies that reinforce the problematic divisions between academic and vocational. One of the most challenging aspects of this project is to involve those in the most privileged social positions, for example the most prestigious universities, to participate in the questioning of practices and policies that reinforce such divisions. This is where a concept of social justice, as both about redistribution and recognition, is so important (Fraser 1997). This involves a deeply transformative reorientation to the project of WP, which requires a focus on the most privileged subjecting themselves to change and transformation rather than the current context, which focuses on the 'disadvantaged' to become more like the advantaged (Gewirtz 2001; Burke and Jackson 2007).

The project I am proposing is clearly a significant, long-term and radical one and I recognize that it is a difficult set of aims to propose in the current global framework. However, the vision is worth keeping to the fore of our educational imaginations. The current economic crisis offers us new ways of doing and understanding and so we are presented with a context of hope and possibility. For those of us who are committed to the project of widening educational participation and to deconstructing problematic

divisions between vocational and academic, we can take some small steps towards a more socially equitable and just future. This requires a reflexive stance towards our everyday practices within educational institutions and our work with colleagues and students. It requires us to resist forms of neo-liberal regulation and to work collaboratively rather than to reinforce current modes of individualization. I have focused on admissions as one form of practice that might be transformed through reflexivity. However, I have argued in the body of my work that access to higher education is much more than issues of admission and entry. It requires us to problematise and re-constitute our practices in all dimensions of our work, including developing inclusive pedagogies, assessment and quality frameworks, and approaches to educational leadership and management.

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