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Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs
Интеграция на деца
със специални образователни потребности

CHALLENGING THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL DEFICIT, THROUGH A FRAMEWORK OF CRITICAL-BASED EDUCATION

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Abstract. Marginalised, disadvantaged students find the habitus of western, higher education institutions most unwelcoming. Central to the difficulties, which they experience, is the deficit-based compensatory model of widening participation applied to non-traditional learners. This model is reflected in the “culture of poverty” hypothesis favoured by neo-liberal institutions as the means of “fixing” the problems experienced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Culture of poverty suggests people from lower socio-economic backgrounds share a series of universally consistent values and behaviours and places responsibility for the difficulties, experiences by these individuals, with the individuals themselves and their communities rather than any systemic failings.

Dealing with the problems experienced by those on the margins of society requires removing the deficit paradigm and replacing it with an asset-based structure, grounded in critical learning practices.

Keywords: deficit, marginalised learners, cultural capital, critical learning

There is a strong body of research which suggests that the white, western, middle-class ethos, which predominates western higher education institutions, provides a most unwelcoming habitus for disadvantaged, marginalised students (Sheeran, et al., 2007). Instrumental in supporting this ethos is the compensatory paradigm within which non-traditional education is situated and the resulting denigration of non-traditional students’ culture. Expansion in Higher Education has led many critics to suggest that an almost indiscriminate rise in student numbers has led to a lowering of standards among entrants. This opinion has placed the problem, which many institutions experience with student participation, firmly at the feet of the students and their abilities, rather than with institutional structures (Thomas, 2002). This attitude reinforces the deficit model of widening participation, too frequently applied to non-traditional learners. The term deficit, in this instance, refers to “capital deficit” as defined by the “capital” theories of Pierre Bourdieu.

The socio-cultural theories of Pierre Bourdieu, relating to education, are based on perceptions of cultural and symbolic stratification, supported by intergenerational strategies, which lead to persisting educational inequalities. The primary elements underpinning Bourdieu's theories are the concepts of economic, social and cultural capital and the three further concepts of habitus, field and practice.

Economic, social and cultural capital, in Bourdieu's view are interrelated and interdependent. Bourdieu describes how economic capital; capital which is material in nature, can be transubstantiated into the immaterial forms of social and cultural capital and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social capital can be described as the accumulation of resources possessed by a sustainable, defined group. These resources, while collectively accrued and owned, benefit individual members in the form of credential, which can be either material and/or symbolic. Reproduction of social capital necessitates continuous dialogue and exchanges in order that the legitimacies of the group can be perpetually affirmed and reaffirmed.

Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, is centred on familiarity with the dominant culture and includes such elements as an ability to communicate; possess the language of the dominant culture. These linguistic and cultural competencies can only be possessed by individuals, whose ontogenetic development includes a familial structure that transmits the competencies of the dominant culture.

The possession of cultural capital varies according to social class. In Bourdieu's view cultural capital is better inculcated in higher class homes, a factor which enables higher class individuals preserve their social position and legitimise their dominant position. Bourdieu further claims that educational institutions, presuppose the possession of cultural capital, among lower class students who, frequently lacking the necessary linguistic and cultural competencies, are unable to properly engage with the educational system. This means that educational credentials hold the key to legitimising and reproducing social inequalities (Sullivan, 2002).

While cultural capital is generally seen as the possession of legitimate knowledge, the dispositions, made up of values, attitudes and tacit beliefs, are what Bourdieu refers to in his concept of Habitus. "Habitus is an acquired system of schemes that allow for everyday instances of perception, categorization and the production of action and most importantly for the mundane judgements (e.g. judgements of moral propriety or impropriety, of likelihood or unlikelihood, of certainty or uncertainty, or judgements of taste such as likes and dislikes)" (Lizardo, 2012).

Habitus is therefore the set of dispositions by which one navigates the world that they inhabit. Of course there are many facets to one's world of existence, many spheres of operation, home, work, social, political, religious and educational. These various spheres of activity are what Bourdieu refers to as fields and many of them have their own regulative principles. How one utilises their cultural capital – their behavioural repertoire- within a given field is what Bourdieu defines as practice (Edgerton, et al., 2013). Capital deficit

is a perceived lack of the economic, social and cultural capital that would allow an individual or group to engage with the habitus of the dominant culture. This deficit model does not necessarily reflect a lack of cultural assets possessed by marginalised groups but rather a lack of recognition and legitimisation of those assets by the dominant culture. Through lack of recognition and legitimisation, social, cultural and economic opportunities are monopolised by interest groups, to the exclusion of others, under an operational framework, defined by Max Weber and expanded by Frank Parkin, known as social closure. Under the terms of this framework “any convenient and visible characteristic, such as race, language, social origin, religion or lack of a particular school diploma or credential, can be used to declare competitors as outsiders” (Murphy, 1983). Social closure applies a pathological lens to, not only individual deficiencies, limitations and shortcomings, but to difference. As a means of perpetuating the social status quo, social closure pathologises individuals or behaviours which are “not White, not middle class or affluent and not without disability” (Pitzer, 2013). Here lies the difficulty for disenfranchised, marginalised individuals trying to gain recognition within the hegemonic structures of the higher educational system. The capital possessed by such individuals fails to be deemed valid, not because it is necessarily deficient, but because it is different. This failure to grant validity and its resultant symbolic capital, secures the hierarchically superior position of the dominant culture. The imposition of categories of thought and perception and the incorporation of unconscious structures to perpetuate the position of the dominant culture is what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence (Nicolaescu, 2010).

One extremely effective means of perpetuating this symbolic violence is through the conceptual promotion of outsider cultures, which “others” disposed individuals based on stereotypical groupings. An example of this “othering” was the “culture of poverty” hypothesis, introduced in the early 1960s in the United States by the prominent social scientist Oscar Lewis and more recently promoted in the work of Ruby Payne, the self-proclaimed leading U.S. authority on poverty and CEO of a multi-million dollar corporation that purports to train individuals to combat the impact of poverty on learning (Valencia, 2010). In his hypothesis Lewis argued that people from lower socio economic backgrounds shared a series of universally consistent values and behaviours.

Lewis’ hypothesis, which was based on a socio-anthropological study, primarily centred on impoverished families in Puerto Rico, Mexico and Cuba and also Puerto Rican families living in New York City, identified seventy traits which he claimed characterised the Culture of Poverty. He organised these traits into four main dimensions:

- **Relationships between Culture of Poverty and the larger society:** this he characterised with disengagement and hostility to the basic institutions of the dominant social structure, hatred of the police, mistrust of government and a cynicism towards the church.

– **The nature of the “Slum Community”:** Lewis indicated that this was typified by a minimum of organisation beyond the nuclear family (Lewis went so far as to say that most primitive peoples had achieved a higher degree of sociostructural organisation than the contemporary urban slum dweller), this leads to the forming of temporary informal groupings resulting in neighbourhood gang culture.

– **The nature of the family:** Lewis portrays the family as one which does not cherish childhood as a prolonged and protected stage of the life-cycle, one where sexual initiation begins early, where marriages are unstable, often resulting in matriarchal dominance, sibling rivalry for goods and affection and little individual privacy.

– **The attitudes, values and character structure of the individual:** The resultant individual has strong tendencies towards fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority (Lewis, 1966).

Lewis’ hypothesis places the responsibility for difficulties experienced by poverty stricken communities and individuals, not with the system that created the conditions of poverty, but rather with the way in which the communities and individuals themselves responded to the conditions of their predicament. Lewis’ culture of poverty was used, firstly by the Regan administration in the USA, and subsequently by consecutive neo-liberal administrations, worldwide, as a pathological lens for viewing the troubles experienced by impoverished communities and for developing the policies to deal with them.

In education, culture of poverty-based policies characterise economically dispossessed people as coming from familial backgrounds deficient in care and normalised home lives. It suggests that parents don’t care about education, parents and children are lazy, have poor work ethics and possess weak language skills, because of their language deficient homes. Within the educational framework culture of poverty “otherises” learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds and deflects the responsibility from systemic failure to the learner’s community and family inherited behaviours (Gorski, 2010). The resultant educational policies centre on “fixing” cultural deficiencies. The consequence of this form of thinking is to locate the deficiency within the learner and see their diversity of experiences as something to be changed and modified, to conform to the dominant socially accepted norms. In the Freirean sense learners, disenfranchised through the process of social closure, are required to be adaptive in order to gain participatory rights within the educational system. Paulo Freire educationalist and advocate of critical pedagogy defined a clear delineation between the processes of integration and the process of adaption. Integration according to Freire is defined as a distinctly human activity, which places the person as subject. “Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus that critical capacity to make choices and transform that reality” (Freire, 2013). Adaption, on the other hand, places the person as object. Adaption, according to Freire is “a weak form of self-defence. If a man is incapable

of changing reality, he adjusts himself instead. Adaption is behaviour characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanisation” (Freire, 2013).

Through an enforced adaptive process the marginalised learner is separated from their background culture and experience and are placed in an environment where, “diversity of experience is seen as an obstacle to overcome rather than a resource to embrace” (Pitzer, 2013). The separation of the learner’s background knowledge, experience and also language from the curriculum means that these assets are unavailable to the learner as support mechanisms. Furthermore the exclusion of these assets means that the knowledge, experiences and language of the enfranchised learners, unchallenged, become viewed as normative and correct. (Dudley-Marling, 2007). To address these negative forces and begin a process of empowering marginalised learners it is necessary to recognise and credentialise the capital, which they possess. This involves shifting from a deficit to an asset-based paradigm, which recognises a broader range of attributes constituting social and cultural capital.

A working model for this asset-based paradigm can be found in the framework known as the “community cultural wealth” model that evolved as part of the “critical race theory” of the 1980s, which aimed to examine and challenge the subjects of race and racism, in relation to social structures. The concept of community cultural wealth aims to recognise a wide array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts, possessed and utilised by individuals and communities navigating through oppressive environments (Yosso, 2005). Tara. J. Yosso, associate professor at the University of California, whose research applies critical race theory to educational access and equity, divides this array into six primary categories of capital.

1. Aspirational capital describes the ability to retain hopes and dreams in the face of adversity and inequity, even when existing circumstances make it difficult to see how positive progression might be achieved. This resilience is often evidenced in how individuals aim to raise their occupational status above that of their parents and how parents in turn try to assist their children to surpass their own academic and occupational attainments (Yosso, 2005).

2. Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills acquired through use of more than one language or varying styles of language and is often to be found in the children of immigrants. In some instances this can refer to individuals or communities with a strong oral traditions which may develop such qualities as “memorisation, attention to detail, dramatic pause, comedic timing, facial effect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme” (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital can also describe communicative ability through art or music.

3. Familial capital is “cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital can take the form of encouragement and support but also it can be

the fostering of ambition and determination through the telling of stories which relate to historical familial struggles, which inculcate a desire for social mobility.

4. Social capital applies to networks of individuals and community resources. These networks can often be essential instrumental and emotional support mechanisms for individuals trying to navigate through bureaucratic institutions. These could take the form of community or peer support with applications, financial concerns, legal issues, employment, education or health issues (Yosso, 2005).

5. Navigational capital refers to the skills acquired by an individual as a result of navigating through socially hostile environments. It is this capital that develops a sense of resilience as it involves drawing from an individual's pool of inner resources to survive, recover and sometimes thrive in the face of adversity. Through the process of networking individual navigational capital can facilitate community navigation (Yosso, 2005).

6. Resistance capital can be described as the knowledge and skills developed through the actions of opposing and challenging oppression and inequality. When this capital is informed by a critical understanding of the underlying structures that lead to oppression then it can challenge an individual's perception of their own identity leading to the motivation to transform the sources of their oppression (Yosso, 2005).

Current neo-liberal educational policies, aimed at retaining authority over the purpose of education and what counts as knowledge, are a major factor in the failure to grant recognition to these forms of capital. Neo-liberal policy makers are uncomfortable with any forms of education that promote knowledge capable of applying critical analysis to the underlying structures of their policies. Shifting from a deficit to an asset-based paradigm, which recognises diversity of experience, requires a form of critical-based education capable of applying such analysis.

Current neo-liberal education policies are designed to meet the needs of the ever changing labour market. It serves to sort individuals into different roles, occupations and towards different apportionments of the society's needs (Sheeran, et al., 2007). Flexibility and provision for widening access, coupled with a strong emphasis on generic skills, indicative of these policies, are clearly aimed at preparing the workforce for any future directional changes, prompted by market demands. This open educational model which appears, on one hand, to be offering opportunity and inclusiveness and equates to what Freire refers to as the "false generosity of paternalism" (Freire, 2000, p. 54) produce "continuously reinvented selves, flexible economic subjects and governed souls (Gewirtz, 2008). To achieve their goal of producing a compliant and flexible workforce neo-liberal policymakers use an educational system governed by managerialist principles and driven by a culture of auditing practices dominated by prescriptive outcomes, which are stripped of critical discourse.

Critical-based education, on the other hand, explores the wider benefits of education, promotes citizenship, democracy and mutual recognition. Where mutual

recognition takes place, the dynamic, democratic, environment, which it creates, produces a location conducive to democratic will formation and communicative action. According to Jack Mezirow, sociologist and founder of the theory of transformative learning, democratic participation produces citizens that are more tolerant of difference, more sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgement and more prone to examine their own preferences—all qualities conducive to the success of democracy as a way of making decisions (Mezirow, 2003). The pedagogical structure that supports this critical education, places individuals in their social context and encompasses their cultural, political and economic realities (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). Critical pedagogy problematizes cultural, social and economic structures with a view to overcoming their oppressive influences. It offers marginalised learners an opportunity to examine the hegemonic systems that underlie their exclusion and perpetuate the conditions of social closure. Through this critical process marginalised learners can reassess the structure of assumptions, explore shared interpretations, reach consensus and act cooperatively. Beyond the educational institution these intersubjective processes can be used to instigate social, cultural and economic reform (Widdersheim, 2013).

Critical learning exposes the prejudices underlying the concept of cultural deficit. Once the deficit lens has been removed it allows individuals to identify their own cultural wealth and empowers learners to utilise assets intrinsic to their own communities (Yosso, 2005). Recognition of the, habitually excluded, intrinsic assets of marginalised individuals and communities serves to expand the definition of legitimate experience and challenges the normative assumptions of what constitutes knowledge. The knowledge and experiences of marginalised learners, viewed as assets, allows the learners to positively contribute to the institutional structures, inform a change process and force institutions to review their process of knowledge production and transfer and their internal structures of powers and decision making. Through this process, learners and educators become what Freire described as, “permanent re-creators” of their own knowledge and reality aimed at producing a more just society” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Removing deficit paradigm and its resultant compensatory educational models and replacing it with an asset-based structure, grounded in critical learning practices, affords marginalised learners the opportunity to engage in actions which challenge the underlying conditions of their marginalisation. Looked at from the Freirean perspective, defeating deficit thinking, as exemplified in theories, such as culture of poverty, removes marginalised learners from the dehumanising location of adaption to a position conducive to integration. Critical learning, committed to social transformation, refocuses the discourse on marginalisation, inclusion and widening participation.

“The challenge presented by widening participation in higher education ... is not in our view about ‘helping’ the socially excluded; or squeezing more non-traditional students into increasingly overcrowded lecture theatres ... rather it is about developing a sustained critique of current rhetoric, developing a distinctive social theory of knowledge derived from a politically committed analysis and theory of power which leads to a form of pedagogy that is concerned to democratize knowledge and learning, in ways that redefine the very parameters of what counts as higher education” (Thompson, 2000)

True transformation only takes place when those who are marginalised are central to the transformation. In “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” Paulo Freire describes it as “a pedagogy forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (Freire, 2000).

Conclusion

The deficit- based model of widening participation, applied to non-traditional learners, serves as a structure which reproduces marginalisation. This model places the responsibility for marginalisation with individuals and their communities, rather than with the systemic social structures that created the conditions of marginalisation, in the first instance. The subsequent deficit culture serves to categorise learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds and “otherise” them from the dominant culture, based on their perceived capital deficiencies, by refusing to credentialise the capital inherent in the experiential diversity of marginalised communities. Through an enforced adaptive process, marginalised learners are separated from their background culture and placed in an environment where their diverse experiences are seen as obstacles to overcome, rather than assets to be embraced.

To shift from a deficit to an asset-based paradigm, which recognises diversity of experience requires a critical-based form of education, which promotes the wider benefits of education, such as citizenship, democracy and mutual recognition

Critical learning exposes the underlying prejudices, responsible for deficit thinking and empowers learners to utilise capital, intrinsic to their own communities. This empowerment, in turn, affords marginalised learners the opportunity to engage in actions which challenge the systemic causes of their predicament. This places the learner in a central role, to set in motion, a process of true transformation.

NOTES

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