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Widening participation in higher education: the role of professional and social class identities and commitments

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Since the neoliberal reforms to British education in the 1980s, education debates have been saturated with claims to the efficacy of the market as a mechanism for improving the content and delivery of state education. In recent decades with the expansion and ‘massification’ of higher education, widening participation (WP) has acquired an increasingly important role in redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in universities. Taken together, these trends neatly capture the twin goals of New Labour’s programme for education reform: economic competitiveness and social justice. But how do WP professionals negotiate competing demands of social equity and economic incentive? In this paper we explore how the hegemony of neoliberal discourse – of which the student as consumer is possibly the most pervasive – can be usefully disentangled from socially progressive, professional discourses exemplified through the speech and actions of WP practitioners and managers working in British higher education institutions.

Keywords: higher education; widening participation; language; professionalism; neoliberalism; social class

Introduction

Evident in the bulk of critical education research dealing with issues in higher education (access, retention, institutional barriers, admissions, enrolment, pedagogy and learning) has been a much-needed and sophisticated account of the variegation in the cultural dispositions, attitudes and motivations informing students’ perceptions and valuations of higher education. In recent years, British education analysts working within sociology of education, Bourdieuian, feminist and poststructuralist frameworks have engaged in important research to explore students’ choice of university degree and

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institution, with particular reference to the impact of students' background (differentiated by geography, family, social class, gender, ethnicity or 'race') on their university choice (for example, see Allan, Iverson, and Ropers-Huilman 2009; Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Ball, Reay, and David 2002; Burke 2004, 2007; Crozier and Reay 2011; Read and Francis 2005; Reay 2001; Reay et al. 2001). An additional component to this research concerns the extent to which there is disjunction or mutuality between students' background and the academic culture in which they find themselves. The key observation here being that academic culture(s) – far from a neutral terrain, divested of cultural and class prejudice – is in reality disciplinary, hierarchical, authoritative and entrenched (to differing extents) in institutional and cultural bias. Consequently, students are summoned to adjust their behaviour and learning to fit with culturally implicit norms and pedagogical demands. To be legitimated and rewarded is to inhabit and perform requisite skills and roles.

For Bourdieu (1997) and Bernstein (1975), this adjustment tends to be exacerbated in the case of working-class students since education institutions articulate (circulate and legitimate) norms and values already available to the middle classes. From this perspective, higher education institutions (HEIs), especially the 'old' HEIs, work to the detriment of working-class students since they offer up a field of identifications, symbols and cultural repertoires that are unfamiliar to them. According to Reay, this gives rise to tension and anxiety in the way some working-class students choose a university to study at because it involves the 'problematic of reconciling academic success with working-class identity' (2001, p. 339) – two seeming incompatible sets of discourses and positions.

Similarly, education researchers interested in policies aimed at widening access to and participation in HEIs for working-class entrants point to how widening participation (WP) operates through a 'deficit model' that positions working-class students as 'lacking' (Bridges 2005; Burke 2002; Gorad et al. 2006). To be working class is therefore to be seen as different and 'foundationally 'other' to a middle-class existence that is silently marked as normal and desirable' (Lawler 2005, 431). Above all, working-class students are held to signify cultural and linguistic lack in terms of the skills, experiences and competencies (e.g. cultural and social capital) they bring to HEIs. This paper sets out to provide an original contribution to these debates by exploring the perspectives and understandings of those who work to improve the success of working-class students entering HEIs, namely WP managers and practitioners.

To provide this contribution we attend to the ways in which some WP managers and practitioners engage in challenging, undoing and recoding the language of WP, either through invoking the language of social class or through promoting understandings of professional purpose and public interest. We are keenly aware that language 'define[s] the contours of what

we can [and cannot] do' (Zizek 2009, 109). On this basis, we identify WP professionals' struggle over meaning as symptomatic of the constraining effects brought on by the government's preference for a certain vocabulary, namely a neoliberal one. We argue that the types of canonical concepts that are particular to WP discourses (including choice, empowerment, aspiration and achievement, to name a few) are sometimes abridged through government texts and policies into a single governing norm: the creation of students of consumers. The fluidity of these concepts are condensed and compressed through government policy texts to compliment a neoliberal vision of education reform. The aim of this paper therefore is to foreground the multifaceted conditioning of these concepts, to demonstrate how they stand at the intersection of competing political philosophies and pedagogical norms (namely progressive-professional discourses *and* neoliberal discourses), and to disentangle the different norms and values apportioned to them by WP managers and practitioners.

In what follows we offer a brief outline of the character of New Labour WP policies and strategies, highlighting its combined and uneven development through its articulation and imbrication of discourses of social distribution and neoliberalism. We then move onto a brief discussion of the changes introduced to WP policy and practice under the Coalition government, and indicate the thrust of neoliberalization as a primary driver for shaping recent WP initiatives. This is followed by a section on methodology before we analyse in-depth qualitative data taken from interviews with several WP managers and practitioners working in British HEIs. To conclude the paper we outline a set of key observations to emerge from our analysis of the data and discuss their merit in terms of contributing to existing and future academic and policy debates on WP.

Neoliberal frameworks shaping higher education

As we have already indicated, the vernacular circulated through WP texts and practices (as conceived by New Labour and later partly proselytized and partly reworked by the Coalition government) works to sustain a particular field of relationships and identifications in the realm of higher education. Understood from the perspective of 'governmentalization' (see Foucault 1979), these policy experiments can be conceptualized as instruments and technologies geared towards summoning at a distance practitioners, service managers and students as self-governing, 'willing selves' (e.g. active, managerial, self-improving, aspirational, engaged, etc.), but also therefore acting within a pre-determined horizon of thinking and behaviour. This is evidenced by the trajectory and scope of WP policy since its creation under New Labour.

During the years 1997–2010 when New Labour were in power, the participation rates for young people entering higher education in the United

Kingdom were considered low by international standards (OECD 2005), with further evidence to suggest that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds were disproportionately less likely to access post-compulsory education (Blanden and Machin 2004; Machin and Vignoles 2004). More recent statistics made available by the Higher Education Funding Council for Education (HEFCE 2010), however, claim that the above trends are today less acute and the likelihood of those from the lowest participation areas taking up a place at university (e.g. areas where the participation rates for young people entering post-compulsory education is low) has increased by 30% over the last five years and by 50% over the last 15 years. University enrolment figures obtained by the Sutton Trust (2010), however, conclude that the proportion of children on free school meals enrolled at the 25 most academically selective universities in England over the three-year period 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08 is equal to only 2% (approximately 1300 pupils each year) compared with 72.2% of other state school pupils and 25.8% educated at independent schools. The focus of these statistics can be used to illustrate the shift away from 'widening participation' (as conceived by the New Labour government) and a concentration on 'fair access', which refers to whether what we might call elite universities are truly inclusive (also a dominant theme of New Labour policy discourse).

To summon the participation of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in further and higher education, the New Labour administration implemented the Excellence in Cities programme in various phases from September 1999 and the AimHigher: Excellence Challenge in September 2001, later renamed AimHigher in 2004. Jointly funded by the HEFCE and the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, AimHigher was responsible for distributing capital to HEIs. The bulk of this capital was used by HEIs to fund and coordinate outreach programmes aimed at recruiting disadvantaged young people as well as to provide financial support, such as bursaries and maintenance grants, to assist poorer students cover university expenses and living costs (Department for Education and Skill [DfES] 2006a, 2006b). Couched in 'both economic reasons and reasons for social justice' (DfES 2006a, 3), AimHigher captured New Labour's preference for 'Third Way' (Giddens 1998) solutions to education reform, namely the practice of pursuing cheek-by-jowl market principles and progressive democratic values as policy devices for welfare change. (As we will shortly demonstrate, WP and associated initiatives are now explicitly constructed in economic-instrumental terms as beneficial to capitalist enterprise and the wider transnational ambitions of the global knowledge-based economy.) This is what Stuart Hall (2005, 319) labels New Labour's 'double shuffle': the act of speaking with a forked tongue through articulating and reconciling seemingly disparate and concordant political philosophies, governmental discourses and ethical imperatives. Borrowing from the

lexicon of Gramsci, Leggett characterizes this complex governmental configuration as a passive revolution used to co-opt and fragment oppositional discourses and actors:

Passive revolution refers to the capacity of the ruling classes, during periods of upheaval, to make political changes ‘from above’ which diminish oppositional forces and enable the reproduction of core capitalist economic and social relations. (Leggett 2009, 144–145)

As we will show later in our discussion of the interview data, the idea that different political and economic imperatives can be successfully combined or aligned through a single governmentality is a contested one, simply because it fails to appreciate how governmental aims are enacted, translated and refracted through the perspectives and actions of practitioners. Here we recognize that government does not translate directly into governance. Government signifies legislative and judicial processes, which include the creation, amendment and repeal of laws and policy. Governance concerns something qualitatively different: the micro-politics of preparing the way for the impact of government decisions. In other words, governance refers to policy enactments (implementation) and their transmission, reproduction and consumption within society and by people. This raises the possibility of resistance at the level of interaction between policy and practice, and of governmental aims becoming co-opted and revised by the people who implement them. As Clarke observes, human action and reaction are not simply the product or effect of power as a domination: ‘Achieving and maintaining subjection, subordination or system reproduction requires work/practice – because control is imperfect and incomplete in the face of contradictory systems, contested positions and contentious subjects’ (2004, 2–3). Translation of governmental aims aside, the thrust of ‘neoliberalization’ as a lever for steering WP policy discourse and development is, at the present time, axiomatic.

Consistent with elements of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ approach to welfare reform, Aimhigher¹ was partly driven by social distribution. Also consistent with ‘Third Way’ philosophy, Aimhigher was motivated by neoliberal incentives; namely the economic necessity to narrow the gap between requisite learning skills and the demands of the knowledge economy (see Lambert 2009). As New Labour outlined in no uncertain terms, the ‘imperative for public education [is] to prove it can respond to the challenges of the new economy’ (Department for Education and Employment 2001, 1.2). Later in 2003 New Labour alluded to a similar set of propositions and demands, this time bringing into focus the importance of the ‘independent learner’:

Today’s generation of students will need to return to learning – full-time or part-time – on more than one occasion across their lifetime in order to refresh

their knowledge, upgrade their skills and sustain their employability. Such independent learners investing in the continuous improvement of their skills will underpin innovation and enterprise in the economy and society. (DfES, 2003, 16)

As Ball (2008, 9) observes, New Labour's appeal to the superiority of markets (over welfare-bureaucracy regimes) and global competitiveness reflect the 'subordination of education to economic imperatives'. Such privileging of the unfettered operation of markets (of competition, consumerism and entrepreneurialism) as mechanisms for transforming education can be traced as far back as the Thatcher era (1988 Education Act), where the idea was to vocationalize higher education, integrate 'enterprise' into degree schemes and generate closer links between higher education and industry and commerce (Trowler 1998).

Subsequent to the electoral victory of the Conservative government on 6 May 2010 together with the support of the Liberal Democrats (conjoining to make the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government) these trends towards 'enterprise' and de-centralization were intensified to coincide with adjustments to how WP activities and strategies would be governed in the future. On July 2011 the Coalition government terminated Aimhigher while retaining elements of New Labour's commitment to WP. To be precise, the national framework through which WP was previously centrally organized (e.g. the Aimhigher National Advisory Board and the Aimhigher Management Group) was abandoned and instead the Coalition government proposed to further facilitate a context of devolved management in which universities run their own WP schemes made of bespoke, 'in-house' access initiatives. Under current proposals, the HEFCE make the continued receipt of the WP budget allocation conditional on the production of an annual Access Agreement that all HEIs charging tuition fees more than £6000 (more than the basic level of graduate contributions) are required to submit to the Office for Fair Access.

Further evidence of 'neoliberalization' of higher education can be discerned through the generation of links between education outcomes and labour-market demands. This is particularly evident when we consider the coalition government's response to the recommendations outlined by the Careers Progression Task Force in their report *Towards a Strong Careers Progression* (Department for Education [DfE] 2010). On the strength of this report, the Coalition government announced further plans to introduce a mixed economy of private, public and voluntary sector organizations to provide students with 'comprehensive information about careers, skills and the labour market' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2011, 5:10). The design and scope of these policy initiatives concern further embedding young people in flows, networks and mediations which have at their centre the figure of the 'citizen-consumer' (Clarke et al. 2007) and which conform

to the idea that public services should be delivered in accordance with the rights of citizens as consumers (Dunleavy 1991). Echoing the Browne Report (2010, 9) on higher education funding and student finance with its emphasis on ‘more choice, more opportunities’ and making available ‘better information about courses’, the Task Force report ascribes importance to the notion of student choice as a lever for widening access to and participation in HEIs:

Choice is an important part of the education system. It gives all students, from all backgrounds, the freedom and opportunity to pursue subjects and interests which best suit their talents and aspirations. It is critical that young people and their parents are well-informed about the potential of these decisions, and the positive ways they can influence their future working lives. (DfE 2010, 6)

The insertion of concepts of ‘choice’, ‘freedom’ and ‘well-informed’ allude to the grammar of neoliberalism and, by implication, the importance attached to an imagery of student choice as exercised by an empowered consumer in pursuit of individual desires. Young people are summoned as individuals who (through choice or imposition) act on the basis of rational considerations for their own future welfare and employment; in other words, as self-responsible, independent and calculating agents. This is similar to how parents are summoned as choosers of education services and located through an active–passive dynamic in which they are positioned as either discriminating and deserving or inert and undeserving (Wilkins 2010, 2011). As identified by the Task Force report, the combination of a post-Fordist economy and precarious labour market means young people, if they are to persevere and overcome the barriers to gaining future employment, must align themselves with these trends in terms of inhabiting and performing the consumer-oriented roles made available: ‘Young people are facing an increasingly competitive employment market’ (DfE 2010, 6). As a result of these trends, further education colleges and HEIs are becoming further encouraged to incorporate ‘enterprise’ into their procedures and rationale (in other words, submit to the pressures of a competitive international economic environment) as a matter of ensuring future employability, preserving economic sustainability and the wealth of the nation.

What does this all mean for the scope and content of WP discourses and activities? Such language can be understood to be skewed to emphasize the demands (or ‘opportunities’, as the Task Force report phrases it) of the global knowledge-based economy and of neoliberal incentives more generally. However, in the spirit of immanent critique, we will explore how the hegemony of neoliberal discourse – of which the student as consumer is possibly the most pervasive – can be usefully disentangled from progressive-democratic and professional discourses. We utilize the term professional discourse or ‘professionalism’ in a very specific sense to refer to a code of

professional conduct oriented towards social progression and the ‘public good’ (Millerson 1964). At the same time, we do not wish to suggest there is a typology or set of normative claims to which the definition and practice of ‘professionalism’ can be securely affixed. We acknowledge on the basis of sociological perspectives on professionalism (see Hanlon 1998) that the professional conduct of persons is in practice a shifting, porous and unstable phenomenon.

In our analysis of the following interview data we will discern the extent to which the figure of the student as consumer is at the centre of WP initiatives and strategies. Moving beyond a narrow utilitarian focus on students as bearers of consumer dispositions and rights (e.g. competitive, informed and discriminating) we highlight instead how the voices of some WP managers and practitioners are powerfully shaped by professional and social class identities and commitments. We focus on the cultural politics that underpin these discourses and capture the interlocking political philosophies, social sensibilities and pedagogical norms through which the language of WP is lived and practised.

Methodology

The interview data analysed in this paper emerged out of a small-scale research project led by Penny Jane Burke and funded by a Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellowship Award. The project served as research background to *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation* (Burke 2012). The aim of the project was to capture the experiences, perspectives, identities, roles and positions of those working in higher education with a specific responsibility for WP. The research consisted of interviews with seven WP managers and practitioners working across seven different universities. The interviews were conducted during 2010, shortly before the Coalition government reorganized Aimhigher to be managed within a context of devolved governance, with centralized authority replaced by sector-owned bodies as part of the development and design of service delivery improvement in post-compulsory education. Each participant was invited to discuss their background and role in relation to WP work and how this might be connected to wider socio-cultural, institutional and professional discourses. Each participant was selected to be interviewed on the basis of the type of HEI they worked at: New (former polytechnic), Specialist or Russell Group. This was driven by a desire to ensure a cross-section of professionals working across the British higher education sector. Each interview was conducted over the telephone and was recorded to be later transcribed verbatim for coding and analysis. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of material, the real name for each participant has been replaced with a pseudonym. Similarly, pseudonyms have been used to conceal the names of any other individuals and institutions mentioned.

Interview schedules were formulated to ensure the highest possible yield in terms of eliciting rich and insightful responses. The interview method incorporated a style of interviewing and questioning that, while attending to the core questions and sub-questions outlined in the interview schedule, proceeded inductively in order to elicit the most ordinary speech acts; for example, the use of follow-up questions that encouraged flexible and open-ended responses.

To study the empirical data we utilize elements of critical sociological and post-structuralist analysis; in particular, discourse analysis (Wetherell 1998; Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001). As we have already indicated, the success of government in terms of fully constituting the discourses and practices of public institutions can never be taken for granted (Clarke 2004), but must be interrogated as sites of resistance and contestation, revision and re-articulation. Critical discourse analysis complements the scope of our aims in so far as we are interested in how WP managers and practitioners account for their commitments to and valuations of the work they do. We take seriously the idea that policies can be read as dynamic and productive spaces in which the fields of possibilities and problems (or ideological dilemmas) are negotiated (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001). Specifically, we employ the idea that conceptions of subjectivity and identity can be viewed as performatively re-inscribed through, although not exclusively bound to, patterns and rhythms of speech as vehicles for social action (Wetherell 2005). This means paying careful attention to how policy discourse is translated and practised at the level of everyday speech or ‘discursive repertoires’ (Wetherell 1998), which refer to shared patterns of describing, arguing and evaluating. On this view it is possible to appreciate how WP managers and practitioners sometimes refuse the discursive resources available to them or re-articulate them to compliment and reaffirm their own values; in this case, distinct ideas concerning professional and social class identities and commitments.

‘Middle class but very interested ...’: social class framings and professional commitments

When invited to discuss their personal or professional commitments to WP in higher education, many of the WP managers and practitioners we interviewed emphasized social class as an important factor. One particular WP manager, Beth, recalled memories of growing up and of her family background:

It was my family, my father’s family came from a Romany traveller background ... We did play with the village children, of course, and we went to the local village school, which my parents both believed in quite strongly, that everybody should mix, despite being quite Tory they were very against

discrimination on any grounds. (Beth, Head of Widening Participation, HEI type: Russell Group)

Beth highlights memories of growing up with a father of ‘Romany traveller background’ and with parents broadly committed to ideals of social mixing and anti-discrimination. For Beth, these memories serve as powerful vehicles for social action; namely a personal and professional commitment to WP. Understood from a discourse analytic perspective, speech patterns are made intelligible through communicative acts of enunciation and pronunciation – ‘the local pragmatics of that particular conversational context’ (Wetherell and Edley 1999, 338). Speech patterns become refracted and sometimes disjointed through local or regional dialects, for example. But more importantly from a discourse approach (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell 1998), speech patterns require some form of cultural intelligibility for them to be understood by others, including the presence of familiar tropes and shared forms of description, evaluation and argumentation (socially circulating discourses). As illustrated above by Beth, memories of socially produced discourses feed into practices of ‘accounting’ for personal attitudes and motivations (Wetherell 2005). They constitute the generation of the discursive production of social selves. Another WP manager, Sarah, highlights social class as instrumental to her decision to promote WP:

It’s my professional interest and belief in social justice. Pretty much all of my career I’ve been working in social justice. Also my own background, a working-class family. Went to university when people from my background didn’t go to university, so I feel really committed to widening participation. (Sarah, Head of Widening Participation, HEI type: Specialist)

Sarah makes explicit her ‘professional interest’ in WP, which she links directly to a ‘belief in social justice’ and to her background as someone born into a ‘working-class family’. For Sarah, social class feeling and understanding underpins her personal and professional commitments to WP. It is the circumstance of being historically and socially situated as a classed subject which Sarah explains motivates her to improve the educational opportunities of others. Both Beth and Sarah therefore demonstrate how professional roles and responsibilities are interlaced with how people locate themselves and others, experientially and socially, through the categories and divisions posited through a class society or class culture. This demonstrates how affective aspects of social class – the place of memory, feelings of ambivalence and signifiers of taste, for example (Sayer 2005) – combine to inform the ways in which professional roles are inhabited and performed. It indicates one of the ways in which the personal – the realm of memory, sensation and feeling – is translated through the availability of scattered discursive resources. The suggestion here is that linguistic

utterances do not simply describe a psychology and interiority particular to the speaking subject. They can be more usefully understood as productive of the ways in which subjects identify and position themselves *vis-à-vis* others. Moreover, social class plays a key role in how some individuals account for the professional orientations and commitments of others. As Sarah explains:

Largely the people I work with are middle class. I am trying to think of anybody that I work with there are very, very few people who are working class, which is quite interesting, on two levels really. Firstly it means that these people have no real experience of working-class people or working-class life or understanding of working-class life.

When prompted to talk about other people from within her department, Sarah highlights that a disproportionate number of them are ‘middle class’. Moreover, she ascribes negative value to this position. In a reversal of the conventional way working-class students are positioned through a deficit model of WP as symbolically and culturally redundant (Gorad et al. 2006), Sarah proposes that it is middle-class professionals who are lacking – lacking ‘real experience of working-class people or working class life’. As Sarah further explains:

So much of it is hard really, to pinpoint something in particular really using WP to further their own career, but actually have very little understanding of what it’s about ... they don’t really have an understanding of what the issues are, what the kind of barriers are to entering higher education for some people ... Some people are really interested, there’s one person on my team who is actually very interested in education, middle class but very interested in education.

Here, again, we are reminded of the interrelation of social class identities and professional commitments, and how ‘professionalism’ stands at the intersection of multiple sets of competing and sometimes contradictory discourses. For Sarah, WP initiatives are structured within a field of contested relationships and identifications that are not altogether compatible. Middle-class professionals are typically attracted to WP, for example, and therefore WP risks becoming a colonizing project for the proselytization of middle-class norms and values. Against this approach, Sarah argues that the professional activity of improving the educational opportunities of young people is best served when there exists among WP managers and practitioners an ‘understanding of what the issues are [and] what the kind of barriers are to entering higher education for some people’. This tends to favour the working-class professional because s/he can identify materially and socially with the circumstances of those being targeted by WP strategies. The suggestion here is that working-class empathy is crucial in terms of generating forms of professionalism that are ‘authentic’ and rooted in lived or ‘real

experience' (Sarah). Professionalism in this context is wedded to the task of authentically knowing the working-class other.

This captures the tension between *working-class empathy* on the one hand (compassion for and awareness of the other based on direct contact or experience) and what might be termed *middle-class sympathy* on the other. The latter, it can be argued, informs a large part of WP work because it is performed and implemented by a labour force consisting primarily of middle-class professionals seeking to enhance the learning opportunities and future employment of disadvantaged young people. Without downplaying the sincerity that naturally follows from helping others, Sarah interprets these acts in cynical terms as ostensibly lacking experiential and emotional resonance. This is because of the contrast in class background between WP managers and practitioners (predominantly middle class) and the likely recipients of WP outreach activities (overwhelming working class). Sarah further suggests that these acts can be judged in economic-instrumental terms as opportunities for individuals to advance their professional careers, thus reducing elements of the ethical-moral scope of WP work to instances of career opportunism.

As we have already alluded to, official policy discourse on WP is crafted with the student as consumer at its centre. Young people are summoned through these documents as individuals who are best served as calculating agents vying for competitive advantage in a higher education market. WP managers and practitioners, on the other hand, interpellate young people differently and in a way that redeems conventional notions of public sector professionalism; namely equality, social justice and collective notions of the 'public good':

If you are from a working-class background you don't feel that, you don't have that same sense of higher education as an entitlement, and when somebody from a higher education institutions says actually we've got a place for you it does fill that kind of blank that middle-class parents create a structure around. (Josh, Schools and Colleges Outreach Manager, HEI type: New)

Here, Josh, a WP manager, explains some of the difficulties encountered by young people of a 'working-class background' who typically lack the educational and aspirational opportunities made available by 'middle-class parents'. He offers a conception of young people as classed subjects who experience different levels of material, educational and cultural advantage. Such explicit engagements with social class formulations of subjectivity typify a break with formal representations of WP policy discourse. In a similar vein, Sarah explains the importance of social class for WP initiatives:

It's taken me a long time to kind of, it's been very difficult, to kind of get my team to understand that it's not about finding talented young people and creaming off people who are, you know, it's not cherry picking, it's not, you know, there's a group of people who are naturally intelligent and we have to save them from their working-class existence. (Sarah, Head of Widening Participation, HEI type: Specialist)

In terms of professional leadership and governance, Sarah explains the difficulties associated with steering her WP team towards achieving particular aims, processes and outcomes. In particular, she repudiates or complicates the idea that WP is simply about 'cherry picking' people 'who are naturally intelligent'. Sarah's choice of discursive repertoires – of 'working-class' and 'group of people' for example – is no coincidence. It hints at the contested field of meanings and relationships through which WP professionals are expected to operationalize their judgements of who should and should not be targeted for WP initiatives. Sarah makes explicit her judgement that WP is not simply about identifying the 'naturally intelligent' portion of 'working-class' young people who are likely to benefit most from higher education provision. Sarah stakes a claim on the ability or future potential of *all* young people to achieve through higher education. Both Josh and Sarah allude to a particular professional code of conduct and orientation among some WP managers, namely a commitment to social justice and to a belief that there exist fundamental inequities in how material and cultural resources and opportunities are distributed to different members of society.

Blurred boundaries and intersecting vocabularies

As we demonstrated, social class and professional commitments and identities intersect to produce particular orientations to and understandings of WP. Social class in particular impacts on how some WP managers account for their personal and professional motivations and commitments, as well as the orientations and attitudes of others working to promote WP. From this perspective, social class makes available a set of recognizable tropes or 'discursive repertoires' (Wetherell 1998) for linking together the personal and the professional. Accordingly, these socially circulating discourses opened spaces for linking the notion of professionalism to ideas of the 'public' (public service ethos, public service orientation, the public interest, the public sector, public service management, and so forth).

Social class and public professionalism aside, WP is envisioned through government policy as best placed as a market-driven activity. The idea here is that improvement in education outcomes for the least advantaged people can be best managed through making available greater information to an

aggregate of discriminating and atomized customers. This is evidenced by the fact that one of the most repeated words in the DfE (2010) policy document *Towards a Strong Careers Progression* is ‘choice’. Choice is the linchpin of a neoliberal governmental strategy committed to creating citizens who inhabit and perform the logics and dynamics that spring out of the role of the consumer (Wilkins 2010). Hence, it is unsurprising that many researchers and commentators focus almost exclusively on the utilitarian-instrumental scope of higher education initiatives and the ever-increasing shift towards consumerism, managerialism and marketization as levers for restructuring the roles and responsibilities of learners and universities. As we have already indicated through our review of government texts, concepts of choice and empowerment take on a specific kind of meaning in these contexts. They are mobilized to index and legitimate consumer-based idealizations of agency as well as engender forms of consumer-performative accountability through which HEIs might be made intelligible to the corporate edifice of market-led rationalities and procedures (e.g. university as provider). This language is also evident through the voices of some WP managers and practitioners:

We stress very much that it's about helping people make the right choice.
(Beth, Head of Widening Participation, HEI type: Russell Group)

As Beth demonstrates, a key strategy for her team concerns ‘helping people make the right choice’, presumably through guiding young people into choosing a university that best matches their skills, qualifications and aspirations. In this case, we might argue that Beth and her team are implicated in the construction of young people as consumers, because they are concerned with empowering young people in their role as discriminating and well-informed agents of higher education provision. At the same time, we cannot reduce Beth’s voice to the reflex of a pro-market position. Choice encompasses more than simply locating individuals within consumer-based attitudes, values and forms of self-understanding. It is important to recognize for example that the meaning and practice of choice contains multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory elements which cannot be contained through the lens of a singular consumerist discourse. Vocabulary and expression is multiply owned.

It's not about making people better people, because that's just really patronising. For me it's about giving people choices in their life. (Sarah, Head of Widening Participation, HEI type: Specialist)

Sarah demonstrates how the meaning and practice of choice can be read differently to a purely narrow utilitarian conception of freedom and aspiration – ‘making people better people’, she explains. It can be aligned also with social democratic notions of social justice, equality and improving the

life-chances of disadvantaged individuals. Such language goes beyond the myopic focus of neoliberal discourse – what Burke describes as ‘hegemonic utilitarian and neoliberal widening participation frameworks’ (2012, 194) – to steer the aims, intentions and outcomes of WP towards social democratic conceptions of empowerment, freedom and choice. Josh, a WP manager, offers up a similar set of understandings and perspectives:

I think, for me actually, I think creating that sense of self-efficacy, sort of a fundamental feeling that you can, you are powerful enough to take decisions which will affect your life in radical ways. (Josh, Schools and Colleges Outreach Manager, HEI type: New)

For Josh, the importance of WP lies in creating among young people ‘a fundamental feeling that you can, you are powerful enough to take decisions that will affect your life in radical ways’. The use of the adjective ‘radical’ registers an extreme and unprecedented break with or reaction against convention, for example. It conjures up an image of a metamorphous of character, lifestyle or attitude that is not simply about ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ in the narrow utilitarian-economic sense, but alludes to a transformation of relations to the self and engagement in the world. The thrust of our argument is that these policy arenas are contested spaces where the struggle over meaning is forever palpable. This suggests that meanings and practices of choice, freedom, opportunity and empowerment – all of which tend to be operationalized through government texts as commensurate with the activity of consumer choice – can be usefully aligned with alternative, progressive education trends. As we have already illustrated, some WP managers and practitioners negotiate the language of WP to complement a pluralistic conception of inclusion and social justice. This is important to the task of disrupting the generic language underpinning governmental policy discourse, with its emphasis on inducing the active enlistment of young people as economizing agents who only experience empowerment through choice-making. What the above extracts demonstrate is how the language of WP is a contested terrain open to revision and translation as it becomes entangled with the social class and professional identities and commitments of WP professionals.

Conclusion

In this paper we have utilized a discourse analytic approach (Wetherell 1998) to illustrate how WP discourses and activities are powerfully shaped by the ethical, moral and social class commitments of WP professionals. Specifically, we have indicated how some WP professionals attach significance to social class as a discourse and framing for steering the implementation and development of WP policy and practice. This highlights the work

performed by WP managers and practitioners to be active and creative, socially produced and historically situated. From this perspective, WP policy involves innovation, experimentation and contestation rather than the rolling out of a stable programme of reform. The scope and content of WP activities across different universities therefore do not flow directly and uniformly from the policy projects produced by neoliberalism. Instead they are reworked and imagined differently through the contingency and particularity of local actors and their elected professional and social class attachments. Moreover, we have pointed to how the language of WP stands at the intersection of a number of competing and potentially contradictory discourses (democratic-progressive and neoliberal, for example). A corollary of this is that WP initiatives and strategies can be conceptualized in contingent terms as arenas where there is struggle over meaning and where the ideological dilemmas of policy-making reveal themselves through the voices and actions of public service practitioners.

The period from 1980 to the present has been one in which social class has been reduced to the ranks of a ‘zombie’ category (Beck 2001) and contrary to the ‘reality’ of really existing postmodern, consumer-driven, cosmopolitan societies. As observed by Gewirtz (2001), New Labour’s move towards the Centre-Left effected a depoliticization of the language of social class, to the extent that categories and distinctions of social class have been further eviscerated of their political force and content. These trends have given rise to, among other things, populist forms of political representation that have frustrated traditional party politics (Laclau 2005) and facilitated the rise of what we identify today as moderate, ‘progressive’ governments who are obsessed with marketization, consumerism and administration over politics (best captured through New Labour’s mantra ‘what matters is what works’). In this paper we have outlined the extent to which progressive democratic conceptions of WP (of equality and social justice, for example) are not simply compatible with the social class identities and commitments of WP professionals. For some WP managers and practitioners at least, politically and socially just conceptions of inclusivity and participation in higher education also hinge on the survival of social class attachments and the understandings/perspectives they make available. To reiterate the words of one particular WP manager, WP is best practised when people possess ‘experience of working-class people or working-class life or understanding of working-class life’ (Sarah).

And perhaps this is a success story in many ways. It alludes on the one hand to the mutating character of professional practice as something fluid and shifting. On the other hand it forces us to concede that neoliberalization never fully constitutes the performative capacity of those it directly addresses and seeks to constitute in its own image. A corollary of this is that policy enactments can be understood as terrains for the struggle over

meaning and where concepts can be re-imagined, resignified and transformed to suit new discursive terrains and structures of feeling.

Note

1. Jointly funded by the HEFCE and the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, £239.5 million was allocated to Aimhigher for 2008–2011, but was formally scrapped by the Coalition government on 31 July 2011. Introduced by New Labour in 2001 (then entitled AimHigher: Excellence Challenge), Aimhigher was set up to raise the aspirations of young learners considering entering post-compulsory education (as well as to extend educational opportunities for mature and part-time learners) through increasing funds to HEIs to assist and facilitate outreach programmes aimed at recruiting disadvantaged young people and providing better financial support, such as bursaries and maintenance grants, to assist poorer students who need help covering university expenses and living costs (DfES 2006a).

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