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Over the past two decades I have been immersed in contributing to, deconstructing, analysing and reframing efforts to widen participation in higher education. This personal, professional and scholarly project has been strongly located in feminist, critical and social justice orientations. I was compelled by this project through my own precarious experiences of accessing higher education and through the observations I made of the profound challenges my peers also faced in participating in higher education against the odds. I studied the experiences, aspiration-formations and subjective constructions of students from under-represented backgrounds at honours (1996), masters (1997) and doctoral level (2001), organised, led, taught and moderated multiple access and return to study programs (1997 – 2004), developed participatory, pedagogically-oriented methodologies (1998 – present) and researched the policies, discourses, practices and structures framing widening participation (WP) agendas (2008 – present). Through this work, and through deep engagement with a range of critical, post/structural and feminist theoretical insights, I became increasingly troubled by what became clear to me as a profound misframing of access, equity and WP in ways that might unwittingly work to further marginalise, exclude or harm.

Based on this body of work, I have argued for a reframing of WP that attends to the multiple and insidious inequalities that have been woven through historical and present formations of higher education. At the heart of this is deconstructing policy and discourse to understand the implications of who is seen as having the right to higher education. Struggles for access to higher education have a long history and are intimately tied to relations of power and difference. Consideration must then be paid to who has access to knowledge formation, who can claim a position as “knower” and how this relates to social and cultural positions of influence at policy, systemic and institutional levels. In relation to these complex concerns, the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE), has built on praxis-based, pedagogical methodologies to make time and space for collaborative, reciprocal, reflexive and ethical ways of reconceptualising widening participation in deep conversation with critical theoretical insights. This enables close attention to the problematic assumptions that have been woven together in ways that distort and misframe the project of WP, including:

1. WP should focus on changing the perceived flawed attitudes and correcting the supposed deficiencies of disadvantaged individuals. This assumption actively reduces complex social and cultural histories and relations of inequality to rigid technologies of discipline and control that work to embed intensified forms of individualism. The problem is profoundly misframed by redirecting the focus away from social injustices to individual bodies re/class/ified through pathologising discourses and deficit imaginaries. Pathologising discourses of WP gained momentum over decades of policy and practice focusing on correcting or fixing the perceived deficit and flawed attitudes of “the disadvantaged” in order to meet their (socially constructed) special needs and to provide help to enable the individual to fit into the broader hegemonic university cultures and values. This framed institutional discourses of “inclusion”. These discursive

[1] This has included weaving the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Fraser, Butler, Freire, and many key critical and feminist scholars, together to generate possibilities for reconceptualising widening participation.

[2] This methodological framework draws together a rich and eclectic set of critical, post/structural and feminist theories. Research is understood within this framework as a pedagogical space in which participants co-produce new knowledge, understanding and ways of doing.

misframings largely constructed WP as a set of activities, to be performed by WP professionals with the aim to change the attitudes of targeted disadvantaged young people. The target groups have largely been determined by government policy and institutionalised categories such as low socioeconomic status, with homogenising effects that overlook complex formations of difference and the relation between micro-level experience and identity-formation and macro-level structure and discourse.

2. WP is a set of activities, or interventions, conducted by WP professional staff. This largely instrumentalist approach to WP conceals the complexity of a project that requires close attention to deeply embedded, insidious, institutionalised inequalities and the reproduction of social privilege via (particularly elite forms) of university participation. Market-oriented outreach activities designed to raise aspirations or provide student service “delivery” of support amounts to a band-aid being applied to an individual to overcome a deep social wound of multiple injustices. This not only grossly underestimates the project of WP but unfairly places responsibility on the shoulders of individual staff who themselves are located at the margins of higher education (e.g. often on short-term, casualised contracts with limited strategic or decision-making influence). This produces dividing practices in which some are responsabilised for WP without influence on institutional change whilst others are unburdened by the WP agenda yet authorised to exercise institutionalised forms of power, influence and control. Furthermore, this misframing strongly disconnects academic research concerned with social justice from professional practice concerned with WP activities and interventions.

3. Methodological framing is irrelevant in knowing “what works”. The discourse of evidence-based WP policy and practice tends to focus on data production and measurement to determine what is “effective”. This hides the significance of epistemological and ontological contestation in the production of knowledge, focusing only on questions of method (e.g. survey or interview?) and occluding from view subjectivities, discursive and epistemological framing and cultural values and assumptions. Lack of attention to methodological frameworks largely conceals the mobilisation of values that reinforce the interests of particular groups. One example of this is the privileging of Random Control Trials (RCTs) as the ideal form of evaluation of WP. RCTs as the “golden standard” might be understood as a quasi-medicalised methodology of WP as “treatment”. In this evaluative (mis)framing, WP is designed as a form of treatment or intervention to overcome a range of (constructed) individual deficiencies, for example perceived low aspiration or lack of cultural capital. The aim of evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the activities to alter attitudes in some of the following ways: aspiring to higher education as a means to gain credentials, developing career aspiration to overcome “debt aversion” and pursuing the individual “success” project of becoming employable in anticipation of the graduate premium. WP evaluation is usually undertaken by a professional consultant who is outside of “the delivery” of WP activities, so that from this “unbiased” position the evaluator can objectively measure the “effectiveness” of interventions and their impact on changing the attitudes of the targeted disadvantaged individuals.

4. WP is simply an effort to increase the numbers of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with potential to benefit from higher education. The assumption here has multiple threads. First, there is a problematic construction that higher education as an institution is disconnected from social inequalities and thus requires minimal efforts for change beyond providing appropriate resources and mechanisms of support for disadvantaged individuals. It is ignored that higher education is a powerful site of the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities. Furthermore, the problem is constructed as simply identifying talented individuals with innate potential and capability that can be straightforwardly assessed and determined. Assumptions about innate intelligence, ability, potential, “brightness” and talent underpins this misframing of WP. The ways social privilege forms the recognition of “capability” is ignored.

That higher education itself is a powerful institution that produces divisions, classifications, hierarchies, inequalities and differences is hidden from view. The ethical imperative to redress long-standing social, cultural and institutional injustices that have largely worked in the interests of particular groups of people is undermined. This misframing of WP ignores how power is mobilised and produced across, within and through institutional spaces, how inequality is formed through complex and unequal social relations rather than through the attitude of an individual and how institutional practices are formed and legitimated through the privileging of certain cultural values, subjectivities and experiences. The technologies and practices of WP then largely ignore how identity- and thus aspiration-formation is deeply relational across multiple and diverse personal experiences, formations of difference, dynamic sensibilities of self and Other and the macro level of enduring social structures and knowledge/power discourses.

5. The structuring of widening participation in universities is peripheral to the “core business” of the university. Research and teaching are seen as the key imperatives of the university but are disconnected from WP efforts. This places uneven responsibility for change and undue stress on a single person or unit to achieve change in an institution that is deeply hierarchical and historically formed in relation to multiple and institutionalised inequalities. The core work of higher education (research and teaching) is divided from the marginalised work of WP (outreach and student support activities). Divisions between research and teaching hierarchies are also concealed by unproblematised claims to excellence, so that teaching staff committed to student support are also often marginalised. The peripheralised discourses and structures of WP work to undermine efforts to build meaningful forms of equity, inclusion and widening participation that have the power to disrupt institutionalised inequalities. This also fails to fully recognise the knowledge and expertise of higher education staff committed to social justice in higher education, both within and external to formal programs of study.

As a result of the above analyses, and emerging through extensive and deep engagement with research, critical theory and praxis, the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) is dedicated to a sustained and collaborative agenda to reconceptualising WP. Building on *The Right to Higher Education: beyond widening participation* (Burke, 2012), and *Changing Pedagogical Spaces in Higher Education* (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017), CEEHE has developed **praxis-based, pedagogical, ethically-oriented methodologies (PPOEMs)** to reframe WP in ways that bring research, evaluation, theory, policy and practice into ongoing dialogue, aiming to generate transformative, social justice-focused change, sensitive to context and the politics of difference. In particular, this framework is dedicated to opening up critical, reflexive “timescapes” (Adam, 1998, 2004) to co-develop WP praxis that is dedicated to challenging deeply embedded social, cultural, symbolic and representational inequalities (Burke, 2020).

Drawing on Fraser (1997; 2003), PPOEMs aim to hold together the multiple dimensions of social justice; redistribution (social and material forms of justice), recognition (cultural and symbolic forms of justice) and representation (political and participatory forms of justice). Furthermore, PPOEMs acknowledge the ways that inequalities are not simply concrete barriers that can be measured and known in straightforward ways. Inequalities are felt in and through the body; reconceptualised as relational, dynamic and embedded in complex formations of power and difference. Reconceptualising WP thus requires methodologies that pay close attention to the politics of knowledge and being known as well as the ways values are privileged or delegitimised through powerful social institutions for which higher education is a key site. This requires that WP policy and practice is reframed with the understanding that injustices are often unwittingly sustained when epistemological and ontological contestation is ignored. Indeed, methodology is too often reduced to method, without due concern for the way methodologies frame knowledge formation and who has the right to claim a position as knower. When important methodological concerns are glossed over, the potential for reinforcing inequality is heightened through ignoring how a problem

is framed, who frames it, how data is not only collected but also interpreted (and by whom) and how then certain values are foregrounded, privileged and assumed as “truth” (Burke and Lumb, 2018). The assumption that data alone provides the knowledge for those legitimised with institutional authority to intervene in the lives of under-represented communities leads to profound forms of misrepresentation.

Developing pedagogical spaces through PPOEMs attends to the complex ways in which (iterative) processes shape our sensibilities of self and personhood through the meaning-making timescapes of research and evaluation, and the impact on what is imagined and what is seen as possible. The meanings we produce are part of a circle of knowledge (Freire, 2004), enabled through participation in the research process and through the relationships between pedagogy, identity formations and difference (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017). PPOEMs allow for meaning making to be refined through participatory practices, creating spaces of praxis both through and beyond the research and enabling diverse perspectives to be re-cognised and re-presented. PPOEMs facilitate new ways of knowing and understanding that otherwise might be unavailable or closed down. Such approaches create possibilities for refusal, resistance, and doing things differently, provoking our pedagogical and methodological imaginations.

A central aim of PPOEMs is to engage all participants in the research/practice nexus, opening up access to the theoretical, methodological and conceptual tools and resources to illuminate and examine the complexity of inequalities, as well as then translate these insights for practice and making a difference. A praxis-based WP framework seeks to bring participants together as re-researchers in iterative, close-up research and practice, creating pedagogical timescapes that facilitate the deepening of understanding from and across multiple perspectives and dimensions, working with and through difference.

In foregrounding praxis, ethics, pedagogies and methodologies, PPOEMs demands a deeply ethical re/positioning in relation to equity and WP in higher education; one that reflects carefully on how meaning is produced through everyday encounters as well as the more formal spaces of research, teaching and learning. This requires a broadening of how both pedagogies and methodologies are conceptualised, to consider how our taken-for-granted practices generate exclusions, value judgements, mis-interpretations, decision-making and actions. A focus on the pedagogical and methodological dimensions illuminates how meaning, understanding, values and experiences are produced and shape becoming and doing. This opens up the time and space to more reflexively, ethically and critically negotiate and examine our complex relation(s) to power. Praxis forms a dialogic dynamic across reflection/action, enabling us to more deliberately re-research and re-shape our practices through and with the critical tools available. These tools have emerged through decades of rigorous and critical theorising about inequalities, difference, power and how these are produced discursively and contextually across time and space with profound material and symbolic effects. This disrupts simplistic notions of what is measured as “effective” to consider the ethics of the intended and unintended “effects” of WP as both a technology of regulation and control and as a space of transformative social justice possibility. The aim of such approaches is to profoundly disrupt homogenising, standardising and reductive timescapes that operate to re/author/ise those in positions of privilege and power to influence what we can know, how we know it and who is positioned as a knower.

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