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‘That social side of things’: Students’ experiences of social and physical place

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This paper highlights the experience of social and physical place as experienced by students at a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) college in Victoria, Australia and TAFE diploma graduates who transitioned to a degree course at a university in Victoria, Australia. Drawing on narrative, one-on-one interviews as well as focus groups, personal perspectives on experiences of physical and social place are discussed. Data collected showed that students perceive status hierarchies between TAFE and university physical and social spaces, and this impacted on a sense of identity and belonging for some students. Some students problematized these differences, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how students experience both environments. Implications of the findings with respect to broader, urgent questions about how the Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors can contribute to meeting the federal government’s ambitious goals for low-SES access to and retention in HE are discussed. The research setting was site-specific, constructed around a partnership between the regional Australian university and the TAFE, enabling issues of place to be foregrounded.

Keywords: TAFE-University pathway, University-TAFE pathway, social and physical place

Introduction

The TAFE-university pathway model has been in place informally since the 1980s. It was officially facilitated via the national policy on credit transfer and articulation in the tertiary sector introduced in 2002 (Bandias, Fuller & Pfitzner, 2011), with the aim of giving students an opportunity to engage in university studies irrespective of their age or secondary school results. The benefits of this practice within the Widening Participation agenda are clear since it enables those who otherwise would not access university to obtain a place. Nevertheless, there have been few studies that evaluate the experience of students who travel the TAFE-University pathway, or indeed those who travel from university back to TAFE. Therefore, this paper reports on a wider study that aimed to investigate how current TAFE Community Services students and past Bachelor of Social Work students who came from the TAFE pathway perceived or experienced the transition to university. The ultimate aim of the project was to further build on and reinforce the bridges between The TAFE and university sectors to support and retain students.

Hierarchy, spatiality and experience of identity

Writers exploring TAFE to university pathways (for example, Bandias et al., 2011; Harris & Ramos, 2012) describe a perceived hierarchical social stratification in relation to Vocational training at TAFE and the training provided by universities. Both within the institutions and in the professional arena, there is a perception that university academic curriculum and learning is 'rigorous' and the knowledge gained is somehow superior to that delivered by 'vocational' courses. Research also suggests a perception that there is a higher academic literacy expectation at university (Watson, 2008 as cited in Bandias et al., 2011), suggesting the students at university possess higher intelligence or academic ability. Of interest therefore, is how students construct their identities at these respective institutions and to what effects? How do students really experience the differences between these two physical and social places?

A number of writers have explored physical and social spatiality and its impact on subjectivity and sense of identity (for example, Dwyer & Jones, 2000; Rose, 1993; Bhabha, 1994). Useful frameworks, drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), explore the intersectionality of identities constructed by gendered, racialised and classed places. These theoretical frameworks can also be applied to students' sense of place in the higher education sector, and the impact of social and spatial hierarchy on students' sense of self and personal possibilities. They can also be used to interrogate taken for granted binaries of superiority/inferiority and status embedded in neighbourhoods and places of tertiary learning, such as TAFE and university.

Similar approaches to exploring working class students' sense of identity in higher education were adopted in the United Kingdom by Reay and colleagues (2010), and Ball, Davies, David & Reay (2002). These studies found that some working class students adopted a middle-class identity while at university. Those that did not adopt this middle class identity only 'partially absorbed a sense of themselves as students' (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010, p. 107), however.

Recent literature in Australia explored the sense of social dislocation experienced by some students in university settings who feel different to the perceived norm of mainstream

university cohorts (for example, Goldingay, 2012; Sidoryn & Slade, 2008). Both these studies reported the alienation experienced by students for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL). This unwillingness, or socialised inability of native English speaking students to connect with black and/or EAL students suggests that those in the mainstream dominant groups are able to actively choose the avoidance of discomfort whereas such privilege is not available to those who are 'othered'. As Dwyer and Jones write, '... white privilege is built upon [white people's] ability to seal themselves from the socio-spatial traces of the Other' (Dwyer & Jones, 2000, pp.214-15).

This ability to 'seal' oneself spatially and emotionally appears to be a socialised mechanism to protect varying degrees of privilege for some groups of people in Australia. The process of identity making appears to be built on what people can perceive they are *not* in relation to hierarchical social stratifications (Dwyer & Jones, 2000). Hosken (in press) has observed that similar processes occur in classed spaces, where those who are taught to think of themselves as working-class 'whites' confer their identity as being superior to working-class or unemployed 'blacks'. The experience of TAFE students who enter university is therefore of interest, especially in relation to how TAFE students perceive their identity in relation to the other students who came through other university entrance pathways. The reflections of students who previously enrolled in university but are not enrolled at TAFE are also of interest. Therefore, the next stage of the paper will explain the research participant group and processes of recruitment, followed by analysis of the data collected.

Participant group

There were two participant groups and several subsets of data in the research we draw from here. The participant groups were current TAFE students, and current and past university students from the TAFE pathway. Those students who made the transition from TAFE through to university are referred to as 'TAFE-University pathway' students. Those students who went from university to the TAFE system are termed 'University-TAFE pathway' students. We conducted interviews and focus groups with a total of 41 students.

Recruitment

For ethical reasons, recruitment and data collection was undertaken by a non-teaching member of the project team. The combination of focus groups and interviews were chosen to enable collect a range of data. Focus groups enabled the research team to draw on the language and culture used by the group, to capture their experiences in their own terms and to get a sense of the consensus of the group (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). We also saw focus groups as a way to try to address the power relation that might be perceived between researchers and participants (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993) due to our connection with the university and our status as researchers. Individual interviews were used to enable the collection of sensitive confidential information and to gather the views of those who lack the confidence to share their experiences with a wider group (Gibbs, 1997). Participants were given a choice as to whether they wished to participate in individual interviews or focus groups.

We recruited current TAFE students via class announcements. Thirty current TAFE students participated in either interviews or focus groups (about one third of the total currently enrolled in the community services course). Past and current university social work students from the

TAFE pathway were recruited via an email and/or letter sent to current and graduated students and via an announcement in the university alumni newsletter. In total we interviewed eleven students who have undertaken the TAFE-University pathway. Of all the student participants in the research, we have identified nine who studied at university prior to TAFE. Some had completed their university studies, some had not.

Findings

Experiences of current TAFE students in negotiating university places

Some TAFE students experienced being at university while they were enrolled at TAFE. For some this was experienced positively, and for others this was more ambivalent. For some students, familiarity with the university campus through prior visits did not produce familiarity which might have facilitated the TAFE-University pathway. One student took a group of clients to the university campus while working as a volunteer in the welfare sector:

When you walk up with the clients up to the cafeteria so they can get something to eat, yeah, it's just like a big world ...yeah I was just looking around thinking, "Wow this is quite a big, sort of, intimidating environment." (TAFE student FG 110)

Of interest is the source of the intimidation – which is not clear from the extract. The subjective experience is expanded on by another student who had visited the university in a number of different capacities yet when it came to enrolment day the meaning of the visit – the moment of becoming a university student – produced distinctively unpleasant feelings:

I felt so stupid and overwhelmed and it was a really busy day ...a really difficult day. Horrible. [Int: Had you ever come to campus before?] I've actually been to quite a few meetings here. It's not a strange place to me. (TAFE-University student 150)

The extract suggests that despite familiarity with the university in a physical sense, this mature age pathway student's experience was one of being less than her usual sense of competence or intelligence. In the suite of possible selves available, this sense of lack was experienced as overwhelming, and the resulting subjectivity was 'horrible'. The student went on to articulate the privilege constructed by class which constituted her identity in the moment being discussed:

In my era there weren't lots of unis everywhere, so it was huge, and it was a class thing. And my family actually lived very close to [a university] so I was actually near the university all the time, so it almost seemed like a separate city, with walls. So that might be it, it was just a big place that you had to be privileged to go to, so I think there's that privilege. (TAFE-University student 150)

The extract demonstrates not only the meanings of 'the university' this student, but also a sense of what the student feels she is *not*. The feeling of being physically close to, but not belonging in the privileged group contributed to the unpleasantness of the experience.

Dislocation in the cloud: The experience of an off-campus student

A feeling of being overwhelmed continued for some pathway students, even when they did not physically attend the university. Some authors have discussed the classed digital divide (Devlin, et al., 2012), where those without means to obtain computer hardware and software and functional internet connections do not become familiar and comfortable with online environments. The student quoted above continued to feel overwhelmed sometime after enrolment day due to unfamiliarity with help seeking in virtual spaces, as shown by the extract below:

because it was total - overwhelm. I didn't know where to go to get help even though it was everywhere, how to do it, I still couldn't work out how to do that because it wasn't a physical location (TAFE-University student 150)

Feeling out of place: A sense of social dislocation

Other students reflected on their distinct experiences of social place, specifically social hierarchy due to class, at university compared to TAFE. A student, who discontinued studies at university and enrolled at TAFE decades later, expressed feelings of social exclusion as a result of being locked out of friendship circles:

My background is I started off one of six kids living in [an area which is] very working class, lower socioeconomic, yeah. So when I went to Uni it was so different to anything I'd experienced and I found that really hard, really, really hard because a lot of the kids had come from these private schools and I had come on my own to Uni and it was just- the whole situation was very difficult to break into, friendship wise... (University-TAFE student 116)

This student also experienced social alienation due to the different physical presentation of the other students and a resulting sense of difference due to this. The student mentions 'elitism', implying that expensive attire and elitism were connected to identity in the university setting, leaving the student feeling stressed and 'less than'. In addition, the student expressed a reluctance to invite people to their private residence as their house and neighbourhood would not live up to the standard:

being very stressed, yeah, and not- feeling like a bit of a square peg in a round hole, yeah... Even the way that people dressed you know, there was just a lot of elitism there [] So yeah, it was basically just that I felt different. I felt really different. And I'd probably be embarrassed [to bring] anyone back to my house as well, you know because it was always a bit chaotic...(University-TAFE student 116)

The same student explained that despite doing well with assignments at university, the social alienation and social discomfort preventing them from thriving:

I went really well, like as far as my assignments went I managed that really well, loved it, but it was that social side of things that - because that - I didn't feel secure socially there. I didn't feel comfortable. I don't think I thrived there, yeah. (University-TAFE student 116)

The importance of a sense of belonging and feeling valued cannot be underestimated and literature attests to the link between social alienation and attrition rates at university (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Slomore 2003). It appears that feeling different and in the 'othered' group as a result of being from a different socio-economic background, and this had a significant impact on the student's sense of identity – and that social side of things impacted on the student's overall wellbeing.

Sense of identity as different from the dominant 'mainstream' – age and ethnicity

Carrying off a student identity as a mature student in a university setting where the majority of other students are school leavers can also be challenging, as explained by the following university student:

I think when you are – I mean, yeah, I think when – if there's just sort of a group of young people, most definitely. And I find too, sometimes when I go in to the library, there's a lot of young people in there and you really feel a little bit old or sometimes I come in here with my little girl, and yeah, just feel like a mum more than a student, type of thing. (TAFE-University student 132)

Another student, who had two experiences of studying at university (both courses incomplete) prior to enrolling at TAFE, felt withdrawn from the younger students:

Sort of, from my, from when I was there, I was there as a mature age student as well and I actually found it – I'm quite introverted – I found it hard – harder at [University] because I was in a classroom with predominantly 18 year olds. And they formed – like, they were quite close, and because I'm not a people person I was a little bit removed from everyone, so, I didn't do the happy hour at the [regional location] Hotel and stuff <laughing>. So they sort of helped each other through their work a little and because I was withdrawn from the group – my own doing – I didn't have as – you know, they had more supports because they sought more supports as well I suppose. (University-TAFE student, Focus group 110)

One TAFE-university pathway student talked about being 'one of the few students who came from a different background', about 'English as my third or fourth <laughs> language', and the 'general way of studying, which I'm not used to.' Further to this was the contrast between the student's background, 'the refugee life experience,' and that of 'some of the students that I was in the class with, most of them were young.' During studies at both TAFE and at university, the student was generally the only student from an 'African background' (University 145). Hosken recounts responses by South Sudanese Australian students who were in the minority in overwhelmingly Anglo Australian welfare and social work classes (teachers and students). These students said 'the only place they could "see" themselves in the unit readings, power-points and discussion was as "subordinate group" members, as "refugees", as the oppressed, as "clients", as the "other"' (2010, p.12). These findings resonate with the findings above, which show TAFE-university pathway students feeling 'othered' due to differences in age and ethnicity to what is perceived as the mainstream student body who entered university through traditional pathways.

Feeling ‘daunted’ by what is perceived as a more rigorous but less supportive environment

For TAFE students who had not attended university, the accepted wisdoms of what is expected at university caused anxiety, creating barriers which might influence a choice to attend in the future:

I’m really daunted by it [Uni], I think. It’s this unknown quality at the moment, or quantity. It’s just, um – I imagine that the workload’s going to be a lot harder, and I don’t know whether this is true or not, but I’m thinking that we might not get as much, or I might not get as much, support at Uni. (TAFE student 108)

The following University-TAFE student also described a sense of fear experienced in a lecture room:

And, with the lectures and stuff like that, they can be a little bit – that was scary for me, sitting in a lecture room. (University-TAFE student, Focus group 110)

The following TAFE student elaborated more on the cause of such discomfort – explaining a perception of the culture at university where the power differential between lecturer and student make approachability and effective communication unlikely:

So, I think that would be a struggle for me if I was going into- from this environment and getting used to it, to going to the lecturer kind of environment where I think there’s a difference of power as well. And how you approach them and how you can communicate with the teacher. (TAFE student, Focus group 110)

Thus, a sense of fear about university seemed prevalent amongst students who had travelled both the TAFE-university and the university-TAFE pathway, fear about coping in a lecture theatre, fear of struggling due to not knowing how to approach a lecturer and fear about not being able to handle the workload. It seems there is a perception amongst these students that the work expectations and environment at universities are beyond their capabilities.

Problematising the hierarchy

A number of participants explored some aspects of the differences between university and TAFE which problematized a sense of social and spatial hierarchy and troubled binaries of superiority/inferiority between the TAFE and university sectors, however. The following extracts show students troubling the binary of high/low workload and hard/easy work which might be imagined between the ‘easy’ TAFE and a ‘rigorous’ university sector:

Focus group member one: And while it’s not as stringent here, it still- the work seems to be more overwhelming. (University-TAFE student)

Focus group member two: Which, I would have thought the opposite, but... (University-TAFE student, Focus group 110)

A TAFE student who had previously completed a course at university troubled the notion of ‘standards’ and how much you learned at each institution:

TAFE, the model of teaching is actually better than a uni. I feel at a uni – I did six years at a uni and I didn't learn much because you could just go into a hall of 600 people and not pay attention... at TAFE level you're more watched. You've only got very few people, one-to-one time, it's very intense so you probably take a lot more in at a TAFE level... (University-TAFE student 103)

Another student troubled the perception of what constitutes quality teaching and learning that might be attributed to universities as well, applying a critical view to the utility of university lecturers' endeavours and style:

Well, a lot of the things that I've read, I just... some of it's written too academically, like, say, for this industry you want people to... I don't know... to empower them to help others, it's written so that most people wouldn't understand it. So, like some of the books, I think, are of no use in helping somebody, because unless all you do is spend your whole life in a book, you're not going to understand what they're writing anyway. That, I just think, yeah, maybe, if they speak that way too <laughs>, it might be a bit... hmm. (TAFE student 106)

The TAFE student's perception of university academics' teaching as not useful or relevant, and which might be alienating, enables the student to again unsettle the assertions discussed earlier in the paper that a university educated graduate is of higher quality than one who has graduated from TAFE.. The student below challenges the binary of status, providing a more nuanced experience of the quality of TAFE education:

so I think there can be a bit of a perception that TAFE's sort of down here and Uni's up there, but having studied at both I feel that this course has, yeah, really prepared me well for uni studies, yeah. I feel quite confident about it... (University-TAFE student 116)

Nevertheless, the perception that TAFE is a stepping stone or preparation for university further reinforces some students' perceived status hierarchy between university and TAFE.

Reflections of pathway students: Further breaking down the binary mythology

A number of students who had followed the TAFE-university pathway further challenged accepted wisdoms and perceptions about the differences between TAFE and university. Arguably such experiences may not be shared across all universities. Status divides between TAFEs and Universities and amongst Universities in Australia are mirrored elsewhere (Crozier et al., 2008; Morrison, 2010; Wheelahan, 2009). The following extracts are from TAFE-University students enrolled in a regional Victorian university:

I think it was an assumption, but I just felt like TAFE level would be a little more easier than uni level. But now I feel like maybe not really. It's very close together. (University 130)

Went very well. Far exceeded my expectations, really, so. So I actually got really quite good marks, and was really sort of pleased with that, and a bit sort of surprised, in a

way, but I guess I was also driven by a bit of fear, because I didn't know what I was in for... (University 135)

These extracts challenge the notion that university is 'hard' and TAFE is 'easy'. Of interest are the student participants' assumptions and expectations about the TAFE/university binary and how this may influence students' choices and sense of self while in the TAFE or university setting. Thus it is timely to consider implications, especially as it relates to the Widening Participation agenda.

Implications

Recent changes in policy with respect to access and retention in higher education suggests a need to re-evaluate long standing acceptance of status hierarchies between the TAFE and university sectors. While such hierarchies might once have suited those with greater power and prestige, namely universities and their graduates, data gathered with those who are considering or have already travelled a TAFE to university pathway now suggests it no longer serves a useful purpose. Ball et al. (2002) observe that 'choices are infused with class and ethnic meanings and choice-making plays a crucial role in the reproduction of divisions and hierarchies in HE [Higher Education]' (p. 51). The Australian Federal government currently provides incentives for Universities to attract and retain students who traditionally may not attend university (Devlin et al., 2012). In order to avoid the ongoing reproduction of divisions in relation to who traditionally attends university and who does not, there is a need to develop new meanings and possibilities for such students in the social and physical space across TAFE and university.

Data collected from TAFE-University pathway and University-TAFE pathway students provides a glimpse into the effect of the hierarchical stratification on students' sense of identity and belonging in the university environment. In contrast to the UK study conducted by Reay et al. (2010), there was no evidence in these data sets from regional Australian students adopted a middle class identity in order to absorb a student identity. Rather, for some, a social divide was experienced, where students felt 'othered' by virtue of being in a different class, age group or ethnicity to the mainstream student body. In some cases, ability to thrive was compromised, and students were locked out of social circles which may have further facilitated peer support and learning opportunities. For some, such difficulties may lead to failure and attrition, a costly loss for both the student and the university.

Some students unsettled stereotypes about the rigorousness of the work at university and the ability for TAFE students to achieve well in that setting, however. Still others found themselves doing well in course work at the university they attended. They found few differences in the style of teaching and the approachability of the teaching staff in university compared to TAFE.

There are therefore a number of implications for policy. Firstly, whole-of institution initiatives which ensure universities provide adequate support for all students may reduce the feelings of being overwhelmed, as expressed by some participants of this study. Secondly, more effective publicity to break down out-dated beliefs about the link between social class and academic ability may also assist. Finally, changing curriculum and pedagogy to provide

place and space for non-traditional and minority students to imagine, see and hear themselves as powerful creators rather than as people with deficits compared to the mainstream is suggested.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on interview and focus group data collected from students who have travelled a TAFE-University pathway and a University-TAFE pathway. It has considered some perspectives which might previously have been excluded, and considered the costs and benefits of the existing dominant ways of thinking and talking about physical and social place across the VET and HE sectors. It has also considered the effects of the current divisions and hierarchies within higher education on those who are positioned at the bottom of the social or spatial hierarchy. Such effects included a feeling of social dislocation and alienation, resulting in loneliness and a failure to thrive. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the paper, some students problematised a number of the accepted hierarchies often perpetuated about the differences between TAFE and university, providing a more nuanced sense of the complex intersections of class, ethnicity and what constitutes quality in the VET and HE sectors.

In addition, the paper has argued that the reproduction of long-standing hierarchies are no longer useful to universities within the current policy environment where extra funding is provided to universities on the basis of their enrolment and retention of low SES students. Despite the Widening Participation agenda, students are still experiencing dissonance and dislocation in university social and physical places, and this could affect their choices. Ideas discussed above to move beyond the accepted divisions and hierarchies require the involvement of Universities, TAFEs and State and Federal Government policy and publicity initiatives.

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