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Book Report

Enhancing the Freedom to Flourish in Higher Education, by Talita M. L. Calitz, London, UK: Routledge, 2019. 210 pp.

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Delia Marshall, University of the Western Cape, South Africa
dmarshall@uwc.ac.za

Globally, higher education is faced with pressing challenges and pressures including persistent inequality of access, the uneven quality of higher education rooted in historic inequalities, and the massification and commodification of higher education. In South Africa, the issues of inequality and quality in higher education are thrown into sharp relief; recent research by the Council on Higher Education (2013) revealed high attrition, low throughput, and racially skewed participation rates in higher education. Only 16% of black African students in the cohort of 20–24 year olds participated in public higher education, compared to about 55% of white students. And only 30% of students registered for degrees in contact institutions graduated in the specified three years with, overall, 56% completing within five years.

In South Africa, where there is low participation in higher education, high levels of unemployment (van der Berg & Broekhuizen, 2012), and where graduates have some of the highest rates of return in the world on their personal investment in education (Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014), succeeding in higher education is key for social mobility and for greater economic and personal well-being. The recent #FeesMustFall student protests highlighted not only the financial barriers to accessing higher education, but also the ways in which many students experience university curricula and institutional arrangements as alienating.

It is in the context of these contemporary challenges faced by higher education that this book, *Enhancing the Freedom to Flourish in Higher Education*, makes a valuable contribution. While it connects with global debates around widening access to higher education, especially for students who are historically, socially, and academically marginalised, the book's focus lies not only in issues of access but, rather, in how to ensure that students experience university as a place of flourishing and participation.

Talita Calitz's research is framed by the capability approach, drawing on the work of economist Amartya Sen (1999) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011). From this perspective, *capabilities* relate to the opportunities individuals have for being able to realise the outcomes that they value. These opportunities are mediated by what are termed *conversion factors*—which constrain or enable the freedom to flourish. The study also draws on the work of Nancy Fraser (2009), applying her concepts of recognition, representation, and redistribution to analysing students' education experiences. Frierian perspectives on learning are introduced to critique some of the unhelpful

pedagogical practices that students encounter, and which reinforce a reproductive, *banking model* of learning (Friere, 1970). These theoretical frameworks—with their concepts of functionings, conversion factors, misrecognition, and so on—can often seem dense and abstruse but Calitz’s clear, eloquent writing makes the theoretical ideas accessible and generative.

The book is woven around the narratives of eight undergraduate students, whom we get to know through their accounts of navigating their way through undergraduate studies. The rich data from these student narratives is used skilfully to illuminate the theoretical concepts that frame the study; the seamless connection between student data, theoretical analysis, and extensive references to other local and global literature make for engaging reading.

In Chapter 5, entitled “Structural Constraints to Participation,” we get to experience the ways in which institutional arrangements hamper these students’ academic progress and their freedom to participate in higher education. We encounter students who struggle with finances, commuter students who feel marginalised from campus life, and students who struggle to access textbooks and technology. While many of these challenges are rooted in broader societal constraints, what the book highlights so forcefully are the ways in which institutional arrangements and pedagogical practices constrain and fail the students they are ostensibly set up to support. We read about demeaning lecturers with a “lecture-and-leave” approach to teaching, courses that reward regurgitation rather than critical engagement with knowledge, crowded classrooms, and experiences of race-, class-, language-, and gender-based discrimination.

But, despite these dispiriting and demoralising accounts of the institutional constraints that students experience, the next chapter, “Student Agency in Higher Education,” is more heartening; we witness how students use their agency and resilience in dealing with many of these institutional obstacles. This chapter discusses five conversion factors that were found to increase student participation: affiliation with lecturers, affiliation with peers, the platform for voice, access to knowledge, and recognition of capabilities.

The final two chapters focus on the practical implications of the study for supporting epistemological and institutional transformation in South African universities. The question addressed here is: “How can these experiences of enablement and constraint be translated into practice in university pedagogy?” A capability-informed pedagogy is proposed to address some of the constraints that students experience, and a set of basic resources is identified, which students would require to enable their equal participation in higher education.

The book is rich in fascinating insights and implications; one of the key ideas that emerge is the central role played by pedagogical arrangements in enabling student flourishing. While access and retention strategies at universities often centre on mentoring programmes, student support services, and extra-curricula activities, the book argues for “reinstating the classroom as the central point of engagement” (Calitz, 2019, p. 150), echoing international voices such as Tinto (2012) on the issue. While cultivating a sense of belonging is crucial, the study highlights the centrality of fostering a critical engagement with disciplinary knowledge: “At a structural level, it is crucial to ensure that students have access to arrangements that cultivate critical academic capabilities while simultaneously offering the psychosocial affiliation necessary for becoming an engaged university student” (Calitz, 2019, p. 145).

Another finding that seemed striking was the sometimes pernicious role of academic support courses. Many of these were generic, skills-based foundational courses, described by students as adopting a “dumbed down” teaching approach, and modelling memorisation of content rather than critical engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Previous research has noted how educationally flawed these

decontextualised, skills-based courses are (see, for example, Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; McKenna, 2010); however, what this study reveals so clearly is how these pedagogical structures may not merely be benignly ineffective, but that they can be experienced by students as undermining of student agency and diminishing of student voice and confidence.

This important book makes for compelling reading and, to my mind, would serve as an ideal prescribed text for courses offered to new academics. It highlights concrete ways for undergraduate lecturers to better enable students to flourish in their classrooms. For researchers and graduate students in higher education studies or sociology of education, the book provides an excellent overview of key literature in the field, both nationally and internationally. And for university managers, student affairs staff, and policy makers, the book provides concrete ways forward for institutions to ensure that more of their students succeed and flourish in their undergraduate studies.

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