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GATEway2Success Open Day and MEaP Symposium, April 2nd 2016

Commentary

Journey to a Successful Career/Self Employment: Four Case Studies

Enterprise Education in many respects has normalised neoliberalism and has become about how best to navigate the market – in other words, how to be enterprising. The character traits necessary for success mentioned are, amongst others, perseverance, industriousness and grit. In fact, Michael Gove in his 2014 speech at the London Academy of excellence spoke about the need to build character and instil grit in children (Gove, 2014). Elsewhere (Clennon, 2014a), I write about the neoliberal trend of responsibilisation of the “work harder” ethic that places full responsibility at the feet of the individual for the structural inequalities they encounter, a mentality summed up by ‘if you work hard enough you can overcome anything’. Pierre Bourdieu (a French sociologist) would recognise this near-universal ethic as a form of “symbolic violence” because for him, “symbolic violence is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). This means that we take this ethic on board as a truth about the world we live in and we don’t ever question it. In fact, Bourdieu goes on to say that this type of violence conceals “the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000 [1977], p. 4). For us and our “work harder” ethic at the basis of enterprise education and character building, this means that the we are fed the ‘aspirations’ of meritocracy when really it is (hidden) privilege that seems to determine success. We can see this at work where HM Government (2014, p. 161) recognises that “some groups are particularly under-represented in enterprise relative to their share of the overall population notably....minority ethnic groups”. The hidden “power relations” causing this ‘under-representation’ are hinted at in former Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg’s (2013) speech when he recommends that banks need to do more to improve their rates of lending to ethnic minorities.

So, here we have Bourdieu’s ‘symbolic violence’ laid bare, where according to Sunak & Rajeswaran (2014, p. 12), “[a]ll minority groups have higher proportions of students staying on in formal education at 16 and 18 than the White population”. Yet, despite this take up of education, ethnic minorities graduates are still more than twice as likely than their white counterparts to remain unemployed (Allen, 2016). And even when



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they want to form their own start-ups they are less likely to be given a loan by the banking system. Bourdieu describes our education system as a form of “symbolic violence” in itself because according to him, our children are being taught that grit, perseverance and hard work alone are routes to success, when these qualities are patently not enough for the majority to achieve success (when examined closely, see (Clennon, 2014b)). What is particularly dangerous is Bourdieu’s supposition that we are all complicit in our own deception because we do not challenge the structural inequalities we live with.

So where does this leave supplementary education and its potential for enterprise?

This is a hard question to answer because whilst we might want to educate our young people to become adept at critiquing the underlying mechanisms of structural inequality, how do we ensure that they can indeed make a living from the very system that they are critiquing?

Can being aware of these “hidden power” relations lead to reform of the system?

I am not entirely convinced that this knowledge by itself will lead to change, as the system seems to be very resistant to change and fights tooth and nail to maintain the status quo. Elsewhere, (Clennon, 2015a; Clennon, 2015b), I write at great length about the struggle against the system and the need to build alliances. However, if the system is so recalcitrant and resistant to change and more importantly, consistently fails our young people despite their grit and “work harder” ethic, would our knowledge and alliances be better applied to building a new system? This, of course, is a potentially dangerous (to the status quo) thought, which as outlined earlier could lead to the irreparable breakdown and segregation of the market but isn’t this just the natural consequence of an unchecked neoliberal agenda that prizes survival at any cost?

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