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2016

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Publication Details

O'Shea, S. (2016). Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the concept of experiential capital amongst first-in-family mature age students. HE: Transforming lives through life-wide learning? (pp. 112-116). The Open University.

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Abstract

This paper is based upon research with university students who were first in their family to come to university. The studies sought to explore how attending university impacted upon both the learners and their families, particularly the intergenerational implications of this attendance. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with older university students, this paper will focus on how this mature cohort articulated the ways in which they drew upon life and work experiences in their transition to university. The research indicates that these learners had access to additional capitals in the higher education environment including what has been termed as 'experiential capital'. In exploring the characteristics and sources of this experiential capital, the paper will include suggestions about how higher education institutions might seek to both recognise and nurture this resource within the university environment.

Keywords

students, capital, amongst, experiential, navigating, first, concept, exploring, family, learners, mature, older, sets, knowledge, age

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the concept of experiential capital amongst first-in-family mature age students

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This paper is based upon research with university students who were first in their family to come to university. The studies sought to explore how attending university impacted upon both the learners and their families, particularly the intergenerational implications of this attendance. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with older university students, this paper will focus on how this mature cohort articulated the ways in which they drew upon life and work experiences in their transition to university. The research indicates that these learners had access to additional capitals in the higher education environment including what has been termed as 'experiential capital'. In exploring the characteristics and sources of this experiential capital, the paper will include suggestions about how higher education institutions might seek to both recognise and nurture this resource within the university environment.

Background

Globally, university enrollments continue to increase with a substantial number of commencing students who are older and returning to education after a significant gap in learning (OECD, 2013). This attendance pattern is particularly noted in Australia, evidenced by both the reduction in student enrollments directly from school (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) and also the significant percentage of enrolled undergraduate students who are aged 25 or above (40%) (ABS, 2012).

As well as mature aged students, another significant cohort within the Australian higher education environment are those students who are first in their family to attend university, which is reported as being 51% of the total university population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). These authors argue that the high number of first-in-family students in Australia is not surprising given that the higher education sector is in a 'phase of educational expansion' (p.321). However, this first-generation or first-in-family group is recognised as being at greater risk of attrition and also, regarded as typically encountering additional barriers and complexities in their higher education journey. For example, Thomas and Quinn (2007) report how first-

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in-family status may reduce individuals' perceptions of their sense of fit or 'acceptance' within the institution, resulting in perceptions of 'lack of entitlement to be there' with an accompanying 'negative impact on self-confidence' (p77). Similarly, Bryan and Simmons (2009) in their study of Appalachian first-in-family students identify how this cohort reflected on various obstacles encountered during their transition into this environment, including difficulties managing the relational, financial and identity facets of their lives.

The particular issues and obstacles encountered by older students, particularly those with child dependents, are also documented in the literature (Gouthro, 2006; Hinton-Smith, 2009, Reay, 2003) so this paper will explore how one cohort of older first-in-family students enacted success within this higher education environment. First-in-family status was defined as having no one in the immediate family including partners, parents, siblings and children who had previously attended university. Included in this participant group are parenting and carer students as well as those experiencing financial or social stratification. This diverse life experience adds greater depth to the findings, recognising that individuals can never be defined in discrete terms and are instead intersected by multiple biographical and social considerations.

Theoretical approach

The research outlined in this paper is underpinned by recognition that discussions of university participation and engagement need to shift beyond deficit discourses or equity constructs and instead explore this field by drawing on multiple 'faces, voices and experiences' (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002, p24). This process was assisted by reference to the Community Cultural Wealth framework developed by Yosso (2005), which recognises the cultural strengths of diverse student groups. The Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Framework has been largely theorised in relation to Hispanic students and students of colour within the United States, but arguably has broader considered application to other non-dominant and under-represented groups throughout society.

In developing CCW, Yosso (2005) built upon Bourdieu's perspectives on cultural capital. Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieuan concepts of cultural capital assume that white middle class culture is the 'standard', which can result in other types of culture being 'judged in comparison to this norm' (p.76). Yosso instead proposes that there are alternate forms of cultural practices and wisdom that are equally valued by more marginalized and less powerful groups. Yosso proposes six forms of capital including 'aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant.' How these various cultural capitals resonate with first-in-family students has been explored in previous publications (O'Shea, 2015, 2014) so this paper seeks to interrogate the possible silences in Yosso's work, specifically as these relate to

the particular cultural wealths of older, first-in-family students returning to learning after a significant gap in educational participation.

Methodology

This paper presents research conducted with first-in-family students at an Australian university between 2013-2015. An initial study was conducted in 2013 and students were recruited via an email sent out to a random selection of first year commencing students who indicated on their enrollment forms that neither parent had attended university. A total of 25 students were interviewed but only the narratives of the older students (those over 21 years) who had no other family members involved in university have been drawn upon in this analysis (n = 15). Whilst the study was small-scale, the use of open-ended narrative biographical interviews generated rich data. Students were encouraged to reflect deeply on their motivations for attending university and the ways in which they enacted success within this environment. Drawing on analysis from this initial study, the second study sought to elaborate on themes related to the cultural wealth of older participants, with specific reference to Yosso's framework. This latter study was conducted between 2014-2015 and a total of eighteen older students, with ages ranging from 25 – 62 years, agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. Table (1) provides an overview of all the participants (all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms) and indicates the diversity of this group in terms of age, background and also, discipline focus.

Both studies adopted a recursive approach to data analysis, which required a continual dipping into the data, reflection and then interrogation. This process was assisted through line-by-line analysis within NVivo (10); the emerging thematic categories (or nodes) were then explored and questioned. Themes then emerged inductively from the interview narratives and were further refined through a process of reflection and memo writing. This act of writing enabled deeper engagement with the data, particularly as a means to check implicit assumptions and assumed understandings.

Results and implications

The deeply personal accounts provided by participants indicate how this movement into university is an embodied one. These older students reflected upon motivations that were both emotional and also, altruistic in nature. The focus of this paper is on the ways in which these older students enacted success within this tertiary environment and the ways in which they drew upon prior knowledges and skills in this enactment. Repeatedly, participants described how their 'experiential capital' provided a rich but largely unacknowledged resource in their higher education journey. One example is Sam, a 44 year old mother of two, who described herself as advantaged due to her '*...knowledge of the world and how things work*

and when the lecturer talks about walking down Oxford Street in London, I can picture it because I've done it whereas they [younger students] just don't have this idea.' The full paper will draw upon student narratives to unpack the nature of this experiential capital and how this impacts on university transition and engagement for this cohort.

There remains a tendency to define older students in terms of deficit or lack, which can mean that their life knowledges remain largely underutilized and unrecognised within the university landscape. In these interviews, the participants reflected upon a range of abilities that included resilience; motivation and tenacity, often derived from their apriori life experiences, which assisted them to succeed and persist in this environment. Using rich qualitative data, this paper will deeply explore the nature of such 'experiential capital' and consider ways that universities might build upon the particular cultural wealths of this older cohort in the enactment of lifelong learning.

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