INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION

EDITOR VIEWPOINT

Widening participation practice and research in the 'Third Space'

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It is a real privilege to be part of the editorial team for the *International Studies in Widening Participation* (ISWP) journal, an important publication for established and emerging scholars in the widening participation and student equity field. I count myself as an emerging scholar, having recently returned to a research role after a productive and rewarding period as an equity practitioner and senior manager in the university sector. The timing of the appointment could not be more opportune and I will argue here that the integration of scholarship and practice as well as collaborations between academics and practitioners are more important now than ever before. To maintain political commitment to the widening participation agenda and to provide guidance for impactful equity work into the future, it is vital to demonstrate the gains that have been made over the past decade in Australia and elsewhere in developing effective institutional approaches to engage with equity students and their communities, and to enable them to succeed in higher education. In my editorial role, I want to contribute to this important task.

This is a viewpoint piece and I start with reflections on my professional and scholarly identity to describe the perspective I bring to the editorial work for *ISWP*. For me, scholarship and practice are deeply intertwined aspects of my professional approach. I am a research-trained practitioner and a practice-informed researcher. This dualism enables me to be a boundary crosser, a pragmatist and a conduit for positive action. I relish the energy generated by exploring issues from theoretical and practical perspectives and synthesising seemingly disconnected information into new insights and workable solutions. My passion is for social justice and I am a strong believer in the transformative power of education. I want to use my privilege to make a difference in the lives of people from diverse backgrounds through higher education and rewarding employment. In my view, the most constructive space for systemic change is at the intersection of equity research, policy and practice and it is here that I choose to contribute.

As a change agent at this critical intersection, my professional identity aligns with Celia Whitchurch's (2013) concept of the 'third space' professional. The roles I have held over the past 10 years have combined professional, academic and management elements. This combination has presented practical, conceptual and philosophical tensions similar to those analysed in insightful reflections on research projects which 'aimed to make a difference' by Clegg, Stevenson and Burke (2016): doing equity work and 'trying to make a difference' in the lives of students in 21st century universities invariably collides with the increasingly neo-liberal institutional contexts that change agents find themselves in. However, working at an institutional level also brought about great possibilities for me and my team to change dominant

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conversations and the institutional status quo and, thus, the conditions in which equity work was being carried out.

Over time, a constructive pragmatism emerged as I attempted to resolve these complex tensions in my daily practice and decision-making to create a professional space in which evidence informed strategy and priorities. I also worked to consciously integrate the three different elements of my senior management role to lead the equity agenda at what I see as a progressive Australian university and to help shape it at the national level.

In 2016, I had the unique opportunity to be an inaugural Equity Fellow through the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). The Fellowship program aims to "support Fellows to undertake strategic, high-impact, high-profile leadership projects targeted, sector-wide, at improving the access, participation and success in higher education of students from disadvantaged backgrounds". The Fellowship provided me with a space to unpack and interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions, rules and practices with experts, colleagues, university leaders and policymakers. It opened doors and enabled conversations that would otherwise not have taken place. Through this discursive process, a rich and complex picture of the approaches taken by Australian universities to widening participation through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) has emerged from my Fellowship research which can guide our collective thinking and action at a time of higher education policy uncertainty. The Fellowship also included a four-week placement at the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training in Canberra. This was a powerful mechanism to increase my understanding of the workings of the federal administration and, in turn, gave the Department an insider's view on student equity practice in the sector.

I joined the NCSEHE in February 2017 as a Senior Research Fellow and was initially focussed on the dissemination of findings and recommendations from the Equity Fellowship. Dissemination activities have included conversations with practitioner colleagues on how this research can inform their practice and strategic review processes of equity programs across different universities. In the second half of the year, I developed the concept for the Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop Series and implemented two of four expert workshops. The series is a strategic initiative to further extend the NCSEHE's capacity in synthesising, codifying and disseminating learnings from research and practice, and then use them to inform future initiatives, studies and policy. The workshops are an opportunity to bring together researchers, practitioners, policy makers and community partners to explore complex equity issues from multiple perspectives and to produce good practice principles and policy recommendations.

My own professional practice is based on a firm theoretical grounding in critical inquiry and radical feminism. I describe myself as a 'tempered radical', someone who rocks the boat without falling out and who uses difference to create change (Meyerson, 2003). For my doctoral research, I developed a critical feminist paradigm informed by critical theorists (predominantly Freire, 1972 and Habermas, 1987) and feminist scholars who analysed and theorised gendered social relations, especially the gendered public/private divide (Bem, 1993; Connell, 1987; Lister, 2003; MacKinnon, 1987; Pateman, 1989; West & Zimmerman, 1987), as well as workplaces (Acker, 1990; Marshall, 1984; Pocock, 2005; Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996; Walby, 1990), the capitalist system (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomson, 1999), and the welfare state (Lewis, 1992) as gendered social institutions.

I understand feminism as a worldview, a lens we adopt and through which we see the world differently. Moreover, Freire (1972) maintains that in our capacities as human beings, we have

the creative possibilities and the responsibility to see the world not only for what it is but also for what it can be. The task arising from Freire's work is to use these creative possibilities to craft a more humane and more just world for everyone (Crotty, 1998). Seeing the world for what it can be' has been a principle of my professional approach and provided the compass for developing strategies and actions to make this alternative reality happen in my local context.

A critical feminist lens has been invaluable in my work as an equity practitioner to identify and address structural inequalities in universities. Although I was unfamiliar with the terminology at the time, I was developing a 'praxis' approach to my professional practice. Clegg et al. (2016) describe 'praxis' as "theoretically informed change for critical social purposes and a view of making a difference" (p. 241). I initially applied this approach exclusively to gender relations, with work/life balance policies and the reconciliation of employment and family life being my core expertise (Zacharias, 2006). I analysed the parental leave practices and experiences at Victoria University, my employer at the time, and found that the relationship between the line manager and staff member pre-commencement of the leave period was the determining factor of the quality of the leave experience (Zacharias, 2009).

Building on this research, I made recommendations to improve the implementation of an excellent policy for more positive experiences for women who took extended parental leave, as well as their managers who played a crucial role in the process. As a practitioner, this was a formative experience of how the power of institutional data and the voices of staff could lead to material changes in the institutional approach and practice. Strategic research projects (see for example, Zacharias, 2011 and Zacharias et al., 2016) have been part of my professional tool box ever since.

The introduction of HEPPP in 2010, following the recommendations articulated in the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), enabled my professional shift into student equity/widening participation strategy and programs and, thus, the application of the critical lens to understanding the systemic disadvantage created by poverty and class divisions. I would argue that once a structural approach to understanding inequality is adopted, it is impossible not to extend this approach to the evidence of the multiple axes of power and marginalisation within and across societies. These complex webs of disadvantage, and how they play out in the lives of individuals and groups of people, have been powerfully theorised in the concept of intersectionality (Walby, 2007; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012; Ferree, 2009). Intersectionality illustrates that equity scholarship and practice are complex, and that simple solutions are usually not available or appropriate for the task.

HEPPP has enabled tremendous expansion and great sophistication of equity practice and widening participation scholarship in Australia over the past seven years. My Fellowship research illustrated how three different universities had constructively worked with the diversity and complex challenges of their communities and developed tailor-made solutions (Zacharias, 2017). A recent publication by the NCSEHE collated case studies of successful equity initiatives funded by HEPPP which demonstrated the diversity and scale of the national equity program (NCSEHE, 2017).

At the same time, we have made important advances in how we understand key concepts in the widening participation literature, including aspiration (Gore et al., 2015a; Gore et al., 2015b; Sellar & Gale, 2011), inclusive teaching and student support (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012), student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017), attrition (Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Luckman, 2016), and success in higher education (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Naylor, 2017). Two

iterations of a national Critical Interventions Framework for equity initiatives (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013; Bennett et al., 2015) have been developed since the inception of HEPPP, which have provided the sector with a common language and agreed structure to advance the equity agenda as a national project. Australia can be regarded as having established leading practice in student equity and widening participation because no other country has made such sustained investments in a national equity program which spans the student lifecycle. The lessons learned here have wider implications and need to be made available to an international audience.

Yet, it is clear that much remains to be done and that structural changes have proven difficult to realise (Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, & Southgate, 2016; Smith et al., 2017). I think we have come to a fork in the road where significant advances can only be made by academics and practitioners working closely together; by demonstrating in rigorous ways the progress that has been made and the means by which it has been achieved. The evidence, both statistics and human stories, is critical to maintaining the current bipartisan policy commitment to a national investment in student equity and widening participation.

My commitment, as part of the *ISWP* editorial team and as a senior researcher with a national platform, is to nurture more third space professionals as well as increased collaborations and exchanges between researchers, practitioners and policymakers. I would argue that to be truly effective as agents of social change, equity practitioners need to understand how gender, class and race structures create systems of privilege and disadvantage which shape the lived realities and opportunities of people. If we engage in this professional space without being conscious of the structural nature of inequality, our work loses its radical impulse, its ability to truly change the way that universities go about their business and, ultimately, the promise of the transformative power of higher education. We must understand how inequality is sustained and (re-)shaped by government and institutional policy and practice to be able to bring about the systemic changes we desire.

The task of crafting a more humane and just world is not purely theoretical but instead requires a strong conceptual understanding of the structures which underpin privilege and disadvantage. The critical lens and the commitment to social change need to be a conscious part of our daily practice; be that as program officers, researchers, teachers or managers of people. Writing for *International Studies in Widening Participation*, or other publications, is one way to achieve a greater level of consciousness and integration of theory and practice. I want to encourage my academic colleagues to reach out across professional boundaries more often to draw on the wealth of experience and insight of their practitioner colleagues. And I want to encourage my practitioner colleagues to stretch themselves and put their practice on solid theoretical foundations; to read more and to write more, to stand on the shoulders of those who have thought about similar challenges before and put their thoughts on paper. And then to follow their lead.

In a recent address to the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Conference, David Sweeney, Director of the Research and Knowledge Exchange at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), reminded the audience that research should not be 'all about me' but about a positive future for the societies we live in. The opportunities for academics to engage with policy makers, industry and wider society on the basis of proven expertise, he argued, were there. The only question was: would we take them?

There are some wonderful opportunities for widening participation practitioners to move into the third space at this point in time in Australia and England with programs such as the *Writing Program for Equity Practitioners* sponsored by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the

Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle and the Equity Fellowships through the NCSEHE. There are opportunities for you every day to reach out and collaborate with colleagues in your own institutions and with those of us who work across institutional, state, and national levels. My encouragement to you is: take them!

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