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Exploring student support, class solidarity and transformative pedagogy: insights from Working Class Academics

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to deepen understanding of the assets within working-class academics (WCA). It is organised into three themes: 1) Class Solidarity, 2) Supporting Students, and 3) A WCA Pedagogy. Within Class Solidarity, the study reveals class unity demonstrated through shared experiences and joint efforts in creating spaces for working-class voices. Supporting Students discusses how WCAs provide unique support, addressing the challenges faced by nontraditional students and aiding in the construction of professional identities. The findings also suggest the possibility of a distinctive WCA pedagogy. This potential approach to teaching includes elements such as incorporating lived experiences, adopting a strengths-based perspective, encouraging the co-creation of knowledge, and integrating social justice principles. These components, if indeed characteristic of WCA teaching methods, could represent a transformative pedagogical framework. However, further comparative research is needed to confirm the extent to which these elements are unique to or more prevalent among WCAs.

Introduction

Class-based disparities exert a profound influence on the foundational structure of higher education (HE), intricately shaping dynamics of access and attainment (Matschke, de Vreeze, and Cress 2022), as well as their policies and practices. This influence is starkly evident in the realm of educational achievement, where social class significantly impacts the challenging trajectory from a working-class student to a scholar (Burnell O'Reilly 2022). The term 'working class' is contested and varies across locations and countries, encompassing economic, social, and cultural aspects. In the British context, Savage et al. (2013) argue that traditional definitions of class based solely on occupation are insufficient in capturing the complexities of class structure in the 21st century. They propose a multidimensional approach drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which posits that social and

cultural resources inherited from one's family background play a crucial role in educational success, potentially perpetuating class-based inequalities within higher education. Taking this into account, working-class academics (WCAs) can be defined as those who have origins in families with limited economic resources, typically engaged in manual or low-skilled labour and who may have experienced social and cultural barriers in their educational journey. Wakeling (2023) analysed data from the 2011 Great British Class Survey and found a disparity between academics' working-class heritage and their current self-identification as working-class. While approximately 23% of the 2,500 academics surveyed had working-class origins, only 10% of the sample self-identified as currently being working class. Crew's (2024) examination of the Labour Force survey from 2014 to 2022 provided additional insights. This study utilised data on class heritage, which first became available in 2014. Crew found that the percentage of academics from 'working-class' backgrounds varied over this period, fluctuating between 8.3% and 14.9%. This variability is likely attributable to the relatively small number of WCAs in the sample, as smaller sample sizes are more susceptible to statistical fluctuations. These findings highlight the complex dynamics surrounding class identity among academics and the potential shift in self-perception as individuals transition into academic careers. This article explores potential assets of WCAs, aiming to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their role.

HE institutions have historically perpetuated class-based inequalities, with the expansion of HE in the UK failing to significantly increase social mobility or reduce class disparities (Bathmaker et al. 2018). The marketisation of HE has exacerbated these inequalities, with working-class students more likely to attend less prestigious universities or forgo HE altogether (Reay 2018). This stratification extends to the academic workforce, with WCAs facing additional barriers to entry and progression. Furthermore, the dominance of middle-class norms and expectations within academia can lead to the devaluation of working-class knowledge and experiences. Classic texts such as 'Strangers in Paradise' by Ryan and Sackrey (1984) refer to the unwelcoming nature of academia for WCAs. This sentiment is echoed by Walkerdine (2021), who characterise universities as 'architectures of exclusion' (65) built on values that impede equitable access and progression for WCAs. Qualitative research reveals that WCAs commonly experience feelings of alienation in relation to mannerisms, clothes, or accent (e.g. Warnock 2016; Crew 2020, 2021). These challenges are further exacerbated by the precarious nature of academic employment, particularly for WCAs. The increasing casualisation of academic labour, characterised by temporary contracts, part-time positions, and limited job security (UCU 2019), disproportionately affects WCAs, who often lack the social and financial safety nets available to their more privileged colleagues. Burton and Bowman (2022) assert that academic precarity influences academics' identity, relationships, disciplinary norms, and the perceived value and legitimacy of knowledge production (499). This broader conceptualisation of precarity aligns well with the experiences of WCAs. The feelings of alienation, inadequacy, and the constant navigation between temporary identities without a true sense of belonging are not merely individual struggles but are deeply embedded in the hierarchical and exclusionary structures of academia. Mahony and Zmiroczek (1997) compellingly examined the profound discomfort WCAs encounter due to class based cultural mismatches in elite institutions. Survey data from Haney (2015) observed the additional effort exerted by WCAs to compensate for their perceived lack of cultural knowledge and professional networks compared to their colleagues from more privileged backgrounds. While Case (2017) recognised her ethnic

and heteronormative privileges, she pointed to the social and financial capital advantages possessed by her middle class colleagues. Lubrano (2005) expressed that his working class family 'don't like who I've become' (232). This poignant expression of familial disapproval underscores the tension between one's working class roots and their transformed identity wrought by academic pursuits. The prevalent sentiment of inadequacy and impostor syndrome among WCAs, as noted by Warnock (2016), finds a nuanced interpretation in Crew (2020; 2024), who linked these feelings to a sense of exclusion from academia rather than conventional impostorism. Research by Pilgram Brown (2023), who interviewed working-class professional services and administrative staff, echoed Binns' (2019) concept of the 'ghosts of childhood habitus' (53), which was likely rooted in financial insecurity. WCAs also continuously navigate academia by shifting between temporary identities without a true sense of belonging (Lubrano 2005; Binns 2019; Pifer et al. 2023). This liminality is further compounded by reports of implicit or explicit discrimination, often manifesting as microaggressions from colleagues (Warnock 2016; Crew 2020; 2024). The absence of mentorship in their respective fields add to the challenges faced by WCAs (Pifer et al. 2023). Academic employment's precarious nature often exacerbates feelings of alienation among WCAs. The constant need to secure the next contract or position, coupled with the lack of long-term stability, can hinder WCAs' ability to establish themselves within their institutions and fields. Moreover, the time and energy required to navigate the precarious job market can detract from WCAs' ability to engage in the networking and cultural capital-building activities that are often crucial for academic success. These experiences among WCAs often find explanation within a Bourdieusian framework, which offers a theoretical lens on how social dynamics perpetuate inequalities. Bourdieu and Richardson (1986) note that academia is a distinct field governed by its own social rules. The alignment of an individual's habitus (social history) with these academic standards (Reay 2017) influences that individual's capacity to thrive or merely survive within the scholarly realm. An academic habitus typically encompasses elite social, cultural, and economic capital, and white middle-class values (Waller, Ingram, and Ward 2018). The systemic bias towards cultural attributes associated with the dominant classes creates barriers for WCAs, hindering their full integration into the academy. Overall WCAs face inherent disadvantages within academia, a stratified landscape where unequal resource distribution reinforces hierarchies. This is further amplified by what Bourdieu (1990) described as a hysteresis effect, as individuals hesitate to navigate unfamiliar opportunities due to past dispositions (cited in Squire 2020: 399).

Shifting perspective – challenging the deficit view

In his influential body of work, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu illuminated the socially constructed nature of what is considered 'superior knowledge'. He contended that the dominant class, owing to their power and influence, can shape and define the forms of knowledge, culture, and taste that are deemed valuable and legitimate. Consequently, what is perceived as 'superior' is not inherently so, but rather reflects the preferences and values of those in positions of power. Bourdieu's work challenges the idea that certain types of knowledge, such as those associated with high culture or elite education, are intrinsically better than others, suggesting instead that these forms of information and understanding are only considered preeminent because they align with the tastes and interests of the dominant

class. By exposing this arbitrary nature, Bourdieu underscores how social hierarchies are perpetuated through cultural and educational institutions. Similarly, Tara Yosso's work contests the notion that knowledge associated with higher socioeconomic status is inherently more valuable, arguing that this perspective frames individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds as somehow 'deficient' or lacking in legitimate 'knowledge'. Inspired by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which challenged conventional ideas about race, racism, and inequality, Yosso (2005) introduced the concept of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). This framework accentuated the distinctive forms of capital inherent in marginalised communities. These include: 1) aspirational capital – sustaining a hopeful attitude and continued action to achieve one's goals and dreams even in the face of great adversity, 2) linguistic capital – the ability to communicate in different languages or language styles which comprises heightened inter-cultural and social skills, 3) familial capital – including family history, cultural knowledge/savoir-faire passed down over generations, moral values etc., 4) social capital – social contacts and community support, 5) navigational capital – the ability and resilience to operate and/or even thrive in unfamiliar social environments or institutions that might have a hostile attitude towards oneself, and 6) resistant capital – the ability to recognise and actively challenge social inequality as well as valuing oneself despite receiving implicit/explicit devaluing messages from one's environment.

Yosso's conceptual model, traditionally applied to students from ethnic minorities, can also be applied within broader research on underrepresented groups within the university landscape For example, contrary to the prevailing depiction of a working-class background as a disadvantage for academics, studies by both Luczaj (2023) and Crew (2020) argue that a working class viewpoint is an unacknowledged asset which actually challenges conventional deficit narratives. Several other studies (e.g. Lubrano 2005; O'Shea 2016; Flynn et al. 2023) note that working-class individuals have substantial aspirational capital which aids them in navigating the challenging transition to academia with determination and purpose. Contrary to conforming, WCAs often adopt a critical stance, offering a valuable 'outsider perspective' that supports adjustments for a more inclusive HE space. Manstead's (2018) research revealed that individuals from working class backgrounds tend to exhibit elevated levels of empathy and a greater readiness to provide support to those confronting challenges. Additionally, Soria et al. (2023) emphasised the profound insights of WCAs into matters of equity and justice, presumably influenced by their experiences in managing limited economic resources. Svoboda (2012), an academic from a non-traditional background, evidences this point, suggesting that her personal history makes her particularly sensitive to academic colleagues making premature assumptions about non-traditional students (NTS). Furthermore, Warnock's (2016) review highlights the ability of WCAs to promptly identify and address instances of exploitation or discrimination within HE. From Yosso's (2005) perspective, this may be an important form of resistant capital.

A unique form of social capital (as defined by Yosso 2005) among WCAs is their high levels of solidarity and support for other academics, NTS and also with nonacademic staff members within HE (Pifer et al. 2023). WCAs in Hurst and Nenga's (2016) study discussed mentoring working class students wherever possible. This is also reflected in WCAs tending to be perceived as more approachable by students (Hastie 2021). The numerous struggles they overcome as WCAs also make them excellent candidates for mentoring NTS or WCAs (Warnock 2016). This is a valuable skill as having a mentor is a crucial predictor for academic achievement (Santos and Reigadas 2004), and mentoring programmes are highly

effective means to support NTS in navigating academia. In line with this, the majority of students from a working class background interviewed by Reay et al. (2009) understood themselves as agents for change within academia.

Researching working class academics

This mixed-methods study gathered and analysed both quantitative and qualitative data to develop a thorough insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of WCAs in the United Kingdom. The research was conducted over a 5-year period from 2018 to 2023 with qualitative semi-structured interviews and survey data collected from 244 WCAs across the UK in three distinct research phases, representing the largest study of its kind conducted in the UK to date. In Phases 1 and 2, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 89 and 74 WCAs, respectively. Phase 2 drew on Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth to improve understanding of the assets held by WCAs. The researcher's shared working-class heritage with the respondents helped establish a strong rapport during the interviews. To mitigate potential bias, the researcher employed a survey methodology in Phase Three to corroborate the themes identified in the interviews. Respondents were recruited through advertisements on 'X' (formerly Twitter), at academic conferences, and through a snowball sample. To be eligible, respondents were required to self-define as a 'working-class academic' and currently work or have worked at a UK university within the last 6 months. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), while the survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis for open-ended questions. The researcher engaged in reflexivity and used memos to document thoughts, interpretations, and decision-making processes throughout the analysis. The following sections will present the findings from this research study, discussing the concept of a working-class academic identity, followed by an analysis of three key sub-themes: 1) Class Solidarity, 2) Supporting Students, and 3) A WCA Pedagogy. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, they will be referred to only by their pseudonyms.

Defining a working-class academic identity: challenges and complexities

Respondents faced unique challenges in defining their identity within the academic context. Three distinct themes emerged from the data: cultural background, financial challenges, and a subjective awareness of one's class identity within academia. Additionally, the concepts of habitus and capital played significant roles in shaping experiences and perceptions. Cultural background was emphasised by one-third of respondents as a crucial aspect of defining WCA identity. This included concrete elements such as language, leisure activities, and community, as well as abstract factors like values and beliefs. Respondents acknowledged the diversity and dynamism of working-class cultures, challenging the notion of a singular, monolithic working-class culture. They also highlighted the importance of cultural identity in supporting students and contributing to a more diverse academic community. Financial challenges were discussed by a significant majority (63%) of respondents, who referred to the substantial debts incurred during their education and the ongoing financial strains associated with insecure contracts. Early career researchers, in particular, faced precarity and financial vulnerability. Securing research funding was also a significant hurdle,

with biases in the funding landscape and limited access to established academic networks posing additional challenges. The subjective awareness of one's class identity within academia was discussed by 51% of respondents, reflecting the commitment of WCAs to infuse their working-class identity into their academic work. This included supporting students from widening participation backgrounds and producing research that benefits the communities they identify with. Respondents demonstrated a strong sense of personal and ethical commitment tied to their WCA identity while also acknowledging the challenges and biases they faced within academia.

The concept of habitus, pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu, served as a useful lens to observe how the behaviours, perceptions, and interactions of WCAs were shaped within the academic sphere. Drawing upon the work of Abrahams and Ingram (2013), the study identified three types of habitus among respondents: cleft habitus (31%), abandoned habitus (37%), and chameleon habitus (32%). Those with a cleft habitus experienced a sense of being 'in limbo' or embodying a dual identity, often leading to strained relationships with family and friends. Respondents with an abandoned habitus, more commonly associated with elite universities, attempted to assimilate within academic spaces by concealing aspects of their class background. These respondents were less likely to discuss their teaching or mention the influence of class on their pedagogical approach. Some WCAs developed what might be described as a 'chameleon-like' habitus. This adaptation of their habitus appeared to allow these individuals to navigate both working-class and academic environments while retaining aspects of their working-class identity. Alongside this, disparities in capital accumulation were evident among WCAs. Access to economic capital remained a complex challenge, with early career researchers facing precarious contracts and financial vulnerability. Cultural capital varied among respondents, with some possessing objectified cultural capital through family connections, while others struggled to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of academia and adapt to middle-class norms. Social capital was limited for many WCAs, with respondents facing challenges in cultivating networks due to unconscious bias and class-based microaggressions.

Class solidarity

A recurring theme in the interview data was class solidarity among WCAs. Bainbridge et al. (2021) discussed setting up a 'Solidarity Space' during the Covid-19 lockdown for working-class voices. Participants discovered a shared identity and experienced class solidarity, utilising 'thinking environment' processes (Kline 2020) to foster collective thinking. They bonded over shared experiences such as social coding, microaggressions, and societal perceptions. This collaboration led to joint facilitation of discussions for the Working Class Academics Conference in 2021. Academia's association with prestige and intellectual pursuits might suggest a shift away from working-class identity, but WCAs often face economic precarity, job insecurity, and power imbalances that are deeply rooted in their backgrounds. O'Neill (2020) expands on this referring to how WCAs 'straddle the bourgeois sphere of academia' – a space where (in theory) intellectual discussion takes place among equals. Among my own respondents, they expressed a dual consciousness, which was adept at navigating both their working-class familial environment and the realm of academia, yet not seamlessly fitting into either. This shared experience fostered identification and mutual support:

'I … bond the most immediately and most affectionately (sentimentally … you might say) with people from commensurate backgrounds … I do feel an immediate deep affinity with other working-class people—especially those now in "intellectual" life. I grab onto them for dear life—to help keep me sane—to give me someone to share alienation with!' [John].

John expressed a strong affinity specifically with individuals from working-class backgrounds, with the tone of his language suggesting the emotional and supportive aspects of these relationships, that they are vital for personal well-being in an environment that may be challenging or isolating.

For some WCAs, class solidarity led to acts of institutional change. Saira worked towards ending the reimbursement culture that made academia difficult for ECRs. When a PhD student came to her office in distress because she couldn't afford to attend a conference and was awaiting payment for teaching, Saira took action:

'I gave her money for the teaching myself, I can wait for it, and then sent an email to a number of Heads of Departments telling them that expecting our PhD students to pay upfront is impossibly unfair. After meetings a new system was set up where conference costs (fee, hotels, travel etc.) are all booked via the school credit card. I had to do this as we will lose more disadvantaged ECRs'. [Saira]

Recognising the hardship caused by the reimbursement culture, Saira challenged it. Her advocacy led to systemic changes positively impacting the well-being and opportunities of disadvantaged members within academia, demonstrating the power of individual action in driving institutional change.

Supporting students

The need to support NTS is somewhat warranted, given the mixed findings in research on the preparedness of these students. For example, Chung et al. (2017) found that NTS can exhibit high resilience in managing university demands and adversities (aspirational capital). They can also display a strong motivation to succeed in their academic studies (McKay and Devlin 2016). The significance of family and friendship interactions within NTS support networks challenges prevailing deficit views (Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn 2022). Other studies concerning first generation or working class students (e.g. O'Shea 2014, 2015; O'Sullivan et al. 2019), contends that individuals who are the first in their family to enter university often grapple with issues of confidence and a lack of support from role models, hindering their transition to HE. My respondents discussed supporting students, expressing a distinct affinity for pastoral care. This may be traced back to their experience of inhabiting 'two distinct cultures' (Bridges 2017 cited in LaFromboise et al., 1993). My respondents indicated one of their methods of supporting students involved assisting them in constructing a professional identity.

Constructing a professional identity

Identity is a dynamic construct, constantly negotiated as people engage with people and opportunities (Skott 2019). Throughout their time in university, it is assumed that students are embarking on a journey to become professionals. The WCA respondents in my cohort were aware of the difficulties NTS can face when trying to build a professional identity.

'*Forming a professional identity is complex, full of challenges. But it is clearly an advantage, for some students, to have someone like me, working as a lecturer*' [Geoff]. The expansion of higher education has complicated the link between degrees and professional roles. While still valuable, degrees are no longer the sole gateway to many professions. Bathmaker et al. (2018) argue that cultural capital and professional networks have gained importance in securing privileged positions. This shift reflects the evolving nature of qualifications and career progression in an increasingly competitive graduate job market. Some of my respondents perceived themselves as catalysts for promoting greater equality in students' job prospects. Joy, for instance, expressed: '*We get educated, but the same people are the teachers, in the judiciary, civil servants etc. We need to be the example of change, and the support they need. Our students need the help we never got*'. Joy observed the importance of individuals, such as herself, who have acquired education and various forms of capital, assuming the role of agents of change, aligning with the sentiments expressed by Reay et al. (2009). Joy referred to the need to break the cycle, where it is usually individuals from privileged backgrounds who are the ones who end up in professional roles. Joy demonstrated a commitment to providing the kind of assistance and guidance that she believes NTS require for achieving success in their careers. Lucas argued that the mere presence of 'people like us', i.e. WCAs, demonstrated both resilience and aspirational capital as WCAs often have to persevere in their careers despite facing pressures to conform to elite or middle class norms.

Fostering a sense of belonging

Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose a 'belongingness hypothesis', i.e. a fundamental human drive for enduring positive, and significant interpersonal relationships (497). In higher education, this sense of belonging – feeling accepted and supported by educators and peers – is crucial for student success and can greatly enhance their educational experience. My respondents typically did not feel a sense of belonging as academics, as their family background differed from many of those already in the academy. As such, my respondents talked of wanting to be welcoming to students to help them 'fit in': '*I almost left academia on a number of occasions. Simple things would have changed that, so if I can help other students I will*' [Jessie]. Strategies used by the respondents (as well as by the author of this paper) to help students feel that they belonged in academia included: weekly meetups, IAG sessions or treating the entire class to coffee. There was a clear intention by respondents to provide support to their students based on personal experiences of not belonging and isolation. Rather than merely acknowledging the issue, respondents took tangible actions to create an inclusive academic environment. The initiatives such as the weekly meetups and class wide coffee sessions went beyond academic interactions and created a supportive social fabric. The impact of these actions may contribute to a more supportive and welcoming learning environment.

Promoting role models for their students

The visible presence of role models can not only encourage potential students to enter HE but can determine whether they thrive or survive. Indeed, research shows that having an academic role model who shares the same social class, gender, ethnicity etc. with their students can boost their academic performance (Kaziboni and Uys 2015). A deep understanding of their influence fuelled respondents' dedication to their students:

> *I see my job now as trying to transform the lives of those who are like me, so first generation*
> *students, students who don't have social capital to get the better turn out of life.* [Pamela]

Respondents often reported having a mission to transform the lives of their students, specifically targeting those whom they perceived shared a background similar to their own, and that potentially the students may not have social capital. Pamela's focus on first generation students reflected an advocacy for those facing both systemic challenges and a lack of privilege. Her emphasis on helping first generation students without social capital reflected her commitment to equality. The language used by Pamela underscored a commitment to breaking down barriers for first generation students.

Joy adopted a proactive and pedagogical approach to supporting disadvantaged groups by developing a module that offered her students the chance to serve as role models in underperforming schools or at local community centres in deprived areas. This initiative went beyond conventional notions of employability, aiming not only to enhance the skills of students from disadvantaged backgrounds but also to positively impact the young individuals encountering these student role models. The findings from Sanders et al. (2018) revealed that inspirational talks or interactions with current students significantly boosted university applications, Joy positioned her module as a means to inspire and encourage prospective students from underprivileged backgrounds to pursue a university education.

A working class academic pedagogy

In discussing their pedagogy, contributors in Linkon's (1999) anthology, 'Teaching Class', often draw inspiration from Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher. Freire's approach critiques hierarchical teaching methods, advocating for an interactive, non-hierarchical co-creation of knowledge that considers each student's culture and background, thereby dismantling cultural hierarchies in the classroom. Freire's (1970) pedagogy aligns with the theoretical framework of Yosso (2005), highlighting the unique strengths of individuals from marginalised backgrounds. It also responds to Girouz's (2014) warning against academia becoming detached from social responsibility. Greenwald and Grant (1999) emphasised the role of WCAs in bridging the gap between academia and the real world. Another chapter focuses on integrating working-class themes into history classes to address the invisibility of this common class. My respondents described teaching approaches that might be indicative of what could be termed a potential WCA pedagogy. These approaches, while not necessarily exclusive to WCAs, seemed to commonly include: 1) Incorporating lived experience; 2) Engaging students from a strength perspective; 3) Fostering students as cocreators of knowledge; and 4) Embedding social justice. It's important to note that these elements were frequently mentioned by the WCAs in this study, but further research would be needed to determine how distinctive or prevalent these approaches are among WCAs compared to other academic groups.

Incorporating lived experience

Zandy (1995) noted that most working class educators have 'pedagogical gifts forged from lived experience' (592). My respondents agreed that their habitus brought with it pedagogical advantages, more so among those in the field of Arts and Humanities than those in STEM.

'*You bring the texts alive, drawing upon your own experience*' [Finn]. Like a performer on a stage, a teacher must captivate and engage students, thus WCAs who draw upon their own experiences can demonstrate real world applications of this knowledge. Respondents cited examples where they actively leveraged personal experiences to enrich students learning and fostered a participatory and inclusive educational process. Theo talked of how he introduced a case study of the 'Windrush generation' to his module a few years ago, not because he had relatives that this had directly affected, but because he was aware that two of his students had personal experience of the scandal. Brandon, a WCA who had a disability, talked of how he addressed the intersection of class and disability in his module. This is an interesting approach as Anderson (2006) argues that the disabled body represents one of the last frontiers to be addressed in education. This concept can be extended to include the intersection of class and disability, suggesting that the classed/disabled body is an equally important and under-explored frontier in educational discourse. Brandon chose the Industrial Revolution as an illustrative example, noting its rapid economic and social changes. During this period, individuals with disabilities from less affluent backgrounds were frequently relegated to asylums and poorhouses. Brandon used visuals to showcase his present life and juxtaposed it with historical records depicting the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, illustrating the stark contrast. As a person with disabilities, Brandon emphasised that he would have led a vastly different life in another era. Notably, this session garnered him the most positive feedback.

Strengths based approach

Respondents adopted a 'strengths-based approach' in their pedagogy, departing from the common deficit view associated with working class students, which tends to focus on perceived weaknesses rather than recognising their strengths. This perspective also aligned with 'funds of knowledge' (FoK), an anthropological concept associated with Moll et al. (1992), who recognised practical and household skills like sewing and cooking, and life skills such as assisting neighbours and sharing cultural stories (Stone-MacDonald 2012). A FoK perspective perceives it crucial to acknowledge households, not solely universities, are valuable 'repositories of knowledge' (González et al. 2005: 26). One of my respondents, Mark observed that some students had a natural grasp of how objects functioned. His working class students typically excelled in repairing vintage washing machines and even motorcycles by using affordable parts – skills beneficial for an engineering degree. Brandon discovered that acknowledging FoK facilitated more effective discussions about welfare benefits with students as he found that his working class students had additional assets, such as a practical, lived experience of welfare benefits.

Zipin (2009) referred to dark FoK (321), e.g. domestic violence, mental illness, and drug addiction, arguing that these can be rich assets for learning (Zipin 2009: 325). Amy, described how her students engaged with dark themes in fiction through the submission of reflective journals as part of their assessment. The resulting pieces of writing explored personal experiences related to poverty and mental health, showcasing the students' creativity (and lived experience). Another respondent, Ann asked her students to write an anonymous journal to record aspects of their health, and to link it with health policies, suggesting that the students enjoyed this type of assessment as it linked theory with the practice, recognising their experiences along the way.

Cocreation of knowledge

While traditional pedagogy primarily revolves around the transmission of knowledge, emphasising what teachers know (Husbands and Pearce 2012: 5), a WCA pedagogy draws upon Paulo Freire (1970) to 'cocreate knowledge' with students. Freire, a critic of traditional, rote learning teaching approaches, advocated for a 'cocreation' model whereby students actively contributed to the learning experience as equal learners. In the context of this study, respondents, such as 'Unity' emphasised that while they had subject expertise, cocreating with her students demonstrated respect for their knowledge. The 'Bridging the Gap' initiative at the University of Cambridge exemplified coproduction in practical class teaching, allowing academics insight into student needs while providing students with alternative perspectives and materials (Hubbard and Dunbar 2017). The importance of codesign in modules was evident in the responses from ten respondents. For example, Amy, recruited student consultants, to suggest how she could embed employability throughout her module. While Jack and his students created a website that provided guides for Maths problems. The actions of Amy and Jack reflect a pedagogical strategy that values student input and strives to bridge the gap between academia and practical skills.

Choosing between different assessment methods emerged as another avenue for cocreation. Respondents such as Deb, empowered her students by including them in the design of essay questions for her module. Coproduction strategies, as employed by Jeremy, took the approach of incorporating local perspectives on a housing development. Both respondents felt that a shift toward cocreation and coproduction in pedagogy fostered an open, collaborative, and creative atmosphere. It empowered students to take ownership of their learning and allowed educators to adapt their teaching methods to student needs, ultimately enriching the learning experience.

Incorporating social justice

A WCA pedagogy integrates a commitment to social justice principles across the curriculum. This approach encourages educators to create empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments. Hooks (1994) emphasized the need for educators to be critically self-reflective. Lecourt (2006) suggests that central to any social justice approach is to help students reflect and understand the inequalities and privileges in their lives. Respondents discussed a number of ways that they did this. For example, 'James' asked students to debate the opposing view of a social issue, 'Tina' assigned weekly journals focused on privilege, and Ann curated a reading list featuring exclusively working class and ethnic minority writers. These assignments tapped into students' skills and experiences, aligning with funds of knowledge literature.

Social justice education means to be attentive to social norms and the ways in which these norms sustain oppression and marginalisation (Hart 2016). Asking simple questions such as 'What is taught?' 'How is it taught?' and 'What is left out?' are some preliminary questions that can help an educator develop their social justice approach to teaching (Breunig 2019). For example, Ashley focused on creating inclusive spaces for students to share their cultural perspectives through weekly presentations on cultural or traditional challenges

> 'We heard from international students and the expectations they face; a presentation on being disabled, the presentation was held in the reception area to demonstrate that she could go no further. A twin presentation from someone who chose to wear the burka and from someone who has chosen not too'.

Ashley's approach provided students with opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives and fosters a sense of belonging for individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The use of real life presentations adds a tangible and experiential dimension to the learning process, contributing to a more comprehensive and empathetic academic environment. Similar, but more hands on assessment for students on a module by Emma, centred around a '5 day challenge to live on £1 per day'. Concurrently, Joy, reported in her interview, that she was currently engaged in a project exploring the historical connections and benefits her institution had derived from slavery.

Teaching based on social justice equips students for active engagement in social initiatives. Nelson Laird et al. (2005) emphasised the importance of students' willingness to 'take actions in their communities in order to end social injustice' (468). Theo and Jeremy, two respondents who exemplified this approach, collaborated with different local partners depending on the specific issues they were currently focusing on, i.e. working with MIND for mental health advocacy. Their involvement extended beyond teaching, as they employed activist strategies to fundraise for organisations, initiated social media campaigns to amplify awareness, and aligned assignments with the goal of promoting social change. Consequently, a WCA pedagogy transcends the boundaries of instructional exercises, evolving into a dynamic framework that serves as a catalyst for critical thinking, social awareness, and transformative action. In embracing a WCA approach, educators recognise the profound impact of socioeconomic factors on the learning experience and leverage their teaching methodologies to address broader societal issues. This pedagogy fosters an environment where students are not passive recipients of information but active participants in shaping their communities, challenging the status quo, and contributing to the dismantling of systemic inequalities. In essence, a WCA pedagogy transforms the classroom into a nexus for empowerment, activism, and the cultivation of a socially conscious and critically engaged citizenry.[1]

Conclusion

This article explores the experiences of WCAs in the United Kingdom, examining potential characteristics of this group, the challenges they face in navigating academic identity, and how their class consciousness interacts with the realities of academic work. The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of WCAs by highlighting their invaluable contributions to supporting students and their distinctive pedagogical approaches. The study reveals the significant role of class solidarity among WCAs, fostering a profound sense of identification and mutual support that extends beyond personal connections and leads to acts of institutional change. WCAs demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting NTS by actively engaging in constructing professional identities, fostering a sense of belonging, and promoting role models. These efforts reflect the aspirational, social, and navigational capital described by Yosso (2005), as WCAs draw upon their own experiences to guide and empower their students.

A key contribution of this article is the conceptualisation of what might be termed a WCA pedagogy, based on the experiences shared by our respondents. This potential approach appears to encompass the incorporation of lived experiences, a strength-based perspective, collaborative knowledge creation, and the integration of social justice principles. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu, Yosso, and Freire, the WCA pedagogy aims to dismantle cultural hierarchies, empower students as active participants in their learning, and cultivate a socially conscious and critically engaged citizenry. This approach aligns with the resistant capital described by Yosso (2005), as WCAs actively challenge social inequality and value their students' experiences despite the devaluing messages they may receive from their environment. This study, focused on a specific sample of WCAs, suggests potential trends in their pedagogical approaches. While these observations are informative, they are preliminary. To determine whether these approaches are unique to or more prevalent among WCAs, broader comparative studies are necessary. Such research would help confirm if these teaching characteristics are indeed more common or distinctive to WCAs compared to other groups within the wider academic community. The findings of this study have significant implications for higher education institutions, highlighting the need to recognise and value the unique contributions of WCAs and to create more inclusive and supportive academic environments. By embracing a WCA pedagogy and fostering a sense of class solidarity, institutions can work towards dismantling systemic inequalities and promoting social justice within academia.

Note

1. This pedagogical approach has inspired my own teaching and assessment. In my introductory module 'Social Divisions' which focuses on aspects of identity and inequalities, I have introduced a presentation whereby students are required to discuss the disadvantages & privileges they have in relation to employment, education, health and housing.

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Disclosure statement

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