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Understanding the role of pedagogy in the reproduction of social inequalities during students' transition to Higher Education: a Bernsteinian analysis

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

This paper examines the role of pedagogy in the reproduction of social inequalities during students' transition to higher education (HE) and examines this in the context of student employability from the perspective of six first-year, undergraduate, working-class students, studying business at a research intensive university in the UK. The study draws on Bernstein's theory of pedagogic practice to explore how issues of power and control within the classroom can impact students' learning experiences. Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, and horizontal and hierarchical knowledge structures were used as tools for analysis to identify the classed nature of pedagogic practices and to examine how these may act as a barrier to student learning. The study shows how pedagogic practices can be barriers to student learning by re-enforcing rather than recognising differences that students from marginalised backgrounds might feel on entering HE.

Full paper

Introduction

This paper examines the role of pedagogy in the reproduction of social inequalities during students' transition to higher education (HE) and examines this in the context of student employability from the perspective of six first-year, undergraduate, working-class students, studying business at a research intensive university in the UK. The study draws on Bernstein's theory of pedagogic practice (Bernstein, 2000) to explore how issues of power and control within the classroom can impact students' learning experiences.

HE has undergone a period of significant expansion over the last 50 years with many developed countries transitioning from elite to mass systems of education. Government policy has been a key enabler to this expansion and this reflects the importance that countries have placed on building a knowledge based economy for competitive advantage (Becker, 1993), and also the role of HE in addressing issues of social inequality through enabling social mobility (Archer, 2007). This expansion and the associated results have largely been targeted and measured through student participation rates and the narrative is one of success (Coulson et al., 2017). However, this narrative masks the way in which students from different backgrounds experience HE and there is a now an extensive body of literature that shows that students from traditionally under-represented groups do not benefit from HE to the same extent as their more established middle-class counterparts (Reay, 2021; Coulson et al., 2017).

One such group of underrepresented students are those from working-class backgrounds. Studies show how working-class students find HE to be a much more difficult environment to thrive and feel comfortable in when compared to their middle-class peers and highlight the uncertainty and unpredictability of working-class student transitions to HE.

Much of the research to date in this area largely draws on the work of Bourdieu (Webb et al., 2017) and there is a broad and understood literature of the reasons for these differences. What is less well understood is how these inequalities can be eradicated (Reay, 2018)

and there are growing calls for practice-based research in this area.

Theoretical approach/methodology

The study draws of Bernstein's theory of pedagogic practice (Bernstein, 2000). Where Bernstein's work differs from that of other social theorists and why it is of relevance to this study, is that his theory of pedagogic practice provides a way of modelling practice at a level of detail which enable potential opportunities for change or transformation to be identified (Moore, 2013).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used as a methodology for the study. Data was collected in semi-structured interviews with students and observations of lectures. . Students were interviewed three times across their first year to capture their changing perceptions of the sessions as they transitioned to HE. Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, and horizontal and hierarchical knowledge structures were used as tools for analysis to identify the classed nature of pedagogic practices and to examine how these may act as a barrier to student learning.

Results

The findings of the study identify two important areas of discussion. Firstly, how pedagogic practices during students' transition to HE can restrict students' ability to affirm their position and sense of fit within HE by re-enforcing their feelings of being different to their peers on entering HE, and how opportunities to constructively acknowledge these differences in the classroom are restricted. The findings show how issues were particularly acute when lecture style approaches are used.

Secondly, how pedagogic practices might restrict students in making the more specific transition of being ready to acquire knowledge relating to graduate labour markets and the development their employability. The findings highlight a tension between findings in the literature which advocate the importance of equipping students early with the necessary skills to navigate the graduate labour markets (Bennett, 2019) and the contextual nature of graduate

employability which the students needed time to acquire. The analysis of the student interviews illuminates how from the students' perspective employability is context dependent, and highlights the importance of pedagogic practices which support students in gaining this context this has implications for the timing of when and how employability is reflected within the curriculum.

Conclusion

The study shows how pedagogic practices can be barriers to student learning by re-enforcing rather than recognising differences that students from marginalised backgrounds might feel on entering HE. It draws attention to the contextual nature of employability and the importance of time to acquire this context and highlights the benefits of teaching approaches that bring opportunities into the classroom for students to recognise themselves within HE.

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