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Working with/in institutions: how policy enactment in widening participation is shaped through practitioners' experience

Widening participation in higher education is driven by policy which is then enacted by individual practitioners. Practitioners bring with them a wealth of personal and employment experiences which shape their interpretations and enactments. Drawing on sixteen in-depth semi structured interviews with practitioners across seven universities in England, a classification is developed in order to conceptualise their orientations to policy enactment. Whilst nationally focused, this study has international resonance especially in marketised HE systems where policies are similarly enacted. The model developed within the paper proposes that personal and professional experience can cause practitioners to orient towards the interests of the institution or the individuals they work with. This orientation can be in compliance with institutional policy or adopt a more transgressive stance. Through deeper theorisation of practitioner positions we can better understand how to ensure work in this area better serves the individuals which it is targeted at.

Keywords: widening participation; higher education; inequalities; policy

Introduction

Widening access to and success within higher education (HE) is global issue (Burke 2012) and is at the heart of current regulation of the English HE sector, forming one of its four regulatory objectives (Office for Students 2019). Whilst previously this was a concern primarily for institutions charging above the base levels of fees (HEFCE and

OFFA 2014), all higher education providers must now engage with this agenda. Within England, pre-entry work has tended to focus on the specific framing of widening participation, an agenda driven by the rapid expansion of the HE sector. Whilst widening participation may be a national concern, the role that policy enactment plays in access to higher education is likely to have international resonance, especially in countries with marketised higher education systems.

Despite all English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) having policies to address access and success (and committing investment of £136.1m in 2016-17 alone (OFFA 2015)), research into how these policies are enacted in institutions has been limited. Previous research on widening participation interventions often frames them as dehumanised projects, ignoring how individual delivery staff can shift and shape what happens on the ground. As (Ozga 2000, 1) has argued, ‘policy is struggled over, not delivered in tablets of stone’. This struggle is often complex, and shaped by both institutional values, and individual's values and experiences (Thompson 2017). The central role people play in policy enactment is a global one, as explored in Leibowitz and Bozalek (2014) study of South African HE which highlighted the role of reflexive agency in activating policy.

Policy enactment has also been conceptualised as often messy and ad hoc in nature (Ball 1993). Therefore, understanding how widening participation policy is enacted and the role of practitioners in this process is vital. Institutional widening participation is complemented by an additional £30m (2016-17) of centrally funding under the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), now known as Uniconnect (Office for Students 2018) . This programme, focused on collaborative partnerships of institutions targeting specific geographic areas is also part of the wider

landscape in England. This is important to acknowledge as these networks also provide employment for a number of additional widening participation practitioners.

Practitioners are regularly required to translate policies, often predicated on a mythical typical student and a middle-class conceptualisation of aspiration and social mobility, into practice. This often means translating idealistic ideas of what into pragmatic realities. Their roles are often poorly defined, under resourced and insufficiently supported. In spite of this practitioners are often highly invested in their work. Ostensibly these are ‘good’ people doing ‘good’ work. However, as Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) have argued in the context of teaching, practices enacted by well-meaning people may not meet the needs of their recipients and cause unintended harm. This is increasingly likely in a marketised sector where tensions can arise between the institutional outcomes-based targets related to under-represented groups and the support is actually needed by those groups to realise individual aspirations (Rainford 2017). These tensions are particularly acute when an institution does not offer a suitable course, is not the right fit in terms of what the student wants from an HEI in relation to the wider student experience or indeed when HE may not be the best option for that individual. Whilst carrying out this work collaboratively within networks of multiple institutions can remove some of these tensions, practitioners are still usually employed by and work within specific HEIs which means there are still expectations to encourage progression to their own institutions.

Policy enactment in widening participation

The conflict between policy makers intentions and the realities of implementation is key to understanding the dynamism of policy (Forrester and Garratt 2016). As has been critiqued in school policy research (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012), research into widening participation has policy focused primarily on senior leaders (e.g. Harrison,

Waller, and Last 2015; Jones 2017). This absence of research into practitioners was identified over ten years ago (Burke, 2008 cf. Burke 2012) yet still endures. Wilkins and Burke (2013) conducted a small-scale study with seven practitioners and was conducted prior to the recent increases in student fees and demise of Aimhigher. More recently, Burchfiel (2017) explored the role of educational theory and personal beliefs on practitioners and Bayes (2019) has researched the tensions recruitment and access issues create for practitioners. In-depth analysis of the role of practitioners in policy enactment is an unresearched gap. This gap is significant as interventions are not neutral (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003), meaning the focus is not always on what is best for the participants, an issue magnified since 2012 with increased institutional reliance on fee income associated with student recruitment. This creates a tension between supporting individuals to access HE but also to support institutional stability both in terms of regulation and finance. Mahony and Weiner (2017) argued in their research into the impact of neo-liberalism in universities that the work of staff has become increasingly performative and increasing time is spent accounting for what is done as opposed to doing it. This tension can limit the capacity to enact policy and narrow the focus to what is likely to have the greatest impact on metric-based targets. This creates complex dilemmas and competing agendas for policy actors which may be shaped by institutional context (Jones 2017), especially where there is a tension between individuals' values and institutional values (Parker, Naylor, and Warmington 2005). Collaborative partnerships involving multiple institutions, whilst adding complexity to these tensions does not alleviate them as employment relationships and funding models can still create institutional power relationships.

Policy and practice relationship

Widening participation practitioners occupy one step in the policy enactment process. Reynolds and Saunders (1987 cf. Trowler 2014, 15) notion of an implementation staircase (fig.1) when layered onto HE policy processes highlights how institutional factors can create shifts in policy. These shifts can also involves a time lag, so for example the Access Agreements¹ that 2016-17 practices were based on were submitted for approval in April 2015 and thus institutional translation occurs in a different period to the enactment of these institutional policies.

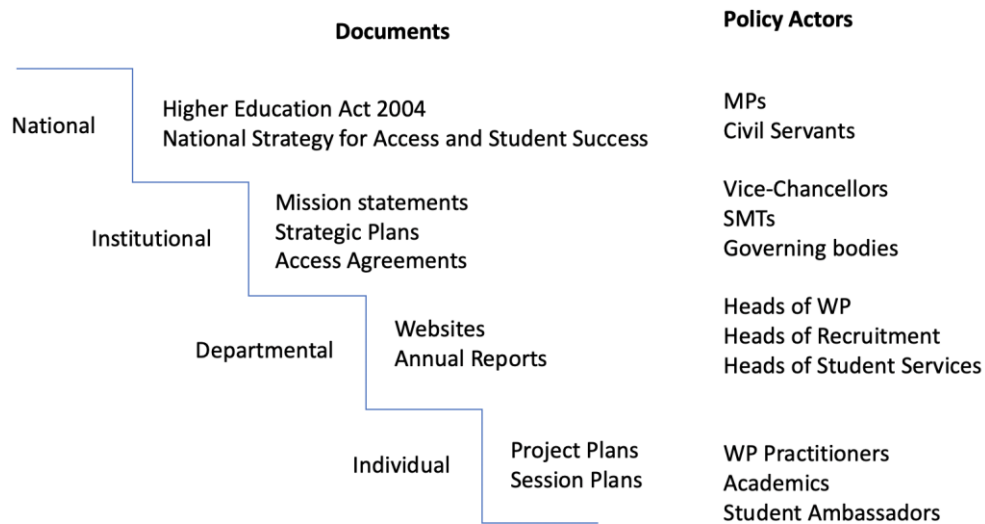


Fig.1 - Policy implementation staircase adapted from Reynolds and Saunders(1987 cf. Trowler 2014 p.15)

Wider issues of policy enactment

The role of the widening participation practitioners in policy enactment shares similarities with individuals in related fields, such as teachers. Maguire, Braun, and

¹ These were institutionally produced documents outlining plans to address issues of access, success and progression and submitted to the Office for Fair Access.

Ball (2014, 2) highlight four key issues for policy enactment in schools: context, competing policies, interpretation and resources. They also found that practice was 'multi layered and messy'. Furthermore, Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) highlighted that teachers' personal experiences and scepticisms can shape the way in which they do, or do not enact policies. These findings, along with Ozga (2000) work on policy enactment suggests the enactment process involves a level of agency with policy shaping the range of options not acting as a determinant of action (Ball 1993). Additionally, policy does not exist in a vacuum and practitioner networks can influence understanding these issues in a wider sector based context (Thompson 2017). As Archer (2003, 135) theorised:

Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances.

When individuals are subjectively deciding how to enact policy, their background can be influential. Hannah Jones (2015) study on community cohesion policy and local government found that practitioners were 'reflexive and self-governing' (p15) and that implementing policy involved elements of personal interpretation shaped through their own personal experiences and knowledge.

Methods

This paper draws on data from a wider study of widening participation policy and practice (Rainford 2019). The study conducted in 2016-17 incorporated sixteen semi-structured interviews with practitioners working within seven different institutions split

equally between selective (pre-92) and recruiting (post-92) universities². Table 1 outlines the teams they were located in and some key background characteristics. Interviews included extended discussion of participants personal and career histories and their job roles. Participant recruitment was initially purposive, based on institutions analysed within the phase one of the study supplemented by an open call for participants to ensure a balance of institutional type. The data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach. Transcripts were coded manually and subsequently in NVivo. This was an iterative, constant comparative process. This analysis resulted in a body of data with a number of themes relating to practitioner's role and their origins, informing the development of the model this paper explores.

The study adhered to the British Educational Research Association guidelines on ethical research (BERA 2011) and ethical approval for the study was granted by Staffordshire University Faculty of Business, Education and Law ethics committee. Anonymity of participants was a key concern and in order to further maintain participant anonymity, details of the institution has been limited to its type. Ethically, this was particularly important where institutions had small teams as defining characteristics that were important to the analysis may have made individual staff identifiable.

² In 1992, a significant change to higher education allowed polytechnics (vocational institutions) to gain university status. Pre-92 institutions who predate this expansion are often more research-intensive with higher entry requirements. In contrast, Post-92 universities tend to have lower academic entry requirements and are more vocationally focused.

[Table 1]

‘A particular group of people’

The practitioners came from a wide range of backgrounds but were often working in widening participation for similar reasons. As Rebecca (post-92) outlined:

People that work in widening participation are a very particular group of people and I think everybody has this overwhelming want to make a difference.

Social justice was a key motivator for all the practitioners interviewed. This aligns with previous findings in relation to conceptualisations of widening participation by a broader range of staff in a HEI (Stevenson, Clegg, and Lefever 2010). However, participants’ underlying motivations were varied: some were from more privileged backgrounds that wanted to do something morally focused with their careers (Alice, Andrew and Rob (all post-92), and Lucy (pre-92)) and some had come from what they self-defined as widening participation backgrounds (Carol and Mel (both post-92), and Hannah and Sophie (both pre-92)). There were others who felt they shared some empathy through their own personal histories such as not fitting in at university (Karen (pre-92) and Rebecca (post-92)) or due to their ethnicity (Rob (post-92), Samantha and Beverley (both pre-92)). Additionally, there were those who had fallen into the role but enjoyed it so stayed (David, Hannah and Katie (all post-92), and Emily (pre-92)).

As previous research has argued, empathy is crucial to be able to make practice authentic (Thompson 2017; Wilkins and Burke 2013) yet only some talked about adopting an empathetic position. Hannah (pre-92) felt that her own identity as a student from a widening participation target group made her empathetic. She said, ‘I draw on my own experiences and I just, I feel I kind of connect maybe a bit more’. Even when

practitioners were not from under-represented groups, they often talked of shared experiences. For example, Lucy (pre-92) felt her experiences as an international student resonated with some of the same issues experienced by students from under-represented backgrounds. This personal commitment was also very important to Mel (post-92). She explained how she felt there were two types of practitioner, those who saw it as a moral obligation and those for whom it was something nice to do. These findings mirror those of Wilkins and Burke (2013) who identified social class positioning and the personal commitments to widening participation as important to practitioners in their ability to ensure their work meets the needs of the individuals they work with.

Whilst coming from a widening participation backgrounds can sensitise practitioners to key issues, these backgrounds are broad. Issues of class, ethnicity and disability intersect and shape individual experiences differently thus while they can create empathy, they may not have direct resonance with the students they work with, especially when practitioners' experiences of university may be somewhat disconnected from that of their participants. Notably none of the participants declared a disability so in relation to this their experience of this is likely even more limited.

Individuals' backgrounds may shape beliefs and attitudes but it is unlikely they will fully determine them (Sayer 2011). Humans are complex and draw on a wide range of resources often shaped by past experiences. Some of the practitioners in the study (Alice, Carol, Katie, Rob, Rebecca and Mel (all post-92), and Sophie (pre-92)) had experience of working in multiple settings in widening participation. This wider experience of the sector seemed to be embedded within their rationalisations and reflections on their current setting. The way in which these experiences shaped the practitioners' narratives was a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of widening participation. These differences in individual practitioners can be mapped

onto Ball and colleagues contextual dimensions of policy enactment in the following ways:

[Table 2 here]

This model can be further developed by drawing on Archer's theorisation of how individuals make their way through the world. Archer (2007) through her three-stage model argued that structure and culture objectively shape situations whilst individuals reflexively mediate these objective powers through their actions combined with their own values (or concerns) shaping their practices. The four dimensions are likely to shape all of Archer's three stages. Consequently, having a greater range of experiences to draw on gives practitioners a greater understanding of structural and cultural issues, providing them with a greater repertoire of solutions to challenges they may face.

Experience is also shaped by personal histories. Within the sample, the majority of the practitioners were state educated. For those who had spent time in private education, there was greater potential for understandings of under-represented groups to be based on stereotypes. Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) found evidence of this in their study of perceptions of meritocracy in undergraduate students at Oxford University. Unlike the undergraduates in that study, the regular contact practitioners had with groups under-represented in HE, was likely to result in more nuanced understandings over time. This temporal change was noted by Andrew (post-92) who felt his views had changed a lot as he gained experience in the sector. Where staff turnaround may be high (i.e. one-year internship posts), staffing these roles with individuals with no personal experience of the realities of lives of students from under-represented backgrounds, without substantial training may lead to a disconnect between realities of

the structural barriers to participation in HE and the narratives of policy. This could be in some ways mitigated by education as Alice (post-92) explained:

I did education and poverty in social exclusion as a part of my undergraduate [degree] so all of that knowledge of the cumulative barriers was already there so none of it was new to me when I started working in WP.

Therefore, either personal experience or academic training are important factors in ensuring national policy is translated to best address the needs of the individuals who are targeted and to avoid causing unintended harm. It is important to note that personal experience alone may be insufficient. For experience to inform practice a level of self-reflection is necessary. This requires both awareness but also time and space. The need for staff training in targeting is supported by the findings of a survey exploring the barriers stakeholders and institutions felt there were to targeting minority ethnic groups (Stevenson et al. 2019) Building this level of professionalisation within the field may have its challenges as unlike teaching, widening participation is often not a planned career path.

Personal troubles, public issues

Personal concerns relating to the challenges of widening participation can shape practices. This resonates with C. Wright Mills (1970) notion of a Sociological Imagination, the ability to turn personal troubles into public issues. Within the sample there are a number of examples of this. Rebecca (post-92) for example comes from a rural coastal area with high levels of deprivation. Whilst she was not from what she defined as a 'poor' background, she felt a personal connection to these issues:

I've grown up in a coastal area I've seen it everywhere and that's sort of white working-class male that doesn't get interested in education, even though they are bright enough to follow it, and I think it really influences how I see WP in general.

Archer (2007) posited that concerns formed the second part of her three-stage model. Furthermore, she argued that these concerns are the *modus vivendi* that is the main focus of internal conversations and ultimately acting as the driver for our own practices. For Beverley and Samantha (both pre-92), and Rob (post-92), their identity as from black and minority ethnic groups were key to their concerns. Rob's *modus vivendi* seemed to be equally driven by his fragmented educational career as by his ethnicity. The lack of support he had experienced was key to his motivation:

I would always try and sort of be learner centric basically because everyone is different. I've benefited from very helpful people once I got into university, but I didn't really have anyone through school that kind of pivoted me because it was kind of assumed that he's alright, his parents are really pro uni.

Whilst every practitioner cannot be expected to have had a life that mirrors the experiences of every person they work with; it is important to acknowledge that an individual's concerns are shaped by their own experiences. These experiences may be unlike those of current widening participation students thus there is of course the possibility for this experience to not always have a wholly positive impact on practice.

Playing to 'type'?

Whilst practitioners had different personal, academic and employment histories, their approaches to widening participation demonstrated common features. Each practitioner occupied a space on two differing continua. Firstly, whether they adopted a **compliant** position with national and local policy or a more **transgressive** position, focused on more personal understandings of the purpose of widening participation. Secondly, whether the approach they took was based on what was right for the **institution** or what was right for the **individuals** they worked with. In light of this a model was developed (fig. 2). The model is predicated on the argument that habitual action is insufficient for

giving individuals guidelines within which to function (Archer 2010) with reflexivity being key to understanding personal positions.

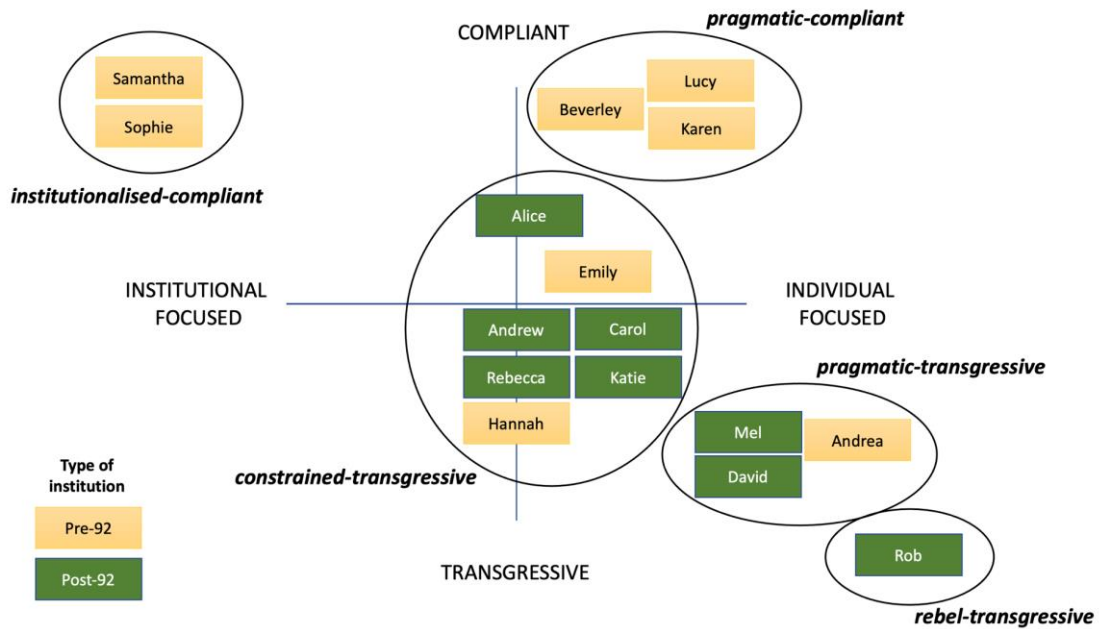


Fig.2- Classification of practitioners

The term transgressive was adopted from the work of bell hooks (1994) as there are many parallels between her work towards engaged pedagogy and developing individual focused widening participation interventions that are rooted in the needs of the individuals. These needs are often in tension with the agenda of the institutions. bell hooks argues that focusing on individuals needs becomes empowering and transformative as opposed to being driven by fixed governing practices. Whilst I am not making claims to the pedagogical practices of these individuals, I argue that practitioners operating further along this continuum are transgressing further from institutional concerns towards those of the individual participants. However, this is not an either/or situation and positioning these two continua results in a number of emergent positions.

The constrained-transgressive practitioner

Most practitioners fell within a mid-position with some showing more or less transgression from institutional norms in their practices and others showing more or less focus on the individuals they work with. Carol (post-92) demonstrated this constraint through her obligation to her employer. She felt that her obligation as an employee was in tension with what might be right for the young people. For Alice (post-92) the issue was different:

In terms of what we are doing for the young people we are working with I think what we are doing is fine. We give them advice and support but it's probably actually more what we're not doing for them, for the young people we're not actually working with.

Her constraint was that those she felt needed the support to access her institution were not actually being targeted. I therefore argue that the institutional policy is constraining practices for this group. Those who demonstrated more transgression in their practices were in roles with more agency. Working on pre-16 outreach meant Hannah (pre-92) was less worried about recruiting to the institution and more focused on guiding young people. With the exception of Hannah, the majority of this group had been working in the sector for far longer than those in the compliant groups. This may therefore have given them a stronger sense of what is possible within their interventions and the extent to which transgressions may be tolerated by the institution. Furthermore, Alice, Rebecca, Katie and Carol (all post-92) had all worked in widening participation in multiple institutions. This combination of a greater understanding of different approaches and experiences of working with a wider range of young people is likely to have shaped their position. Whilst Andrew (post-92) had only worked within one institution, he was involved in a number of external widening participation networks

and studying at postgraduate level which may have shaped his understanding of differing approaches across the sector.

Whilst this position seemed to be occupied more often by those working in a post-92 setting, Hannah and Emily (both pre-92) also occupied this position. For Hannah, this seemed to be as a result of having recently completed a PhD and being from what she described as a working-class background. Her thesis focused on a very niche topic and demonstrated her awareness that like her own path, the range of routes young people may wish to follow would be wide. This also manifested in her practices where she used her outreach to promote her love of culture and languages, reflecting on what she felt was important for young people and modifying her practices accordingly. She reflected on her position:

[I] haven't done an apprenticeship and I haven't done a foundation degree, so I can only really talk about my experience [...] I do always say on certain days that university's not for everyone. I always use the phrase, if you decide university is for you because it isn't for everyone, but I wouldn't, I wouldn't say I feel pressured by the university to be like you have to [come here]. You know you have to promote that I think it's just sometimes unavoidable.

This demonstrated that she felt constrained by her knowledge of other routes and that her primary role was to promote university. This constrained the extent to which she was able to transgress from the institutional position. This resistance can also be conceived as what Greenbank (2006) framed a local rationality, where managers (in the case of his study) were seen to be pursuing objectives that were rational for them but not necessarily the institution. Unlike others who had been working in the sector a similar length of time, Hannah was far more reflexive of her positionality, something which could be related to her doctoral study in a cognate field that involved her

developing a more critical voice. However, not all the practitioners talked about transgressions from institutional positions.

The institutionalised-compliant practitioner and the pragmatic-compliant practitioner

These two groups, whilst distinct in their orientation both shared a commonality. One was focused on the interests of the individual participating in widening participation and the other more towards needs of the institution. For both groups, adherence to institutional policy was a given. In the case of the *institutionalised-compliant practitioners* (Sophie and Samantha (both pre-92)), they did not discuss any tensions between issues of inequality and the work they did. Sophie explicitly said there were no tensions, whereas Samantha highlighted a possible tension if one of her target students chose a more prestigious university over her institution. Yet neither critiqued if elite HE should be the sole focus of this work. In contrast, the *pragmatic-compliant practitioners* were more reflexive in their discussions surrounding the tensions between what was right for the young people they work with and the institutional position. For example, Beverley (pre-92) extensively talked about the value of other careers paths which did not involve university and the need for 1-to-1 careers advice; yet she did not feel it was within her remit to address this. Karen and Lucy (both pre-92) also highlighted tensions of structural inequality but did not suggest how they might alter their practices to address this. I argue that adopting these compliant positions supports the argument made by Wilkins and Burke (2013, 11) about the potential for middle-class professionals to make widening participation a ‘colonizing project for the proselytization of middle-class norms and values’ a real possibility.

For both groups, most practitioners were new to the sector. Where careers had spanned a number of periods of policy shift, this may have illuminated other ways of doing things or the limitations of new agendas. In contrast, newer entrants may be unaware of the origins of direction of travel in policy, as also highlighted in Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) study of teachers. This means policies and initiatives may be viewed in a different way to experienced practitioners who had experienced success or failure of similar policies in the past. In each case, having only been exposed to one institution for a relatively short time may have limited their ability to engage critically with policy. Sophie (pre-92) was the exception. She had been in the role for four years and had also previously been a student ambassador. However, by remaining in the same institution she may not have had exposure to other ways of being like the more transgressive practitioners. This position is one that I believe practitioners can transition out of through experience or education.

The pragmatic-transgressive practitioner

Common to the practitioners in this group (Mel and David (both post-92), and Andrea (pre-92)) was the intersection of a high level of experience in the sector and a high level of autonomy in their roles. Mel had been working in widening participation for six years, Andrea and David for over 15 years. As David (post-92) stated:

So you try and find a work around and you're sort of going we know a high percentage of these learners in your school are from these postcodes anyway so we'll allow you basically to target anyone and then we'll look at the results and try and see whether it justifies it. Or you start looking at going, Oh we're going to do this event anyway and we'll count this proportion of the learners to NCOP and this proportion to our widening participation budget and it becomes an accounting exercise

This level of transgression was arguably only made possible through David's seniority and ability to set the agenda in the team. Whilst Mel (post-92) was in a less senior role, she still had some autonomy over her remit. David also talked in his interview about adopting a pragmatic attitude. He was interested in individuals making informed decisions but understood that he had to work within the constraints of institutions' targets and agendas. As he put it there was a 'balance between doing what we believe to be right and doing what we've been told to do'. In contrast, Andrea's (pre-92) focus was on a primary school programme which she ran more or less in isolation. For all three, this combination of autonomy and experience seemed to be key. The ability for manipulation of the agenda based on personal beliefs within institutional constraints is a way of resolving the latent power conflict but without needed to challenge structural power.

The rebel-transgressive practitioner

Unlike the constrained positions of *pragmatic-transgressive* practitioners, Rob (post-92) occupied a more extreme position, one which was often in tension with the institution:

I don't always fit with the institutional line, and there's been times occasionally I've been told 'don't say that in public again because that doesn't really fit with what the sector's trying to do'. My job is not to make every young person want to go to university or go to university but it's about making sure that they are aware of all the range of options at every stage in their life.

Rob did not seem constrained by the institution but actively pushed at the boundaries of what was possible within his own practices to ensure what he was doing was, he felt, the morally right thing for the individuals with whom he worked, demonstrating more resistance to power. This did not necessarily seem to be because he had less constraints

on his action or was subject to weaker institutional power but as he later stated in his interview:

I think there is a personal interpretation of how you enact what is required of us to make sure that it isn't inappropriate for the young people.

Therefore, the *rebel-transgressive* is using practice as a form of resistance. This position is likely to be rooted in several personal factors. As with the *pragmatic-transgressive* his experience in the sector is likely to have shaped his ability to draw on a wide range of possible actions and to develop a more nuanced understanding of structural and cultural contexts. Unlike *pragmatic-transgressive* practitioners, Rob's personal narrative showed a lot of resistance to institutional norms throughout his education career, moving through different schools and making a number of personal choices going against the grain of family expectations. Therefore, it is possible that he would be predisposed to adopting such a position. Resistance or deviation from institutional mission can be seen as a form of political action. As Audre Lorde (2018, 19). asserts: 'In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action'. Relating this back to Archer's notion of a *modus vivendi*, it is through reflexive engagement with these personal projects and the objective circumstances within which practitioners work that practice emerges. Rob (post-92), was very clear about how this may be at odds with what management might see as desirable but was the right thing to do.

How can this help to reimagine practice?

Through the understandings of the tensions between institutional and personal positions that this research has foregrounded, we can begin to think about how this can inform practice and help ensure policy is enacted in a way that actually addresses intended

issues in an ethically sound way. As Ball et al. (2012, 142) have argued in relation to teachers, policies are 'struggled over and struggled with', yet this does not always mean that they will fully resist implementation. When there are certain targets to meet and when their continued employment relies on meeting these targets, there may be a limited agency in resisting institutional positions, although the enactment of policy can offer a space for 'creative reinvention' (Trowler 2014, 14). The extent of this can be highly variable; some reinvention may be subtle, altering the content of a workshop, whereas other reinvention may involve deliberate subversion of the aims of a programme. To draw again on Archer (1995, 187)

A person occupying a particular role acquires vested interests with it and is both constrained and enabled by its 'dos and don'ts' in conjunction with the penalties and promotions which encourage compliance.

It was through the navigation of these constraints that the practitioners in the constrained-transgressive group showed variation. Emily (pre-92) for example stated that:

[...]one of the positive outcomes of them coming to our events or working with us is that they don't want to come to university. I see that as a positive outcome if that's an informed decision.

Yet this was not reflected in her institution's access agreement, thus Emily was balancing the constraints of what she was asked to do with what she feels was right for the young people, focusing on the individual over the institutional needs. Similarly, Andrew (post-92) highlighted the tension between recruitment to the institution and the needs of the students. This tension was narrowly focused on the subjects offered. Therefore, he was not adopting a radical-transgressive position by suggesting they look elsewhere, merely offering factual advice. This supports the idea that 'policies from

“above” are not the only constraints and influences upon institutional practices’ and as Wilkins and Burke (2013, 16) argued:

[policies] are reworked and imagined differently through the contingency and particularity of local actors and their elected professional and social class attachments.

Through theorising types of practitioners, this paper has highlighted differences in the levels of compliance with institutional agendas. However, these positions are not fixed. More transgressive practitioners appear to have more resources to draw on in developing their own reflexive positions. In order for all practitioners to function in a more reflexive way to meet the needs of the individuals with whom they work, they need to be equipped with these resources, both in terms of agency in developing their practices and in structural and contextual knowledge. For compliant practitioners, lack of experience in the sector or agency in their practice may hold them in this position. I argue that in order to reimagine practice to offer practitioners the tools to adopt a more transgressive position, allowing them to focus more on the needs of the individuals they work with.

This requires individuals who are empowered to work in the interests of individuals and an institution that supports this approach. Whether this is possible in an increasingly marketised field is a subject for debate and may require regulatory pressure or the disentanglement of widening participation work from the mechanisms of competition the field reinforces. Collaborative approaches could be seen as a mitigation for institutional power, however the fact that practitioners are still often physically located within and employed by a specific institution means that this latent power remains. However, the data support the argument that networking and discussing issues of widening participation beyond institutional silos is important. Those who adopted

more transgressive positions all talked about participation in conferences and outside networks. The value afforded to this is variable across the sector. Carol (post-92) felt that there was limited time and space to do this in her institution. This meant that different institutional environments resulted in differing approaches. Yet engagement with policy, research and external networks only have the ability to deeply affect practice when there is time and space to reflect on this engagement. As Sayer (2011, 26) argued:

Our 'professed values' may also differ from our 'values in use', not necessarily through deliberate deceit, but through lack of reflection and self-knowledge.

This resonated with one of the common themes in the data ; that of a lack of time and space to reflect on practice and echoes with wider studies on academic staff in universities (Mahony and Weiner 2017). However even where practitioners were time poor, having studied for a related postgraduate qualification seemed to create a greater awareness of the importance of taking a macro view of the sector to keep up to date with policy changes

The role of experience, context, understandings of structural and cultural issues and an individual's *modus vivendi* all play a part in the positionality of practitioners. To enable more transgressive practices to emerge, opportunities for individual practitioner development are needed. Penny Jane Burke (2012), drawing on feminist practices argues that in order that widening participation can be transformative, critical tools need to be employed to challenge taken for granted meanings. This is beyond the current abilities of most practitioners. Those who demonstrate a more critical perspective have done so because of their previous training in teaching or social science. I therefore argue that by giving sociological training to all practitioners as standard practice we can begin to foster this criticality. Whilst existing training and opportunities such as master's

degree in Education go some way to addressing this, accessing is reliant on institutional funding and is not universal to all practitioners.

Additionally, drawing on the work of bell hooks, Burke argues that ‘to teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think’ (hooks 1994, 11). I would argue that this is key but to enable this, some form of pedagogical training is needed. Whilst work done by widening participation practitioners is less formal than academic teaching in a school or university context, it is nonetheless a pedagogical act. For this pedagogy to be effective there therefore needs to be some awareness of what pedagogy is and how it works. Some practitioners come with those skills as trained teachers but not all do, and even those who have been trained in pedagogy may in many cases benefit from reflecting on the way in which they enact that pedagogy to ensure it engages with those learners to make them active participants in learning. This is extremely important, as the groups who are often the targets of this work, may have been ‘switched off’ from traditional didactic teaching and therefore being able to show them that education can be engaging and emancipatory is vital. For this change to be widespread, core training needs to be mandatory across the sector. Without making it mandatory, the effect of developing such training is likely to be unequal and available only to those with the interest and material resources to access it.

Whilst training is important, just offering professional training is unlikely to solve the problem. When policy pressures force institutions into a quantified focus on delivering more events and interacting with more individuals, valuing scale over quality, there is unlikely to be the space to implement valuable reflective practice. The demands placed upon practitioners to meet institutional targets and the issues of performativity noted more widely in HE (Mahony and Weiner 2017) mean that time not spent delivering an intervention is often challenged for its value. This devaluation of the

space to critically deconstruct practices therefore limits their effectiveness and it is the role of policymakers to put pressure on institutions to ensure that reflective practice becomes embedded in what institutions are expected to do. This is also about value and the value institutions place on the work done by these practitioners not only to widen participation but to prepare students from under-represented groups to enable them to make a successful transition to HE. These reflective practices are important especially given the broad spectrum of characteristics that define a widening participation student in order to prevent the reification of stereotypical assumptions.

Whilst improving the status and the training afforded to widening participation practitioners would go some way to addressing many of these issues, the actual picture is more complex. Firstly, structural issues endure. This paper has explored the role in individuals' practices transgressing from institutional positions but of course none of this transgression would be needed if institutions focused more on individual's needs as opposed to narrow framings of what success in widening participation looks like, that is the increasing recruitment of under-represented groups. Furthermore, pre-entry widening participation work is necessarily not a discreet area and in fact many benefits are derived from the inclusion of academics and student staff in the design and delivery of these interventions creating pathways into HE provision. However, many of the issues impacting policy enactment would also apply to these groups. The challenge to address these issues with a wider group this is more complex, especially when this work may only be a fraction of what they do in the overall employment or studies. Therefore, other methods of reaching staff in academic focused roles may be needed, such as integrating similar training within the professionalisation of teaching staff agenda.

Conclusions

Through the practitioners' narratives five key types of practitioner emerged, theorised through their orientation to individual or institutional concerns and by their compliance or transgression from institutional positions. Where individuals have fewer resources to draw on, be it experience or agency in their roles, they are more likely to adopt the position of a compliant practitioner. This compliance without understanding the impact of inequality and the complexity this can create in lives of their participants has the potential to cause unintended harm for example through framing their aspirations as in deficit. Where they have more experience, or deeper understandings of the complexities of the work they do, they were more likely to adopt one of the transgressive positions, with the level of agency in their role constraining the extent to which they can transgress. There certainly seems to be the possibility for working in a team to influence their positions and I have argued that relative lack of experience or smaller teams may increase the institutional influence. Additionally and as argued for in the wider study, the tensions between individuals and practitioners could be addressed through re-evaluating institutional framings of widening participation (Rainford 2019). However structural change is often harder to realise than practice level change.

On this basis, the role that practitioners play in policy enactment is worthy of further exploration to enable further development of the model. This might foreground additional positions and deeper understandings of what causes individuals to shift positions. Furthermore, resonance for this model could be tested in international contexts where policy processes and differing forces of marketisation may impact pre-entry access to higher education work in different ways.

Through understanding how and why different positions are adopted, we can better develop training to ensure that they are working in a way which best meets the needs of the individuals who should be the primary beneficiaries of widening

participation. Some of these solutions involve valuing reflective practice and giving time and space for practitioners to work in a more critical way or providing more formal training in the structural and cultural issues which impact upon the groups with which they work. This may also involve taking a more holistic look at who delivers work and how prepared they are to do so, creating recruitment pathways from teaching and social science degrees into the field.

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Institution	Practitioner	Gender	First Gen. HE	Ethnicity	Disability
Pre-92 A	Beverley	F	Y	Black or Black British- African	N
	Samantha	F	N	Black or Black British- Caribbean	N
	Karen	F	N	White	N
	Lucy	F	N	White	N
Pre-92 B	Andrea	F	Y	White	N
	Emily	F	Y	White	N
	Hannah	F	Y	White	N
	Sophie	F	Y	White	N
Post-92 A	Mel	F	Y	White	N
	David	M	N	White	N
	Rebecca	F	N	White	N
	Rob	M	N	Other Asian Background	N
Additional Post-92 Participants	Katie	F	N	White	N
	Carol	F	Y	White	Y
	Andrew	M	N	Other White	N
	Alice	f	N	White	N

Table 1. Participant characteristics and institutions

Situated contexts	Personal histories, Places they have lived, Previous jobs
Professional cultures	Ethos of the team, Institutional Doxa, Training

Material contexts	Teams worked within, Emphasis placed on different part of their roles
External contexts	Engagement in wider sector, Policy pressures

Table 2. Contextual dimensions of policy enactment in widening participation