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Widening Participation (WP) and equity of access are common international terms used in Higher Education when referring to policy and practice applied to student groups who are institutionally positioned as 'non-traditional' or minority. Such groups may include, (ARC 2013: ii): students from lower socio-economic groups, mature students, part-time learners, learners from ethnic minority groups, vocational and work-based learners, Disabled learners, and care leavers. WP practices are commonly considered and positioned as social justice responses to ingrained cultures and perspectives, which have excluded and ostracised these groups from their human right to an equal education at tertiary level and thus access to choice and social mobility for them, their families and communities. In relation to students disclosing disability, a history of silencing, misrepresentation, frustration and failure exists (Gibson and Kendall, 2010; Gibson, 2015; Gibson and Cook-Sather, 2020). Whilst statistics in many western nations show some progress for this group in terms of accessing higher education and employment (Trainor, Morningstar and Murray, 2016), the reality beyond the stats is continued unfair representation and negative education experiences. Reasons why have been investigated by credible sources and I summarise below four of the contributing variables:

### **The 'social justice imaginary'**

This work posits HE as an increasingly neo-liberal endeavour and argues matters of social justice and/or inclusion take second place to the dollar sign (Gale and Hodge 2014; Gibson, 2015). Watson (2013), critiquing WP in the context of HE's massification drive from the 1990s, argues the core driver for WP is profit, not equality or social justice. In line with this position, Gale and Hodge (2014, p 690) suggest the changes currently being wrought to the higher education imaginary by neoliberal theorizations are unlikely to foster a just imaginary (if any lasting change can be expected at all). That said, the failures of WP practices may be explained by their not taking account of, or critically considering, deeply embedded and complex histories of exclusion, inequality and misrecognition of our traditionally excluded minority groups whilst the background noise is 'recruit, recruit, recruit'.

### **Habitus and Hegemony: the Social Inclusion Meme**

Hughes (2015) in her work addresses the 'Social Inclusion Meme'. She asks are universities doing enough to create socially just forms of education and problematizes this in light of HE's history - who has had access and who has not - then links this to the nuanced ways in which traditional thinking and established norms continue to exclude the 'new' or 'diverse' student. The crux of her argument centres on Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus', that institutional habitus, through habits of mind and practice, result in a form of agency which maintains the inclusion of some and exclusion of others. In line with this, Gibson (2006) discusses how the political processes of silencing minority positions and knowledge in education and society occur due to hegemony and connects her view to the work of Carey (2003, p 424), who suggests the existence of multiple layers of control, "*such as the law, family, education and work [...] Widespread societal oppression demands that the patterns and relational networks of people's everyday lives reinforce efforts at social control*". Such historic and culturally ingrained forms of agency, networks and practice need to be acknowledged and seen for what they are if social justice is become a genuine driver of HE.

### **The Social Justice field: The intersection of Disability excluded as pathology**

Traditionally the field of social justice in its work addressing questions of inequality in relation to 'race', gender, sexuality and age, has excluded 'disability' (Gibson, 2015; Goodley 2011; Guillaume 2011; Liasidou 2014). Why? Historically, much of the social justice discipline positioned and positions Disability as pathology, resulting in its exclusion from well-considered and framed political assertions on social, economic and educational disadvantage as unjustly experienced by other intersections.

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Where one might assume that the field of social justice would work as an ally and beneficiary with literature and research on 'disability', its reluctance to engage reinforces 'disability' as an isolated, medicalised and negative individual experience – something to be 'fixed' not something that occurs as a product of various related and socially constructed forms of disadvantage.

### **Inconsistent and ineffectively considered provision**

Other sources highlight ill-considered, ill-represented, inconsistent and ineffective forms of 'inclusive provision' for students with disabilities, (Beauchamp-Pryor 2012; Hughes, Corcoran, Slee 2016). Hughes et al maintain (2016, p.488): While universities are bound by institutional requirements for 'reasonable accommodations' emanating from the Disability Discrimination Act, support levels – and quality – vary between institutions greatly, as well as across different physical, psychological and emotional illnesses or conditions. Furthermore it is argued these students are not prioritized as a group (Gibson, 2015; Hughes, Corcoran, Slee 2016; Madriaga, 2007)

Sources also note a lack of representation of students with disabilities in policy development, application and evaluation. Beauchamp-Pryor's (2012) work focused on the perspectives and views of disabled students', addressing matters of power and voice. She discovered that little was known about disabled student experiences and that dominant discourses, traditional ideology and stigma resulted in ineffective forms of provision, Gibson (2015). This lack of engagement with student views has been found as a common occurrence in other studies, (Gibson 2012; Madriaga 2007; Vickerman and Blundell 2010).

Students positioned as disabled, or self-identifying as disabled, can offer collective insight into their lived and observed experiences with inequality. Their knowledge provides richly layered and nuanced insights into structural and cultural barriers to inclusion. When given a platform and valued by the academy, this can deliver material which can be used to challenge injustice and push forward change. It is by engaging in this way that education as a system and institution can gain certain insights as to how, where and why significant inequality in our Universities and wider society continues for this particular group of people.

### **Conclusion**

I argue the above variables are examples of 'Disablism', which in the University context I define as a form of eugenics positioning the non-disabled student as the model norm. Such a sense of normalcy replicates thinking about the 'non-traditional' student resulting in their continued suppression and marginalisation, (Gibson, 2015). In response, I suggest a new discourse is required to generate equity in, through and beyond higher education for those who identify or are identified as disabled. Core to this work is the reconceptualization of WP or its equivalent policy and practice/s, and the bringing together of research, practice, action and reflection within fully representative communities of praxis. I consider this new discourse emerging from an engagement with the work of Burke (Burke, 2012) in particular the platform, scope, critique and process/es offered by a praxis-based pedagogical methodology (Burke and Lumb, 2018; Burke, 2018). Such work provides "*time and space for collaborative, reciprocal, critically reflexive and ethical ways of re-searching collectively across, though and with difference to deepen engagement with social justice in and through higher education*". (Burke, 2018, p.4)

By repositioning disability in this way, it becomes both a core and legitimate part of the wider social justice field whilst also working to disrupt hegemonic beliefs, thus radically altering that which is positioned as valid knowledge and who is positioned as knower – the legitimate and legitimised holders of agency and power.

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