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Theorising transitions to Higher Education: The case of students with VET backgrounds

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The general problem space



- Why are educational outcomes still so closely tied to socio-economic background?
- What produces the inequitable distribution of educational opportunity and outcome observed all over the world?
- What more might we be able to do about it?
- Does producing more equitable education outcomes matter without an appropriate opportunity structure?



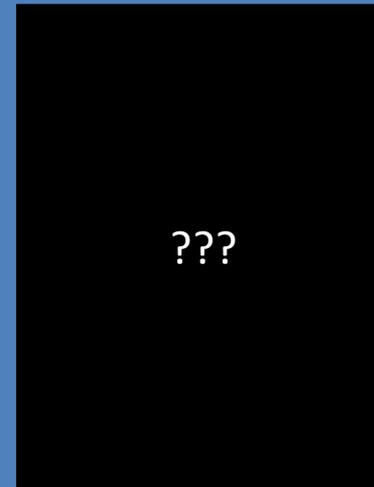
Compared to those who have followed an academic pathway those with a VET background:

Come from poorer backgrounds

p [transition to HE] is increasing

p [being accepted] lower

p [attending elite HEI] much lower



p [retention]
lower

p [retention] is
+ve correlated

with % have a
VET
background

Start

End of year 1

Educational Policy metaphors

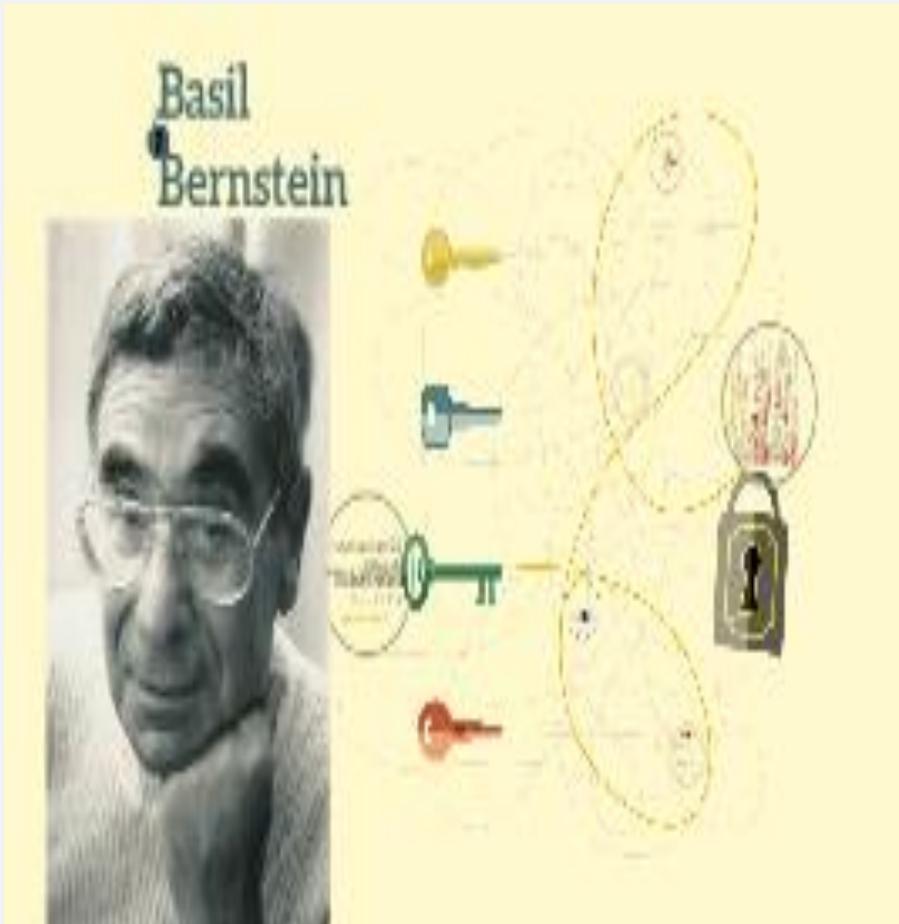


Policy Theme	Purpose	Metaphors
Extension of education careers via VET provision	Reduce risk of unemployment/NEET status	Pathways
Widen access, increase participation in HE	Increase social mobility; redistributive justice	Pathways, barriers, access
Individualisation	Maintain flexible labour markets; provide choice to rational actors; market mechanisms in	Pathways, barriers, access, navigations, negotiations



- Education as a *field* in which manifold modes of power operate (Bourdieu 1993,1996)
- Struggles over knowledge framing, classification and transmission central to this field's operation, distinctiveness and relative autonomy

BRINGING KNOWLEDGE BACK IN ??



‘Knowledge partakes of the sacred, it is not ordinary or mundane’
(1975,p.75)



Knowledge distribution-acquisition

Two forms of knowledge: subject-specific and field-specific knowledge

Social agents

- participating in epistemically differentiated sub-fields where certain forms and classifications of knowledge are valorized over others
- entering in and moving between differentially structured and unequally valorized *epistemic sub-fields*



Classification and identification

- ❖ **Formal/informal, formative/non-formative assessment practices** aim at allocating students in the hierarchy of academic merit, operating as other-defining and classificatory devices
- ❖ **Dialogical and relational:** social agents come to develop their understanding of themselves as knowers in interaction and in relation to others



The vocational background

The college that I went to was called Spring Vale Learning and it was a thing set up in 1997 for [pause] like to have a cross community kind of thing. [...] I just wanted to use it [the College] as a tool in order to get me the NVQ to get me on to do other things because I wanted to like go on. The main thing was that I wanted to go on placement and get the experience because I think anyway the only way you really learn is by actually like doing it, day by day you know especially if you're in the workplace. I think there's no better way to learn, that way, you know [...] Most people come straight out of school and that's the natural progression into university or whatever you know. [...] Well, it would have been a lot easier for me if I had just stayed on and done my A2's, maybe re-sat a couple of my AS's and just done straight down the road right into university thing. But at the same time I'm glad that I got the experience that I've had you know. (Antoin, 22 years-old, Computing in Central University)



Katie: I was really nervous because I'm not one of the brightest bulbs in the pack, and I have to work a lot harder than other people do, it's like Kelly said, there's a lot of 19 year olds here and I'm 35, so it's like 'Oh my God, I'm so old going to University'. That was sort of really like, you know, you've got all these young kids that are like so full of it[...]enthusiasm, and they're clever really, and I think it was the academic side of it, because I'm not very academic, you know, the practical side[pause]fantastic, I know that I'll be brilliant, but the academic side, it's just 'oh' I think that's more nerve wracking than anything else, coming somewhere, full of youngsters, and being a bit thick I think. (Katie, 35-year-old, Nursing, Home Counties University)

Epistemic struggle: to be a nurse nowadays requires the mastery of vertically structured disciplinary knowledge (biology and chemistry) achieving which work-related knowledge is a poor preparation

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The pedagogical dimension



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*The pedagogical dimension is associated with the curricular content, the modes of teaching and learning, the assessment regimes, the diffuse communicative and relational ethos of certain institutions all governed by with what we term as *organisational logic**



- A set of explicit and implicit rules, norms and expectations that govern practices within certain organisational settings
- shaped in the course of HE institutions' history and with reference to their projected future vision
- The transition from one sub-field to another entails a process of adjustment to the new pedagogic regime



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Work experience is not much use for learning mathematics (Lecturer in Computing, Central University)

- **Institutional logic:** *professionals are increasingly required to draw upon abstract, theoretical bodies of knowledge (singulars) that cannot be acquired on the job or through daily practice*



At the start I was a bit unsure about the whole technique[...]this whole self-study thing as well, you know, I find that quite hard and I'm saying "She's not taught me that or he's not taught me that" but at the end of the day I've got to go and teach myself some stuff you know so aye[...]the college lecturers are brilliant, you know, they really help you then you come in here; these guys help you and all but it is a different way of learning you know, and you take it on yourself [...] The self-study thing; it really is tough [pause] the stuff you've got to go and do yourself you know. (John, 36 years-old Computing, Central University)



It wasn't the whole studying thing because I had experienced it all, through my work I had studied for professional qualifications and stuff at home. So, I wasn't worried about whether I'd cope with the work or anything, I was more worried about the sort of people who had just done their A levels knowing more about the subject than me, maybe falling behind, which wasn't the case. [...] I think I've got an advantage of having come out of studying and making the choice to come back to study rather than just to progress in it because that's what people do. But I really want to do it so I'm making sure I do well. I guess I've got a more mature approach to studying (Lee, 23-years-old, Computing, Home Counties University)



- Students entering the field of education with differential volume of capitals available at their disposal
- Three forms of capital identified by Bourdieu (1986) the economic, social and cultural *capital*
- *Academic capital* (Bourdieu, 1996) the most valorised currency in the educational field



This capital basis frames the material and socio-cultural spectrum within which transitions take place rendering educational transitions materially and socio-culturally embedded practices



- Transitions as the situated acts of negotiation that occur at the interface between institutional structures and cultures as social agents dialectically shape their pathways through the educational field, whilst drawing upon existent and accumulating new resources and knowledges.
- Metaphor of *transitional friction* as a conceptual tool to help us make sense of and capture the multi-layered struggles, conflicts and tensions inherent in the process of educational transitions.
- *Friction vs barrier* : useful metaphor for drawing attention to the ongoing dynamic and multitudinous nature of the transitional process



- Conceptualisation of educational transitions at the notional core of which lies the nexus of cross-cutting material, cultural, but also epistemic and pedagogical dimensions
- Educational transition not as an *entry into* but as a process of *becoming* a certain knower, an academic subject; a process that takes time and struggle.
- What is at stake in these struggles is the accumulation of knowledge, capitals, particularly academic capital, but also the sourcing of epistemic self.

Epistemic and
pedagogic
struggles lead to
epistemic doubt



Misrecognition of
worth in the field of
HE and reduced
'attachment'

Epistemic and Pedagogic Transitional Frictions



- Transitions as **situated acts of negotiation** between not the self-responsible actor constructed and idealised in policy discourse but between **social agents**, the **resources** they possess, the **epistemic field** and the **organisational logics** prevailing in the HE institutions they find themselves.
- How can we better prepare young people for transitions between the educational sub-fields?

Thank you!!! 😊

- Katartzi, E. and Hayward, G. (2019) Conceptualising transitions from vocational to higher education: bringing together Bourdieu and Bernstein, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, DOI: [10.1080/01425692.2019.1707065](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1707065)
- Katartzi, E. and Hayward, G. (2019) Transitions to Higher Education: The Case of Students with VET background in UK, *Studies in Higher Education* DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2019.1610866](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1610866)