Towards a clearer understanding of student disadvantage in higher education: problematising deficit thinking

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The increased diversity in the student body resulting from massification poses particular challenges to higher education. This article engages the uncritical use of the 'disadvantage' discourse and its effect on pedagogy. It explores some of the challenges of coping with student diversity, with particular reference to the South African context. Students enter higher education institutions with a variety of educational backgrounds, not all of which are considered to be sufficient preparation for the demands of higher education. The dominant thinking in higher education attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as *lacking* some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society. This constitutes a deficit thinking model: it focuses on inadequacies of students and aims to 'fix' this problem. In the process the impact of structural issues is often ignored or minimised. Employing a deficit mindset to frame student difficulties perpetuates stereotypes, alienates students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in perpetuating the barriers to student success. In the process, universities replicate the educational stratification of societies. This article suggests that we need to find more suitable responses to diversity in the student body. These require a change in our way of thinking: we need thoughtfully to consider the readiness of higher education institutions to respond to students and to cultivate the will to learn in students. We need to find ways to research the full texture of the student experience and to value the pre-higher education contexts from which students come. In addition, the notion of 'at risk' students could be helpful and the original sense of the concept needs to be reclaimed.

Keywords: academic literacies; non-traditional students; stereotypes; student diversity; underprepared students

Introduction

Massification of higher education is a worldwide phenomenon. Globally, higher education participation has grown just over the last decade from 19% in 2000 to more than 26% in 2007, and in North America and parts of Western Europe more than 60% of the age cohort is now enrolled in higher education studies (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). The same report predicts an increase in the diversity of higher education students as a key demographic trend for the period up to 2030. It also expects a shift in national debates on higher education to include an increased consciousness of disadvantaged groups. The increased diversity as a result of massification in the student

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body poses particular challenges to higher education – 'a sector long protected by high walls of selective entry and intellectual aloofness' (Northedge, 2003, p. 18). This paper explores some of the challenges of coping with student diversity in higher education, with particular reference to the South African higher education context.

In the post-apartheid era in South Africa there has been a stated commitment to increasing participation in higher education. However, even though access to higher education has to some extent been improved, participation by the main population groups in South Africa remains highly skewed: 60% of the 20–24-year-old age cohort of the white population is enrolled in higher education, compared to only 12% of the black population age cohort (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007). In order to address equity issues and to widen diversity in the student population, higher education institutions have been implementing various measures to allow admission of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.[1]

Obtaining access to higher education presents only the first hurdle to these students. Many students enter higher education institutions with the product of what still amounts to inadequate schooling and experience great difficulty with their studies. Understandably, there are concerns around these gaps in skills and conceptual knowledge that students bring with them. However, 'disadvantage' has become an umbrella term to cover a wide array of perceived shortcomings and has not been clearly conceptualised.

In other contexts different terms are employed to grapple with similar concerns arising from massification of higher education. The term 'non-traditional' students is used in the UK to describe students similar to what are called disadvantaged students in South Africa ('non-traditional' is also used to describe mature age students and part-time or short-term students, for example Bridge [2006], but this is not the focus of the current paper). Warren (2002) describes traditional students as ones who enter higher education shortly after completing secondary schooling and who are considered to be better prepared for higher education due to their prior socialisation, schooling and attainment. By contrast, non-traditional students are diverse in terms of age and educational, class, language and cultural backgrounds. They are often from lower socio-economic groups and some use English as an additional language. Many have not yet acquired the necessary literacy, numeracy and academic skills crucial to succeeding in higher education. Elsewhere, students like these are called 'under-prepared' and, in some places, 'minority' students, although some of the prestigious universities in the USA now have minorities in excess of 40% in their freshman intake (Chow, 2007).

The dominant thinking in higher education thus attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as *lacking* the academic, cultural and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society. Much of the discussion around these topics concentrates on some aspect of deficiency: those who do not succeed in higher education fail because of some internal shortcoming (e.g. cognitive or motivational) or some external weakness linked to the student (e.g. cultural or familial background). The terminology used contributes to the deficit discourse: students are referred to in terms of what they are not: *not* traditional, *not* prepared for higher education, *not* in a position of privilege or advantage. This discourse sets up higher education in a position of privilege and defers responsibility for any critical examination of practices in higher education itself. In this sense, it could be argued that it effectively places the responsibility for the lack of certain desirable characteristics that would promote academic success, within the student. Biggs

(1999) calls this the 'blame-the-student' theory of teaching. This approach to teaching focuses on the inadequacies of the student and aims to 'fix' this problem. When applied to education policies attempting to respond to student difficulties, it has been argued that deficit thinking amounts to a neo-liberal commitment to help those who cannot help themselves (Valencia, 1997). There are discursive implications when the problem is framed in this way and I return to these later in the paper.

In 'The evolution of deficit thinking' (Valencia, 1997), the authors trace the progression of the use of the deficit thinking model in explaining school failure, particularly among economically disadvantaged ethnic minority students in the USA. Menchaca (1997) argues that deficit thinking has its roots in early racist discourses in the USA: the belief that people of colour are biologically, intellectually and culturally inferior to people from so-called European descent. The implications of the conceptual model and its links to pedagogic practices over time are discussed. Valencia (1997) warns that deficit thinking is a 'protean' theory, taking on different forms to adapt to acceptable educational thinking of the day, and that it continues to impact on teaching policy and practice.

A more recent version of the protean deficit thinking model employs the concept of the 'at-risk' student (Pellegrini, 1991). During the late-1980s, the term 'at-risk students' became widely used to describe students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was initially introduced to counter the deficit thinking inherent in the description of disadvantaged students as 'culturally deprived'. The concept 'at-risk' has its origins in epidemiology in which medical professionals use statistics to identify vulnerable sections of the population to target for inoculation against disease. Intrinsic to the 'at risk' notion is the presumption that it is possible to predict student failure, based on certain characteristics of the student. In terms of education, risk factors, such as poverty, poor schooling and limited English language proficiency, are often linked and their effect has been described as multiplicative, rather than additive (Davis, 1996; Natrielo, as cited in Levinson, Cooksen, & Sadovnik, 2002). Swadener and Lubeck (1995) challenge this, seeing it as inherently racist, class-ist, sexist and able-ist in situating student difficulties firmly in the student, their families and the communities they come from. In many cases this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for students. By contrast these authors promote the idea of seeing students as facing real challenges and yet being 'at promise'. The task of higher education then becomes helping students realise those promises.

Boughey (2007) argues that the deficit model for educational development in South Africa in particular has strong historical roots. She reminds us that the early Academic Development Programmes in South Africa developed from historically white universities' resistance to the apartheid government's attempts to control the numbers of black students who would be allowed into higher education. Early student support programmes therefore had an essentially liberal agenda and were aimed at giving black students a fair chance of success in higher education institutions. Disadvantage and underpreparedness were considered to be factors inherent to black students (Vilakazi & Tema, 1985): they lacked the required language and social skills, as well as the conceptual background to take on higher education and so support programmes were developed to remedy the inadequacies. These support programmes often were in the form of adjunct courses outside the mainstream offering. Implicit in these was the uncritical acceptance of the dominant culture of higher education: the intention was for black students with potential to be assisted to become part of this dominant culture. This would lead to replication of the dominant culture. In the language of discourse (Gee, 1996) black students were expected to take on the ways of being in the world that mark them as members of the typical university student body.

Why is deficit thinking problematic?

In some ways there is a commonsense appeal to deficit thinking: students enter higher education with real shortcomings and a programme is developed to bridge the gap between prior schooling and university. What are some of the fundamental difficulties with this kind of thinking?

The injustice of stereotypes

One of the most serious effects of deficit thinking is that it strengthens stereotypes in the minds and thoughts of educators, policy makers and students themselves. In essence, deficit thinking allows generalisations about student ability to be made and supports a laziness to grapple with the complex issues around student difficulties. In the process, people who are already disenfranchised are labelled and further stigmatised. An example of this can be seen in the practice of some South African higher education institutions to attempt to address equity concerns by making provision for lower entrance criteria for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, using race as a proxy for disadvantage. When ethnicity is used as a proxy for disadvantage, it almost inevitably leads to fixing stereotypes and, as some argue, racial prejudice (Govender, 2010).

Low teacher expectations and pedagogic disadvantage

Garcia and Guerra (2004) point out that deficit thinking disguises lowered teacher expectations and impacts on teaching practice. In a study on variations in mathematical instruction in South African high school classrooms, Swanson (2002) also describes the way in which dichotomies are set up between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' students in terms of social differences between students (for example, gender, class, race, culture, language differences). Deficit thinking produces and (eventually) reproduces these differences between students in the learning context. Swanson (2002) describes how the social differences are recontextualised as educational disadvantage, establishing 'truths' about students from disadvantaged communities. This finds its outworking in pedagogic practices that limit access to the regulative discourse of the mainstream mathematics: 'constructed disadvantage begot pedagogic disadvantage' (p. 1474). What is particularly disturbing in the scenario described is the way in which social disadvantage is 'refracted' or recontextualised as low academic ability and how it is then worked out in pedagogic practices. The effect of this is an inevitable societal reproduction as the consequence of education. Using Basil Bernstein's terms, Swanson (2002) argues that the academic support programme in mathematics described in the study is weakly classified and framed and reinforces notions of disadvantage rather than contesting them.

Mann (2008) argues for placing teaching and learning issues in the discourse of ethics and justice. Any diminishment of the student, such as described above, then compromises the human rights and freedom of the individual. She reminds us that educational processes are situated within particular social and institutional contexts that act upon the relationships between the teachers and learners and that these interactions are neither neutral nor natural. It is easy to see how power relations are set up that students experience as disempowering rather than enabling.

Alienation

The effect of the deficit thinking model on students can be devastating. Tema (1985) points out that the students from disadvantaged backgrounds who get to university

see themselves as survivors of an inferior schooling system, as strong, successful individuals who have beaten the system and who, in many cases, carry with them the hopes and dreams of families they leave behind. These students arrive at higher education institutions and are told, in effect, that they stand very little chance of succeeding, that they are lacking in a number of aspects and that they have to 'catch up'. They are marked and separated from the 'mainstream' by virtue of their deficiency, and their 'other-ness' is reinforced. In these ways students are in effect alienated from the very system they have worked hard to be part of.

Thomas (2002) draws on the work done by Bourdieu and Passeron to explain how higher education processes are biased towards the pre-knowledge and experiences of the (traditional) dominant social groups served by universities. This 'institutional habitus' (p. 430) serves to further alienate students who come into higher education from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

Structural factors and 'commonsense'

Another problem with deficit thinking is that it focuses on educational policies that attempt to instil missing qualities (conceptual knowledge, skills, life skills etc.). A great deal of educational development in South Africa focuses on agentic discourse – the response that should be encouraged in the lacking student – and neglects the very real effects of the structural injustice of inferior prior education (Davis, 1996). Even if there is at some abstract level a nod towards recognising the consequence of inferior schooling, the concrete, tangible effect of external structural factors like inequality in schooling resources (such as computers, internet and library access, untrained teachers), inflexible teaching and assessment strategies and oppressive policy decisions, are not taken seriously. There is also a danger that in labelling students as disadvantaged, lecturers are absolved from blame or responsibility when considering teaching and learning interactions.

In a related issue, Boughey (2002) points out the danger of relying on commonsense notions (as opposed to sound theory and research) about students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of these commonsense ideas (such as 'disadvantaged students struggle with the concepts in academic courses because of their poor command of English') have strong ideological foundations and reinforce the deficit thinking model that student difficulties can be attributed to innate differences in cognition.

Are there more appropriate ways to reflect on educational disadvantage?

How does one then proceed? The reality of the difficulties faced by underprepared students cannot be denied. Neither can the dilemma faced by higher education institutions. If an institution intends to produce highly skilled graduates and takes in students to address equity profiles, these issues have to be grappled with. What follows here are not simple solutions to the problem – there are none. The challenge is complex and any suggestions on how to proceed will have to be multifaceted. I want to propose that what is most needed to begin to address the problems of underprepared students is a change of perspective, hinted at by a number of theoretical constructs discussed next.

Central to these perspective shifts is the notion of the university as a social construct that throughout its history has privileged a particular section of society. Even the use of a term such as 'non-traditional student' presumes some typology of an ideal student

attending the university. In this process of favouring certain kinds of prospective students the university has served to perpetuate the stratification of society. This remains true even in these days of massification of higher education. Reay, David and Ball (2005) point out that despite successful policies to bring about widening access to higher education in the UK, there are growing concerns about a deepening of class inequalities in the different options of higher education available.

Acknowledge the university as possibly an underprepared institution

There is a sense in which higher education institutions themselves are underprepared for meeting the needs of the changing student body. Massification of higher education has brought the university to a place where it finds itself not ready to deal with the diversity it faces in the current student population. Boughey (2007) describes the arguments made in the 1990s in South Africa, calling for a different perspective of situating disadvantage in the structures that act on individuals – 'structural disadvantage' (Hutchings & Garraway, 2010, p. 6) – rather than in the students themselves. Haggis (2006) calls for a reconceptualisation of the 'barriers to learning' model in which higher education would rigorously critique and challenge those activities and patterns of communication in its pedagogical culture that make it difficult for some students to learn.

The time has come for higher education institutions to move beyond discussions about access for disadvantaged students and special programmes for underprepared students. Educational development has to move from the provision of entrance or bridging programmes to being infused in mainstream academic teaching. And although this kind of conversation has been taking place in terms of the changes in university policies around Academic Development Programmes (Boughey, 2007), a strong argument could be made that for many mainstream academics this is still not a consideration, that student development has not moved from the periphery to the core business of academia. Many academics hold a 'defensive cynicism' (Haggis, 2006, p. 523) that associates widening access with an inevitable loss of higher education standards. Scott et al. (2007) are highly critical of the view of some in higher education that these students do not belong in universities. The only way change will come will be if we find ways to challenge some of the dominant discourses in our institutions. Maybe it is time to redefine the effectiveness of higher educational institutions: Scott et al. (2007) suggest that it should encompass more than the assessment of quality and standards – it should include assessing the capacity of the sector to address equity of outcomes for all of the diversity of students taken in.

Take on board the concept of academic literacies

Academic literacy as a way to think about learning in higher education has been advocated for at least the past two decades. Some of the earlier authors on the subject were Taylor et al. (1988). They warned against a reductionism that would see academic literacy merely as a skill that can be learnt in disembodied language training classes. They encourage what they call an 'anthropological approach' to literacy (p. 7). In this they explore the fundamental relationship between the culture of knowledge and the language used to express it. They define becoming *academically literate* as involving 'learning to "read" the culture, learning to come to terms with its distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour' (p. 8). This challenge to see academic literacy as more than a language-based approach to student learning and difficulties remains hugely relevant today, and has to be grappled with.

Likewise, Lea and Street (1998) point out that approaches that ignore the issues of identity, power and authority tied to writing practices in universities are unhelpful. They believe that literacies are social practices, linked to identity and epistemology. Further research in South Africa has supported a move away from academic support of a minority of underprepared students to an emphasis on academic development of the large group of increasingly diverse incoming students (see, for example, contributions in Angélil-Carter, 1998).

This view of academic literacy supported by contemporary educational and sociological theories allows an alternative explanation for student experience in terms of literacy and discourse (Gee, 2001): learning and teaching are seen as socially embedded practices and not as neutral activities. These theories make it possible to move away from deficit thinking and get to the heart of the problem: disadvantaged students are outsiders to the discourses of academia and unfamiliar with what is valued in higher education. Interventions based on deficit assumptions (such as 'fixing' students' language inadequacies through adjunct language courses) only have limited success because they address secondary problems. What students need is access to the 'ways of being' in the disciplines that take into account what matters in higher education. Warren (2002) points out that students encounter new and unfamiliar 'ways of knowing and writing, values and beliefs . . .' (p. 88) as they engage in the process of becoming insiders in the discipline. These have to be made explicit in *higher education's* pedagogical practices.

This is a form of literacy that is broader than language use. Gee (1996) calls it the Discourse of the discipline, Bernstein (2000, p. 29) access to the 'unthinkable' and Morrow (2009) coined the phrase 'epistemological access': for students to become participants in academic practice, they need to 'understand and care about the relevant epistemic values' (p. 46) of the discipline they are studying. This can only happen if the appropriate values and discourses are made explicit in teaching and if a community is created into which students are welcomed (Mann, 2008).

Nurture the will to learn

Barnett (2007) makes a powerful argument for what he calls an 'ontological turn' (p. 9) in our thinking about students in higher education. He believes that the will to learn is the most important educational concept and focuses his attention on how it is that students persist in higher education, rather than on why students fail. And this maybe gives us a clue to a different way of thinking. The successful disadvantaged student has a wealth of information we need to tap into to understand how it is that some of these students flourish in higher education.

The will to learn is different from motivation: it is internal to the student and more general than motivation. Barnett (2007) believes that an exclusive emphasis on the knowledge and skills agenda in higher education provides us with only two pillars – the epistemological and practical pillars – and that we need a third pillar, ontology, to build higher education on a stable foundation. The ontological approach brings back the student into our conversations about higher education; Barnett believes that there is a real danger of objectifying the student or to only see students en masse in our current conversations in higher education. This happens when we refer to students only in terms of social equity (access and success), as units of resource or cost (throughput issues), sources of income (fees) or as eventual economic participators (employability, graduate attributes). Barnett argues for a different vocabulary to be used – what he

calls a suitable vocabulary. It employs terms like will, energy, engagement, being and becoming, passion, self-confidence, journey, travel. He believes that we are in desperate need of thinking and practices in higher education that take the student as human being seriously. In a resonance with theorists such as Gee (1996), Barnett (2007) describes the being of the student as 'the way the student is in the world' (p. 27). This being is at the same time both durable and fragile and educators need to be aware of this. A true higher education involves a transformation of the student being. A balance between the agency of the student being and the structures bearing on the student is required. Again there are no easy solutions – it lies somewhere in an acute awareness of the tension that is implied by the structure-agency discourse. This transformation of the student being is complex, because it does not simply mean a change from one mode of being to another kind of life, but it involves the taking on of a 'mode of being for uncertainty' (p. 39), for living with contested knowledge. Again, there is a ring here of the thoughts of other social theorists in the idea of acquiring a Discourse to gain secondary literacies (Gee, 1996).

In the context of this paper, this is a challenge to us to reconsider our ideas around disadvantage. Are we not guilty of objectifying students when we label them as disadvantaged? The emphasis is certainly on throughput issues in our conversations about disadvantage. Do we take full cognisance of the student's will to learn when we employ deficit models of thinking? What are the pedagogical implications for tapping into this will to learn? To what extent do we diminish the 'will to learn' when our pedagogic practices separate and alienate students from a process that should be about enabling, about becoming?

Insist on rich investigations rather than commonsense notions

How should we then go about infusing these ideas in practice – is it even possible to test some of these in pedagogical practice? I have already noted Boughey's (2002) concern that certain commonsense notions of what should be 'done' with disadvantaged students carry with them the danger of oversimplification and of misuse of education theories. Barnett (2007) suggests the idea of a 'muted empiricism' (p. 5) that could be deployed in researching; we glimpse reality with our senses and imaginations:

> with our hopes and even passions. … However, the stories that emerge should not be totally fanciful; rather, they should be testable and tested against experience. … The ideas may have a utopian quality … but they should have an empirical potential, being capable of being taken up perhaps as resources for imaginative actions. (pp. 4–5)

A hint of this kind of empiricism and rich investigation can be found in a study done by Marshall and Case (2010). The researchers used a narrative analysis to explore the particular resources disadvantaged students bring with them into higher education and how these could be harnessed in identity construction. Again this brings a shift in perspective to reflection on the successful 'disadvantaged' student.

Recover the essence of the idea of 'at-risk' students

In the earlier discussion of the protean nature of deficit models, concerns were raised about the way in which the idea of at-risk students has been distorted into a form of deficit thinking. However, the emphasis on early recognition of students most likely to experience difficulties is a compelling diagnostic tool, especially with large

intakes of students. Taking the medical origin of the term into account, implicit in its use in education should be an appreciation of the differential susceptibility to the impact of a combination of personal and environmental factors on student success (Natriello, as cited in Levinson et al., 2002). Not all students who come from academic disadvantage experience the same difficulties in higher education. If we could recover this understanding of differential susceptibility to structural environmental factors, and embrace the appropriate tentativeness implied in the term, we could gain a powerful conceptual understanding of underprepared students. One could then conceive of the important role mentors could play in supporting at-risk students.

Value diversity and recognise what students bring to higher education

Massification of higher education has brought about an increase in the diversity of students. This diversity is evident in student backgrounds: socio-economic status, language, cultural and educational background. It is a feature of globalisation and increased mobility. Asmar (2005) and Leask (2006) make arguments for the internationalisation of teaching – equipping all students to live and work in a global world with cultural diversity.

All higher education institutions need to value this diversity and tap into its riches. Scott et al. (2007) point out that diversity is embraced in national and institutional vision statements and cultural diversity is widely lauded as enriching. However, diversity in educational background, largely embedded in socio-economical inequalities, becomes a stumbling block to development. Tema (1985) argues for much more nuanced research into student background and argues strongly against the convenience of labels. Labels hide unidentified, unexamined assumptions – we need to know what good things students learn from their disadvantaged backgrounds (see also Marshall & Case, 2010). Deficit thinking applies a narrow pathology-seeking assessment to groups of people and fails to recognise individual strengths.

Recently there has been an emerging discourse calling on universities to shift from an integrative model, in which diverse students are assimilated into the dominant culture of the university, to an adaptive model, in which the universities change to accommodate the diversity of students (Zepke & Leach, 2005). The authors suggest this can be done in many practical ways that would acknowledge and show appreciation for the culture of origin of students (see also the description of changes in an occupational therapy course curriculum at a South African university: Hutchings, 1998). Academic staff need to actively search for ways to tap into student competences and find ways to recognise what Sacks (2002) calls 'the dignity of difference' (p. 45).

Conclusion

Across the world the demographics, conceptual background, skills, values and attitudes of students entering higher education have been changing. The increasing focus on market forces in allocating places in mass higher education systems challenges selection criteria that are used to encourage access from previously excluded categories of student. Quality assurance agendas demand a sober assessment of throughput and graduation rates. The weight of these arguments is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. In addition, the challenges are in tension with conversations about education for the public good, conversations about democratic education, graduate capabilities and even education for poverty alleviation.

It is important that higher education grapples with ways in which to address the very real challenges faced by students from academically diverse backgrounds. Describing 'disadvantage' primarily in terms of poverty or socio-economic status gives an under-nuanced perspective. Employing a deficit mindset to frame student difficulties acts to perpetuate stereotypes, alienate students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in the barriers to student success. In the process, universities serve to replicate the educational stratification of societies.

This paper suggests that we need to find more suitable responses to diversity in the student body. These require a change in our way of thinking: we need to carefully and thoughtfully consider the readiness of higher education institutions to respond to the diverse student body, and cultivate the will to learn in our students. We need to find ways to research the full texture of the student experience and to value the pre-higher education context of students. In addition, the notion of 'at risk' students could be helpful and the original sense of differential susceptibility of the concept needs to be reclaimed and used in the appropriate explorative way.

Perhaps this is one of the contributions 'voices from the South' can make in conversations around the uncritical use of 'disadvantage' discourse and its direct effect on pedagogic processes. In the South African context the voices may be more strident, the realities starker, and the political pressure more adamant, but the need for higher education to find a way to respond to the very real issues faced by diverse incoming students, without succumbing to deficit thinking, can hardly be overstated.

Note
1. The term 'disadvantaged' refers to members of population groups in South Africa who, under the Apartheid system, have been deprived of political, social and economic opportunities. This institutionalised inequality resulted in inadequate school education for the majority of the population. In the context of what this paper attempts to address, the term itself becomes problematic. However, in order to engage in this conversation, the author uses the term with reservation.

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