Rethinking tensions and freedoms in the higher education environment: Exploring the capabilities and capitals of first-in-family learners (0151)

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Background

Research has indicated that for those students who are the first in their family to come to university, the higher education experience is characterised by significant obstacles, resulting in lower educational outcomes and an alarming rate of attrition, evidenced within Australia and beyond (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2014; Coates & Ransom, 2011; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Lehmann, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Based on a global review of studies conducted in the last two decades, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) conclude that first-in-family (FiF) students are generally constructed as a "group at risk" (p.329) who struggle to engage with the university environment and adopt a student role. Similarly, a UK study (Ball, Davies, David & Reay 2002) reports how the lack of a higher education imprint within the family or "transgenerational family scripts" (p. 57) serves to limit the educational preparedness of these learners. Without a parental or family history of university attendance, both students and their families may experience a steep "learning curve" upon arrival at university (Removed for Review, 2012, p.23).

However, our understanding of how this FiF student cohort enacts success within the tertiary sector remains limited. The research projects outlined in this presentation sought to analyse the capitals and capabilities that one cohort of FiF learners drew upon 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 sought to understand how participants conceptualise of themselves as successful learners and what assisted in the enactment of this success. The questions guiding this research included: (1) What knowledges and skills did students reflect upon as assisting them in their transition to university? and (2) In what ways did existing social and cultural constructs translate into and interact with the university environment?

Theoretical Framework

Understanding of cultural capital is largely based upon Bourdieu's (1977, 1997) theorisation and generally defined as "proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices…" (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997, p. 573). Yosso and others have built upon Bourdieu's theory with the reproductive nature of his theorisation attracting some critical attention. Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieuian cultural capital theory narrowly defines "assets and characteristics" (p77) and instead argues that learners arrive at university with

various forms of capital and strengths that remain largely unacknowledged. However, we know little about how learners draw on "internal capabilities" (Nussbaum, 2011) when persisting in university; these capabilities are not innate but instead develop in interaction with an individuals' environment (social, cultural, familial and political). Exploring how internal capabilities and existing capitals assist HE persistence and the functionings that support these, contributes alternative perspectives to the issue of student retention. With the growth in diverse student populations, the need to understand the internal capabilities and the capitals that support academic persistence and success is needed, so that the freedom to access university is not a limited or bounded one.

Research Design and Methods

The study drew upon a narrative inquiry approach (McLeod & Thomson, 2009) in order to encourage students to deeply reflect upon their experiences in the higher education environment. Essentially, narrative inquiry enables educational research to perceive the different worlds that exist in educational settings and provide a means to engender university on a symbolic and lived level. The production and recognition of counter narratives highlights the constructed nature of accepted discourses and negotiates contested terrains of meaning rather than acceptance. There is no standard or generally accepted approach to conducting narrative analysis and the approach adopted is dependent on the focus of the study, essentially dictated by whether the focus is on narrative content or the structure and form of this discourse. In this research study, it is the evaluative nature of this occurrence, the meaning associated with these experiences that is explored.

Participants were recruited on the basis of being the first out of their immediate family, which included siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, to attend university. An initial study (Removed for Review, 2013) focused on first year commencing students who indicated on their enrollment forms that neither parent had attended university, a total of 25 students were interviewed of varying ages. Drawing on analysis from this initial study, a second study (Removed for Review, 2014-2016) sought to elaborate on themes related to the cultural wealth and capabilities of older participants, who were the first in their family to come to university. This latter study was conducted between 2014-2015 and a total of eighteen older students, with ages ranging from 25 – 62 years, agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. This interview material is further supported by responses to online surveys derived from family members (n=40) and FiF learners (n=101) (Removed for review, 2014).

Significance

The rich detailed data generated indicated how first-in-family students do not necessarily arrive at university bereft of the necessary capitals to enact success but rather that the capitals they described are not necessarily those traditionally celebrated within this environment. This presentation will explore the

particular use of what has been termed as "family capital" in the enactment of "success" [1]. This term (family capital) is being used to refer to the networks of social capital that exist both within the internal dynamics of the household and also, in relation to family structure. The impact of family on university participation varied across age groups and so the presentation will both explore this variance but also importantly, identify the ways this form of capital seemed to provide a form of "cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) amongst participants. Bourdieu refers to the fundamental role of social and cultural capital in the enactment of educational success but the interviews with students undertaken in this study point to the important role of family capital in this endeavour.

Notably, this study provides the basis for further understanding of how the self and existing capitals are drawn upon when first-in-family students transition into, and engage with, the higher education environment. Such insight can be used to improve the student experience for this cohort, perhaps relieving some of the "tensions" around perceived freedoms to access the HE sector. Application of this understanding to Australian university equity programs is currently underway (Removed for Review, 2016) underpinned by the recognition that the cultural wealth that students arrive with at university should be both appreciated and nurtured.

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1 The term 'success' is being used in a broad sense defined as what individuals themselves described as signifying a successful student self

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