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Art for a Few: Exclusions and Misrecognitions in Art and Design Admissions Practices

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Background

This paper will deconstruct the policy and practice of admissions to art and design courses in the context of the widening participation (WP) agenda. WP in higher education (HE) has become a central theme in UK educational policy. The government has made a significant commitment to WP, in the attempt to address the under-representation of certain social groups in HE. The HE landscape has undergone change and transformation partly as a result of its diversification, with new student constituencies and professional identities emerging and posing specific challenges. However, persistent patterns of under-representation continue to perplex policy-makers and practitioners, raising questions about current strategies, policies and approaches.

WP policy is largely concerned with issues of access to HE, underpinned by discourses of 'fair admissions'. The Schwartz report on HE admissions highlighted five central principles for a fair admissions system: 1) transparency, 2) the selection of students able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential, 3) reliable and valid assessment methods, 4) minimizing barriers for applicants, 5) creating a professional system underpinned by 'appropriate institutional structures and processes' (Schwartz, 2004: 7-8). Schwartz asserted that there was a need for greater transparency of entry requirements and selection processes, conflating transparency and fairness. However, making admissions processes and practices clear and transparent does not render them 'fair' if they continue to discriminate against certain class, ethnic and gender groups.

Schwartz, S. (2004). Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice. (London, Department for Education and Skills).

Research Questions

The research was designed to uncover the complexity of processes of admission and to deconstruct the key assumptions underpinning the selection of students for art and design courses in HE. A qualitative methodological framework enabled the collection of detailed data of admissions practices and the analysis of the assumptions, values and perspectives admissions tutors bring to the selection process.

Methods

The methods included a review of admissions policies, prospectuses and websites and in-depth interviews with admissions tutors about their perspectives of the admissions system and process, as well as observations of actual selection interviews with candidates. Interviews and observations were conducted in five colleges of art and design (two in large metropolitan areas, one in a cathedral town, one in a rural area and one in a large town). Three out of the five were 'selecting' rather than 'recruiting' institutions. Admissions are clearly a sensitive research focus, and confidentiality was crucial to the ethical considerations of this research. In total ten members of staff were interviewed and seventy selection interviews were observed. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, with anonymity and confidentiality strictly followed.

Frame

We draw on Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital to analyze the data, as well as feminist concepts of power and subjectivity. The concept of habitus helps to expose the ways

in which those applicants unfamiliar with HE environments might experience feelings of 'discomfort, ambivalence and uncertainty' (Reay et al, 2005, pg 28). In addition to generating feelings, emotions and particular forms of practice, habitus produces various forms of resources, which Bourdieu calls 'capital'. Different forms of capital are 'capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder' (Skeggs,1997:8). The concept of cultural capital and its possible conversion into symbolic capital is generative for understanding the complexity of admissions practices. Additionally, feminist poststructural concepts of power and subjectivity help to shed light on the relations of inequality and misrecognition that are often so subtle and insidious that they are largely overlooked in everyday practices. Subjectivity illuminates the complex formation of identity as tied in with the 'paradoxical conditions through which the accomplishment of subjecthood is made possible' (Davies 2006: 425). Constituted through discourse and performativity, subjectivity disrupts notions of identity as fixed and stable. A central concept of subjectivity is recognition, which is achieved through the dual processes of submission and mastery. The subject both practices agency and intent whist also being subjected to the discourses that name and position her/him. Subjectivity highlights the relational, discursive and embodied processes of identity formation; of becoming recognized as a subject.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste (London, Routledge).

Davies, B. (2006). Subjectification: the relevance of Butler's analysis for education. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 27, 425-438.

Reay, D., David, M. & Ball, S. (2005) Degrees of choice : class, race, gender and higher education (Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books).

Skeggs, B. (2004) Class, Self, Culture (London and New York, Routledge).

Research findings

Our data suggests that the admissions tutors made judgments based on implicit and tacit values and perspectives about potential and talent. Their expectations of the applicants demanded particular forms of capital and habitus and constructed an imaginary ideal student-subject. This was linked to the identity formations of the admissions tutors as well as the ways in which the applicants were constructed, which related to the discourses they cited in the interview context. Our findings expose the ways that admissions practices are tied up with complex operations of exclusion, which privilege the habitus, subjectivities and cultural and linguistic capital of 'traditional' students, who tend to come from white, middle-class backgrounds. The focus on individual practices rather than wider sets of discursive practices helps to hide the workings of inequality in processes of selection, which are embedded in particular disciplinary and ontological frameworks, as well as tacit and implicit judgments about ability and potential.

This research raises theoretical issues for understanding processes of exclusion and misrecognition at play in art and design HE admissions. There are also implications for policy and practice to consider from our analysis of the data. Drawing on this analysis, our paper will offer suggestions for policy and practice, and for developing equitable admissions frameworks.