Posh Talk
Posh Talk
Language and Identity in Higher Education

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For Cesario

Born in Santas, Galicia in 1882, my grandfather, Cesario Conde, spent his childhood as a cowherd. At the dawn of the twentieth century, he left Spain in search of a better life. At the same age as many of the young people in this book, he worked his passage first to Liverpool, then Newfoundland and finally to Cardiff. On landing in Wales, he found work in Merthyr Tydfil, first as a navvy, building roads, and then stoking the furnaces in the local Iron Works, where he worked before and after the Great Depression of the 1930s. So he came to settle in South Wales, where he married my grandmother, Florence Dean, a baker's daughter, and raised two children, my uncle José and my mother, Gloria. Having received no formal education, or English language lessons, my grandfather was limited to the manual labouring jobs available at the time. During the Depression, along with many thousands of workers in South Wales, he was made redundant and was unemployed for eleven years before resuming work at the Iron Works. During these years, he supported the family with produce from his allotments and by picking coal, a life-threatening activity due to the precarious structure of the tunnels that the coal-pickers dug in the mountainside. His experiences gave him the hope that education could improve the prospects of his children and free them from poverty. This book is dedicated to his sacrifice and efforts to improve the lot of his family, to the millions of migrants around the world who seek a better life for themselves and their families, and to the power of education to realise some of their dreams.
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Finally, words are inadequate to express my thanks to Phoebus for cheering me on and supporting me throughout this endeavour, and my family for their pleasure and pride in this achievement.
Transcription Conventions

A slash / shows the end of a chunk of talk
A hyphen - illustrates an incomplete word or utterance
A question mark ? indicates question intonation
Pauses of less than one second are shown with a full stop inside brackets (.)
Pauses of one second and longer are timed to the nearest second and the number of seconds is put in brackets, (3)
Square brackets [on top of each other indicates the point where speakers overlap
An equals sign at the end of one utterance = and the start of the next speaker’s utterance shows that there was no audible gap between speakers
Double brackets around a word or phrase shows that there is ((doubt about the transcription))
Double brackets around x’s ((xxx)) shows that the speaker’s utterance is inaudible or can’t be made out
<phrases or words in angled brackets> is an additional comment by myself as the transcriber on what is happening at the time or the way in which something is said
Words or syllables in CAPital letters are spoken with extra emphasis
words or phrases enclosed by percentage symbols are spoken very %quietly%, almost like an aside
A dotted line marks the beginning of a stave

Reading the transcription between the dotted lines shows the interplay of the voices at that part of the conversation (like the instruments in a musical score)

Staves are used in places where it is not possible to represent overlap clearly using a format based on turn taking.
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Introduction

Three female students discussing their experience of making friends at university (L=Leela, B=Biba, A=Awino):

L:  when we came [to university] (. ) I mean/ if I saw a posh person I actually spoke posh with them/ but if I saw somebody who was (. ) happy with their slang/ I spoke slang with them/ and I think that's how you socialise with them/
A:  yeah
B:  it's how you adapt to different people [that's what adapting is about/]
A:  [yeah/ you've got to adapt/]
   yeah/
L:  yeah/
B:  adapting to different people an' their cultures (. ) y'know/ an' their backgrounds/

This book is about language and identity in the context of higher education in the UK. Specifically it gives an account of the ways in which a group of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students from widening participation backgrounds negotiate their identities in the academic community. As the interaction above illustrates, the way people talk is central to the assumptions that they make about each other. Based on their encounters at Millennium University, a pseudonym for a post-1992 university in London, Leela, Biba and Awino have categorised their fellow undergraduates into two groups: those who speak ‘posh’ and those who are ‘happy with their slang’. Speaking ‘posh’ indicates a greater level of conformity to Standard English and Received Pronunciation. It is also suggestive of the middle-class positioning associated with university education. In contrast, using ‘slang’ demonstrates affiliation to the local variety of vernacular English, which is an integral part of these
students’ linguistic repertoires. As I shall illustrate, ‘slang’ evokes cool and youthful identity positions, embedded in cultural hybridity.

Having constructed a ‘slang/posh’ dichotomy to refer to their fellow students, Leela, Biba and Awino go on to talk about diversity, a reference to the wider student body, and perhaps also the diversity encapsulated in their group. In terms of age, for example, Leela and Biba are both young whereas Awino is a mature student. As regards ethnicity, Leela is a British Asian of Gujarati descent, Biba is a British Arab of Moroccan heritage while Awino is a Black African who was born and raised in Kenya. With reference to religion, Leela is Hindu, Biba is Muslim and Awino is Christian. All participate in family and community practices associated with their respective cultural and religious backgrounds. They also embody linguistic diversity, using Gujarati (Leela), Arabic (Biba), and Swahili and Kamba (Awino), with members of their family and heritage communities. All are multilingual in that their linguistic repertoires embrace the heritage languages of their families and standardised and vernacular varieties of English (Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000). Part of the purpose of this book is to explore the linguistic diversity that accompanies ethnic and cultural diversity and to put forward a case for treating the linguistic repertoires and perspectives of multilingual students as a resource.

The book is based on a study that I undertook with 93 undergraduates (45 women and 48 men), enrolled on Business and Administration degree programmes (Preece, 2006c). At the time, I was teaching the students on an academic writing programme that Millennium University had established to improve the prospects of its non-traditional undergraduates. I was inspired to undertake my study through my experiences of teaching on this programme. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ perceptions and experiences as they seemed ill at ease in the classroom with being viewed as studious or scholarly and with the language and literacy practices of higher education. In the traditions of reflective practice, I wanted to examine my impressions and assumptions and think about ways of helping the students settle into university life and fulfil their academic potential.

As discourses of feminism, critical pedagogy and experiential learning have been influential in shaping my perspectives of teaching, I view education as having the potential to fulfil, transform and empower lives. Having taught for many years, I also recognise that formal education can result in pain, anxiety and shame. Students encounter difficulties along the way that for many are not easily resolvable, requiring persistence, tenacity and support to overcome. Students discover that
learning involves a change in ‘stance and dance’ (Brookfield, 1995), shifts in outlook and understanding about the world that are experienced somewhere along continua of exhilaration/ discomfort and openness /resistance. Taking the view that the ‘whole person’ is involved in learning, I see learning as an emotional as well as a cognitive affair. Jeanne Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) capture this well in their observation that:

as an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. In this view, learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities (p. 53).

I regard learning as inextricably linked with the way we think and feel about ourselves. As Lave and Wenger comment, this involves shifts in identity positions. In formal education, this is further complicated by the institutional setting. As research in educational institutions consistently illustrates, students need to find ways of balancing social and leaner, or academic, identities (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Jackson, 2006; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Wortham, 2006). For students going through the life stage of adolescence and early adulthood, this can be complicated by peer group demands for displays of ‘coolness’ arising from streetwise and popular culture. In a bid to maintain their social standing with peers, students may be drawn to peer group practices that conflict with the practices of the academic community.

Students’ social and academic experiences have been constant themes in the discussion on student retention in higher education (Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Peelo and Wareham, 2002; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993, 1997, 2003; Yorke and Longden, 2004). Much of the literature draws on
Vincent Tinto’s highly influential work on student retention, particularly his ‘Model of Dropout’. This model, which is rooted in the notion of transition from one (educational) culture to another, views drop out as a longitudinal process, in which an individual’s experiences of interacting in the ‘social’ and ‘academic systems’ of his/her place of study have a significant effect on decisions over whether to persist or not with studies. According to Tinto, academic integration is both ‘structural’, in that students are required to meet certain standards to remain on their courses, and ‘normative’, in that students need to develop identification with the norms of the academic system. Social integration, on the other hand, is related to successful encounters with fellow students and staff that help to develop a sense of belonging in, and identification with, the institution. While academic integration is regarded as encouraging students to make continuing efforts towards graduation and intellectual development, social integration is viewed as increasing commitment to the place of study.

During the transition into higher education, first-year undergraduate students need to establish new social networks with their fellow peers while coping with the demands of the academic community and an unfamiliar educational setting. This is not a straightforward process. As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) points out, social relations are not necessarily egalitarian; they frequently involve the exercise of power. In this book, I examine ways in which the students in my study are ‘on speaking terms’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 648) with each other and how students can become marginalised through adopting unpopular positions with their peers. I use Erving Goffman’s notion of ‘face’ (1972), as the ‘positive social value a person effectively claims for [him/herself] by the line others assume [he/she] has taken during a particular contact’ (p. 319; pronoun insertions SP), as a way of understanding how students work to maintain face with each other in spoken interactions in the classroom. I argue that the peer group can offer undergraduate students powerful positions from which to speak, both to counter the relatively powerless positions that first-year undergraduates occupy in higher education institutions and to mask feelings of anxiety and vulnerability associated with the process of transition into higher education.

Central to my discussion is gender, as from a feminist perspective there are many examples of gendering and gendered activity in the data. Along with gender and language scholars (e.g. Cameron, 1996; Coates, 1997; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003), I argue that gender is still of particular salience in the social world. At the very least, others ascribe our gender (and have done since our conception) even if we resist or
pay little attention to doing gender ourselves. I take Cameron's (1996) view that the majority of people ‘experience gender as an inalienable part of who they are, and the treatment they get reflects who others think they are’ (p. 47). This standpoint underpins my approach to the analysis in Chapters 4–7 in which I view gender as constituted discursively, a dimension of identity, and emerging in spoken interactions. In other words, gender is not an attribute or property of an individual but something accomplished through ‘doing’, and experienced as both inhabited and ascribed identity positions, as I shall discuss. Following Judith Butler (1990), I also regard gender as ‘performative’ and ‘performatively constituted’. Gender as a dimension of identity only appears to have a substance through its continual repetition, discussed by Butler as a process of ‘congealing’:

gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (1990: 33).

Important here is the interpretation of ‘performance’ as ‘enacting...oneself as a culturally recognizable (i.e. gender-normative) subject’ (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 491). The notion of making the self ‘culturally recognizable’ suggests the interaction of gender with other dimensions of identity, such as sexuality, ethnicity, social class, life stage, occupation, family roles and so on. While attending to gender, I view it in the local context and shaped by other dimensions of the students’ identities. I also treat gender as a relational term, in which Cameron (1997: 60) argues that the ‘minimal requirement for “being a man” is “not being a woman”’. I consider ways in which the students both maintain and blur gender differentiation in spoken interactions about fellow peers, language and literacy practices and their language repertoires.

To explore the relationship that the students have with the languages in their lives, I draw on a variety of research, including the work of Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris and Constant Leung on ‘language inheritance’, that is, the language(s) inherited from parents; ‘language expertise’, that is, the level of proficiency developed in a language or language variety, and ‘language affiliation’, which relates to affect, the emotions and feelings associated with a particular language (Leung et al., 1997; Rampton, 1990). Importantly, Rampton and others caution against taking an over-romantic view of the language expertise and affiliations of
bi/multilingual students. They question the assumption that individuals will automatically have high levels of expertise in and affiliation to their heritage language(s), a contention that I have borne in mind in the analysis in Chapters 4–7 and in the final chapter to this book.

Three influential groupings for the students were their undergraduate peers, the academic community and their families. As the students met regularly in these groups to participate in activities concerned with family and student life, I found it helpful to consider each as a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Through interactions in these communities, practices and beliefs emerge that are oriented to wider discourses in society. According to Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003), membership of communities of practice not only provides individuals with ways of participating in society, but also ‘a sense of their place and their possibilities in society’ (p. 57). Drawing on this, I view the students as experiencing their everyday lives in peer-group, family and academic communities of practice. I explore how the students negotiate the practices of these communities in the setting of higher education. To do this, I examine spoken interaction among the students in the classroom and with me, in an interview setting. To relate interaction at the micro level to macro concerns related to subject positions and dimensions of identity, three broad questions have guided the analysis in Chapters 4–7:

- How is gender invoked as a dimension of identity in the spoken interaction?
- How does the students’ positioning among peers and in the institution orient them to the norms and practices of the academic community?
- What may this suggest about developing inclusive practice with multilingual students from widening participation backgrounds?

**Research ethos**

In approaching the research, I was influenced by the notion that we cannot capture meaning and pin it down in the manner of a Victorian butterfly collector. Nor can we separate ourselves from the messiness of the social world in the process of research. Foucault discusses this in terms of our ‘will to truth’ (Sheridan, 1980: 123), in which our desire for understanding results in statements about the social world becoming enshrined in discourses as though they were indisputably true, or as ‘common sense’ (Weedon, 1997). In Foucault’s eyes, knowledge is
intrinsically linked with the ‘politics of truth telling’ (Foucault and Rabinow, 1991). As Chris Weedon (1997) argues, ‘science can only ever produce specific knowledges, with particular implications’ (p. 28), suggesting that within the social world, including institutions of education, ‘truth’ is located in specific social-cultural and historical situations.

I am also struck by the view that what we research and the way in which we go about it demonstrates that we are ‘socially located persons who inevitably bring our biographies and our subjectivities to every stage of the research process’ (Cameron et al., 1992: 5). This is particularly evident in practitioner-based research in education where practitioners need to negotiate a variety of positions, including teacher and researcher. Elaine Unterhalter (2003) claims that different positions allow different perspectives to emerge through the positions working to inform each other. Reflecting on this, I can identify the ‘intrinsic’ nature of my researcher positioning, in that I was interested in researching identity for its own sake. I can also identify a more ‘instrumental’ (Stake, 2000: 437) teacher positioning, in that I wanted to consider what the findings suggested about practice. Underpinning this are notions of social justice, the idea of documenting marginalised voices and getting these heard in institutional settings.

I regard my study as embedded in a ‘world of action’ and aiming at a ‘step to action’ (Adelman, Kemmis and Jenkins, 1980). In reporting the research, this book not only documents experiences and perceptions, termed as a form of ethical research on participants by Cameron et al. (1992), but also takes an ‘advocacy position’, or research on and for the students to ensure that their interests are accounted for in higher education policy and practice. Cameron et al. (1992) point out that this formalises the relationship between the researcher and the researched in which the researcher is called on to act in the role of an ‘expert’ on behalf of the participants (p.15) while Ann Oakley (1981) discusses this as the researcher acting as an ‘instrument for those whose lives are being researched’ (p. 49). I suspect that this is partly motivated by my own fraught experiences as a first-year undergraduate. In common with several of the students in this book, I was excluded from higher education at the end of my first year of undergraduate studies; in my case, this was as a consequence of failing one of the first-year examinations. Despite repeating my first year and going on to graduate, this experience has had long-lasting effects. For as Derek Rowntree (1987) comments, the values associated with academic assessment frequently result in those who are unsuccessful feeling as if they ‘have failed as a person’ (p. 42). I do not claim that others who fail their first year of studies experience
this in the same way as me. However, it seems likely that many would grapple with the feelings of humiliation, ‘rejection and shame’ (Hinett, 2002: 172) that can arise from exclusion from higher education. For some students, dropping out may become a more attractive proposition once they get into difficulties with their work, particularly as academic failure is dangerously intertwined with perceptions of ability and intelligence as innate (Covington, 1992; Peelo and Wareham, 2002; Rogers, 2002). To be excluded in such situations carries with it the risk of loss of face with family, friends and employers as well as arousing negativity about one’s own self-worth.

In designing the study, I was also influenced by ethnographic perspectives and paid attention to some of the features of ethnographic research. This included investigating and representing the perspectives of the participants, undertaking parts of the study in the classroom – as the natural setting, observing the participants in the classroom, generating theory rather than testing a hypothesis, and acting as a ‘methodological omnivore’, by using a range of methods (LeCompte, Preissle and Tesch, 1993: 232). Drawing on the claim that it is not possible to capture ‘objective reality’ only to comprehend ‘reality’ through representations of it (Richardson, 2000: 5), I also used a combination of methods to extend the range and richness of the data (Flick, 2002). I also departed from some of the norms associated with ethnography. For instance, participant observation usually involves sitting on the sidelines and writing field notes and/ or engaging in activities as a participant. Most of my observations are the result of routine teacher observation of classroom events, on which I reflected in a notebook following each session.

The structure of the book

In the first three chapters, my aim is to introduce the main concepts and contextual information that inform the analysis of the data in Chapters 4–7. Chapter 1 sets the scene by discussing widening participation in tertiary education and the research site. Chapter 2 explores identity from a social constructionist perspective by using Michel Foucault’s (1991) concept of the ‘discoursing subject’. Here I follow Foucault's conceptualisation of the human subject as embodied within discourse and responsible for reproducing, adapting, subverting and resisting discursive practices. The poststructuralist lens means a shift in focus from ‘big stories’ to ‘local explanations’ (Cameron, 2005: 484). Instead
of searching for universal laws governing human behaviour, I am more concerned with what David Block (2007) describes as ‘nuanced, multilevelled and ultimately, complicated framings of the world around us’ (p. 13). I examine how the students as ‘discoursing subjects’ are both positioned and take up positions in the discourses to which they have access and the ways in which dimensions of identity are continuously interacting and being constituted.

Chapter 3 considers how the discoursing subject is constituted in discourses on literacy in higher education. Drawing on Mary Lea and Brian Street (2000), I reflect on three common discourses associated with approaches to student writing in higher education: skills, socialisation and literacies. I contend that the first two discourses are particularly insensitive to first-year undergraduate students. Skills discourses have given rise to a pathological imagining of students who need ‘fixing’ whereas socialisation discourses position undergraduates as needing to be assimilated into academia, a process largely viewed as unidirectional. While discourses on literacies appear more sensitive to student identities, it is difficult to discern how this is realised in practice.

In the second part of the book, I turn to the data. Chapter 4 examines the spoken interaction in all-male, or predominantly male, peer groups in the academic writing classroom. I consider how gender is evoked as the male students discuss their identifications with their fellow undergraduates and academic staff, academic literacy practices and the languages in their lives. I reflect on how performances of laddish masculinity (Jackson, 2006; Whelehan, 2000) create an impression of ‘walking a tightrope’ between peers and the academic community.

Chapter 5 mirrors Chapter 4 in that it considers similar matters in the spoken interaction in the all-female peer groups in the classroom. I examine whether laddishness is as attractive for the female students or whether they experience the academic community in different ways. Chapters 6 and 7 develop the issues in the previous two chapters by looking at the students’ self-reports in the questionnaire and interviews. I explore whether the students adopt similar or different positions when away from peers and in one-to-one interactions with me as an institutional authority figure. I reflect further on the students’ identifications with language, reading and writing and the gendered identities that these invoke.

In the concluding chapter, I reflect on the questions that guided the study and consider some of the implications for practice with
multilingual students from widening participation backgrounds. I suggest issues for development that may facilitate a greater sense of inclusion and belonging in higher education for students such as the ones in my study. I argue for greater institutional awareness and sensitivity towards these students and for an imagining of higher education as a multilingual space.
Widening Participation

Introduction

In this chapter, I look at what widening participation (WP) means in practice as universities recruit students from a broader range of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. I consider social justice and economic competitiveness as factors in WP and of interest in my study, and argue that there continue to be inequalities in accessing tertiary education. I look at what is known about the experiences of BME students from WP backgrounds in higher education in the UK and note that multilingualism has received little attention to date in the debate on WP. I argue that higher education institutions in the UK have largely ignored the linguistic repertoires of their BME students and there has been little strategic thinking in the sector about linguistic diversity in terms of ‘language-as-resource’; rather, the dominant approach is one of ‘language-as-problem’ (Ruiz, 1984), in which students’ linguistic resources are viewed as in need of remediation and as an obstacle to their progress in higher education. The notion of remediation has tended to inform approaches to student writing and the development of programmes of study skills and academic writing in the sector.

Expansion of tertiary education

In the last two to three decades, there has been a mass expansion in the number of tertiary students, more or less across the globe. With the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, UNESCO (2006) reports dramatic increases, from 68 million students in 1991 to 132 million in 2004. In many countries, there have been attempts to increase the number of students from groups that have historically been
under-represented in the sector. In the UK, this has resulted in encouraging individuals from state schools and colleges, particularly those with lower socio-economic status, traditionally referred to as working-class, and/or those who live in areas of Britain with a low proportion of 18 to 19-year-olds in the sector, to enter higher education programmes of study (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2005). This policy has become widely known as 'widening participation'.

A variety of issues have contributed to WP and the expansion of tertiary education, including globalisation, urbanisation, economic competition, social cohesion, social justice and equal opportunities. Two of these issues appeared to be of particular relevance during the study: social justice and economic competitiveness. Proponents of social justice have focused on redressing inequalities in society through increasing access to the tertiary sector for under-represented groups. Those concerned with economic competitiveness, on the other hand, have concentrated on the needs of industries in the knowledge economy for a highly educated and skilled workforce to compete within the global market. While these agendas are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there is considerable disjuncture between them. In an early report on WP in the UK, for example, Helena Kennedy QC (1997) warned that the demands of the economy were in danger of overwhelming the agenda for social justice:

In all the political debates, it is the economic rationale for increasing participation in education which has been paramount. Prosperity depends upon there being a vibrant economy, but an economy which regards its own success as the highest good is a dangerous one. Justice and equity must also have their claim upon the arguments for educational growth. In a social landscape where there is a growing gulf between those who have and those who have not, the importance of social cohesion cannot be ignored (pp. 5–6).

This theme was taken up more recently by Monica McLean (2006) in a review of higher education policy. As she comments, the social justice agenda has all but disappeared from official documents on tertiary education while the ‘economizing of universities is taking place across the globe’ (p. 45). Penny Burke (2002) observes how the sector is increasingly regulated in the language of commerce, industry and globalisation. Within the UK context, a partnership has been constructed between the tertiary sector, employers and individuals, in which tertiary institutions not only become providers of a service with externally imposed targets
for access and standards, but are also expected to respond rapidly to the needs of employers. The government’s Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (since June 2009 subsumed in the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills) places great emphasis on the role of universities in providing the workforce with knowledge and skills so that the UK can compete in the global market place. Valerie Walkerdine (2003) comments that the modern economy demands a ‘flexible and autonomous subject...able to cope with constant change in work, income and lifestyle and constant insecurity’ (p. 240); it appears that a key role of the tertiary sector is to prepare students for working in this scenario. Students are engaged in a narrative of ‘upward mobility’ in which, Walkerdine argues, success is tied to an individual’s efforts to be a ‘constantly changing successful entrepreneur of oneself’ (p. 241). Academic staff have become caught up in both producing and resisting demands to tie tertiary education ever more closely to the world of work.

Inequalities in access

The dominance of economic discourses masks continuing inequalities in the sector, both at global and national levels. At the global level, UNESCO reports make stark reading. In Europe and North America, for every hundred individuals of tertiary age, 69 are enrolled in tertiary-level programmes of study. This figure drops dramatically for South and West Asia, where only ten out of every hundred people are enrolled in tertiary education, and Sub-Saharan Africa, where only five adults out of hundred are studying at tertiary level (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006). UNESCO (2005) also reports that on average, children in Europe and North America can expect to spend twelve years in compulsory education, followed by three years in the tertiary sector, whereas children in Africa can expect to spend less than eight years in education in total, of which just two months will be in tertiary education. The figures are bleaker when comparing the ten countries at the extremes. In those with the highest rates of participation in tertiary education, individuals can expect to remain in the sector for thirty times longer than their counterparts living in the ten countries at the opposite end of the scale.

Even in countries with high rates of participation in the tertiary sector, inequalities in the system persist, and it is arguable that these are becoming more, rather than less marked. In the US, for instance, students from low-income backgrounds are far more likely to take a two-year
associate degree programme in a community college than a four-year Bachelor degree, particularly one in a prestigious university. In 2000, only 10% of students categorised as in the bottom income group gained a Bachelor’s degree compared to 60% of those in the top income group (Allen et al., 2005). As Allen et al. (2005) point out, the US situation is also compounded by race and ethnicity with African-Americans and Hispanics more likely to be from poorer families, attending community colleges, and having lower rates of completion than their White and Asian-American counterparts.

In the UK, there are similar inequalities. The third Universities UK report on access indicates that access and retention of undergraduates from lower socio-economic groups and ‘Low Participation Neighbourhoods’ remains a ‘persistent challenge’ (Thomas et al., 2005: 6). Government measures have made little headway in addressing the social-class divide, in that students from middle-class families are still three times more likely to enter higher education than their working-class counterparts (DfES, 2003). As in the US, UK students from WP backgrounds are also disproportionately enrolled at less prestigious institutions. Most are in former polytechnics, which were granted university status in 1992. There are also increasing numbers of students from WP backgrounds studying on degree-level programmes in further education (FE) colleges since the validation of higher education programmes of study in further education institutions (HE in FE). McLean (2006) notes how the ‘old’ (pre-1992) prestigious British universities are not only better resourced but are also populated with many more students from professional and moneyed backgrounds in comparison to the ‘new’ (post-1992), and less prestigious, universities. While these institutions recruit a greater number of students from WP backgrounds, they are also required to educate them with far fewer resources.

Black and minority ethnic students

Drawing on the 2001 Census, Thomas et al. (2005) conclude that UK-domiciled undergraduates from BME communities are over-represented in both applications and acceptances in the higher education sector compared to the size of the BME population nationally. They also suggest that the grouping of BME students in higher education reflects patterns of habitation in the UK, in which minority communities have tended to settle in London, other major cities and urbanised areas. Other studies have commented on the grouping of BME students in urban universities (Allen, 1998; Farr, 2001). Marc Farr (2001),
for example, surmises that post-1992 universities in major cities attract applications from local ethnic minority communities. His study found that despite a decline in average distance travelled to university among all students, this was most marked among those from Bangladeshi and Pakistani families and among mature students of all backgrounds. Gender may also be a factor in selecting institutions, as according to Alison Allen (1998), young women from BME communities may be under more family pressure to study in the local vicinity.

Given that BME students appear more likely to be studying in institutions closer to home, there appears to be an argument for considering access statistics on a regional basis, comparing the percentage of first-degree applications and acceptances with the composition of the population for the region. This may highlight differences, variations and lack of access from certain communities in certain areas, which analysis on a national level obscures. As John Bird (1996) argues, the statistics on under- and over-representation are complex and contested; there is a great need to exercise caution in their interpretation in order to avoid the conclusion amongst policy makers that ‘enough has been done, … equity has arrived’ (p. 14).

While access statistics are useful for identifying trends in student recruitment and highlighting continued inequalities, they are also limited by the ways in which data are gathered and analysed. These statistics also use social science categories, such as social-economic group and ethnicity, in an unreflective manner, treating these not only as fixed and essentialised, but also as separable variables. As Block (2006) points out, categorisations on official documents, such as the Census, are one-dimensional, only tell part of the story and conflate ethnicity and ‘race’. Part of my purpose in this book is to show how positions that are ascribed to BME students are only part of the picture. I also aim to illustrate some of the complexities of identity that cannot be accounted for in statistics.

As the number of BME students in the sector has risen, there has been a variety of speculation in the literature about the motivations for continuing studies. One factor mentioned is the value placed by the family on education in terms of its perceived status and benefits. Ramindar Singh (1990), for example, discusses the importance of parental expectations and pressure on young people from Asian communities, arguing that:

Parents who encourage their children to aspire to achieve the maximum level of education earn recognition, pride, status within their own community…for Asian parents university education,
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particularly for boys, is seen as a ‘must’ and that failure to gain some sort of post ‘O’ or ‘A’ level qualification lowers their social status within their own community. In the case of Asian girls, higher educational qualifications are thought to improve considerably their chance in the ‘marriage market’ (p. 349).

Elsewhere, Allen (1998), remarking on the results of a survey into the experiences of BME students in higher education, cites the following poignant quote by a Black British student:

My parents decided that I had to go to university, otherwise I’d be kicked out of the house, either university or out. All my brothers and sisters have been to university. We have no choice at all (p. 57).

Other factors cited include the desire to improve examination grades, the aspiration to be well-qualified and the opportunity to increase prospects in a job market perceived as covertly, and in some cases overtly, operating discriminatory practices against members of BME communities. As David Drew, John Gray and Nicholas Sime (1992) note:

It is the distress associated with unemployment and the insecurity of low status jobs that many black young people are seeking to avoid in working for qualifications and skilled or non-manual occupations’ (p. 10).

There are also a number of studies looking at the experiences of BME students in higher education in the UK (e.g. Allen, 1998; Ball, Reay and David, 2002; Bird, 1996; Bowl, 2003; Law, Phillips and Turney, 2004; Martin, 2008; Osler, 1999; Weill, 1986). Many of these address the experiences of BME students from WP backgrounds and are suggestive of ways in which gender, ethnicity and social class interact within the sector. In a study of working-class and minority ethnic adults entering higher education, Marion Bowl (2003) observes that these students’ perspectives were rarely seen as resources for learning and that lecturers seemed unaware of the contributions that these students could potentially make in many areas of the curriculum. Bowl concludes that despite the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ in higher education, in many universities there is only the ‘illusion of inclusion’ (p. 133). Peter Martin’s (2008) findings parallel Bowl’s. In his study of the education trajectories of four minority ethnic university students, he comments that the students often expressed the view that lecturers missed opportunities to
bring multicultural and multilingual perspectives to bear on learning. Importantly, Martin observes the empowering effect on students when lecturers created spaces for their perspectives to be pursued. Overall, these studies suggest that ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986), defined as ‘socially optimal and valued knowledge, taste and know-how’ (Block, 2006: 35), plays an important role in students’ experience of higher education. As BME students from WP backgrounds generally enter higher education with less of the ‘socially optimal’ cultural capital than their counterparts from middle-class and professional backgrounds, they may experience greater feelings of marginalisation in the institution.

To contrast the norms and practices with which students are familiar from poorer, possibly immigrant families, and non-selective\(^2\) schooling with the norms and practices of the academic community in higher education, Mantz Yorke and Bernard Longden (2004) use the terms ‘non-elite’ and ‘elite’. These are useful terms, inasmuch as they draw attention to the disjuncture that these students are likely to experience on entering higher education, particularly when there is little, if any, first-hand experience of university or professional life within the family. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’, as the ‘collectivity of norms and practices of a social group’, Yorke and Longden argue that to navigate higher education successfully, students need to be able to negotiate the practices of an ‘inherently elite’ academic environment (p. 80). They suggest that those entering from ‘non-elite’ backgrounds frequently experience difficulties making sense of and coping with higher education during the process of transition into the institution. According to Yorke and Longden, unless the student and the institution can successfully find ways of reducing this gap, non-elite students are in danger of failing, which they perceive not as a matter of individual blame, but as covert institutional discrimination.

While all undergraduates are likely to have some problems during the process of transition into higher education, the problems that non-elite students encounter are likely to be more serious and more difficult to resolve. They do not have the benefit of university-educated and professional parents to help them make sense of the system. This is compounded for BME students in cases where parents and elders have limited use of English and little first-hand experience of study at tertiary level. These students are likely to have access to far fewer material resources than their more elite counterparts and may also have responsibilities for caring for family members. In a study of BME students’ routes into higher education, Stephen Ball et al. (2002) argue that the very act of going to university requires non-elite BME students to ‘[eschew]