

## ***Book Review***

McClean, M., Abbas, A. & Ashwin, P. 2019. *Quality in Undergraduate Education: How Powerful Knowledge Disrupts Inequality*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

ISBN: 9781474214490

The book emanates from a three-year 'Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project' and draws on an extensive range of data from sociology and related social science courses offered in undergraduate degree programmes in four UK universities. The authors state in the introduction that the promise of university education contributing to '...creating an inclusive, just society' (p. 16) often goes unfulfilled and instead '...reproduces society's inequalities and leaves its ills unchallenged' (p. 16).

Basil Bernstein's theoretical lens frames the project investigating what is conceived of as knowledge and how that knowledge is legitimated in pedagogic decisions of the four departments forming part of the study. The authors have an interest in understanding how knowledge distribution impacts on social justice and to that end draw on the work of philosophers Miranda Fricker and Wally Morrow.

The authors put forward a compelling argument for scrutinising a prevailing assumption in the UK that links quality higher education with high status and better resourced universities. The entrenched assumption disregards evidence of 'systemic differences of experience for different social groups at different universities' (p. 17). The authors maintain that central to the question of defining good quality university education that benefits all students, is the '...connection between the quality of education and the extent to which it reproduces or disrupts inequality' (p. 17).

The book consists of ten chapters, divided into five parts. Part I and II set the scene by introducing the concepts of university education, inequality, and knowledge. The authors provide anonymised descriptions of the four universities labelled Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity. The first two are associated with higher-status and the latter with a lower-status; thus, providing the backdrop to an elaboration of the existing patterns of inequality in higher education.

In Part III, the authors succinctly problematise and challenge the assumption that higher-order knowledge is distributed by the Prestige and Selective universities because these institutions focus more on knowledge production. Drawing skilfully on a Bernsteinian lens, the authors provide accounts of the explanatory power of the observations of sociology curricula in the four universities. Bernstein's pedagogic device is used to provide a comparative framework of the four curricula, uncovering how students are positioned differently in the four universities.



The crux of the book is in Chapter 7, titled 'Pedagogy for Powerful Knowledge and Understanding', which answers the core concerns raised in the introduction: 1) whether sociology graduates from the different universities have comparable knowledge and confidence to speak up in public spheres; and 2) whether the aspirations of students attending lower-status universities are curtailed in any way or whether working class students attending higher-status universities are epistemically wronged. This chapter provides detailed accounts of students' opinions of the quality of education drawing on their experiences in seminars as well as pointing to the significance of the relationship students have with academics in their departments. These accounts offer profound insights of the essential epistemic and pedagogical conditions required to provide epistemological access for *all* students.

Part IV features Chapter 9, 'Undergraduate Education and Future Lives', where the authors demonstrate how students' disciplinary identity is shaped by their understanding of sociological knowledge. This account of how identities are developed is organised under five broad sub-headings: 1) sociology enables students to hold opinions on a broad range of issues, 2) sociological knowledge is embedded in curriculum modules, 3) sociological knowledge is a way of understanding the world, 4) sociological knowledge has implications for students lives, and 5) sociological knowledge offers alternative way of understanding the relationship between lives and social structures.

The categories are used to illustrate how powerful sociological knowledge shapes student's disciplinary identity and their futures. It is in this chapter that the authors tuck away a tentative suggestion that one of the institutions has a curriculum offering students transformative educational experience. The curriculum and pedagogy provide students with alternative ways of understanding themselves and the world.

Part V concludes the book with the authors taking the reader through a well-crafted summary of each chapter, demonstrating the compelling argument of how universities can do justice to students by not buying into myths of hierarchy.

While this argument holds for the UK universities, one cannot help but think whether the argument could translate to other contexts within the UK and further afield. Can we confidently assume that going to university is still worthwhile for *all* students as suggested by the authors? Particularly those students for whom accessing and thriving in tertiary education is not the expected norm. Can those students also expect to experience good-quality education at any university?

It would be a mistake to assume that this book is pertinent only for sociology and cognate departments. It has far wider reach and is a gem for higher education studies and the field of sociology of education, and particularly for curriculum specialists working across faculties who maybe searching for a powerful theoretical lens to frame curriculum development. The authors artfully draw on Basil Bernstein's theories to illuminate curriculum development processes, while ensuring that anyone unfamiliar with his work was carefully considered, by making his theories highly accessible.

The value of the book is the categorical challenging of the myth that quality education only resides in elite institutions benefiting students from middle and upper socio-economic backgrounds. The authors present a firm case for focusing on one discipline to offer insights into how powerful knowledge disrupts inequality in undergraduate education. However, this presents a limitation. The conclusions drawn, although plausible, raise the methodological question of whether concentrating on different disciplines in different contexts would yield similar findings. In spite of this question, this book is highly recommended as it offers a useful framework for departments and institutions concerned with engaging in rigorous curriculum review processes.

*Reviewed by*

Amanda Hlengwa, Rhodes University