

Resisting objectification: stories of subjectification in a Singapore university

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Is there still room for undergraduate students to exist unencumbered by the dominant educational discourse of learning as the production of human capital, prioritising qualification and socialisation? What about subjectification, i.e., developing students' unique subjectivities and ways of being, independent from societal orders (Biesta, 2009)? The worry is, without subjectification, education becomes an instrument of adaptation rather than emancipation (Biesta, 2024). Despite well-developed theorisations of subjectification, empirical investigations are scarce, and interpretations vary. Drawing from a study conducted for the author's master's dissertation on pedagogic conditions that foster subjectification in the context of a Singapore university, six principles are proposed, then used to analyse narratives constructed from eight unstructured interviews with students. Findings suggest that even in a context where instrumentalism is entrenched due to the tight economy-education link (Gopinathan, 2015), students nonetheless seek out and are attuned to pedagogical gestures that offer opportunities to resist objectification and pursue self-discovery.

Full paper

Introduction

Subjectification, according to Biesta (2009), is one of three educational purposes, alongside qualification and socialisation. While qualification highlights the acquisition of competencies to perform specific functions, and socialisation concerns enculturating individuals into societal orders, subjectification is distinctive in encouraging "ways of being that hint at independence from such orders" (p.40). Worryingly, subjectification has increasingly disappeared from the educational agenda (Biesta, 2010a). In Singapore's context, given the tight economy-education nexus within a state-led developmental model since independence (Gopinathan, 2015), subjectification has not been as emphasised as qualification and socialisation. Despite recent emphasis on developing critical and creative

thinking, this seemed motivated by the imperative to economically reinvent Singapore (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011). Consequently, these skills are recontextualised as instrumentalist skillsets lacking emancipatory features (Deng, 2001; Lim, 2013). Responding to Biesta's (2024) call to resist education turning into training, this study explores how experiences of subjectification can still emerge in contexts that may not always be conducive to their development.

Literature Review

First, a theoretical scoping review was conducted to clarify subjectification's "working definitions and conceptual boundaries" through mapping key concepts (Peters et al., 2015, p.141). Next, an empirical scoping review identified gaps to guide the study's inquiry (Levac et al., 2010). From 107 articles identified, six principles were synthesised: 1) constant equalising – students and teachers interact as equal intelligences, 2) non-egological responsabilising – alerting students to their responsibility and freedom to be a subject and encounter the world without trying to control it, 3) qualified reconciling – encouraging students to reconcile their qualified freedom with the world, 4) transgressive pluralising – generating multiple understandings to illuminate the limitations of current truths, 5) interruptive reconfiguring – destabilising the naturalness of a given order and repositioning it as a contextualised practice, and 6) ignorant disidentifying – constantly interrogating existing ways of thinking, acting and being (Biesta, 2010b, 2012, 2017, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021). Of 23 empirical studies found, six investigated students' experiences of subjectification, with only one in a tertiary context (James, 2014). Besides the dearth of empirical studies, specific student-teacher interactions are not examined, and varying interpretations of subjectification make it difficult to identify instances of subjectification. Current studies also do not employ narrative methods to access participants' meaning frames and relatively short semi-structured group interviews may not generate sufficiently rich data.

Methodology

With student-teacher interactions as the "arena" to study (Lather, 1986), the interpretivist theoretical perspective was adopted to explore how students make sense of their interactions with teachers (Hammersley, 2013; Moon and Blackman, 2014). The narrative inquiry approach was used to access the complex meanings participants attribute to interactions (Creswell, 2007). Eight interviewees – full-time undergraduate students from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) across different years of study and disciplines – were selected to provide varied and in-depth stories. Unstructured interviews were conducted to refrain from imposing an a priori categorisation on participants' sharing through pre-determined questions (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). Taking the 'story analyst' standpoint (Smith, 2016), a pluralistic approach was used, i.e., mixing analytical methods to capture the multidimensionality of narratives (Frost, 2009; Nasheeda et al., 2019). Effort was taken to resist over-coding themes to maintain the story's gestalt and decide on the most significant narrative (Robert and Shenhav, 2014; Smith, 2016).

Findings

Findings indicate that subjectification occur in myriad ways, influenced by individuals' unique backgrounds. Some stories were underpinned by a "quest" narrative, defined by the agentic pursuit to gain something from experiences (Frank, 1995, as cited in Sparkes & Smith, 2003). Ironically, this seemed motivated by the impulse to differentiate themselves from their peers, reflecting an enmeshment in the neoliberal imperative to outcompete. Others articulated "release" narratives, characterised by experiences of being momentarily liberated from the imprisonment of societal norms, when pedagogic interactions took a non-instrumentalist turn. One participant's experience of subjectification unfolded slowly, prompted by an exchange trip which led to critical examination of his context.

Notably, all participants were keenly aware of the injurious aspects of an overly instrumentalist education system and sought to overcome or escape from it in their various ways. This attunes students to subtle pedagogical gestures of caring attentiveness that offer opportunities for subjectification. Nonetheless, of the six principles, interruptive reconfiguring and ignorant disidentifying prove difficult to engender, perhaps due to the strong pull of community and societal expectations. For subjectification to be fully realised, it requires individuals to commit to an ongoing struggle, and resist the temptation and pressure to turn back and live in "bad faith" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022), i.e., to act as if one is not free.