



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Widening participation as behaviour management: An ethnography of student equity outreach in one Australian low SES school

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This article seeks to illuminate the complex social relations entangling 'widening participation' activities within contemporary Australian higher education. Using ethnographic and interview data constructed for a doctoral study of student equity staff outreach into schools in low SES areas, I narrate and interpret McIlwraith university's 'Rock and Water' workshops with Year Nine female students in one school. As well as providing 'rich and thick' (Denzin, 1989) descriptions of a contemporary Australian widening participation practice, the analysis traces the way the subjects of widening participation policy and activity, namely the students within schools whose 'aspirations' are presumed to be low, are objectified and accounted for via federal government reporting requirements and policy mandates. The ethnography and informant interviews raise concerns over the role that the discourses of 'aspiration' and 'disengagement' play in the construction and governance of students and schools from low SES areas, and the way that widening participation policy is textually mediated by university and school policies and practices, usually without opportunities for meaningful input and feedback from the students involved. In this school in a low SES area, there is a conflation of widening participation outreach activity and behaviour management strategies. Although the university outreach staff act skilfully and with concern for the students in the program, their work remains tangential to the work required to disrupt the relations between social class, gender, rurality and educational achievement.

Keywords: widening participation; aspirations; educational achievement; Australia; higher education

Introduction

So it's very much about selling what we have to offer these schools, and selling that in a way that they see that as an advantage for their students to engage... some schools were more enthusiastic and appreciative of the benefits for their students than others. While all schools were encouraged to participate in the full suite of offerings as a rounded 'aspirational' package, there was a tendency on the part of some schools to 'cherry-pick' from the list of activities offered.

The quote above comes from a 2012 student equity report compiled for the Australian federal government by a Group of Eight (top tier) university - that I am calling 'McIlwraith'. After a century of cultivating deep partnerships with the elite high schools in its region (both government and non-government), McIlwraith's systematic move to promote mutually beneficial partnerships with schools in low socioeconomic status areas (low SES), as per the guidelines of the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme policy (HEPPP), has proved difficult. As the student outreach staff informant suggests, it required staff 'selling' their message that McIlwraith was now interested in these schools and their students, even if it had not expressed this interest in this way before. Whilst 'cherry-picking' might be a respectable activity for universities to engage in (the recruitment of the high achievers from schools in low SES areas, as per McIlwraith's past practice and as it continues to do in other contemporaneous programming), the informant quoted above

seems surprised that these newly targeted schools might engage McIlwraith on their own terms while taking advantage of its interest.

This article seeks to illuminate the complex social relations entangling 'widening participation' activities within contemporary Australian higher education. Using ethnographic and interview data constructed for a doctoral study of student equity staff outreach into schools in low SES areas, I narrate and interpret a McIlwraith university's 'Rock and Water' workshop with Year Nine students in one school. As well as providing 'rich and thick' (Denzin, 1989) descriptions of a contemporary Australian widening participation practice, the analysis traces the way the subjects of widening participation policy and activity - the students within schools whose 'aspirations' are presumed to be low - are objectified via federal government reporting requirements and policy mandates. The ethnography and informant interviews raise a number of concerns, such as the role that the discourses of 'aspiration' and 'disengagement' play in the construction and governance of students and schools from low SES areas, and second, the way that widening participation policy is textually mediated by university and school policies and practices, usually without the voice or input of students involved. In this school in a low SES area, there is a conflation of widening participation outreach activity and behaviour management strategies. Although the university outreach staff act skilfully and with concern for the students in the program, their work remains tangential to the work required to disrupt the relations between social class, gender, rurality and educational achievement.

Policy Context

The HEPPP policy, inaugurated by the Rudd/Gillard federal Labor government in 2009 and in its final year of operation at the time of writing, set the target that 20 per cent of domestic undergraduate students would be from low SES backgrounds by 2020¹. This equity target was situated within a wider, expansionary target that 40% of all Australians aged 25-34 will have attained an undergraduate degree by 2025.

The HEPPP policy provided for funds to be distributed via two programs, designed to both spur competition amongst universities and enhance cross-sectoral educational collaborations to achieve the government's goals. First, a 'Participation program' was designed to improve the participation, retention and success of low SES students. Universities were rewarded for these efforts by receiving funds based on their participation rates for low SES student participation, and so universities have been encouraged to compete with each other to embrace more low SES students. Second, a 'Partnerships' program was designed to develop partnerships and outreach activities with schools, vocational education and training providers, community groups, and others to 'encourage' the 'low' aspirations and capacity of people from low SES backgrounds to participate in higher education (ComLaw, 2012, Sec 1.70.1, 1.70.5). Universities here were encouraged to collaborate in targeting low SES communities in which aspirations to higher education were assumed to be low or absent.

Funded through the HEPPP 'Partnerships' guidelines, McIlwraith's 'Rock and Water' outreach program is narrated in this article to trace the articulation of student experiences into

¹ The most recent complete data set from the federal department responsible for administering the HEPPP has the participation rate of students from low SES backgrounds at just over 17%, where 25% is the figure that represents parity, or proportional representation, in the equity model used within Australian higher education. It is estimated that at current rates of growth it would likely reach 18% by 2020, falling short of the policy's explicit goal (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013)

mandated reporting requirements, as well as the local mediation of federal policy goals to serve school level behavioural management strategies. In this one outreach program in one low SES school, despite the best of intentions of highly skilled practitioners, the challenging and complex lives of students in a regional high school are not meaningfully supported to imagine different possibilities beyond those produced through the deficit discourses of disengagement.

McIlwraith's Rock and Water Program Workshop

Over three days of observations and interviews, I accompanied and observed a McIlwraith outreach worker, Paul, and a McIlwraith student ambassador², Shelley, at a school identified as being located in a low SES area. In what follows, I narrate and interpret my observations workshops held by McIlwraith staff for Year Nine students, and provide context for this programming by interpreting interview data from school staff.

McIlwraith staff were enacting a truncated version of the 'Rock and Water' program. Reading the program notes in the McIlwraith car on the way to the school on the first day, I saw the program was designed in the Netherlands, originally for boys, and seemed a mixture of martial arts philosophy and psychological constructs around discipline and resilience. It focused on individual responses to conflict and obstacles, and was designed to be very physical and interactive. According to the program's originator, the Rock and Water Program aims to:

...assist boys in their development to adulthood by emphasizing the importance of being conscious of their own power and responsibility within society. (F. Ykema, 2000a, 2000b; F. Ykema, 2002)

Today the Rock and Water Program is taught both to boys and girls, in separate streams, although the higher lessons or stages, 9 to 13, are described by Ykema as 'more suitable for pupils from age 14, are gender specific and aimed toward boys' (2000, p. 3). As well as expanding to include a separate stream for girls, the Rock and Water Program had also been used by one Australian State education department as a 'behaviour support services program' to assist, among others, students with Autism.

Upon our entrance to the school, the Principal sat down to welcome Paul, Shelley and me, and noted that 'there was some resistance from parents to their child's participation in the program'. He received phone calls from parents asking 'why is my child participating, what did they do wrong?' Clearly 'Rock and Water' was not seen within the school community as being for high achieving students.

After we walked as a group to a room in the library I assisted in moving back the tables and chairs to create an open carpeted space. Shelley had positioned herself up high on a stack of plastic chairs to one side, and soon around 15 Year Nine girls came in and sat on the floor at her feet, almost as if it was a staged Socratic dialogue. She engaged them in conversation. The girls chatted about 'hot boys', driving cars in paddocks ('nothing else to do in this town'), and asked Shelley about her car. 'Holden Astra'. 'Cool', said one of them. While we waited for the rest of the girls to arrive, Paul told me Shelley would lead the session. 'Better for the program', he said, 'when women lead girls and men lead boys'. The

²A Student Ambassador at McIlwraith has been selected by the university to both be trained in and to lead various student engagement activities.

Rock and Water has clearly essentialist, gendered assumptions around boys and their learning – action oriented, physical, and competitive. Girls are taught the same activities today within McIlwraith widening participation practices yet, as I show below, their educational futures are constructed differently, in highly significant ways.

Paul began by saying the theme of the day was ‘responses to conflict’. The first activity of the day was ‘Chinese sticky hands’. The racist language was jarring, and reminded me of schoolyard phrases from my childhood such as ‘Chinese burn’, ‘Chinese whispers’ and ‘German measles’. There did not appear to be any students of Asian ancestry in the room. The goal, Paul explained, was to try to move one’s partner off balance, your hands against theirs. Pushing forward with force into the other person’s hands is like being a ‘rock’. Falling, or letting the other person fall forward, overbalancing, is like ‘water’. ‘Both are effective responses’, Paul said, and both need to be employed ‘to win the game’. Paul also explained: ‘To fall over is to lose your centre; you need a strong core’. These were literal statements referring to body parts within the physical contests, but functioned figuratively as well in the program as strategies for life. When a student lost a contest, Paul asked her, ‘Did you lose your grounding (feet), your centre/core (controlled by stomach/hips), or your focus?’ (meaning getting distracted). Some of the girls clearly delighted in the physicality of the challenges. Shelley proved a popular partner, and impressed with her physical prowess and athleticism. She skilfully interspersed highly energetic activity with responses to the girls’ questions (What do you do at university? How old are you? Where did you go to school?). She engaged a student who told her how his sister was now going to university.

Paul called the students together again and sat on the floor with Shelley, explaining to the students that their second activity was ‘Chinese boxing’. This time the open hands were used to hit the other person’s open hands, in an attempt to make one’s opposing partner overbalance. Once again, Paul modelled the activity with Shelley – Paul, a smaller, muscular frame, Shelley, tall and athletic – and both were adept at all of the activities. The students engaged each other, and Shelley and Paul moved around the group assisting students and facing up to challenges from students. The students began their ‘Chinese boxing activity’ and laughed and enjoyed themselves. Two girls improvised and changed the game into ‘A sailor went to sea, sea, sea to see what he could see, see, see’.

Paul re-entered the facilitator’s role, and introduced the ‘leaning game’, trying to disrupt a partner’s ‘castle’, or stance. One smaller girl responded to Shelley, ‘but I’m too weak’. ‘No you’re not’, said Paul. But she did not try it and withdrew. Shelley then helped her and she completed the activity. Paul summarised by saying ‘we need to be strong, centred and focused *to be able to support someone else*’ (emphasis added). That phrase, ‘to support someone else’ was jarring to me, as it had not appeared in any program materials. Was this phrase only used for girls participating in the program? Was Paul improvising with it? Why was it important for girls to be strong ‘for someone else’? Like all of these Rock and Water phrases, it had a literal referent within the competitive interaction of the game, but worked on another figurative level as a value statement about how one should live. These hints of gender essentialism lurked throughout the Rock and Water program, but this phrase seemed to reproduce a blatant sexism that assumes that men are/should be focused on themselves, at best for the sake of their families or others, while women fulfil their own destinies by being ‘for others’. The students continued with their activities, fully physically engaged, testing the limits of their balance, strength and flexibility.

Paul and Shelley, like the students, had exerted much physical energy through their contests, and they suggested we go and eat lunch. We moved to a small room for staff and saw the Principal had catered sandwiches and drinks for us. The Deputy Vice Principal came

into the room to speak with us. He said that many of the students selected for the Rock and Water Program from the school had been handpicked because they had 'issues' such as bullying, violence, and 'sexting' (texting sexually explicit messages).

I interviewed the Deputy Vice Principal of the school about the selection processes for student participation in the Rock and Water Program. The program is populated by students constructed by the school, via the departmental data base and from personal contact, as 'offenders' or 'disengaged', 'really good kids' and 'born victims'.

Informant: We went through our behaviour records and identified, of the 15 kids who went into it, about 70% of them were offenders. The other 30% were either really good kids that had friends that they needed to help with these strategies, so we thought that if they learnt them they might be able to pass them on through peer mentoring. And some of the others are born victims who just need some more skills to deal with situations like that.

Researcher: What do you mean by offenders?

Informant: The kids constantly identified as bullying, harassing other kids, not being able to focus in class, just disengaged, I suppose. Probably a better way to describe them.

The school felt it could not bring the students with histories of harassment ('offenders', 'bullies' and the 'disengaged') together with the same students they had harassed (the 'born victims'), and so the school also picked the friends of the 'victims' to participate in the hope that they would pass on, in a more informal and peer-to-peer process, some of the strategies from the workshops. Whatever the success of this strategy to build resilience and offer alternative modes of conflict resolution, it is clear that the Rock and Water Program at this school was hybridising 'widening participation' or 'outreach' strategies into the discourses and practices of 'social-emotional learning' and 'anti-bullying practices'. This was the school's local mediation of the government's HEPPP agenda.

After lunch, Paul and Shelley then modelled a new activity. Paul placed a thin strip of white masking tape across the carpeted floor. The 'white line' was to separate partners. Standing either side of the line, Paul and Shelley linked right arms and leant back, finding an equilibrium point with each other. Using their groundedness, centre/core muscles and focus, they then let go - without falling backwards and moving their feet. After trying initially to let each other go deliberately so they might fall to the floor, the girls did the exercise properly and quickly got good at it. So Paul interjected: 'Let's have a competition' and the girls lined up against each other. This time the white line marked off two teams. The goal was to drag as many people across the line as possible. The girls were encouraged to help each other drag the bigger girls across the line. The tug of war began, and the chaos commenced. Screams, gasps, giggles, bodies were flailing. One student hit the ground hard, breaking into tears and withdrawing for a time. When a girl crossed the line, she joined the other team. 'I haven't lost yet' said Paul, 'so keep your focus, because I want to win'.

Perhaps because of this background as a trained Social Worker, and his sensitivity to working with highly marginalised youth, Paul mentioned to me after the session that he saw signs of self-harm on some of the students' bodies. As their arms locked and they grabbed, dragged and pulled each other through the various activities, Paul noticed some girls with these tell-tale signs of trauma and often very difficult home lives. In Australia, the Rock and Water program is used not only in schools and their 'social-emotional' and 'anti-bullying programs', but also with foster-care children and children who are wards of the State

(Raymond, 2005). This was, for McIlwraith especially, a radical form of 'widening participation' into higher education.

In the car on the way back to the university, I asked Paul about the links he saw between the Rock and Water program and widening university participation. 'Rock and Water', he said, 'taught basic self-discipline and self-confidence strategies, techniques to groundedness, core stability, and focus. These capacities are essential to succeeding at school and gaining the educational success necessary to create pathways into higher learning, training and work'. This seemed reasonable enough at first hearing, although it is hard to imagine how any activity at a school (or outside it) might not also be similarly regarded as 'widening participation' work. All of the strategies and techniques in Rock and Water focused upon individual instruction and change. There is a clear assumption that individual traits, characteristics and skills ('self-confidence', 'self-discipline') are ultimately what determine individual success at school and university, and through those enhanced social mobility. In that sense, although the 'Rock and Water' program is a radical form of widening participation activity for an elite university, it nonetheless reproduces the dominant 'meritocratic' assumptions around higher education opportunity, as well as uncritically reproducing gendered assumptions. Furnishing students with training in self-discipline, developing self-confidence and other appropriate individual dispositions, and providing students with tailored information and support, collectively, within this model, provide the necessary opportunities for students to choose higher education. These practices dovetail with wider entrepreneurial subjectivities cultivated through neoliberal education policies that self-responsibilise students for inequities in education outcomes.

Nonetheless, Paul describes his understanding of 'outreach' in interview as follows:

...outreach is about providing people options. Showing what the benefits are, the pros and cons for each choice that they may make and letting people make decisions for themselves. But at the end of the day I see outreach work as providing choices, not recruitment.

In contrast to McIlwraith's work with in other schools, 'outreach' in the schools allocated by inter-university agreement to McIlwraith for widening participation activity is not focussed upon recruitment to McIlwraith. It is instead providing individual students with 'options'. However, the construction of those options for the students, and the complex process of aspiration construction (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2013) as it is mediated by socio-economic status, gender, race/ethnicity (Burke, 2012), school cultures and the particularities of the regional unemployment in this town are not seriously engaged with in this outreach practice.

However, the schools, said Paul, 'have really liked Rock and Water'. Whether the schools understand this work as part of their own anti-bullying strategies, or as part of a 'widening participation' agenda from the universities, is not what is important for Paul. Whereas McIlwraith usual practice is to recruit the 'best and brightest' students to its gates, including those from low SES and Indigenous backgrounds, it is the Rock and Water program that is providing outreach to some of the most marginalised children in McIlwraith's 'widening participation' schools. This view seems to be shared by a Guidance Counsellor from another low SES school within the region:

Now that was a guidance initiative there to get Rock and Water in at [the school] so that their jacaranda shirts [McIlwraith staff polo shirt colour] can be seen, and that they [McIlwraith] can be seen as another option there. It was great to see McIlwraith offering something that was practical. That was on the ground - and

they were really skilled providers, they were terrific – and the profile McIlwraith has is that it is unattainable, elitist, and here were these three very practical, skilled... they were relating really well with the students, they did a fine job. And also the staff, the admin, could see, ‘oh, well maybe McIlwraith has got something to offer.

When the elite university in the State is seen as doing something practical, and perhaps without immediate ‘pay-off’ in terms of low SES enrolments, then according to this experienced Guidance Counsellor, McIlwraith begins to be seen differently. As I observed the Rock and Water Program unfold, I too was struck by Paul and Shelley’s skills, and how these interactions presented a different face of McIlwraith to schools in lower SES areas. Although this outreach in schools remains uncritical of and without a response to the institutional misrecognitions of students in these ‘low SES’ schools, the Rock and Water Program is positioning McIlwraith more favourably amongst some of these same schools than its usual concern for only the highest achieving of their students.

Gendering Equity and Participation

The gendered assumptions about discipline and learning in McIlwraith’s performance of the Rock and Water Program seemed to position the participating girls in a secondary role, lying outside of the main purposes constructed for the program. McIlwraith in 2012 reported, in part, the following account of the Rock and Water Program for its HEPPP student equity funding:

The Rock & Water workshops in Semester 2, 2012 (engagement with more than 300 students, primarily in Years 8 & 9) have proved very popular. Generally focused on developing self- confidence in students...these have worked particularly well in engaging young males.

There are four claims made in this text to support/construct the Rock and Water Program as a widening participation activity: it has engaged many Year Eight and Year Nine students and has been popular, it develops self-confidence, and it works well with young males. There is no reflexive account as to why it did not work as well, as can be implied, with young women students. The concern for ‘young males’ and their participation in Australian higher education seems to be directed at anxieties expressed in the university and school sectors since the 1990s about the role of male students and their engagement in schooling and higher education. For instance, James and colleagues (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004) suggested the need to consider gender equity in a way that set targets for male participation in education and nursing. These ‘crisis of masculinity’ discourses that arose in education in the 1990s were accompanied by popular concern that women’s gains in higher education participation were coming at the expense of men’s (Burke, 2006; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998). The Rock and Water Program, as it is articulated to the McIlwraith’s reporting to the federal government, seems to affirm the importance of marginalised boys as a distinctive equity category, and the boys themselves as objects of widening participation activity. This local enactment of widening participation policy, jointly constructed by school personnel and McIlwraith for ‘student engagement’ purposes, reproduces an essentialist conception of gender and connects contemporary widening participation practice with older policy concerns in Australia for ‘failing boys’.

Conclusion

Student equity outreach practices in Australian higher education are enmeshed in a type of quantitative ‘matrix’, which functions, as Hacking has insightfully described, ‘as an idea, talk about the idea, individuals falling under the idea, the interaction between the idea and people, and the manifold of social practices and institutions that these interactions involve’ (as cited in Thomson, 2013, p. 180). The ‘idea’ is low socioeconomic status, the policy problem is the underrepresentation of individuals assigned to this category participating at university, and the policy solutions involve the discourses and practices of ‘raising the aspirations’ of, and ‘stimulating the demand’ for higher education from these individuals in order to ‘widen participation’ in university institutions. In Dorothy Smith’s (2005) terms, these are the ‘ruling relations’ of governance that articulate the diverse experiences of students in Australian schools into categories amenable to programmatic intervention. They are also textually mediated discourses that both constitute and reproduce student equity outreach practices in universities across Australia, aligning the complicated and diverse work of student equity staff into categories amenable to accounting and governance.

As was suggested by the quote at the beginning of this article, the construction (of the demand) and selling (the supply) of ‘aspirations’ in this McIlwraith outreach practice also aligns with the broader neoliberal undercurrents of Australian student equity policy. Students are positioned in this exchange as consumers, and universities as businesses that compete for their custom, while ‘aspirations’ become the elusive currency that individuals become responsible for acquiring for a competitive shot at participation in a globalised economy.

Yet widening participation policy enactment is always accomplished locally, in mediated forms that serve local interests. In this case, the university outreach conducted by highly skilful and caring staff was entangled in anxieties over sexualised behaviours and bullying, reproduced sexist and neoliberal assumptions over ‘choice’ and individual opportunity, and ultimately misrecognised (Fraser, 2007) the construction of student aspirations in a regional high school. These gendered widening participation practices are a concerning departure from current HEPP policy and tend to reproduce fears of women’s enhanced participation in higher education for (some) men. Rock and Water, as a widening participation related program coordinated by McIlwraith staff, ideologically embeds the message that higher education for women is for the benefit of others, and not in the first instance, for themselves. It also valorises a narrow construction of masculinity around competition, physical accomplishment and discipline, and winning. Such masculinist constructions align strongly with the dominant metaphors of neoliberalism and winning the knowledge-economy race, discursively functioning to question the value of women’s’ (and other kinds of men’s’) participation in higher education. Despite the warmth of interpersonal relations generated through McIlwraith’s unusual widening participation program in this particular school, its messages about higher education here seem confused, and function to cultivate neoliberal, competitive subjectivities in students as much as enlarge their visions for life after school.

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