



NALN Research Report

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ART FOR A FEW

Exclusion and
Misrecognition
in Art and Design
Higher Education
Admissions

I DON'T WANT
ART FOR A FEW
ANY MORE THAN
EDUCATION FOR A
FEW, OR FREEDOM
FOR A FEW.

William Morris



Research Aims

- to examine admissions practices in the selection of students for art and design courses in five case study HEIs
- to uncover the complexity of processes of admission and to deconstruct the key assumptions underpinning the selection of students
- to collect detailed data of everyday practices and to analyse the assumptions, values and perspectives admissions tutors bring to the selection process

Background & Context

- The background context of the research is widening participation (WP) policy and practice, which emphasizes the importance of developing ‘fair’ and ‘transparent’ admissions
- concerned with ‘fair access’ (a meritocratic view)
- Underpinned by discourses of deficit
- WP connected to anxieties about lowering of standards
- Fair admissions – key policy discourse – underpinned by assumptions about ‘fairness’ and ‘transparency’ (these are problematically conflated in policy discourse)



Research Methods

- **An information review**
- **In-depth interviews with admissions tutors about their perspectives of the admissions system and process**
- **Observations of actual selection interviews with candidates**
- **Nine of the eleven NALN art and design college were approached, and five agreed to participate.**
 - **2 in large metropolitan areas**
 - **1 in a cathedral town, one in a rural area**
 - **1 in a large town.**
 - **3/5 'selecting' rather than 'recruiting' institutions**
- **10 admissions tutors were interviewed**
- **70 selection interviews were observed**

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu

- **Habitus – helps expose the ways in which those applicants unfamiliar with HE environments might experience feelings of ‘discomfort, ambivalence and uncertainty’ (Reay et al, 2005:28)**
- **In addition to generating emotions and particular forms of practice, habitus produces various forms of ‘capital’**
- **Different forms of capital are ‘capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder’ (Skeggs,1997:8).**
- **The concept of cultural capital and its possible conversion into symbolic capital is generative for understanding the complexity of admissions**



Theoretical framework: Bourdieu

- Admiration for art is not an innate predisposition; it is an arbitrary, i.e. cultural product of a specific process of inculcation
- art is implicated in the reproduction of inequalities
- the relationship between culture and power is such that taste creates social differences
- Certain kinds of art can only be decoded, and appreciated by those who have been taught *how* to decode them (Bourdieu, 1984)
- The cultural capital of the working classes, and certain ethnic groups, is devalued and delegitimated (Bourdieu, 1984)
- dominant groups make inequalities seem just, and natural, through notions of meritocracy - the idea that economic and educational 'rewards' are the natural result of ability and hard work, resulting in the misrecognition of the effects of class as the causes of class (Bourdieu 1984).

Theoretical framework: Feminist poststructuralism

- **Processes of selection are tied to complex power relations across intersections of difference (e.g. class, gender and race)**
- **All individuals are implicated in complex sets of power relations as situated subjects (including admissions tutors attempting to operate in fair and transparent ways)**
- **Judgments about who is seen as having potential and what forms of knowledge and experience are deemed to be legitimate are interconnected with the processes of subjective construction -**

processes of mis/recognition

- The concept of mis/recognition sheds light on the ways the candidate is judged against the construction of an (imaginary) ideal-student subject
- emphasizes the centrality of the politics of identity and subjectivity in selection processes – who is seen as having potential – what counts as talent and ability
- Subjective construction is classed gendered and racialised, embodied, discursive & performative.

Information Review

- **Admissions statements - commitment to equalities which had become codified and homogenised (Greenbank,2004)**
- **‘...ritualistic recitation and reproduction’ (Morley, 2003) without close attention to ways that inequalities are reproduced is dangerous**
- **Websites and prospectuses were marketing tools and ‘impression management’ (Ball in Reay et al, 2005) contained little information on selection criteria or how to apply**
- **Poor ‘cold’ information disproportionately affects social and ethnic groups with little or no access to ‘hot’ information’ (Ball and Vincent,1998)**

THE CANDIDATE IDENTIFIED
AS HAVING POTENTIAL IS
EXPECTED TO ALREADY
DISPLAY CERTAIN ATTRIBUTES,
SKILLS AND UNDERSTANDING.



Issues raised by analysis of data

- Institutional admissions statements often include expressions of commitment to equitable and fair practices
- there is often a conflation of 'fair' and 'transparent' and a lack of clear strategy about how to put this into effect;

Issues raised by analysis of data

- internal progression schemes tend to advantage those candidates from higher socio-economic and certain ethnic backgrounds;
 - (which award degree course places to institutions' internal one year foundation diploma students before external candidates can apply)
- particularly the case in selective institutions

Issues raised by analysis of data

- general lack of clear information, advice and guidance available to candidates applying to art and design programmes;
- lack of clarity is connected to the admissions tutors' tacit & unspoken understanding of what counts as having potential and/or ability interviews (seen as innate, fixed, and measurable, through portfolios, tests and interviews)

Stands out...

- *It is quite difficult to be really specific about it, and it sounds like a cop out to say you know it when you see it but you do.*
- *It becomes fairly obvious after a while. I know what I am looking for and it stands out a mile.*

Issues raised by analysis of data

- The over-emphasis on particular attributes associated with having potential serves to exclude those groups traditionally under-represented on art and design higher education programmes;
- Potential is a complex concept that is largely taken-for-granted
- works to favour those attributes acquired through access to certain forms of cultural and social capital -
 - for example knowledge of contemporary artists and designers and familiarity with certain galleries and exhibitions

Contemporary

- Alan, an eighteen year old young man from an inner city council estate was asked to name a contemporary artist whose work he liked:
- *Interviewer: Tell us about a contemporary artist whose work you admire*
- *Alan: (after a brief silence): Salvador Dali*
- *Interviewer: He's dead*
- *Alan: Pardon*
- *Interviewer: I said contemporary, Salvador Dali is dead.*

Mis/recognition – as unworthy

- Alan -able to name a 'modern' but not a 'contemporary' artist
- not offered a place on the graphics foundation degree
- the words 'modern' and 'contemporary' are almost interchangeable in everyday language.
- Alan did not have access to the understanding of the admissions tutors – which marked out differences between contemporary and modern -- which thus marked him out as an 'unworthy' applicant for selection.

Issues raised by analysis of data

- Decisions about selection are made against an institutionalized (class and ethnically biased) notion of a highly idealized student

Issues raised by the analysis of the data

- The observation data suggests that institutional and disciplinary values and perspectives (e.g. what counts as knowledge and experience) implicitly shape the selection process in ways that exacerbate inequalities and exclusion in art and design admissions

Influences

- **Nina, a Black working class young woman from a poor inner city area, applying for a Fashion Design BA, was asked at the beginning of her interview about the influences on her work:**

Influenced by Hip-Hop

- **Interviewer: What influences your work?**
- **Nina: I'm influenced by Hip-Hop?**
- **Interviewer: Hip-Hop or the history of Hip-Hop**
- **Nina: The History of Hip-Hop**



Rejection

- **Body language of interviewers changed – suggested they disengaged from Nina**
- **They asked her what she would like to design and she answered that she was interested in designing sports tops.**
- **After Nina left, the interviewers immediately decided to reject her.**
- **Discussion of how to record this on their form:**



INTERVIEWER ONE:
WHY SHOULD WE SAY
WE'RE REJECTING HER?
INTERVIEWER TWO:
WELL SHE'S ALL HIP-HOP
AND SPORT TOPS.
INTERVIEWER ONE:
WE'LL SAY THAT HER
PORTFOLIO WAS WEAK.



Unfashionable, immature, lacking confidence

- **Before the interview, Nina's portfolio had not deemed it as weak.**
- **Nina's clothes were noted as not fashionable**
- **Interviewers said she lacked confidence**
- **They were dissatisfied with Nina's intentions to live at home whilst studying – sign of immaturity.**

All part of the experience

- **The white middle-class male candidate interviewed immediately after Nina, was from an affluent spa town, expensively dressed and cited famous artists and designers amongst his influences.**
- **In the interview discussion, he confirmed that he would ‘definitely be leaving home because it is all part of the experience.’**
- **The young man was offered a place in spite of having considerably poorer qualifications than Nina, including having failed GCSE Art.**

Embodied misrecognised subjectivities

- Nina not recognized as a legitimate subject of art and design studies because she cited a form of fashion seen as invalid in the higher education context.
- Nina embodied Black racialised ways of being, which were seen as signs of immaturity and lack of fashion flair.
- Her intentions not to leave home were read as signifying her inappropriate subject position.

Processes of Recognition

- The male, middle-class, white-English candidate knew how to cite the discourses that would enable him recognition as a legitimate student subject.
- The admissions tutors' judgments shaped by implicit, institutionalized, disciplinary and racialised perspectives of what counts as legitimate forms of experience and knowledge.
- Classed, gendered and racialised formations of subjectivity (embodied and performative) profoundly shape selection-processes.

Recommendations

- **Institutions must be as explicit as possible about their selection criteria**
- **This advice must be practical, and underpinned by attention to how inequalities are reproduced**
- **Admissions criteria must be readily available to everyone**
- **Institutions should provide CPD training for staff which includes careful attention to issues of equality**
- **Staff need to understand that having a set of standard questions is not the same as 'fairness'**

Recommendations

- Interview questions should avoid being value laden
- Admissions teams should be accountable to their institution for making selection decisions against inclusive criteria
- Admissions teams should be accountable to their institutions for ensuring tools of assessment are equitable, anti-discriminatory and inclusive
- The art and design academy needs to carefully scrutinise the potentially discriminatory role of internal progression schemes, and foundation diplomas, in the admissions process

Recommendations

- the art and design academy needs to further investigate the extent to which the inequitable admissions practices described in this report reflect equally discriminatory curriculum and pedagogical practices

THE FUNCTION WHICH PLATO
ATTRIBUTES TO THE WATER
OF FORGETFULNESS FALLS,
IN OUR SOCIETIES, ON THE
UNIVERSITY WHICH IN ITS
IMPARTIALITY, THROUGH
PRETENDING TO RECOGNISE
STUDENTS AS EQUAL IN
RIGHTS AND DUTIES, DIVIDED
ONLY BY INEQUALITIES OF
GIFTS AND MERITS, IN FACT
CONFERS ON INDIVIDUALS
DEGREES JUDGED ACCORDING
TO THEIR CULTURAL HERITAGE
AND THEREFORE ACCORDING
TO THEIR SOCIAL STATUS.

Bourdieu,
1993:235

