Can we generate 'socially just knowledge' through international partnerships between universities?: a case- study based on a Chinese and European partnership.

Abstract

The theoretical framework described has been developed from case-study data that is helping us to interrogate whether the knowledge produced, by a project aiming to build the capacity of Chinese universities to support inclusive education in primary schools, can be considered 'socially just knowledge'. The capacity building project aims to generate knowledge to improve inclusive education in China but such projects have often involved the ineffective imposition of 'western knowledge' into inappropriate contexts. Our conceptualisation of socially just knowledge is emerging from an ongoing iterative process that brings our complex case-study data into dialogue with three theoretical perspectives: Nancy Frasers (2001, 2010) perspective on social justice; Basil Bernstein's (2000) notion of pedagogic rights; and, Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach. Our aim is to produce a framework that can be used by other researchers in the field who aim to co-produce appropriate knowledge across diverse economic, intellectual, social, cultural and political contexts.

Outline

In a rapidly changing higher education research environment, the nature of collaboration across disciplines, countries and into non-academic spaces is receiving growing interest. Many researchers have challenged the very notion of collaboration, particularly in international partnerships between high and lower income countries where there are significant power dimensions at play within the 'formal conditions of collaboration' (e.g. Pryor et al., 2009). Some scholars have highlighted that the nature of such partnerships can lead to epistemological dependency (Arowosegbe, 2016) driven by assumptions about where methodological and theoretical expertise sit within the team. There are many resonances here with feminist and critical race theorists who have challenged what knowledge is deemed most valuable and the processes by which knowledge is validated.

The authors of this paper are involved in a three-year ERASMUS+ partnership between four European and four Chinese universities. They are aiming to build the capacity of Chinese universities to support inclusive education in primary schools through the development of masters programmes relevant to the context. In recognition of the difficulty of developing and transferring appropriate knowledge between contexts, the authors are reflecting systematically on the nature of the knowledge being generated by undertaking a case study to interrogate whether 'socially just knowledge' that can effectively inform the masters is being produced.

The project has completed its first- year and the case-study work is on-going. To date, twelve qualitative semi-structured interviews have been undertaken with project team members from the universities involved at two critical stages in the project (after workshops in China had

been led by European Colleagues and during the development of joint papers by Chinese and European colleagues). These are considered to be critical as they are key mechanisms for understanding how knowledge might be co-created and for the development of that knowledge. In addition, field notes (regarding meetings and project activities) have been generated and analysed. Also, the outputs from scoping research which is exploring the current state of inclusive education (a survey of 6000 teachers and interviews and focus groups with teachers, representatives of local government and NGO's) and documents pertaining to and produced by the project (e.g. the bid, meeting notes, the documents guiding the 8 work-packages) are analysed and coded to explore the way in which knowledge is being created. Drawing on this data and our ongoing engagement with the project a conceptualisation of 'socially just knowledge' is being generated through an iterative process that brings our complex case-study data into dialogue with three theoretical perspectives: Nancy Frasers (2001, 2010) perspective on social justice; Basil Bernstein's (2000) notion of pedagogic rights; and, Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach.

Our analysis is complex particularly as it is ongoing *and* it is not designed just to illuminate what has happened but is intended to capture and change the processes so that we can generate more socially just knowledge. We are not aiming for a static analysis of what happened, instead this case-study research should interact with the main project to transform it and improve the creation of socially just knowledge. The three conceptual frameworks are chosen because between them they describe different aspects of what we believe is necessary to constitute socially just knowledge.

Fraser's framework highlights participation and how knowledge should be co-created between the academics from different the participating countries and universities who through the research process, practices and relationships are: a) recognised (in terms of status in relation to their knowledge and expertise) as valid participants; b) able to have their knowledge and expertise represented through the process of doing the research; and, c) able to recognise and represent any inequities through the project in such a way there can be a redistribution of recognition and the ability to be represented. An example of an issue that can be analysed using this lens pertains to the way the use of language in the project undermines some of the structures that aim to make the project more equitable. The EU have made concerted efforts to give ownership to the Chinese Partner Universities who are the grant owners and who will validate and run the masters courses at the end of the project. Hence there is some redistributive justice built into the project. However, the language of the project is English and this undermines the ability of Chinese partners to have their expertise recognised and to represent themselves adequately particularly as the European partners do not speak Mandarin. In the project we are constantly fighting these tensions and trying to redistribute this power, for example, by having additional interpreters and break out groups in different languages.

Bernstein's (2000) concepts are important for us in considering the efficacy of the knowledge produced. The concept of the pedagogic device allows us to dovetail with Fraser's ideas in thinking about how production rules (the first aspect of the pedagogic device) shape how the field of knowledge is constituted in international projects. However, Bernstein's pedagogic device then also allows us to think through how and what knowledge is recontextualised into the project (for example, included in the survey for teachers, or what becomes part of project workshops). Also, the evaluation rules which are the third aspect of the pedagogic device facilitate an analysis of how we judge whether the knowledge itself is socially just knowledge. Our idea of socially just knowledge is based on Bernstein's notion of pedagogic

rights. Knowledge that grants access to 'powerful knowledge' is not reproductive of pre-existing power structures, instead it opens up new possibilities that challenge and transform the current context. Knowledge that grants pedagogic rights: a) enhances individual academics knowledge about inclusive education (in the project this is broadly defined and pertains to the exclusion of children with different ethnic backgrounds, social classes, genders, abilities etc); b) generates knowledge that is suitable to the social context so that academics in the four Chinese universities can play a role in improving inclusive education in China (the masters course will grant them access to a social context however if the knowledge is not appropriate to the context it will be ineffective). An example, how this framework is helping us to think about socially just knowledge is in the way the project conference and the visit to two Chinese primary schools generated debates between the team about difficulty of recontextualising knowledge, for example, about inclusive education for ethnic groups into a context where there are separate schools for ethnic minorities and different conceptualisations of ideal relationships of ethnic minorities and majority groups.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach dovetails with recontextualisation as it encourages us to start with the people and the contexts in which knowledge around inclusive education needs to work for them. It also acts as a counterbalance to the notion that powerful knowledge can be universal. Hence, it encourages us to engage seriously with what would be useful to increase social justice according to the Chinese partners and the primary school teachers they will eventually be working with. In this respect it is important to consider the scoping exercise as informing us about need rather than as simply indicating deficits and strengths in relation to a European model of what inclusive education should look like. As the project has cast the Europeans as experts in this respect there is a tendency to use this lens for all project partners.

It is hoped that the framework developed can be used by other researchers in the field who aim to co-produce appropriate knowledge and face these challenges across diverse economic, intellectual, social, cultural and political contexts.

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