

Doing It Right When Someone Is Looking: Neoliberalism and Quality Assurance in UK Higher Education (0080)

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"I want something better for my children". A study of the 'experimental capital' of first generation mature students in HE.

This paper presents the transition experiences of mature first generation students at an English Higher Education Institution. The study captures how these students moved into and took up their place at university and engaged in study. It focuses on how this mature (aged over 25) cohort drew on their life-journey and work experiences. Explored is how attending university impacted the students and their families. Suggested is that these students brought to HE, a variety of capitals especially what has been termed by Yoss, (2005) as 'experiential capital'. Through examination of the origins of these capitals this paper proposes that HEIs need focus on the range of capitals that mature students bring to university and how these are not deficit but are a source of resilience.

Research indicates the range of issues and obstacles that mature students may encounter, there is also a need to '...explore the emotional journeys that different students make as they encounter different learning environments' (Christie, Tett, *et al*, 2008:579). Returning to education is a pattern of engagement that is reflected globally (Skilbeck, 2006) but there is limited exploration the capital reserves mature students may employ. For these students transition occurs at a different time in the life course than what is generally anticipated, representing what Mercer (2007:30) terms as a 'non-normative transition' that occurs. Mercer (2007) argues that this aberrant nature may translate into less family and social support available to individuals. However, such lack is not necessarily a deficit and be regarded as encouraging students to rely more on the self as a 'motivator, facilitator and regulator' of their studies (Mercer, 2007:30).

This paper draws on students' narratives to gain a better understanding of the knowledge and skills students over 25s bring to the HE, rather consider a deficit perspective. I argue that debate around university participation and engagement

needs to shift beyond deficit discourses. The focus should be on the capital reserves that brought to the HE environment and subsequently drawn upon. The students in this study were asked to reflect on their transition to university and to consider what knowledge and skills they thought may have assisted them. This was to encourage them to reflect and recognise how their existing social and cultural constructs translated into and interacted with university.

Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002:57) report how the lack of a higher education script or narrative within the family can limit the educational preparedness of these learners. Thomas & Quinn, (2007:77) propose that being a first generation student could reduce an individuals' perceptions of their sense of fit or 'acceptance' within HE, resulting in a 'lack of entitlement to be there' and a reduction in confidence. This cohort may also have to complete additional and often invisible 'work' in relation to university attendance, and are 'investing wisely' by studying, as well as acting as an enabler for others considering further education (Thomas & Quinn, 2007:59).

The risks to identity are more subtlety understood for these mature returners. Wainwright & Marandet (2010:458) highlight how '...adopting a new identity of learner in addition to the continued identity, role and responsibilities of parent can be challenging'. Mallman & Lee (2014:5) stated that there is little evidence in the literature that considered the identity work of older learners of both genders, particularly the 'emotional dynamics of inhabiting a new learner identity'.

While transitions in identity occur for both older and younger learners it is important to recognise how these are bounded by particular ages and stages of life. Adult transitions are 'frequently multiple and multilinear, the adult life course is ever less defined by precise age-related stages; and support mechanisms are fragmented and spread between the public and – increasingly so – the private sector' (Field, 2009: 22). Identity work for the over 25s can be difficult, as could be in a position of 'stigma' defined by age and maturity (Mallman & Lee, 2014:9). Mallman & Lee's (2014:9) study indicate how mature students endeavoured to adjust their behaviours. Mallman & Lee (2014) describe how mature students internalised a 'stigmatised other' and so modified their identity positions. This stigma was largely constructed around younger students' perceptions of what was appropriate behaviour at university.

The particular issues and obstacles encountered by over 25 students, particularly those with child dependents, is well documented (Gouthro, 2006; Hinton-Smith, 2009, Reay, 2003). The focus of this paper how this cohort of over 25 first generation students enacted success within the HE environment, and analyses the capitals that these students drew on during their transition to the university environment and at significant points in their learning journeys. Rather than focus on the deficits or weaknesses of individuals, this research considered how participants conceptualise of themselves as successful students. The application of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework allowed a deep exploration of the student's 'voices'. This reflective process framed an opportunity to think 'differently' about their experiences, examine they had brought with them to university and how these capitals potentially enable them to achieve. Yosso (2005: 76) argues that Bourdieuan concepts of cultural capital assume that white middle-class culture is the 'standard', which can result in other types of culture being 'judged in comparison to this norm'. Yosso (2005:77) proposes that 'traditional Bourdieuan cultural capital theory' focuses on a limited understanding of peoples' skills and knowledge. This builds on established interpretations of Bourdieu's work in order to better understand the intersection of student and institutional capital.

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