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Reconceptualising Equity through Pedagogical Methodologies

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Abstract:

Equity policy and practice mis/frames equity through deficit imaginaries, particularly when devoid of rich conceptual insights. This paper presents a collaborative re-search project framed by Pedagogical Methodologies (PMs) (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017; Burke and Lumb, 2018) aiming to reconceptualise equity through the insights emerging from critical, post/structural and feminist theories of social justice. The paper argues that hegemonic discourses and methodologies limit our pedagogical imaginations and constrain what is re/cognisable. Drawing on interviews, reflections and artefacts generated through participatory, praxis-based PMs in the context of equity programs and projects facilitated by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE), this paper examines and interrogates the values, assumptions and perspectives across contested spaces of equity research and practice. The paper seeks to contribute to creative ways of reframing equity work in and through higher education, drawing on the experiences and perspectives of diverse participants engaged in such processes.

Paper:

Equity in higher education (HE) might be understood as a set of (often contradictory) policies concerned with enabling access to and participation in HE. Although equity is a contested field of policy and practice, certain policy imperatives have dominated the agenda, shaped by neoliberal, marketized and corporatized values, perspectives and assumptions, amongst other intersecting political forces. Policy and practice, particularly when devoid of rich conceptual insights, often mis/frames equity through deficit imaginaries. Despite substantial levels of financial and human investment in the equity agenda nationally and locally, persistent patterns of underrepresentation raise urgent questions about the efficacy of current approaches to access, equity and widening participation in higher education. Increasingly, we are compelled to develop 'evidence-based' policy & practice, including to evaluate and measure the impact of equity practice in higher education. However, evidence-based frameworks have been extensively critiqued as embedded in an objectifying, paternalistic and/or colonising set of technologies that work to construct 'the

disadvantaged' in pathologising ways (Mirza, 2014) and that regulate and discipline our imaginations of who is seen as having the right to higher education (Burke, 2012). The focus on evidence-based methods, which only counts that which is observable or measurable, reproduces a narrow lens that is unable to re/cognise the complexity of inequalities that work at the insidious levels of the cultural, affective and symbolic dimensions of lived and embodied experiences.

This paper sets out 'Pedagogical Methodologies' (PMs); a unique, innovative praxis-based methodological framework (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017; Burke and Lumb, 2018). PMs create critical participatory and relational spaces to generate personal and institutional trans/formation for social justice. Engaging diverse participants in processes of collaborative sense- and meaning-making across formations of difference, PMs aim to open up critical 'timescapes' (Adam, 1998) bringing equity practice in conversation with the rich insights emerging from critical, post/structural and feminist theories of social justice (e.g. Lather, 1991, 2012; Fraser, 1997; Freire, 2009). PMs aim to reframe, *research, evaluation and practice as pedagogical spaces* in which diverse and heterogeneous *communities of praxis* (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017) generate meaning and trans/formation, drawing on explicit social justice concepts to interrogate and reimagine equity programs and projects. By reframing *re-search* and *e-valu-ation*, PMs aim to disrupt the violence of evidence-based measurement that inevitably undermines the time and care required to deepen pedagogical relationalities embedded in an ethos of critical hope (Burke and Lumb, 2018). Such reframing of equity timescapes and methods helps counter the colonizing, objectifying and dehumanizing discourses of evidence-based policy and practice that are influenced by hegemonic versions of what and who is seen to count. Rather, the focus is on shifting our temporal orientation to deep praxis – one that reveals the insidious ways that certain values seep into our pedagogical and methodological imaginations, leading us to believe there is no alternative, and reproducing hegemonic value judgements through methods assumed to be neutral and value free. Rather, PMs engage with the "world-making", constructive quality of research and practice (Usher, 1997), through shifting our dis/positionality towards reflexive, iterative, cycles of participatory meaning-making across difference.

In a neoliberal policy and practice paradigm, PMs can facilitate generative spaces for dialogue between diverse perspectives on the purpose of higher education structures. This produces the possibility of apprehending for interrogation the political, cultural, social and economic rationales guiding higher education institutions – a crucial responsibility in our current socio-political context. The history of higher education in western contexts reveals that the economic rationale is not new, yet in our contemporary 'post-truth' times we arguably face an increasingly heightened "risk that the dominance of the economic and financial rationales can develop hegemonically, weakening the cultural, political, and social rationales that remain important" (Carpentier, 2019, p.14). It is in this context, with neoliberal commitments to hyper-individualism emphasizing the interiority of responsibility and choice, that we require more than a surface-level means of counteraction (Bunn and Lumb, 2018). It is in this context, whereby students are increasingly lead to experience a sense of shame and guilt for things outside of their control (Bunn, Bennett, & Burke, 2018) that we require research and practice methodologies founded on an ethics of equity and social justice. It is in this context that Pedagogical Methodologies can help to foreground the teleology of higher education; to challenge epistemologies that limit or foreclose certain ways of *being* (Lumb and Burke, 2019) and to produce the possibility of imagining and pursuing alternatives that lie outside the dominant discursive frames.

This paper draws on in-depth interviews, critical conversations, reflections and artifacts generated by programs and projects framed by PMs within the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE), itself a unique *decentred centre* underpinned by an explicit social justice conceptual framework. Drawing on PMs, the re-search examines and interrogates the values, assumptions and perspectives across the contested spaces of equity research and practice. Re-search participants engage in dialogic communities of praxis to consider the impact of such approaches in relation to previous experiences of doing equity work, ways that PMs have (not) trans/formed their practices, their professional commitments, positionalities and identities and how engaging with PMs have re/framed understanding of equity work within higher education.

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