Comment on 'Addressing (and) inequality'. Subjectivation and desubjectivation in education, and how inequalities can be addressed.

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Abstract
In this chapter, I provide a brief comment on the ideas in this book. I reflect firstly on the relationship between addressing the subject, that is, the naming of the individual subject, and their corresponding social positioning, which results in the reproduction of social inequalities; and secondly on how social inequality can be addressed in education, assuming that we accept that inequality is at least partly created by the social constitution of the subject. Employing, in particular, the work of Judith Butler, I consider the processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation in education policy and practice, drawing on a range of recent empirical and theoretical projects of my own, and other scholars. I argue that a Butlerian theorisation of these processes enables a better understanding of the way in which state discourses reproduce social hierarchies in education. I conclude that one way of resisting these discourses and addressing inequalities might be found in a consideration of the third space of education.

Keywords: Addressing inequality in education, subjectivation, desubjectivation, Judith Butler, social positioning.

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to comment on the ideas in this book, initially drawn together at a conference at the University of Bremen in 2021, and now collected as a series of chapters. The title of the conference was 'Addressing (and) inequality'. This formulation, incorporating three words, with the 'and' in brackets, seems to me to encapsulate two ideas: Firstly, the notion that 'addressing' an individual in a certain way, results in a placing, ordering and arranging of individuals and identities, and therefore creates inequalities. In other words, this is about the social constitution of identities via a naming process, which results in a social positioning process. And secondly, how can we address inequality? Of course, there is a third idea encapsulated here as well, and that is the relationship between these two ideas: how can we address inequality, if we have understood that it is created, at least in part, by the social constitution of the subject?

The contributions to this book take a variety of different approaches to addressing these ideas, and as most of us are commenting from, and on, the field of education, this forms the context for this discussion.

1   Subjectivation and inequality in education

Starting, then, with the notion that the way in which we 'address', or name, an individual, results in, or contributes to, the constitution of their subjectivity and social positioning and therefore tends to reproduce social inequalities. Following the work of Althusser, Foucault and Butler, scholars have argued that identity is formed in power. Althusser argued that the subject is formed at the moment it is hailed, or interpellated. The subject will recognise itself in the interpellation. Judith Butler picks this up and argues that norms, often considered to be identity categories, produce subjects, rather than reflecting or describing (pre-existing) subjects, as is widely believed. From a Butlerian point of view, an individual is subjectivated, or rendered a subject, through norms and discourses. So identity is 'a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience' (Butler 2008: 23). Viewed as socially and discursively constituted, identities for Butler are not considered to be an essential essence coming from within a pre- existing subject, but are negotiated reactions to social norms coming from without and are therefore historically and socially situated. Subjects are formed fully in relation to others and there is no 'original' subject which is not formed historically, culturally, and socially. For Butler the interpellation takes place not only once but continually throughout our lives, and is continually cited. This raises a challenge to the notion that identities are 'natural' or innate, or that individuals are independent, sovereign subjects. This subjectivation process positions us socially, within existing, sometimes shifting, social hierarchies based on gendered, raced and classed structures.

This idea, that the individual is rendered a subject via norms and discourses, and that inequalities are reproduced on an ongoing basis via this process of subjectivation, has widespread significance for the field of education (Youdell 2006; Chadderton 2018), also picked up by Norbert Ricken in this volume. Not least because one of the main purposes of formal education (and indeed, perhaps less often scrutinised, but still the case, of informal education) is the creation of subjects, via education, for a certain (nation) state: national identities. This includes the constitution of insiders and outsiders and containment of threats to the nation. Certain subjectivities are sanctioned, others not. As I have argued elsewhere, Britishness, for example, tends to be constituted as white and monocultural (see Chadderton 2018). The state is therefore 'a direct agent of educational provision' (Kitching 2014: 22) and schooling is linked to nation-building and citizenship.

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Several of the chapters in this collection focus on this, the different ways in which processes of subjectivation in education (re)produce social hierarchies and inequalities, demonstrating the breadth of work in this field, to mention just a couple: Saman Sarabi argues that conducting education research itself subjectivates groups and individuals along the lines of race, gender and class; Kerstin Jergus and Christiane Thompson explore how shifts in the professionalisation of the field of Early Childhood Education are changing the subjectivities of those working in the field.

There is perhaps a particular interest among the authors writing in this collection in desubjectivation. Indeed, Antje Langer and Daniel Wrana in this volume even argue that there is perhaps too much (empirical) focus in subjectivation research on the powerless, the excluded and the precarious. By desubjectivation, I mean when the subject is either not intelligible or viable as a full subject, or the removal of the subject's recognition as a legitimate subject. Subjects who do not fit with dominant norms are often unintelligible or unviable as subjects. They are constituted as culturally unintelligible, beyond the imagined community, and tend to be marginalised and oppressed. This process can also go beyond subjects being not 'just' socially unacceptable, their status as a full subject comes into question. This involves being constituted as beyond the human and not being recognised as a legitimate subject, which tends to have material consequences. In this volume, Aysun Doğmuş, for example, narrates how she is desubjectified as an academic working at a university through a process which involves a being in spaces which are supposedly anti-racist (Rassismuskritisch), where white colleagues and students, however, are not engaging with their own complicity in racism. She argues that this process renders both the racism, and those who experience racism, invisible, silenced, and in its turn confirms the academic subject as white. Equally Paul Mecheril, Shadi Kooroshy and Nadine Etzkorn argue that colonialism is fully structurally embedded within European traditions of education, such as Bildung, and therefore education itself inevitably empowers some groups and disempowers others. This is one of the processes by which the subjects and non-subjects of education are created. This insight of course challenges the idea that education always automatically empowers its subjects, still so common in educational settings and policy.

For scholars such as Judith Butler, subjectivation becomes a question of existence and survival, since one can be desubjectivated, i.e. constituted as less-than-human. We are only recognised as human in relation to social norms. Although the notion of being beyond the human may sound extreme, Butler has argued this is the way in which oppression works: through the creation of unviable or unintelligible subjects, or abjects. 'Normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life,

what will be a grievable death' (Butler 2004: 146). This therefore can be understood as a process of desubjectivation, which can be both explicit and implicit, overt or covert, officially or legally regulated or not:

> 'Oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects – abjects we might call them – who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law.' (Butler 1991: 20)

A lack of rights can be accorded to groups or populations on a variety of grounds, including gender, sexuality and ethnic/racial. While Butler's focus is mostly on gender, they have also considered desubjectivation on racial grounds. They have, for example, referred to the case of the prisoners incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay to exemplify this notion of desubjectivation on ethnic grounds:

> '...the humans who are imprisoned in Guantanamo do not count as human; they are not subjects protected by international law. They are not subjects in any legal or normative sense. The dehumanisation effected by 'indefinite detention' makes use of an ethnic frame for conceiving who will be human, and who will not.' (Butler 2004, xvi)

Denise Bergold-Caldwell and Gundula Ludwig's work in this volume argues that state discourses of white supremacy desubjectivate migrants trying to cross the borders into Europe and normalise necropolitics towards them, which results in thousands of actual deaths. It is worth noting that Bettina Kleiner, in this volume, argues that Butler's notion of desubjectivation does not attend sufficiently to the differential ways in which de/subjectivation occurs, and her theory only explains the subjectivation of black people through the gaze of white people, rather than in their own subjectivity.

I think Butler's work is particularly useful to examine the notion that state power desubjectivates, and that the state wields the power 'to construct the subject of cultural difference' (Butler 2008: 21). What Butler's work enables, I would argue, is an understanding of desubjectivation as an integral part of governmentality: the governing by the state of its populations, with their consent, which tends to be understood as the management and control of populations and bodies, but for Butler, it is also the production of these, via both state and non-state discourses. Thus, governmentality involves the constitution of subjects in relation to explicit and hidden policy aims (Butler 2004: 52).

In my recent work I have shown that the UK government's schooling policy for England during the pandemic desubjectivated racialised minorities (Chadderton 2023) by directly increasing the risk to life. While this policy potentially

increased the risk to life for all families, the risk was greater for racially minoritised families, whose risks of ill-health and death were higher than the overall population Reasons given for this high death rate include high infection rates due to high numbers of racially minoritised people working in healthcare settings and other frontline work, a high likelihood of individuals working in low paid, precarious roles and therefore perhaps being less able to isolate, a higher likelihood of working in frontline roles and being unable to socially distance, and a raised likelihood of living in overcrowded housing (e.g. Aldridge et al. 2020). In fact, recent research shows that workers in insecure jobs are more than twice as likely than average to die of Covid, and racially minoritised individuals are more likely to occupy such roles (Partington 2021). Research also suggests higher rates of death once infected, due to a high incidence of existing health issues such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, and evidence that some minority groups face a range of barriers in accessing healthcare (see e.g. Aldridge et al. 2020). My study found that the UK government's schooling policy is likely to have contributed to this increased risk in three main ways:

Firstly, the slow closure of schools in England in March 2020 and the government's refusal to close schools in autumn 2020 put Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) pupils and their families at increased risk, and probably led to higher loss of life in these groups. Despite ministers' denials, opening schools has been shown to increase transmission of the virus and lead to higher cases overall (Stage et al 2021). As Divya Anand and Laura Hsu (2020) have argued with regards to the situation in the US, opening schools while cases are high 'places the highest risk of loss on constituents of color […including…] loss of life' (ebd.: 195).

Secondly, the closure of schools meant that children had to access learning online from home which was easier, and more possible, for children in better-off families. Many children from less wealthy homes, including a significant proportion of BAME children, had little or no access to a device to access their schooling (Maugham 2021). The UK government was slow to provide laptops for these children. By early 2021, 10 months after the start of the lockdowns, only 560,000 of the million which the education secretary said he had ordered had arrived, and even if these did arrive, there would still be a shortfall as Ofcom, the communications regulator, estimated there were 1.7 million children without devices (Montacute/Cullinane 2021). The government issued new guidance saying children who cannot learn remotely 'due to a lack of devices … should attend school or college' (Secretary of State for Education Williamson 2021 quoted in Maugham 2021). This forces BAME families to choose between risking their health and their lives, or their children's schooling, and potentially pushes them towards sending their children to school to prevent them missing out on formal learning. Again, for those who did send

their children to school in the absence of government-supplied technology, this will have increased the risk of ill-health or even death.

Thirdly, on the return to school after the second lockdown in England, the government did not make masks and twice weekly covid tests compulsory, making them voluntary instead (Pidd 2021). Schools Minister Nick Gibb said it is simply 'highly recommended' (cited in Pidd 2021). This increases the risk of infection for pupils and staff, and may disproportionately put BAME families at risk, who have a higher risk anyway. Not only can it be argued that this is an extreme form of state-sponsored white supremacy, it could even be argued that it is an example of desubjectivation, along race lines. While the risk of ill-health and death was very real for the whole population, it was higher for BAME families. This was a situation which was fuelled by the government's own actions and in-action. This means that this emergency education policy actually affects people differently on grounds of race. The result of this is that BAME people do not have the same rights as white people under this law, because of differential vulnerabilities. Although not all BAME people are directly experiencing this violence, it is the threat of violence and the differential powers of the law which desubjectivates. Like Bergold-Caldwell and Ludwig's work, I make link here between discursive desubjectivation, and the potential of actual death. The UK's BAME population is therefore cast into '...an unprotected exposure to state violence' (Butler/Spivak 2007: 37), due to the government's pandemic response, BAME groups are constituted (in Butlerian terms) asnot fully human. They do not have the status of full subject. The law does not protect them from death- in fact it exposes them to death.

There has been a particular interest in general, both in the English-speaking world and beyond – although perhaps somewhat less in the German context – on the way in which education policy itself de/subjectivates and thus creates inequalities. For example, there has been attention paid to how neoliberal education policy aims to constitute aspirational subjects, while simultaneously constituting those who are perceived not to fit with neoliberal norms of individualism and flexibility due to classed or raced and gendered stereotypes, as unsuccessful neoliberal subjects (Stahl et al. 2018; Chadderton 2018; Chadderton 2020). Deborah Youdell (2004), equally, has shown how the constitution of learners as ideal, acceptable, and unacceptable via intersecting discourses of ability and conduct, supports the engineering of markets in education, creating hierarchies of desirable and less desirable schools which attract certain types of more and less privileged parents.

2 Addressing inequality

The second idea encapsulated in the title of this collection of writings, is, how can we address inequality? Indeed, how can we address inequality, if we have understood that it is created, at least in part, by the social constitution of the subject? There are, of course, many responses to this.

It makes sense once again to engage with the work of Butler, which addresses these very points. Like much poststructural theory, however, Butler's work has been critiqued for not having a clear framework for social transformation, a stance with which I would disagree. In fact, essential to Butler's theories of social change, the possibility of transformation lies within an understanding of the subject as socially and discursively constituted. An understanding of the subject as discursively produced means that hegemonic meanings can be unsettled, the subject can be reconstituted due to the wide range of discourses that constitute it, as these discourses can potentially be interrupted (Butler 2004, 2010). It is the lack of fixity of the material which allows for the possibility of transformation. Discourses can take new meanings and circulate in contexts from which they have been rendered unintelligible, as performative subjects engage a deconstructive politics that intervenes and unsettles hegemonic meanings.

Butler views the ultimate goal of action to address inequalities, to be the gaining of recognition for all subjects, not only formal state recognition but also cultural recognition in the everyday. This should not however, involve recognition on the terms of those who are in dominant positions because the terms of recognisability do not change if this is the case. Rather it should involve an ongoing interrogation of the limits of intelligibility in general (Ruitenberg 2010). It should not involve the invention of new categories, which Butler argues will inevitably be exclusionary, rather the questioning of categories and movement towards the abolition of categories. Butler's aim is to work towards ensuring that categories can no longer function as categories, because they become meaningless through work, acts and practices which challenges their boundaries.

For some, of course, this approach to social transformation is controversial. Firstly, because it rejects the notion that social change is only, or at least, mainly, brought about through conscious political action, and secondly, because it is viewed as focussed on the individual, rather than the collective or institutional. For Butler however, conscious political action requires an original sovereign subject, which for them is impossible. Whilst they do not dispute the importance of collective action, they argue that this should not be on the basis of an essentialised subject. It is argued that their work instead potentially opens up opportunities for new coalitions and alliances which can lead to lasting change. However, these debates continue.

Other scholars have considered how educational inequalities might be addressed on Butlerian terms. For example, Deborah Youdell and Felicity Armstrong (2011) suggest that a changing of traditional spaces in which subjectivation occurs, can enable an escape from subjectivations, and open up new possibilities. They argue that the shifting of the educational space from e.g. school, to a local canal, enables an unintentional shift in how the learner subjects are constituted. More recently Ellen Kollender (2021) documents individual resistance among Muslim parents of school children in Berlin to racist discourses. Involvement in their children's school life is assumed by the authorities to be incompatible with (perceived) 'Islamic values'. The parents tell of appropriating other discourses to counter such racist perceptions, and in particular they perform neoliberal discourses of meritocracy, hard work and aspiration, to convince the teachers they are 'good' parents. While these examples do identify moments of shifts in cultural intelligibility and interrupt discourses, one could equally argue that they do not constitute any great structural or institutional change. Perhaps what this offers us is a way of recognising individual resistance, however, a wider notion of the terms of recognisability changing is as yet unattained.

Lisa Pfahl and Boris Traue in this volume call for a rethink of theoretical understandings of agency, arguing that current understandings tend to be either unrealistically pessimistic about the possibilities of social change or unrealistically optimistic about social transformation through intentional action. In response to this challenge, I wonder whether the concept of the educational third space might offer a way of addressing inequality? Homi Bhabha's 'third space' is an in-between and hybrid space, where social and cultural translations and negotiations are possible, where plurality is the norm (Bhabha 1994: 56). Drawing on the work of Balwant Kaur (2022, 2023) conducted in the English Midlands, I argue that the third space in an educational context can be viewed as a peripheral space where new possibilities are raised. In Kaur's (2022) work this might involve informal conversations in the common room of formal educational settings, but outside of the taught curriculum; the school staffroom being used by pupils on weekends and during holidays as somewhere to study; a childcare course in adult education which becomes an empowering feminised space, for those whose previous experiences of education have been uncomfortable; and youth and community informal educational provision. Of course, it is recognised that these are spaces which are threatened by austerity politics and narratives of securitisation.

The educational third space is co-created through a co-labouring by students and teachers. It is therefore, in part, an intentionally created space. This is a space in which teachers and those in mentoring roles adopt pedagogical practices which involve a recognition of students' biographies and capitals, which might evolve through encountering difference, that centre young people

as having autonomy and decision-making faculties which elicit a conscious participation in these spaces, where informal friendship groups or buddying systems are created. 'The educational space as a third space has the potential to shift what is deemed to be worthy and credible as both knowing and being' (Kaur 2022: n.p), and to reverse structures of domination, which has particular significance for students from marginalised groups.

> 'Rather than a stringent reversal however, the third space suggests a shift in whose presence – or indeed perspective – dominates and more importantly, what students of different backgrounds bring to this space. This has particular implications about developing pedagogies of trust and relationality as there is a risk here of further othering and thereby silencing groups because of their "difference.' (Kaur 2022: n.p)

In Kaur's project, these are liminal spaces, in which knowledges and practices that might have seemed jarring are brought together. They are spaces to explore student histories, identities and managing the home/school separation. They open up access to observe, try out, negotiate and construct identities and enact possible future selves, which changes what becomes possible. These spaces subjectivate differently: they enable the construction of hybrid identities, offering a possibility of transformation through seemingly insignificant moments to create a self that sits amidst contradictory cultural practices. The third space becomes a potential site of resistance: a resistance to a fixed identity; to the binaries of coloniality, of gender expectations, of class positionings; to hegemonic meanings; to essentialised categories. The limits of intelligibility are challenged and there is even a possibility that the terms of recognisability might shift, even slightly.

The third space will not address all forms of inequality and desubjectivation, and will not resolve all the debates around what works best. The designation of a third space is fraught with difficulty. It does, though, offer a possibility.

3   Conclusion

Education, educational research, and educational discourses subjectivate in different intersectional ways, resulting in the reproduction of inequalities by privileging some subjects and desubjectivating others. There are various ways to attempt to address this, and to understand the different kinds of resistance to the reproduction of inequalities. The texts in this book demonstrate the continued relevance of such debate.

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