

## **PhD researchers, pedagogy and primary education: A perspective piece on breaking barriers to Higher Education**

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### *Abstract*

*Barriers to fair Higher Education access are often determined at an early age, particularly for students from working class backgrounds with no parental history of Higher Education and who live in some of the lowest socio-economic areas in the United Kingdom. But barriers can be broken. One such method is through The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme which mobilises PhD researchers by placing them in UK state schools to teach subjects which are not traditionally taught on the school curriculum such as human rights, contractual rights, and rights protected by the criminal law, amongst many other subjects and disciplines. The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme assists in increasing university awareness as well as developing the core skills necessary for academic success. Liberational pedagogy can also assist in breaking barriers as it encourages creativity, critical thought and awareness in students. Part I of this paper outlines what The Brilliant Club does in the context of social justice and breaking barriers to Higher Education. Part II explains my own experience working as a PhD tutor on the Scholars Programme with Key Stage 2 students and how I used liberational pedagogy in the context of problem-posing teaching methods to encourage critical discussion and to learn in dialogue with the students.*

### *Keywords*

*Liberational Pedagogy, Widening Participation, Social Justice, Higher Education, Charity, Breaking Barriers*

### **Introduction**

Imagine that you are seated in a lecture hall at a highly-selective university. The traditional image is likely to be one with an adult standing at the front as primary knowledge giver, in the role of a lecturer. Could you imagine witnessing a Key Stage 2 student facilitating this role by explaining to the audience the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice and which one adopts a more humane

approach to punishment? Now, can you imagine another Key Stage 2 student explaining the debate between natural law lawyers and legal positivists on the topic of human rights, and which debate the student prefers on the grounds of morality? Continue to imagine that you had witnessed this, but you were told that the students had just one lesson on each of these topics and had recently submitted a one-thousand-word university style essay on it, and were both awarded a first-class grade. This may seem absurd, but mobilising PhD researchers in local primary schools and applying liberational pedagogy (Freire, 1970) can make the above a reality. This paper is a perspective piece based on my experience of teaching Key Stage 2 students through The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme during the summer term of 2019. Part I of this paper outlines what The Brilliant Club does in the context of social justice and breaking barriers to Higher Education. Part II explains my own experience working as a PhD tutor on The Scholars Programme with Key Stage 2 students and how I used liberational pedagogy in the context of problem-posing teaching methods to encourage critical discussion and to learn in dialogue with the students. It is concluded that The Brilliant Club acts as a mechanism for social justice in promoting fair access to Higher Education to target students<sup>1</sup>, and that PhD researchers can assist in breaking barriers further through applying problem-posing teaching methods.

## Part I

The Brilliant Club is an award-winning charity and its mission is to 'increase the number of pupils from underrepresented backgrounds progressing to highly-selective universities' (The Brilliant Club, 2020). The Brilliant Club was co-founded in 2011 by two teachers, Johnathan Sobczyk and Simon Coyle, who became involved with university access via their work in inner-city schools (The Brilliant Club, 2020). In 2012, with seed funding from The Sutton Trust and support from a board of trustees, The Brilliant Club was formally established as a charity (The Brilliant Club, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Target students being those who are high performing and who are eligible pupil premium, with no parental history of Higher Education and living in a low-income area and / or have been eligible for free school meals within the last six years.

The Brilliant Club also has a number of supporters and partners, the University of Lincoln being one of them.

The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme aims to fulfil the above mission by placing PhD researchers into UK state schools to deliver high quality tutorials on subjects which are often not taught on the school curriculum, which includes pre-designed courses as well as courses designed by PhD tutors based on their individual PhD research. The Scholars Programme consists of an initial launch trip at a highly-selective university where the first tutorial is delivered, then a series of tutorials in the school, followed by a graduation trip at another highly-selective university. To define highly-selective universities The Brilliant Club uses the 'top third' list by the Department for Education (The Brilliant Club, 2019) and it is within these highly-selective universities that 'privileged students make up most of the intakes' (Major and Banerjee, 2019). Students enrolled on The Scholars Programme are expected to complete an initial baseline assignment to test their knowledge at the start of the programme and will then complete a final assignment to assess their development throughout the programme.

The Brilliant Club note a problem that 'pupils from low-income backgrounds are far less likely than their wealthier peers to attain five good GCSE grades, progress to Higher Education or secure a high-income job' (The Brilliant Club, 2017). This can be demonstrated from the fact that in 2017 just 1 in 40 young people in England who had been eligible for free school meals attended a highly-selective university compared to 1 in 10 of those who were not eligible (The Brilliant Club, 2019). The Brilliant Club alleviates this problem somewhat through The Scholars Programme, which is evidenced by their impact and through the demographics of students selected to participate. Since 2017, The Brilliant Club has required schools to ensure that at least 55% of pupils completing The Scholars Programme are target pupils meeting at least one of the following measures (The Brilliant Club, 2019):

1. *Educational Measure of Deprivation*: England - Pupil Premium eligibility (children who have qualified for free school meals at any point in the past six years; children who are or have been looked after under local authority care for more than one day or children from service families who receive a child pension from the Ministry of Defence). Wales - Pupil Development Grant eligibility (pupils who qualify for free school meals or Looked After Children). Scotland - Free school meals eligibility.
2. *No parental history of Higher Education*: As it suggests.
3. *Deprivation According to Postcode*: The bottom 40% of postcodes according to IDACI in England (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index). WIMD in Wales (Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation). SIMD in Scotland (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation).

Therefore, The Brilliant Club's pupil targeting reaches those students who are least likely to be represented at highly-selective universities (The Brilliant Club, 2019), which in my view assists in breaking barriers and promotes social justice in terms of equal educational opportunities.

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) conducted independent analysis through a cohort of 927 school leavers who had completed The Scholars Programme in 2015, 2016 and 2017 (The Brilliant Club, 2019). This was compared to a control group of students who shared similar characteristics. It was found in a typical group of 100 students which had completed The Scholars Programme that 79% applied to a highly-selective university, 77% received an offer from a highly-selective university and 56% progressed to a highly-selective university. By comparison in a typical group of 100 students from the control group, 50% applied to a highly-selective university, 46% received offers from a highly-selective university and 30% progressed to a highly-selective university. Therefore, it was found that

students who completed The Scholars Programme are significantly more likely to apply, receive an offer from and progress to a highly-selective university.

The Brilliant Club have developed an outcomes framework to assess six core competencies which are key in supporting young people to succeed with progression to university (The Brilliant Club, 2018). These competencies are subject knowledge, written communication, critical thinking, university knowledge, meta-cognition and motivation, and self-efficacy. The Brilliant Club assesses each of these competencies through the duration of The Scholars Programme. Written communication, subject knowledge and critical thinking are all assessed from the progress made (grade improvement) from the initial baseline assignment submitted after tutorial one, through to the final assignment. The students are awarded university style grades (i.e. First-Class, Upper Second-Class, Lower Second-Class, Third Class and working towards a pass). It should be the case that students written communication, critical thinking and subject knowledge are enhanced throughout The Scholars Programme, which is reflected in the grades they receive for their final assignment.

A lack of knowledge about Higher Education is a key barrier in accessing it, therefore university knowledge is another core competency which The Scholars Programme addresses. As noted in a review of widening participation research which was focussed on addressing the barriers to participation in Higher Education, middle class students tend to opt to go to more selective institutions which reflects their knowledge of the Higher Education system and subsequently reinforces their advantages (Gorard et al., 2006, 93). Such knowledge may not be readily available to students from working class backgrounds without outreach activities or charities. The Scholars Programme provides university knowledge through two trips to highly-selective universities (at the launch trip and graduation trip) and through using a multiple-choice questionnaire which assesses knowledge at the start and end of the programme to assess whether there is an increase. Further, the PhD researcher provides a vital link as they can answer questions and provide support and additional information about university access.

Finally, the deeper learning skills (motivation, meta-cognition and self-efficacy) are assessed through a questionnaire both on the initial launch trip and at the graduation trip. Motivation and self-efficacy are assessed through the intrinsic subscale of motivated strategies for learning questionnaire (Pintrich et al., 1990) and meta-cognition is assessed via the cognitive strategy and self-regulation subscales of the motivated strategies for learning (Pintrich et al., 1990). All six of these listed competences are tested throughout the duration of The Scholars Programme and therefore should assist in breaking down barriers to accessing Higher Education and highly selective universities.

The Brilliant Club's aim is, in my view, one of social justice as it seeks to promote fair access to highly-selective universities. Fair access to highly-selective universities is important in terms of social mobility as 'their graduates continue to dominate the country's most influential positions' (Major and Banerjee, 2019). The Brilliant Club reaches its aim through mobilising the PhD community and through supporting target students with the six core competencies identified. The success speaks for itself, through the Brilliant Club's impact reporting and through UCAS's analysis that students who complete The Scholars Programme are significantly more likely to apply, receive and offer from and progress to a highly-selective university (The Brilliant Club, 2017). Breaking barriers to Higher Education access for students who are from a low-socio economic area and with no parental history of Higher Education should not be left to charities. However, the fact remains it often is. Therefore, it is my view that The Brilliant Club's work is critical to Higher Education access and progression to highly-selective universities.

## **Part II**

Breaking barriers to Higher Education can be done via The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme (as outlined in Part I), but it can be furthered through the specific teaching methods the PhD tutor chooses to apply during the placement. This part briefly explains liberational pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and why it can be used to break

barriers, as well as how I used it during my placement with Key Stage 2 students during the summer of 2019. It is necessary to state that whilst tutorials must be both academically rigorous and engaging, The Brilliant Club does not prescribe any particular form of pedagogy for tutorials. I chose to use this approach through the professional autonomy that I have in my role as a tutor.

Liberational pedagogy is best explained by postcolonial Marxist Paulo Freire, in the renowned works '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*' (Freire, 1970). Freire asserted that traditional teaching methods, notably banking teaching methods maintain status quo in society and keep oppressed groups oppressed as they fail to adopt a critical view of the world (Freire, 1970, 45). Freire argues that the banking concept of education turns the students into 'containers ... to be filled by the teacher' (Freire, 1970, 45) which curbs creativity and criticalness (Freire, 1970, 45) and in turn prevents the student from becoming fully human (Freire, 1970, 45). The teacher-student relationship which is generated by the banking method secures and maintains the superiority of the teacher whilst ensuring the inferiority of the student, mirroring the role of the oppressor and the oppressed in society (Freire, 1970, 48). After reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I decided to try and avoid banking teaching methods as much as possible, particularly as one of the objectives of this placement was to break down barriers.

Problem-posing liberational pedagogy is a form of revolutionary education, which Freire argues resolves the teacher-student contradiction (Freire, 1970, 52). Problem-posing methods ensure that the students are not simply 'docile listeners' but that they are 'critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher' (Freire, 1970, 54). Problem posing methods assist in breaking cycles of oppression as they allow students to perceive critically the way they exist and make them into critical thinkers (Freire, 1970, 57). I decided to try and use some problem-posing methods throughout my placement, such as presenting material and then reconsidering it as the student expresses their view.

During the summer term of 2019, I undertook a placement with The Brilliant Club teaching Key Stage 2 students the topic 'what are rights?' covering human rights, contractual rights and rights protected by the criminal law as well as teaching theory, including natural law, legal positivism and the tension which arises between retributive and restorative justice. This was a new topic for the Key Stage 2 students, and it is one which is not traditionally taught on the curriculum of English state schools.

One method which I applied throughout the placement to encourage the students to express their views was to use value continuums or opinion lines. Here I would present a statement such as 'education is an important human right' and then the students would place themselves on an imaginary line across the room to show how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement (they also had the option of remaining neutral by standing in the middle). This would create conflicting views and then the students could express and debate their opinion based on what they perceived as being important. Situations arose whereby some students had starkly contrasting views to mine and so I would ask them to explain their position, listen, and then reflect on my own views which challenged me and enabled me to learn with them. For example, we used an opinion line to discuss whether imprisonment for less serious crimes was necessary. All of the students in this instance believed that it was on the basis that we are entitled to liberty providing that we uphold our social obligations not to break the law, and not enforcing such laws would render much of the criminal law obsolete. I am very much of the opposing view and support prison abolition, but their answers challenged this view and allowed me to consider their points, particularly around the impacts this could have on our current criminal justice system and laws for less serious offences. It was a mutual learning process and I believe that using such methods assist in encouraging criticalness and dismantling traditional teacher-student roles.

I also learnt a lot from the students from the way in which they engaged with material. For example, on the topic of retributive justice in prison, one student explained their



understanding in the context of being sent to their room and not being allowed to play with their toys and that there would be further punishment for additional misbehaviour such as not being allowed to attend a trip to the seaside with the family, rather than being given a “chance” which restorative justice would provide for. I found this way of engaging with the concept of retributive justice fascinating because it allowed the student to critically apply the situation to their own life to understand it. This also allowed me to have a simplistic view of a topic I was traditionally taught in an overly complex theoretical way, through a lecture followed by a reading list of academic texts I struggled to fully comprehend. It was through this conversation on retributive justice with Key Stage 2 students that I began to realise how explaining theory in *such* simple terms could assist in breaking down further barriers as such theories are often rendered inaccessible due to the complex language they are written in and are therefore often gate kept by academia.

Furthermore, creativity and originality in conversation was also encouraged rather than being *so-called* corrected. For example, on the topic of criminal law one student discussed the potential liability of zombies who would commit crimes but who technically would not be a person before the law as they were deceased. Therefore, the question over whether we would apply the laws we have now or create zombie-specific criminal laws arose. I welcomed this type of thinking for debate and changed the structure of the lesson to accommodate. I would also challenge their views and ask for additional information, because with problem-posing methods the students must be challenged and not merely listened to in order to become critical (Freire, 1970, 92). From this we (the students and I) generated a lively, critical and engaging learning environment in which all ideas were welcomed, considered and challenged.

The placement has also allowed me to reflect on breaking barriers surrounding gatekeeping in academia and Higher Education more generally. Overly academic methods of explaining concepts renders much content inaccessible. I often still find many journal articles within my field inaccessible purely because of how they are written. If we, as PhD researchers, committed to a practice of dissecting our research

in an accessible way (both amongst peers and to the general public), then we too can further assist in dismantling barriers in accessing Higher Education but also barriers that exist *within* Higher Education, such as understanding academic texts, theory and concepts.

## Conclusion

Charities often bear the burden of inequality but can act as a catalyst for issuing social justice. The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme is one example of this, as it seeks to increase the number of pupils from underrepresented backgrounds progressing to highly-selective universities (The Brilliant Club, 2020) which in my view is act of social justice against an unfair and classist education system. Whilst there has been an increase in the marketisation of Higher Education, this being the application of the economic theory of the market to Higher Education (Hall, 2018) and policy changes following the Independent Review of Higher Education chaired Lord Browne in 2010 (Browne, 2010) which recommended the cap on tuition fees be removed, it must be noted that fair access is still acute at most selective institutions (The Brilliant Club, 2017). Fair access to highly-selective universities still remains a barrier for the most disadvantaged students and as stated by Sammons et al. (2018):

*'Economic and educational inequalities continue to hinder social mobility and decrease the chances of disadvantaged children achieving the same levels of academic success as their more advantaged peers and there is growing international concern about the effects of disadvantage in shaping life chances and affecting economic performance.'*

Moreover, Major and Banerjee (2019) argue that:

*'It will take nearly a century for highly-selective universities in England to raise the participation rate for 18-30-year olds from the least advantaged areas to the existing participation rate for 18-to-30 year olds from the most advantaged areas.'*

Major and Banerjee further argue:

*‘Much of the heavy lifting on widening participation in Higher Education to date has been undertaken by newer and less selective Higher Education institutions. The access challenge therefore remains greater at more selective institutions.’*

It is my view that despite some positive efforts to widen participation at highly-selective institutions, the system is still inherently classist and the bulk of the responsibility to break these barriers should not fall on less selective universities and charities, yet it continues to do so.

It is also my view that PhD researchers can assist with breaking barriers further through applying problem-posing teaching methods as this will encourage the students to become creative and critical thinkers, as well as generate a stimulating and positive experience of Higher Education, rather than a dull and off-putting one. Problem-posing methods will also assist with the PhD researchers own development, as it will challenge them to learn with the students and may offer new ways to dissect complex topics. In turn, this will assist with breaking additional barriers such as gatekeeping within academia as overly complex concepts can and should be taught and written about in a much more accessible way.

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