Diversity, inequality, and a post-structural politics for education

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Abstract

This paper considers the contribution to understanding educational inequalities offered by post-structural theories of power and the subject. The paper locates this consideration in the context of the ongoing endeavour in education studies to make sense of, and identify ways of interrupting, abiding educational exclusions and inequalities. The paper examines the potential of Judith Butler's work, in particular her engagement with Foucault's concepts of productive power and subjectivation, and the articulation of these ideas with the notion of the performative constitution of subjects, for making sense of the processes through which students come to be particular sorts of subjects of schooling. The paper argues that taking up these understandings not only enables us to better understand the endurance of particular configurations of educational inequalities, it also opens up new possibilities for interrupting these through a post-structural politics that seeks to displace prevailing discourses and constitute students differently through every-day practices of preformative reinscription.

Introduction

In this paper I want to draw together post-structural theorisations of the subject and a concern for social justice in education. In doing this, I aim to demonstrate the usefulness of Foucauldian theory, in particular the take up of Foucault in the work of Judith Butler, for thinking about schools and students differently. Specifically, the paper offers an account of the links between the production of student-subjects and the reproduction of abiding educational inequalities and exclusions in order to suggest a reconfigured, post-structural politics in education.

The paper proceeds from the position that 'who' students are biographically and as learners should not be taken for granted ("that's who the student is"), or taken as either discreet ("learning has nothing to do with background") or inevitably linked ("of course

students from professional, middle-class background get the best results"). These are not new assertions. Rather they have a long tradition in Education Studies and are part of a body of work that continues to be developed by critical, feminist, anti-racist, inclusive and other educationalists concerned for social justice. This body of work has argued, in a range of ways, that social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, disability are not determined; that the links between identity markers of this sort and educational experiences and outcomes are not inevitable, but instead are the result of discriminatory practices whether these are explicit or intentional or not; and that policies of inclusion and inclusiveness do not necessarily ameliorate the exclusions faced by disenfranchised groups. (See, for example, Apple 2001; Ball 2003a; Barnes *et al* 2002; Benjamin 2002; Gewirtz *et al* 1995; Gillborn & Mirza 2000; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Kenway *et al* 1998; Kehily 2002; Reay 1998; Whitty *et al* 1997.)

I would like to offer a story:

> *Assembly, a Nottingham primary school, on a large, inner-city council estate.* A three-year-old girl stands straight upright on a wooden chair at the front of the assembly hall. She wears a checked cotton summer dress with white ankle socks and navy leather Clarkes sandals. Balancing in the girl's hands is a large hardback book. She reads aloud from it the story of the *Lazy, Hungry, Caterpillar*, projecting her small voice and pausing to turn the book around to show the illustrations to the congregated students. "Wow Miss, she can read!" one student, a Black girl from the Top Juniors, exclaims in whispers to her teacher, the girl's mother, who is standing smiling at the back of the hall.

At play here is social class. A primary school teacher, my mother had been initiating me into the formal knowledges of the primary school classroom as well as its cultural forms, bodily practices, and attitudes well before I began school myself. The students at my mum's school had been initiated into knowledges, cultural forms, bodily practices, and attitudes, but these did not always seem to be the same ones as mine. At play also is gender. I was perhaps a more confident and enthusiastic learner of school knowledge than other girls my age (and no surprise), but I was a girl none the less, appropriately consensual, cooperative, caring. At play also is race; I was White, like all of the teachers in my mum's school. Like the school caretaker, many of the students were Black.

This is one of my earliest memories and, of course, is a reconstruction and representation of events that can never exist unmediated. At age three I did not think that I was reading to the assembled school because I was exceptionally clever. I thought I was reading to the school because my mum was a teacher. And I stood up straight and was proud of myself as I read. I don't know when during my childhood something about this memory started to feel uncomfortable, to feel unfair.

This paper aims to set out tools that can help to make sense of the very ordinary and unfair set of material circumstances that this account speaks of. It aims to better understand how variant social and cultural practices are developed and circulate and how these come to complement or contradict or be incommensurate with each other. It seeks to interrogate where class and race and gender and ability and disability and sexuality come from and how they operate. It hopes to show how particular social and cultural practices and identity markers come to be entangled with being a good student (or not). It endeavours to explain how and why social and educational inequalities persist despite political activism, equal opportunities legislation, and apparent public goodwill. And it tries to imagine how else these processes might be intercepted and undercut.

Using post-structural theory

In beginning to develop these conceptual tools, I take up the work of Judith Butler, a US scholar working across communication and literary studies, philosophy and feminisms. Butler's work, which draws on a range of writers (including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan) makes a number of important contributions across a series of ongoing inter- and trans- disciplinary debates. Of particular use to me, and which I will discuss here, is her work on understanding the subject that picks up and develops notions of discourse, subjectivation, and performativity to understand both constraint and the possibilities for change.

The use of post-structural ideas may seem at odds with a concern with educational inequalities and exclusions. Indeed, post-structural ideas have been charged with

relativism, self-indulgence, an evacuation of politics, and a failure to take account of, speak to, and be useful in the real world. Yet as Foucault illustrates strongly in his essay *Critical Theory/Intellectual History* (Foucault 1988), post-structural ideas do not come out of a rejection of concerns with material conditions. Rather, they come out of a recognition that existing structural understandings of the world, whether these focus on economic, social, ideological, or linguistic structures, do not offer all the tools that we need. In supplementing these tools, Foucault's work reconfigures how we understand history, knowledge, the subject, and power. In a Foucauldian frame, history is understood not as the march of progress, but as marked by improvisational borrowing in the face of new and pressing demands. Knowledge is understood not as a reflection and transmitter of external truths, but as contingent and constructed and linked intimately to power. The subject is understood not as pre-existing, self-knowing and continuous, but as subjectivated through her/his ongoing constitution in and by discourse. And power is understood not as wielded by the powerful over the powerless, but as at once productive and an effect of discourse. (See Foucault 1990 and 1991.) These ideas help us better understand how practices – located and real and constrained – make some things possible, or even likely, and other things all but impossible. Judith Butler takes up these ideas and develops them in ways that have enormous potential for developing insights into the processes through which social and educational inequalities and exclusions come to endure and how these might be shifted.

Performatively constituting subjects

Judith Butler begins by adopting Foucault's notion of discourse. Discourses in this sense might be understood as bodies of ideas that produce and regulate the world in their own terms, rendering some things common sense and other things nonsensical. In exploring the productive power of discourse in relation to the production of subjects, in particular sexed and gendered subjects, Butler makes use of the notion of the performative. This is not the performativity, after Lyotard, of the marketised and corporatised education work place that Stephen Ball (2003b) writes about. Rather this performative is borrowed from work concerning the nature of language and its relationship to the world in which a performative is: 'that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (Butler 1993:13). Butler argues that:

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> Discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make. ... [g]enerally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares. (Butler 1993:107).

This is a significant, if perhaps, counter-intuitive claim. With this understanding of the performative, the schoolgirl and boy, the gifted and talented student, the student with emotional and behavioural difficulties, even the teacher, is so because he/she is designated as such. Indeed, while these designations appear to describe pre-existing subjects, *it is the very act of designation that constitutes the subject,* as if they were already student, teacher, gifted, EBD and so on. Indeed, Butler argues that the subject must be performativity constituted in order to make sense *as* a subject. While these subjects of schools appear, at least at the level of the everyday or commonsense, to precede their designation, this apparent prior subject is an artefact of its performative constitution. This has massive implications for education because it insists that nobody is necessarily anything and so what it means to be a teacher, a student, a learner might be opened up to radical rethinking.

Discursive performatives are often considered as they are deployed through spoken and written language. This might be through direct naming of social and biographical categories (like girl, boy, student, teacher) or supposed characteristics (like clever, or gifted, or disruptive or badly behaved). And in some discursive frames such supposed characteristics relate back to social and biographical categories – for instance, Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) now infamous claims for the links between intelligence and race. Discursive performatives, however, might also be deployed obliquely through representations that implicitly cite particular discourses – for instance, the sorts of photographs of students that are found on government department websites and the covers of glossy school prospectuses. Discursive performatives may be deployed through bodily gestures, adornments, acts – the way students sit at their desks, how they wear (or do not wear) their school uniform, how they link arms in the corridor. Indeed, Butler suggests we might rethink Bourdieu's bodily *habitus* as a bodily performative, at once productive and constrained. Finally, performatives might be deployed through silence, through what is unspoken and what is not done – the student whose social

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and/or educational unacceptability is constituted through the absence of an address or through playground abuses left un-intercepted.

Intelligibility and performative constraints

These examples begin to suggest the limits of discursive performatives. Performatives must 'make sense' in order to work; they have to be recognisable in the discourses that frame their deployment. And to continue to be recognisable, they must continue to be cited. In school contexts being a schoolgirl or boy, being gifted, having emotional or behaviour difficulties makes sense. These subjects cite enduring institutional discourses about who students are and what schools are about. School discourses are suffused with girls and boys, teachers and students. We cannot 'think' schools without them.

That the discursive performative has to make sense in its context in order to make sense also suggests that performatives might *constrain* the sorts of subjects that students can be at the same time as they constitute students. Butler usefully borrows from Althusser's understanding of subjection (1971) and Foucault's understanding of subjectivation (1991) to explore how productive power and the performative constitution of subjects are linked. According to Foucault, the person is *subjectivated* – s/he is at once rendered a subject and subjected to relations of power through discourse. That is, *productive power* constitutes and constrains, but does not determine, the subjects with whom it is concerned. This notion of simultaneous production and constraint is usefully elaborated by Judith Butler as follows:

> "subjectivation" …denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection – one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency. […] Subjection is, literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced. Such subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally *acts on* a given individual as a form of domination, but also *activates* or forms the subject. Hence, subjection is neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction *in* production. (Butler 1997b: 83-4 original emphasis)

The girl is inaugurated into subjecthood through gender discourse, but she must continually cite (be it tacitly or knowingly) the rules of this discourse if she is to remain

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intelligible as a subject. And behaving well in school according to school discourses of the good female student – being cooperative, empathetic, and industrious – is one of the discursive threads through which this is made possible. (See Benjamin 2002; Kehily 2002; Renold 2004; Youdell in press.)

Performatives that do not make sense in the discourses that frame schooling, or that are counter to prevailing institutional discourses may fail or may act to constitute a subject outside the bounds of acceptability as a student. The boy is also inaugurated into subjecthood through gender discourse, but those discursive practices that constitute certain heterosexual masculinities can provoke bodies and selves that are incommensurate with school discourses of acceptable learners (see Nayak 2003; Youdell forthcoming). And the Black student who is constituted street-cool in the discourse of the student milieu is simultaneously constituted as challenging White hegemony in the discourse of the school institution and excluded from the possibility of being a good student, or of being a student at all (Youdell 2003). Schools are also suffused with exclusions, with what the student-subject cannot be, with who cannot be the student-subject. Subjecthood – and studenthood – comes with costs.

Discursive performativity, then, shows how raced, classed, gendered and otherwise marked subjects continue to be produced and constrained in the ongoing processes of being marked as such subjects. It also shows how particular sorts of learners are produced and constrained. Maintaining the notion of subjectivation in play when thinking about these performative processes underscores that performatives, and the subjects they constitute, are not neutral, but are invested in enduring relations of discursive, productive power. These theoretical tools, then, demonstrate how intersecting discourses constitute some students inside educational processes and others outside these.

Discursive agency and performative politics
Understanding students as subjectivated through ongoing performative constitutions suggests that the political challenge is to intercept these performatives in order to

constitute students differently. Foucault, Derrida and Butler offer tools for thinking how this might be done.

A key contribution made to debates concerning the function of the performative is Derrida's (1988) assertion that any performative is open to misfire and so might fail or entice something unintended or unexpected. And Foucault's (1990) account of discourse insists that no discourse is guaranteed – while particular discourses prevail in some contexts and endure, the potential for the meanings of these to shift and/or for subordinate discourses to unsettle these, remains. Butler develops these ideas to detail how discourse and its performative effects offer political potential. She engages with Althusser's understanding of interpellation (Althusser 1971) – the turn to the hail of authority – to think about how the performatively constituted subjects might engage in the sorts of insurrectionary acts that Foucault speaks of. She suggests that while the subject needs to be named in ways that make sense in discourse in order to be '*recognizable*' (Butler 1997a:5, original emphasis), by being performatively constituted the subject can performatively constitute another. Butler writes:

> the one who names, who works within language to find a name for another, is presumed to be already named, positioned within language as one who is already subject to the founding or inaugurating address. This suggests that such a subject in language is positioned as both addressed and addressing, and that the very possibility of naming another requires that one first be named. The subject of speech who is named becomes, potentially, one who might well name another in time. (Butler 1997a:29)

Butler calls the capacity to name and so constitute which results from subjectivation, 'discursive agency' (Butler 1997a: 127). By thinking of agency as discursive – as being the product of being inaugurated in discourse and so able to join citational chains of discourse – Butler moves past an understanding of intent and agency that is the property of a rational self-knowing subject. Yet she does this while accounting for how the subject continues to act with intent – discourse and its effects exceed the intent or free will of an agent, but the performatively constituted subject can still deploy discursive performatives that have the potential to be constitutive. As such, challenges to

prevailing constitutions of subjects can be deployed self-consciously through the discursive practices of subjects who are themselves subjectivated.

Butler suggests that these insurrectionary practices would 'involve decontextualizing and recontextualizing ... terms through radical acts of public misappropriation such that the conventional relation between [interpellation and meaning] might become tenuous and even broken over time' (Butler 1997a:100). She insists, after Foucault, that the sedimented meanings of enduring and prevailing discourses might be unsettled and reinscribed. And that subordinate, disavowed, or silenced discourses might be deployed in, and made meaningful in, contexts from which they have been barred. So the enduring inequalities that are produced through the performative practices of institutions, teachers and, indeed, students, might be unsettled. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender politics' reinscription of 'queer'; disability studies' reinscription of 'crip'; and, undoubtedly more problematically, hip hop's reinscription of 'nigga' might all be understood as examples of such performative politics in action.

Inside school, gifted students, clever students, challenging students, disabled students, special students, hardworking girls, naughty boys, boffins, swots, dumb kids, retards, rude girls, homeboys, gypsies, faggots, and dykes might all be made to mean differently. And made to position students in new relationships with school institutions and with learning. Such a 'performative politics', Butler claims, offers 'an unanticipated political future for deconstructive thinking' (Butler 1997a, 161).

Conclusion

The practices of decontextualising and recontextualising, misappropriation, redeployment and reinscription advocated here are clearly not features of a simple, checklist style model of change for which we might campaign. Rather, they suggest ongoing, localised, contextually sensitive – but potentially generalised – practices of educational equity, practices that may well, indeed must, trouble both our thinking about education as well as our educational institutions.

Yet I believe this is precisely why these ideas are so important and so promising. By understanding the subject in the ways I have described we see how it is in the minutiae of school life, its routine practices, mundane occurrences, and everyday interactions that students come to be performatively constituted – not just along social, biographical and sub-cultural axes, but also as learners. And by understanding these constitutions as the effects of matrices of intersecting discourses and, indeed, planes of incommensurable discourses, we see how markers such as race, gender, ability, sexuality, disability, social class come to be entangled with the sorts of learners that it is discursively possible, intelligible, for students to be. And how some students come to be impossible learners.

These discursive effects are neither complete nor guaranteed. The subjects constituted are not uniform – there is significant and sometimes unpredictable diversity not just of categories but also within categories. This, though, is not an identity free-for-all as early identity politics optimistically claimed. Rather, the diversity of subjects is constrained by enduring discourses. These subjects, though, are not determined or devoid of a capacity for action, even if this action is constrained by the discursive frame in which it is deployed. The contingency of the discursive performative, and the mobility of discourse and discursive meaning, mean that these processes can be resisted, undercut, deflected; discursive meaning can be shifted; silenced, disavowed discourses can be deployed; subjects can be constituted differently.

If we accept these theoretical propositions then we can see new possibilities for dislodging the familiar links between class, race, gender, sexuality, ability and disability and educational inclusions and exclusions, experiences and outcomes. Indeed, the contemporary success of (certain) girls in schools may be an example of shifts in the implicit gendering of discourses of the good student, and the *re*-constitution of the girl as learner. Such changes do not take place through legislation and policy development (although such reforms for equity remain welcome), rather they occur through practising differently in the everyday, from moment to moment, across school spaces.

A key goal of this paper was to illustrate the usefulness, and so importance, of these theoretical tools for educationists and education researchers concerned with politically

framed progressive action in education. In particular, I sought to show how these ideas might be put to work to understand and interrupt abiding educational exclusions and inequalities. That is, I sought to set out the potential of a performative politics in education – a politics that looks to the potential of the performative to reinscribe meaning and subjects and the capacity of deconstruction, after Derrida (1978), to unpick, reverse and displace hegemonic discourses.

Such a theoretical point of departure has been criticised as a-political; as (conversely) inappropriately positioned; and/or as irrelevant to educational practice. Such criticisms proceed from particular modernist/structural conceptions of what politics or action for change might look like; scientific notions of neutrality; and/or scientific/technical accounts of the teacher and teaching. As such, they miss the crucial point that the practice of deconstruction is itself a political practice, albeit one with reconfigured methods and goals; they sidestep the incredulity to Truth (Lyotard 1984) that draws together much post-structural thinking; and they eschew the implicit politics embedded in normative educational thinking and practice.

A performative politics does not set itself above, or in contest with, other modes of political engagement. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, post-structural theory is not a rejection of, for instance, critical theory. It is an additional set of conceptual, analytical, and political tools that might be taken up in order to generate particular types of understanding and pursue particular avenues for change. As far as these theoretical tools help us to understand and unsettle the relationship between the subject, the institution, power, and meaning, they are critical to politically engaged scholarship and action in education.

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