Ambassador or Observer? Competing identities of the academic researcher in studies of higher education participation

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Education Policy Research: design and practice at a time of rapid reform

Citing this paper
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Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on the delicate process of eliciting data from young people as they consider their post-compulsory educational options in the increasingly marketized context of English higher education. At a national level, debates about how universities should be funded are high profile, with some arguing that 'cost-sharing' measures are necessary to maintain institutional competitiveness following unprecedented sector expansion (Browne 2010; BIS 2011), and others noting that fees for students at English universities, even if deferred and collected through a more progressive repayment mechanism, remain among the highest in the world (OECD 2012; McGettigan 2013). This chapter focuses on how such tensions play out at a local level, particularly among students in lower-performing urban schools. The response of such young people has important ramifications for public policy in general, and the UK’s widening participation agenda in particular. It is vital to monitor the extent to which the 2012 fees increase (and the associated changes to non-repayable financial aid packages and loan settlement mechanisms) are understood, to the assess levels of debt aversion/tolerance among those directly affected, and to consider the broader implications for social mobility (Milburn 2012).
Research findings are presented elsewhere (Jones, forthcoming); what this chapter considers is the part of the researcher in drawing out the views of young people when potentially life-changing educational decisions are being considered. The first section deals with the dual role of the academic researcher: on the one hand, an ambassador of the higher education sector and a ‘champion’ of participation; on the other hand, a disinterested and detached scholarly investigator. The second section deals with the process and practicalities of using theoretical social science tools as a means to interpret and conceptualise frontline educational research.

Overview of Research Undertaken

The research discussed in this chapter involved a series of interaction with classes of high academic achievers across several low participation, urban schools in the same city. According to the Office for National Statistics Atlas of Deprivation (2010), the city falls under one of the five most deprived local authorities in England, and each school’s most recent Ofsted reports noted a disproportionately high number of pupils with Free School Meals eligibility. All schools are located in areas with an above-average proportion of residents with no qualifications and, according to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, all are in the top 30% of deprived Local Super Output Areas in England. Access was granted to Year 10 and 11 students who, based on attainment scores and rankings within the year group, fall in the top 40% of achievers nationally and could therefore be considered suitable for progression to higher education. Contact with the young people took the form of a one-hour class. I led the sessions and class teachers were present at all times.

Researching with Multiple Roles

Evidence about how young people from less advantaged backgrounds respond to the prospect of higher educational debt remains inconclusive. Maringe, Foskett and Roberts found that, as long as the repayment schedule is sufficiently generous, debt did ‘not seem a big deal’ (2009, 156) to the young people they surveyed. For Callender and Jackson (2005), however, aversion is very much a socioeconomic issue, even once class-related predispositions toward higher education were controlled for. Application and entry figures are inconclusive: Boliver (2013) reports that the 2004 fee rise did not disproportionately reduce applications from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and initial evidence suggests that the 2012 hike resulted only in a short-term overall fall (UCAS 2012). However, a lack of labour market alternatives may distort the picture for less advantaged applicants, and several studies have indicated that financial costs are a key consideration (and potential deterrent) for would-be applicants (Paulsen and St John, 2002;
A possible explanation for the range of (sometimes contradictory) findings reported in this area is the particular difficulty faced by the academic researcher in eliciting relevant data. The process is incestuous because one cannot avoid being seen as a representative of the research topic being investigated: the university. This inevitably affects the validity of the data. It also creates a dilemma for the academic researcher – how to obtain meaningful data without compromising an implicit professional responsibility to promote decisions about higher education that are in the best interests of those whose views are being elicited.

The role of Widening Participation (WP) activity is well established in most English universities. Government rhetoric, accompanied by funding incentives, have ensured that WP is a key performance indicator, and undergraduate demographics for top universities receive broad media attention, with participation rates judged against a range of ‘disadvantage’ variables, from post-code data to school performance. A wide body of literature has emerged to evaluate the extent to which fairness is achieved (Ogg, Zimdars and Heath 2009; Boliver 2011, 2013) and parliamentary debates on the topic are common (e.g. Hansard 2011).

For many academics, therefore, WP activity is a part of the job, whether through visits to local schools, open days for under-represented groups or one-to-one sessions with individual students as part of an access programme. The goal is to sell the idea of higher education participation to those who may be under-informed about what university involves, or culturally disinclined towards entry because of non-pecuniary ‘dislocation’ fears (Reay, David and Ball, 2005) and the amount of ‘identity work’ required to fit in (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010, 120).

Tuition fees muddy the waters of WP. Since 2004, when fees increased from £1,000 to £3,000 per year, higher education participation has become a financial gamble for disadvantaged groups as well as a cultural gamble. In the £9,000 era, WP activity is no longer able to focus exclusively on the benefits of attending university; it must also explain the economic implications: how much debt will be accrued; how much non-repayable financial help will be available; how much graduates can expect to earn in the job market. Cheerleaders for participation have become financial advisors.

Against this backdrop, using young people for research purposes becomes even more problematic for the academic researcher. How does one elicit views about participation without influencing responses by one’s very
presence? To what extent, morally, can the WP agenda be simply put aside in order to uncover extant truths and dispositions? Or, to exemplify this dilemma in practice, should the researcher correct young people’s misunderstandings and provide answers to their questions, or remain silent because their role is to observe, not interfere.

Complicating any data gathering process are teachers who, keen to impress on students the important of their guest speaker, inadvertently make the academic researcher’s job more difficult. For example, when a short questionnaire was distributed to classes of about 30 students, results may have been distorted by one class teacher urging students to ‘try very hard to answer the questions.’ Or by another who introduced the questionnaire with: ‘and let’s remember to give a good impression of the school to our important visitor’. These well-meaning directives seemed to be reflected in the questionnaires returned, with students in those groups responding very differently to some questions. For example, in one class, only two students ‘admitted’ to not knowing anyone had been to university. In same-school groups that were not prompted to give a ‘good impression’ by their teacher, the distribution was markedly different, with the proportion being about 50%. One teacher even distributed her own reformulated version of the pre-sent questionnaire so that ‘better’ answers would be received. Naturally, responses had to be discounted in any quantitative analysis.

Throughout the sessions, attempts were made to keep the data collection elements of the exercise separate from the WP elements. The goal was firstly to assess students’ understanding of and attitude towards higher education, and secondly – quite separately - to deliver a more traditional WP talk, explaining the likely benefits of participation and the financial support available. In practice, this proved impossible. Students began raising their hands from the outset, usually to ask pointed and intelligent questions, and all plans for a neatly bifurcated encounter disappeared.

What emerged in the place of quantitative data, however, was arguably something richer. Students’ discussions with each other, and sometimes with their class teacher, proved highly instructive in revealing underlying predispositions towards university. As a researcher, I began to facilitate rather than orchestrate, intervening only to arbitrate on a specific factual dispute (‘no, the new fee levels will be nine thousand per year, not nine thousand in total’) or to assess broader levels of understanding (‘okay, so Mrs Hanif has just mentioned a bursary – hands up who knows what a bursary is’). In most cases, students were able to resolve issues amongst themselves, without my intervention. For example, a question was asked in one class about whether Muslim students were allowed to pay interest on a debt. This triggered a
series of responses from around the classroom, including reassurances that such loans were considered acceptable in the absence of alternatives.

At other times, however, the very presence of an academic researcher appeared to contaminate the data. For example, it was noticeable that many students apologised before making negative comments about university (‘sorry, but it’s just not somewhere I want to go’). Those who had already decided against participation were particularly unforthcoming, especially when their teacher was in earshot, often responding with little more than a shrug when asked to say a little more about the decision they had made. However, such reticence was informative in itself, revealing much about those students’ internal negotiation between perceived educational and societal expectations and more localised life-course narratives.

Strategies are available to counterbalance the risk of data contamination, of course. For example, it may be the case that ‘insider’ research would improve the validity of findings (though it is difficult to imagine how any adult could canvas views about higher education participation from young people without being seen as a role model or representative of a particular pathway). Or it may be that the researcher needs to be flexible, and adapt to the flow of the class discussion, choosing her or his moments to intervene carefully and giving students the space to express and renegotiate their ideas. In my experience, such ‘researcher invisibility’ yielded the most favourable results.

A more substantial risk is that the WP aims of the higher education sector, and society at large, could be bruised by a data gathering procedure that encourages young people to speak openly about their feelings towards participation and therefore, potentially, to communicate negative messages. On occasions, some students did indeed express unconstructive views about university, whether in relation to the costs involved (‘I don’t get it - how can it ever be worth that much?’) or their personal anxieties about fitting in (‘it’s not me though, is it?’). However, by allowing young people to speak freely, it was interesting to note how discourses evolved and student continually positioned and repositioned themselves in response to new information. Upon learning that fees would be £9,000 per year, the mood was low. Upon fully understanding that none of the debt would be repayable until earnings reached £21,000 per year, the atmosphere improved. Information about bursaries and grants helped raise spirits further (though perhaps not as much as sometimes assumed). However, deep-rooted, individualised inclinations remained stubbornly difficult to shift. For those who had simply had enough of education, or whose family and friends were not assuredly pro-participation, structured interaction with more positively predisposed classmates had little impact.
Public rhetoric about participation tends to suggest that the repayment schedule for higher fees is so favourable that the only barrier to participation is ignorance (Lewis 2012). In practice, young people wanted to know more about the system. Questions were often asked about how interest accrues, how inflation and pay rises affect projected repayments, how average graduate salaries differ by subject, and how likely students are to repay their debt in full. Brynin has noted that ‘a rising proportion of graduates receive only average pay’ (2012, 284) and students were keen to learn more about the financial gamble involved, and how the graduate premium breaks down across subject areas and institution types. Cynicism was sometimes expressed that the economic benefits of participation were exaggerated (‘where do get jobs worth that much round here?’). However, once relevant information was provided, young people (or at least those from more disadvantaged backgrounds) appeared to grow in confidence. Not all indicated that they would apply to university, but most reported the participation process to be less mystified, and took a step towards having firmer ownership of the decisions that lay ahead. Because they had been allowed to discuss and share ideas openly, without the presence of an overbearing ‘authority’ figure, the interaction arguably served WP aims just as effectively as more traditional modes of delivery.

**Thinking with Educational Theory**

I now consider the extent to which theories of education accommodate the kind of responses elicited from young people facing a new funding model for higher education system. Particular attention is given to two sources: *The State Nobility*, Pierre Bourdieu’s 1996 study of prize-winners in competitive examinations for French students, which shares some similarities with the research described here as young people from less advantaged backgrounds compete for limited places at top educational institutions; and *The Right to Higher Education*, Penny Jane Burke’s (2102) critique of societal inequalities in the UK and the politics of misrecognition.

Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ (2000) of field, habitus, and capital are a useful place to begin. Here, the arena of practice (field) is higher education, young people’s dispositions and tastes (habitus) are revealed through the language they use to talk about participation, and the assets available (capital) incorporate everything from students’ academic ability, for which attainment is a proxy, to their family connections and extra-curricular activities.

Research into higher education access regularly draws on Bourdieu’s work (e.g. Reay, David and Ball 2005; Byrom 2010) to expose the means by which social class structures are reinforced and reproduced. For example, students are discussed in terms of their ability and inclination to ‘play the game’
(Bourdieu 2000), and the symbolic effects of different forms of capital  
(Bourdieu 1997) have been drawn upon to explain why equal attainment  
applicants do not share the same likelihood of being offered a place at top  
universities (Jones 2013; Boliver 2013). Zimdars (2010) finds evidence of  
‘homophily’ in her study of admission tutors, suggesting that selectors may  
subconsciously recruit in their own image. This recalls Bourdieu’s observation  
that applicants must demonstrate the ‘dispositions to be, and above all to  
become ‘one of us’’ (Bourdieu 2000, 100) and raises equity questions about  
the prospects of young people from disadvantaged, urban areas as they  
attempt to play the higher education admissions game. Of those surveyed for  
the research described above, few were able to self-conceptualize in  
academically appropriate ways. They repeatedly positioned themselves as  
outsiders in the schooling system, and their language betrayed a distrust of  
education in general, and – partly because of its price – higher education in  
particular. Few demonstrated a familiarity with the system, or the confidence  
and capacity to ‘stand out from the crowd’ (Jones 2013).

‘What new entrants must bring into the game,’ according to Bourdieu, ‘is not  
only the habitus that is tacitly or explicitly demanded there, but a habitus that  
is practically compatible, or sufficiently close, and above all malleable and  
capable of being converted into the required habitus’ (2000, 100). As noted in  
relation to the personal statements of students from low participation schools,  
however, ‘evidence points to great variation in habitus compatibility’ (Jones  
2013). And in the classroom, a similar pattern emerges. Though the young  
people surveyed all had the academic ability to participate in higher education,  
many expressed themselves in a deeply non-scholarly fashion, often drawing  
censure from class teachers who held firm views about the type of persona  
needed to enter and succeed in higher education. Bourdieu notes that the  
.game is not ‘rigged,’ but likens it to a ‘handicap race’ in which some applicants  
are more advantaged than others (2000). Evidence pointed to students self-  
handicapping themselves out of contention, often weighed down by  
inappropriate symbolic capital and burdened with cultural misconceptions and  
incomplete information.

However, the main form of capital lacked by those young people surveyed  
remains economic. In the UK, low socio-economic status generally results in  
lesser academic attainment and, according to commentators such Callender  
and Jackson (2005) and Voigt (2007), a more pronounced resistance to  
accumulating high levels of debt. Within the research, evidence of what Finnie  
(2002) calls ‘sticker price’ aversion – a reluctance to participate because the  
total monetary commitment is so great compared to anything previously  
encountered – was commonplace. Such are the levels of debt accumulated,  
even by students in receipt of bursaries and grants, no repayment mechanism  
could be sufficiently sympathetic to compensate.
Findings also confirm that social capital – including the family networks and personal connections that may help students to access work experience, receive high quality guidance about the admissions process, etc. - is not evenly distributed (Bourdieu 1997; Dekker and Uslaner 2001). Despite their curiosity, students’ understanding of higher education generally drew on ‘cold information’ (Reay, David and Ball 2005) and unreliable, localized narratives. These narratives were often communicated through extended family channels (‘two of my cousin’s mates went [to university] and neither of them finished’) and proved difficult to correct even when fallacious (‘you only get a grant if your mum and dad live in separate houses’). Cultural capital was plentiful but rarely of the kind that could be productively exchanged in higher education admissions processes. Students perceived their life experience and their extra-curricular activity to be far removed from that of campus life.

Also prevalent in the research conducted was evidence of self-exclusion resulting of academic self-doubt or intellectual under-confidence (‘I don’t know if I’m that good though – I’d never keep passing everything’). Bourdieu notes that the choosers offer themselves up for choosing, but ‘others spontaneously exclude themselves from a competition that would exclude most of them anyway’ (1996, 141). In the classroom, self-exclusion also manifested itself as rejection of orthodox educational systems, contempt for an undergraduate culture perceived as artificial, and a loyalty to one’s own ‘authentic’ identity. Two male students (independently) bragged that they had already attended the ‘university of life’; a third described the environment in which he grew up as a ‘ghetto university’. The primary function of such comments may be to foster peer respect, but they also work to sidestep engagement with participation discourse. By casting their own life experience as an incompatible alternative to higher education, less advantaged students are able to reframe the debate in terms of conventional universities failing to accommodate or recognize their potential contribution. This rationalizes a decision to self-exclude without admitting structural injustice or personal rejection.

But why does this matter? Higher education need not be for all young people and public discourse increasingly focuses on alternatives to further learning, such as work-based apprenticeships. For Bourdieu, the consequence of unevenly distributed opportunity is a fractured society and, ultimately, the emergence of ‘nobility’: a privileged minority comprised of the holders and regulators of institutionalized social capital.

When the process of social rupture and segregation that takes a set of carefully selected chosen people and forms them into a separate group is known and recognized as a legitimate form of election, it gives rise in
and of itself to symbolic capital that increases with the degree of restriction and exclusivity of the group so established. The monopoly, when recognized, is converted into a nobility. (Bourdieu 1996, 79)

According to many studies into higher education participation, this monopoly – and therefore nobility – arises because the some young people are better inducted into the game of higher education than others. Evidence of this is ubiquitous in the research described above, from misunderstandings about the loan structure with which new entrants must engage to misconceptions about the academic requirements and cultural landscape of a university experience with which they have little familiarity. This is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s observation that ‘what is important … is less what is explicitly taught than what is tacitly taught’ (2000). For many young people, the academic ability is there – albeit not always self-recognized – but rarely is it complemented by insight into the nature of the education market and awareness of how to develop and exchange appropriate forms of symbolic capital.

Burke (2012) takes this line of thinking further - and challenges tendencies to conceptualize under-participation in ‘deficit’ terms, as though it were the fault of young people themselves for not ‘fitting in’ - by considering the role of institutional misrecognition. She argues that judgments about candidates’ potential rest on ‘privileged ontological dispositions (i.e. those coded as middle class, white and heterosexual)’ (2012, 105). Common in classroom discussions of participation was potential being expressed in alternative ways. Students did not come across as budding academics; rather, as ideally placed to benefit from exposure to a broader range of teaching styles, from encouragement to think differently and critique their surroundings, and from the confidence to see and articulate themselves differently. Note that recent studies (e.g. Ogg, Zimdars and Heath 2009) continue to suggest that undergraduates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds outperform equal attainment peers from more privileged backgrounds when they complete their degree programmes at university.

Burke deconstructs discourses of participation, rejecting terms like ‘barrier’ and ‘disadvantage’ because they cast some young people as in need of remedial help from the middle classes (2012, 44). Her observation that ‘predominantly’ middle class applicants ‘talk their way on to a course’ by having symbolic cultural capital (2012, 44) was upheld by the absence of such linguistic capital in the research described above. For Burke, the habitus of young people is central to understanding the decisions they make, though she questions the extent to which such decisions are actually the result of personal agency:
Habitus illuminates the ways that unequal relations of power become internalized and naturalized so that decisions to participate in higher education (or not) are seen as freely made individual choices. (2012, 60)

The newest variable for would-be higher education applicants in England to factor is the deferred cost of participation, currently up to £9,000 per year for fees alone. Burke notes that ‘willingness to accept debt as an inevitable part of the pursuit to ‘success’ is tied to particular (white, middle class) values and dispositions, as well as certain (neoliberal) political and cultural conceptions.’ (2012, 139). Unwillingness to accept debt may therefore be tied to other values and dispositions, often the kind associated with young people from non-traditional backgrounds. Evidence of this was rife, with students incorporating non-pecuniary factors into their participation decisions, and often being unconvinced (or unimpressed) by the promised gains in lifetime income associated with attending university (‘no-one guarantees you get paid extra though, do they?’). This is particularly concerning in light of Bachan’s (2013) finding that that students who are pessimistic about future earnings tend to be more resistant towards student debt. The formula of risk aversion and education aversion often seemed particularly potent, with a number of students indicating that a more substantial and failsafe graduate premium was needed before they could be persuaded to stay in education a further three years.

Thus, theoretical approaches to education are essential both for contextualizing data in terms of structural inequity, as Bourdieu’s work (1984, 1996, 2000) helps us to do, and reflecting on how current institutional practices and discourses may be in need of attention, as Burke (2012) argues. The decision-making process undertaken by would-be applicants today is very different from that of previous generations. Though the broad range of cultural dispositions noted by Reay (1997) are still in operation, and reproduction of class-driven behaviour still observable, the picture is complicated by the introduction of higher fees and the prospect of three decades of graduate debt repayment. Educational theory allows us to take the responses of those affected and interpret them through a social science lens. Because though the context may be different, the underlying structural inequities still exert the same pressures on those in possession of least symbolic capital.

Conclusion

In most cases, a key requirement of any data gathering process is that the gatherer remains objective and does not influence findings. Studies into higher education participation test this principle to the limit, the process being distorted – but also potentially enriched – by the perceived and actual
identities of those involved in the research. Traditional approaches to WP place the academic as an ambassador for higher education, encouraging students to participate in order to benefit financially and culturally, both for private gain and for public good. However, the increased marketization of UK higher education problematizes this role, as participation becomes an economic gamble for almost all students, as well as a cultural gamble for those from non-traditional backgrounds who fear identity loss or compromise.

Researcher neutrality is almost impossible to maintain, either in the eyes of students and teaching staff. However, strategies are available to minimize contamination and allow data to remain robust. In particular, adopting a discourse analysis approach, and positioning oneself as an informed bystander (rather than central figure of authority) allows observations to be made that, though not necessarily ‘pure’, are nonetheless instructive and insightful when recurring themes and dispositions are unpicked.

Social science theory enables further contextualization of the research area to facilitate interpretation of data. For example, Burke’s take on the educational theory outlined above is that ‘at the heart of Bourdieu’s work … is attention to struggle rather than reproduction’ (2012, 41). Evidence of this struggle repeatedly surfaces in research into perceptions of higher education among low participation groups. Often internalized as a conflict between notions of individual authenticity and the possible pay-off from entry into a sphere to which their communities may have felt historically excluded and culturally adrift, this struggle is both shaped by and feeds into wider structural issues of social class reproduction.

Partnerships between higher education and young people from low-participation backgrounds are more vital than ever in a higher fees era. However, the nature of this partnership must evolve to meet the changing context: gathering data becomes more pragmatically challenging; widening participation more ethically complex. For students, the struggle is one to better understand how higher education works, in terms of economic considerations (the fee structure, repayment schedule and likely graduate premium), but also in cultural terms (what university is like, how to avoid academic failure, how to self-identify within a new and very different educational setting). Not all would-be applicants are equally equipped to understand and weigh up these variables, and Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital allows us to better understand cultural disinclinations, in particular. What higher education must continue bringing to the partnership is a readiness to employ the most appropriate research strategies available in order to bear witness to the ways in which public policy affects all levels of society, and to press for the most incisive and evidence-based interventions. This need not be incompatible with the more tradition role of the academic to widen participation by acting as an
ambassador for the sector and an insider authority on the ‘rules of the games’.
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