

Widening participation and the pedagogic action of schooling: A double bind for socioeconomically disadvantaged learners

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While equity has long been a focus of the Australian higher education sector, attention has more recently turned towards widening participation (WP) to historically underrepresented groups. A key focus of this agenda is socioeconomically disadvantaged learners, with a flurry of initiatives designed to improve university access, particularly among school leavers. Research has consistently shown that aspiration for higher education is not the issue policy has claimed and yet, the focus of many equity initiatives remains rectifying a lack of desire for, and knowledge about, university. This paper takes a different stance, drawing on interview data from teachers ($n = 12$) working at one government school in a relatively disadvantaged area of NSW, Australia, to examine the role of schooling in supporting the aims of WP. Framed through a Bourdieusian lens, I use the concept of ‘pedagogic action’ to illuminate how the work of schooling guides students’ post-school futures. ‘Pedagogic action’ is taken here to mean the imposition of a cultural arbitrary through formal education, by which young people are socialised into understanding their place in the world. Adopting a case study approach, I explore how teachers speak about core institutional practices that relate to young people’s post-school futures, which includes a timetable structured around vocational education, the dominance of ‘work studies’ and ‘work readiness’ in the curriculum, and the identification of students with ‘potential’ for university outreach. I demonstrate that there are paradoxical tensions between WP and the pedagogic action of schooling that ultimately place students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in a double bind, caught between two irreconcilable demands: to be ‘aspirational’ and to accept their place. I therefore argue that access to university for socioeconomically disadvantaged learners will remain low without more attention to the entire education system, including schooling practices that counteract the very aims of the WP agenda. Without it, many ‘equity initiatives’ are destined to be superficial and limited in their impact.