

## **Women, adult literacy education and transformative bonds of care**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on a research project: [\*FE in England - Transforming Lives and Communities\*](#) (sponsored by the University and College Union) to explore the intersection between women, literacy and adult education, this paper argues for the place of research in affirming localised understandings of education that cut across the grain of contemporary educational reform. In the context of the increasing dominance of a 'skills' discourse in education in the UK and reductions in funding targeted at adult education, this research project exposed how further education can still challenge and address hurt and often spoiled learning identities and counteract the objectification of the skills discourse through creating catalysing bridging bonds of care. The research data illustrate that further education offers organic transformative tools for consciousness-raising (Freire 1995) and a caring space where hope can act as a change agent that fuels women learners' lives and teachers' practice (Duckworth 2013; Duckworth and Smith 2017, 2018b).

To support the discussion, our paper draws on a range of learners and teachers' narratives to expand on the conceptualisation of adult education as a bridging space for a curriculum informed by an ethic of what we term *dialogic caring*. We also develop a theoretical position that anchors the research in learners and practitioners' experience as an empirical antidote to the simulations (Baudrillard 1994, Lefebvre 2004) conjured up by the decontextualised knowledge production activities that marketization has imposed on educational institutions. We position education

research as having an important role to play in revealing powerful often hidden social practices and lived human experience beneath the neoliberal, globalised 'grand narratives' of international competition. To that end, we mobilise the term *transformative teaching and learning* to signify educational experiences that are not only student-centred, but which defy, counteract and work against the neoliberal educational imaginary. We align our research approach with adult literacy education and critical pedagogy as working towards social justice and against deficit generating educational structures that marginalise women, their families and communities.

### **Positioning Literacy, renewing agency and Care**

The research this article draws on conceptualises literacy through its link to learner identity; it looks at how learners' everyday lives have been shaped by their relationship to dominant literacies during experiences of schooling and how re-entering further education spaces can catalyse positive changes in students' lives, choices and prospects. We present this through the concept of transformative teaching and learning – a contested and arguably overused and / or imprecise concept (see Hoggan 2016) with many antecedents (Freire 1995, Mezirow 1990, Illeris 2013) but one which we see as necessary to reclaim in the current context of further education in the UK.

In the UK and internationally, the current discourse around literacy is driven by international surveys that have become increasingly important over the last twenty five years. Produced and promoted by a range of agencies including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNESCO and the European Union, national governments commit funding to these surveys and the data are used to decontextualize and compare each country's 'performance'. In this process, views on what counts as literacy are shaped and literacy is reduced to a unitary, measurable factor.

However, literacy is not simply an 'autonomous' (Street 1995) skill to be acquired and tested through competency assessment and, if generalised and conceptualised in this way, it can become a vehicle for bringing about the symbolic domination of institutionalised literacies which derive from notions of human capital, economic investment and returns (Becker 1993). When framed by such human capital discourses, at the level of the individual, literacy becomes reductive (Black & Yasukawa 2012, 2016); it manifests as a technology for stratifying human beings as embodied labour power and a way of quantifying potential 'productivity'. This framing also contributes to the stratification of higher prestige literacies with the effect of reifying existing social divisions. Through the sorting and delimitation of individuals, it can also impact on the productivity and wealth of the communities and societies in which they live (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth 2015).

In many ways this 'economisation' of literacy serves to depoliticise it at the local and individual level. This is consistent with a neoliberal hegemonic view that typically attempts to neutralise politics through a common sense understanding that economic considerations are sovereign (Davies 2014). In the case of literacy, this also involves rupturing its rootedness (e.g. in Freire 1995) in emancipatory pedagogy. To counteract this, we argue that adult literacy education can be positioned within a discourse of transformation. In other words, it can be seen as offering spaces in which individuals can (re)discover their agency: an enjoyment of learning and success as learners that connects with their lives in the outside world including through employment.

### **Politics of literacy**

It is important to acknowledge how literacy in the UK school curriculum has increasingly been used as a key tool in the regime of testing and assessment that ranks schools and children in terms of 'performance' (MacBeath 2015). In England this has resulted in approximately one third of 16 year olds being labelled as having 'failed' (Dorling 2011). The dominant utilitarian model of 'delivering' literacy education

reifies dominant literacies, sorts learners and reproduces class inequalities while failing to address the impact of power relations in learners' lives (see Crowther et al. 2006) including the issue of gender inequality (Duckworth 2013). This market-driven model also fails to recognise literacy as a means to achieve personal enlightenment or to mobilise the wider social benefits it can confer with regards to health and well-being.

Further education in the UK has long been characterised as 'the handmaid of British industry' (Ainley and Bailey 1998: 14) which suggests not only the instrumentalisation of its curriculum, but also, in the context of a hierarchical divide between academic and vocational qualifications, the objectification of students through an emphasis on vocational curricula. Recent further education policy in England has been substantially shaped by funding reductions consequent on the financial crisis of 2008/9. This has had a significant impact on funding for adult education courses (Smith 2017) which include Access to HE and Adult literacy classes – from which the data in this article draws. Access to HE classes typically are connected to HE courses through a foundation year arrangement; while the provision of Adult literacy classes has moved increasingly into third sector (charitable) providers.

## **Methodology**

The research took place over two years between May 2016 and 2018. It involved interviews and other contributions from more than 70 participants and data was gathered from more than 30 different further education providers. The initial sample was accessed through the researchers' professional links with colleges. The research questions were:

1. How does further education provide routes to higher education for learners who would not otherwise access HE?
2. How does further education offer learners the chance to engage in education at multiple stages of life, recognising that their relationships to employment/education are not neat and linear?

3. In what way does further education provide vocational education at all levels on a holistic personalised basis that is successful in providing learners with the confidence, knowledge and skills to progress?
4. How can we improve on the efficacy and appropriateness of the current funding and accountability regime in order to develop a model that supports transformative further education?

The first participants were students who had been identified by their tutors as having overcome significant obstacles in their studies and often as having joined courses with few or no qualifications and who were seen to be thriving. Their teachers were also interviewed. Other later participants were often people who had contacted the research team in order to tell their stories. The methodology incorporated aspects from a range of different approaches. For us, life history and biography provided important entry points into our research (Goodson & Sikes 2004; Duckworth, 2013). Having biographies that are closely bound up with further education and this provided the researchers with a crucial frame of authenticity when meeting and speaking with participants. Reciprocity in telling our stories while asking participants to share their own contributed to the collaborative practice of gathering the data. On the use of life stories in research, Goodley et al. (2004: 167) comment that:

Researching life stories offers opportunities for drawing on our own and others' narratives in ways that can illuminate key theoretical, policy and practice considerations.

Listening to participants' life stories provided insights into the transformative impact of further education for them and on their lives; it also illuminated the ripple impact on family and community. The researchers also strove to enact a democratic approach to research. This approach sought:

not only to change conventional relations of engagement in the research process, but also to transform fundamentally the.. nature of research, in terms of what

counts as knowledge and who produces, owns, uses and benefits from it, with implications beyond that for wider social relations. (Edwards and Brannelly 2017: 272)

The democratization was about respecting the ability and voice of participants as they told their stories. To that extent we were also drawing on creative methodologies as advocated by Gauntlett (2007) in which participants are the 'experts on their own lives' and while our approach didn't use creative methods *per se*, the research conversations frequently entered territory that was emotionally intense and intimate. The approach also relates to Nind's perspectives on inclusive and participatory methodologies that emphasise the co-production of research knowledge:

Mutuality and 'radical collegiality' in the research endeavour stands to transform what it means to be a teacher, student and researcher. (Nind. 2014 np)

Participants engaged with the project because they had a positive story to tell. The research approach itself became a part of the affirmative practice that helped create the conditions for the transformative learning that participants had often experienced. In that sense, taking part in the research reinforced the positive learning identities that the participants talk about having achieved. The methodological approach adopted in this study sought instead to be forward-looking: to endorse newly established learning identities and to share in a collective imagining of future plans. We drew on participatory methodologies where the oppressive qualities of the 'researcher' and the 'researched' relationship were challenged, this cohered with our intention to position social justice at the core of the undertaking. As such we strove then to convene research discussions in a safe space, a space moreover that shared some characteristics with critical pedagogical space. Underpinning this was a sense of research as a social practice (Herndl & Nahrwold 2000) i.e. not divorced from everyday relations or having any 'mystique' that might in any way make participants feel like 'subjects'. Instead, just as education can be experienced as a socially embedded process that is to

a greater or lesser degree conditioned by the social forces and structures that shape our society, so as researchers we were aware of how research can reduce to a limited and convention-ridden exchange between people who do not enjoy an equal social footing.

As such, the methodological approach adopted for the study was closely aligned to critical pedagogy (Freire 1995, Breunig 2005) and extended a number of its underpinning principles. Research conversations (we reject the term 'interviews' because of the connotations it carries of an unequal and uni-directional exchange and distribution of power) were framed to foster and sustain a sense of equality between participants. As a researcher whose own story has involved transformation through education, one of the research team shared her story with participants. These exchanges were typically reciprocal and dialogical as stories were exchanged and opinions and feelings shared.

In dissemination, the methodology draws on video as a medium for foregrounding participants' voices. For that reason, the project drew on the BERA ethical guidelines (2011), being particularly mindful of the ethical issues associated with using video. While participants understood that they could remain anonymous, most wanted their real names used, seeing this as an affirmative aspect of participation in the project. Colleges and teachers that were mentioned were anonymised or permission was sought to include names. The question we as researchers thought it important to ask ourselves when producing this knowledge and disseminating it was: what meanings were being foregrounded? Where were participants being positioned? What impact might dissemination have on their hopes and trajectories? Participants' experience of education frequently involved symbolic violence that sought to position them at the bottom of an existing social order. But symbolic violence does not only occur in educational circles. A critical and reflexive research methodology has to be conscious of the potential for research interactions to visit just the same kind of violence of

definition and imposed meanings and of *use* on participants and their stories. In the next section, we will focus on some key participants from the research to provide evidence for the part literacy education played in catalysing learners' experiences of literacy learning and connecting educational achievements to their dreams and aspirations. We will also chart the role of care in this process.

## **Findings**

### **i) Challenging intergenerational poverty and the ripple effect**

Anita was a participant from the North East of England. She returned to education as a mature student. Regarded as a failure at school because of her dyslexia, she developed a skill set as a parent and in the community. Adult education harnessed these skills and she began to study to become a social worker.

*The teachers at school assumed I was born to fail. Dyslexia was not... I had one teacher at school that sent me for assessment. But it was the early eighties. It had just been identified. So you were thick, you were stupid and if your parents didn't even have any faith in you, you're not going to have any faith in yourself.... The progression course before the Access to Higher Education course was putting my toe in the water to see if I could so it.... I came to college and started with GCSE, then went onto Access.*

Her story shows us how adult education can offer opportunities to develop new knowledge and new identities. Importantly, the educational space is one in which new identities are formed through and by the relationships of affirmation and care established by teachers. Anita goes on:

*In eighteen months, I'll be a qualified social worker. My tutors are the ones that got me here... They encouraged me. They never once doubted me. They made me grow. Through that, I've been able to inspire my kids. One's at Manchester University... he's in his final year. My daughter wants to go to Oxford to do Medicine. My oldest one has gone into the building trade and is doing fantastically well. He's gone into*



*the management side. He would never have done that but he saw that I could do it. If mum can do it, I can do it. I like to think I have inspired them.*

A key theme that emerged from the study in this passage is the notion of the ripple effect of transformative learning. In a sector of education in England that is dominated and governed by metrics (mainly focused on so called success rates: retention X achievement) linked to funding (see for example Smith 2013; Smith and O'Leary 2015), the notion of the ripple effect is a *countermetric*: an unmeasured and therefore widely unrecognised social benefit that falls outside a neoliberal purview but nevertheless has a significant positive economic impact beyond the achievement of a qualification by a single individual. Anita's journey can be described as her following a trajectory that moves away from 'dead-end jobs' towards a career with significant organisational and administrative responsibility and challenging literacy demands. The affirmation of her tutors and the bridging of strong bonds of care they established helped her to 'thrive' and led to a realisation of her aspirations with regards to having fulfilling employment. This, in turn, has impacted on her children's aspirations and educational progress catalysing a transformation in the dynamics of her family. Anita also described how she supported other people from her village with a similar, negative experience of schooling to return to college. The initial barrier that adult education helped Anita to overcome was the constriction of the label of being thick / dyslexic that marked her out at school as a failure according to the dominant model of 'autonomous' literacy. Once this constriction had been tackled, the rebirth of hope and the construction of new, positive learning identity leading to a material change in Anita's social positioning inside her family, her community and then in society more widely took place.

## **ii) Motherhood: different capitals, different literacies**

Anita's narrative illustrates how when mothers' confidence and expertise is re-positioned as valued and needed knowledge, they can develop new literacies, advocate for their children and contribute to their literacy progress. In the next participant's case, adult literacy classes have connected with and harnessed the agency and aspirations associated with motherhood in shaping a new learning identity.

Jade is a young mother who attends adult literacy classes run by a local charitable trust in the north west of England. Being a mum motivates her and she has seen her confidence increase while studying and has learnt new literacies. Now, she has aspirations for her future and is determined to be the best possible role model for her son.

*It gives me confidence. It makes me feel better. It makes me feel more like I can go and get what I need to achieve and... be who I want to be. I just want to be like... someone with a job. Have money. I want to be able to treat my son. I used to get holidays when I was younger and it was exciting and I want to be able to treat my son to stuff like that. At the moment I can't really do that and it's making me feel like I can do it. I can do it.... I want to give him the best childhood that he could have and that's by me doing what I want to do as well... I've been through times of depression but I've always tried to stay positive... I've been at the lowest place in life... My son brought me out of it. Children look up to their parents and I want him to look up to me... It's for my son. It's all about him really. What he's had in his life up to now is crap. He deserves a lot more. Kids are innocent and pure and they are the way they are taught...*

This passage illustrates the centrality of motherhood as a motivational force for Jade as an adult learner. It is important not to underestimate the affective dimension of the learning experience she is describing. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is useful here. The meanings of habit and habituation that habitus carries within it may be connected to established social patterns of being and acting in the world, but they are also bodily,

they involve feelings of acceptance and resignation or possibly of resistance and rekindled agency. Jade's account communicated strongly a habitus associated with poverty and unemployment. For her, there was a relationship between these aspects of her life and her mental well-being. The seeming intractability of her circumstances resulted in depression. This feeling of being trapped and locked into a pattern of existence was broken by her adult literacy classes. Jade finds motivation through fond memories of her own childhood, in her hopes for son. These hopes are anchored in the principles of happiness and innocence and she feels it to be her role to provide these for her child.

Rather than a focus on the production of depersonalised neoliberal vision of human economic potential signified by human capital, in Jade's case, her literacy classes are engage with her existing emotional capital (see Reay 1998, 2000) as a way of opening up possibilities for educational success. Emotional capital includes the need to be a good mother and educational care (O'Brien 2007) such as the support offered to Jade and Anita by their teachers. In Jade's case, it also extended to her circle of friends. Jade was determined to introduce one friend (with experience of mental health issues and also a mother) to the Literacy classes as a way of helping her out of a cycle of depression and deprivation:

*(M)y friend, she's had her kids took off her, and she's suicidal, I don't like seeing her like that – it breaks my heart, looking at her. I try and help her as much as I can and get her on the parenting course or the literacy course. Just to get her to stop thinking. Or to get her mind onto something else. I'm always speaking about courses that my friend could go on because she's just so low and I think she deserves a lot more than she's ever had in her life – to build up a bit more, because she thinks very lowly of herself.*

Jade expressed a sense of being comfortable, feeling welcomed and belonging in her literacy classes. The educational space here was transformative in the way it sought to connect her current aspirations for herself and her son with a future lifecourse

trajectory. Reay (1998, 2000) suggests that an investment of emotional energy in education by working class mothers depletes their own emotional well-being. However, in Jade and Anita's cases, rather than depletion, we see invigoration: motherhood seems to have acted as a catalyst to the women accessing education and then harnessing educational experience to a future trajectory in life and work, and in helping their children to succeed.

Our third illustration from the project is shared by Marie. Marie is a staff nurse who grew up in a large family on an estate in outside Manchester (where she still chooses to live). In our conversation with her, she talked about how she went back into education after a negative experience of school. She also talked about the power education has given her and her family to make choices in life. Adult education brought about a turning point in her life when she became 'hooked' on education after starting a course at a local college rather than take up another low paid job opportunity. Through this, adult education became the medium of her transformation and through her, brought about a big change in the opportunities and the educational and lifecourse trajectories of her family. As she stated:

*I don't care if (my son) stays in education till he's thirty years old. I want him educated because education gives you power and that's what I want my children to have. I want them to be able to make choices. Definitely, I want them to be able to... you know... say, 'Well actually I don't want to do that, I want to do that. And I want to go and live there, I don't want to stay there and live there. And I want to have a car and I want to do this.' Just choices... I want them to be able to go to Costa and get a coffee. Something I could never do... that's what education will give him: choices.*

One of the important things in the passage is the emphasis Marie places on the range of opportunities on offer that she wants for her children. This is about positionality in the world and a rekindled sense of agency to act in and on the world. As Bloch states:

Dreams... and possible things circulate inwardly which can perhaps never become outward. Of course, nothing would circulate inwardly either if the outward were completely solid. Outside, however, life is just as little finished as in the ego which is working on this outside. No thing could be altered in accordance with wishes if the world were closed full of fixed, even perfected facts. Instead of these there are simply processes, i.e. dynamic relationships in the Become has not completely triumphed, The Real is process: the latter is the... mediation between present, unfinished past, and, above all: possible future. (Bloch 1986, 198)

There are echoes in the renewed perspective on life and the world in Marie's narrative and Bloch's view of the way dreams and wishes (as expressions of hope) interact with the world. Key in this, is the idea that the world is not fixed and that the Real is an ongoing process of becoming that can be changed through individual agency. Transformative teaching and learning centres on this sense of becoming and offers a way forward for people who may feel trapped in a cycle of deprivation and poverty.

It is important to note that the transformative learning experiences for Marie made possible seeing the world in new critical ways. Marie described having her eyes opened to the systematic inequality of society and the wider world. There is almost a sense of lost innocence in her interview when she describes:

*I used to think doctors and police were all good and that people like that never lied. Now I know different..... I used to think people were better than me. But no one's better than anyone: we're all equal.*

The unseen literacy at work here is connected to Bourdieusian notions of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1974) but moves beyond that to a newly established 'informed' position within the field of social relations. Through her engagement with learning, Marie has developed a facility for reading social relations in her workplace

but also in society more widely. This *social literacy* enables her to read society and social situations in new ways. It also connects with notions of social capital as explored by Tett and Maclachan (2007): adult literacy learners' increased self-confidence and ability to connect with wider and new social networks. But in Marie's case, it also connects to consciousness-raising: an enhanced critical perspective on society. It provides Marie with a vantage point from which to understand not only her own position within society but to come to grips with the bigger structural forces that shape her life and the lives of others. This social literacy is deeply imbued with criticality as Marie has learnt a body of subject knowledge but also acquired an understanding of the factors that positioned her where she was before she began her journey.

Acquiring social literacy is about being able to navigate the complexities of different social groups; it's about being able to move without feeling like a fish out of water between different contexts: home, the classroom, the school on parents' evening, the doctor's surgery, the police station with a sense of agency. We might call it wholeness or confidence but it comes from a deep understanding of the self as subject: our sense of who we are in society.

A fourth project participant, Nyomi, was studying on a Podiatry degree when we met her in a college in the north east of England. The narratives of participants in this area of the country were all marked by the historical context of the 1984 Miners' Strike. The closure of pits in a large number of villages in the area had severely impacted on job prospects and the economic activity in the area. The impact of this was still being felt more than thirty years later. Nyomi talked about leaving school feeling confident and self-assured and then losing this confidence through the attrition of unemployment, demanding family circumstances and mental health issues. Nyomi's narrative makes it clear how returning to education, this time with an understanding of her dyslexia, enabled her to change her life. As with Anita, Jade and Marie, she talked about the ripple effects of her continued education and the benefits for her family.

*I had wanted to be a youth worker. They had pulled quite a lot funding for youth workers at that time. So I then spent the next four years, I would say, unable to find a job, caring for my partner who is on Employment Support Allowance. I kind of spiralled into quite a bad depression. I got pregnant, had my daughter and luckily my daughter gave us a little bit of a boost, so I went and got help for my depression... It was the Health Visitor that spoke to us and tried to get us to get a little bit of motivation and to go back out into the world and try again.*

This narrative suggests a tipping point can be reached in people's lives when a combination of external circumstances can seem to create insurmountable obstacles to the realisation of hope. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), women are more vulnerable to the effects of this.

(W)omen are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, psychosomatic systems, eating problems and sexual dysfunction. Violence may also affect their reproductive health. (WHO 2000b: 3)

Mental ill health is strongly linked to the prevalence of deprivation and poverty in communities. For Nyomi, her hopes and plans were affected by economic and employment conditions and further affected by family circumstances. Adult education, in the form of an Access to HE course, provided a gateway to renewed hope.

*(The course) was hard work, it really was.... But it gave me such a sense of belonging. I knew I was doing it for my partner and my daughter. But I also knew that I had to do it for myself. Because I had spent the last four years extremely depressed because of the way my life was panning out. I didn't think... I didn't see myself in education again. And it's hard when you come from living and not having a job and you know that you should be working... and nobody employing you... The only thing I could do to give my daughter some kind of life was to do the Access Course. It's been amazing. I opened up. I came off anti-depressants which I'd been on for quite some time. I made friends with people. And I haven't really spoken to a lot of people in years. It really does change your life. It's allowed*

*me to get back out... Within two months I was a completely different person... I've made people proud and I've made myself proud.*

Communicated powerfully by the passage is how Nyomi's experience on the Access to HE course was founded on strong ties between herself, the teachers and the other students from the same and other similar villages. The relationships that grew within the transformative teaching and learning space helped her reposition herself in relation to the outside world.

In a context in which a national, neoliberal grand narrative as espoused by the Thatcher government of the 1980s effectively closed down the established lifecourse trajectories of whole communities in the north east, adult education is seen to offer a space in which individuals from those communities can plot a way forward. The importance of the affective aspect of the transformative educational experience is writ large in Nyomi's increased self-esteem and her statement that not only did she feel a sense of pride in her achievements but that she had made others proud. This pride can be read as an indicator of the distance travelled on her journey of hope.

### **iii) The role of teachers in facilitating dialogic care**

According to our research data, teachers in further education play a vital role in creating the social conditions and establishing the strong relational ties through which transformative learning takes place (Duckworth and Smith, 2016). As a starting point, their practice needs to take account of the negative prior educational experiences of learners who in many cases have been judged and written off by a rigidly linear school system that assesses individuals against a normative, age-staged matrix of 'learning progression'. These teachers understand that in some cases it has taken enormous courage on the part of some would-be adult learners to cross the threshold onto college premises. An initial focus of their work is to create a safe learning environment,



establish trust and build confidence. The teachers form affective bonds and these bonds arise from an awareness of the historical positioning of the learners and their communities and how their location has shaped their trajectories.

One participant, Judith, Nyomi's Access to HE teacher, was conscious of the importance of her teaching work in a region with historically high levels of unemployment and job losses.

*For me transformational teaching is teaching that makes a difference. Whether it's people enjoying the lesson... or sometimes... people have come in and they've been very quiet and haven't had much confidence. You'll see them five or ten years later and they'll say I'm a primary school teacher now or I'm a social worker or I'm doing my master's degree, I'm doing my PhD. And you think: Wow what a difference!*

What's interesting about the description is that Judith sees the transformative potential as immanent in the students. Judith sees this transformative process as a collective phenomenon and as having social as well as individual origins:

*People feel once they get to their twenties or thirties, Oh I didn't stick in at school or I'm not clever enough or I'm never going to do anything. And it only takes one person in a friendship group to go and do something like an Access Course and go on and do well and then their friends want to come on as well. ...We have to break the cycle of low aspirations in the north east because we've got whole generations now who don't work...*

Judith's understanding of her role is deeply rooted in the location of the college and in the communities the college serves. In this case, her role involves addressing the legacy of the industrial strategies of 1980s Thatcherism when the largescale industries of motor manufacture, coal and steel production had public subsidies withdrawn. Judith here signals how the impact of the Access course on an individual often led to the recruitment of others from that individual's social network. Judith identifies some important ingredients in the formation of dialogic caring relationships with the

learners. Amongst these, although not specifically named is the respect she has for them as people. Once more the egalitarian nature of transformative teaching and learning comes across powerfully:

*We try to get to know the students as people and be part of their journey... A lot of people think they're not academic when actually, they are.... They're so used to thinking of all the things they can't do, we've got to focus on what they can do... By the time they finish they realise that they can do the same as those people they thought were better than them because they had a degree or they are a doctor. I've had people say to me: ... I've learned how to phone up and complain if I'm not happy about something. I've learnt to say, I disagree with that. At the end of the day they are empowered and they have more confidence.*

The emphasis in this is very much on the self-discovery by learners of already-there potential: a process which makes *becoming* a realisation of immanence and which unlocks the door to a previously remote and unattainable future. There is a sense then that the teacher's role in the process is one of producing the transformative educational space and opening up the learning dialogue with individuals. The role of care in this is seen in the nuanced meeting of individual students' needs underpinned by a consideration for their dignity.

### **Discussion: Transformative Teaching and Learning and 'differential space'**

In seeking to theorise what we mean by transformative teaching and learning, we also draw on the theories about space and time developed by Henri Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre saw abstract space as 'dominated' and often oppressive and defined it as:

the urban spaces of state regulated neo-capitalism characterised by their commodified exchange value and their tendency to homogenisation (Lefebvre 1991: 49-53)

“Differential space” on the other hand he saw as offering a counterpart to abstract space that arises from its contradictions and the inherent possibilities that are constrained within it. Differential space:

... privileges inclusiveness and use value rather than the exchange value of abstract space. It is often transitory space which can arise from the inherent vulnerabilities of abstract space. (Leary-Owhin 2015: 4)

As explained above, literacy within neoliberalism is instrumentalised and mobilised in the service of the creation of an imagined national pool of human capital. This form of literacy is commodified by the funding arrangements underpinning much further education which attaches an arbitrary ‘cost’ to the ‘doing’ and ‘delivering’ of literacy qualifications.

The alternative view of literacy education traceable back to Freire (1995) provides a setting for the emergence of differential space. Adult literacy classes provide and realise differential space in two significant ways: first, by taking the reductive utilitarian view of education as a starting point and, through an engagement with learners’ educational biographies, critiquing this; and secondly, by providing an affirmative environment for the development of learners’ aspirations and a reorientation to possible lifecourse trajectories in the future (Duckworth and Smith 2018a). It is this aspect which makes of differential space a landscape in which learning that can be described as transformative can take place.

Transformative teaching and learning is a pedagogical approach that specifically counteracts the effects of the neoliberal instrumentalist purposing of education. It is a pedagogy founded on care and solidarity and is driven by a dialogue between students and students and teachers. A key distinction between transformative teaching and learning and ‘student-centred’ approaches resides in this re-evaluative and ultimately retro-active aspect. An important initial stage of transformative

teaching and learning involves remedying the damage caused by the internalisation of negative labels and expectations from students' compulsory education. It is in this sense that transformative teaching and learning is an enactment of differential space as 'politicised-democratic space' (Leary-O'whin 2015). Duckworth and Smith (2018a) argue that teachers play a vital role in establishing an environment or space and set of relationships in which students can validate their socially situated knowledge and value the knowledge generated from their lived experiences. They also shift from positioning the motor of transformation (only or primarily) within individuals, seeing it instead as an effect that is consciously produced through *interaction* between teachers and students through 'dialogic care'. The kind of care underpinning transformative teaching and learning is not demeaning or passivizing but instead is orientated towards fostering student engagement, autonomy and choice.

### **Schooling, class and gender**

The research data emphasised the enormous (often negative) impact that schooling had on the women in the study. The literacies the women brought to school as children afforded little symbolic value in that they could not be used in class to pass exams. For example, the caring literacy traditionally carried out by girls and women, caring for siblings and their children remained invisible and unvalued. In addition, oral and written linguistic capabilities were not equally valued in schools, and learners' idiolects (and through them, their identities) were devalued through the hierarchisation of varieties and dialects that positions Standard English as imbued with an intrinsic prestige that masquerades as natural and almost moral in character – rather than as a dialect whose status is rooted in specific historical incident / accident (Trudgill 2000). As such, literacy was very much linked with their subjectivity and how they viewed their self-worth in the public and private domains of their lives. This meant that learners who were not proficient in the linguistic and 'academic' literacies required in schools were defined as 'failures' or as lacking in intelligence simply

because of the way they related to and articulated their knowledge of the world. This in turn influenced their experience at school, the 'choices' they had or did not have and subsequent trajectories as adults.

Our study explored participants' lives and afforded a comparative exploration of gendered construction of subjectivity in and through education. While their schooling was marked by labelling and marginalisation, their experience of adult education renewed hope in ways that impacted on their lifecourse trajectories. Our analysis of the learners' life stories moves away from a simplistic notion of individuals 'bettering themselves' – we extend the idea that this is 'linked to their selfhood and social identities' (Luttrell 1997) and rather than viewing working class identities in pathological terms, we see them developing a criticality that repositions them *as they are*, as working class women, in a new relation to people from other, more privileged and middle class social backgrounds. In Marie's and in Anita's cases (but also in the stories of other participants not covered by this article), this meant bringing a different set of values to their work, and a viewpoint that understood and reached out to people they perceived as coming from a background similar to their own.

Our analysis unpacks these negative ontological assumptions, based on dominant and normative discourses of the middle class, which pathologise gender and class and women's and working class experience (see Walkerdine et al. 2001; Lawler 2005; Duckworth 2013).

### **Dialogic caring and hope**

The ideological coupling of choices and opportunities for all that was a key theme in New Labour's rhetoric about responsibilities, resurfaced in the notion of the Big Society that was an early policy theme of the Coalition Government (2010-15), was

carried forward in a slightly different form into the agenda of the new conservative government. Theresa May's first speech outside 10 Downing St includes the lines:

*When it comes to opportunity, we won't entrench the advantages of the fortunate few. We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you. (Prime Minister's Office 2016)*

Here, the meritocratic emphasis of New Labour is transposed into the notion of 'talent': an ideological and mystical quality (reminiscent of IQ) that transcends and therefore makes unnecessary any attempt to address the structural causes of poverty and deprivation and instead places significant emphasis upon an essentialist notion of 'ability'. This in turn implies a condemnation of the lifestyle, culture and choices of the poor and marginalised. We see this in the labelling and pathologising of the women in the study and the impact this has on their notions of choices in the public and private domains that they inhabit and more broadly health and well-being.

Culturally sensitive literacy education has the potential to transform students, teachers (and researchers) to become writers of their own educational stories and, moreover, authors of their own lives. The telling and sharing of the stories was a way for the women to share what had happened and make the connection with someone who would not judge, but who had similar experiences. In this way, through digital media the research study aims to contribute to the ripple effect that participants' stories evidenced. Through the sharing of these histories participants began to recognise that what had happened to them at school was not their fault and began to feel a sense of agency in their lives.

The research process created a safe space in which the telling of narratives was experienced as affirming and this can again be linked to the narrative as a capital for resistance against the barriers the women have faced, for example being poor, labelled and stigmatised. Offering a democratic and 'differential' space both in the classroom,

the community and through research activities for the learners to share their narratives also allowed for a sharing of stories about obstacles and ways to overcome them. In this context, the narratives in themselves became a resource of hope and assumed the status of a capital which others drew from to inspire and offer strategies to move themselves and others forward.

## **Conclusions**

This research illustrates how Literacy is crucial for promoting women's rights as it provides opportunities for them to revisit and reclaim the spoilt learner identities to ones of empowerment (Pants-Robinson, 2016). Indeed, women are marginalised and often silenced if they are unable to access the powerful literacy tools that can enable them to transform their lives (Duckworth, 2013; Duckworth & Smith 2017). Many of the learners in this study have experienced social and economic inequality for most of their lives. They were aware that they had been labelled and stigmatised but the bonds formed in their literacy classes facilitated them to overcome their experience of past symbolic violence within the education system. Then, the strong bond they formed with the teacher and their peers supported and cemented the development of a new identity within a collectively experienced space.

The research narratives reveal how the participants try to make sense of their structural positioning as literacy learners in a society based on inequality of opportunity and choice. Through their educational journeys these women challenge and transform existing hierarchies. As learners they overturn the monopoly on hope that is reified by existing social inequality and the employment and income structures that support this. In that sense, literacy classrooms take on the characteristics of 'differential space' (Lefebvre 1991) as spaces and times in which agency can be rediscovered and an engagement with society on different terms planned for.

The research foregrounds the importance of caring bonds in supporting learners through their educational journey. The study reveals how teachers, even when constrained by performative curricula, can open up a space for critical reflection and dialogue which facilitated learners to challenge dominant notions of what literacies are and which literacies matter and which do not. It was this move from a competence based model to a holistic approach (see Morrish et al. 2002) and care (see Feeley 2007, Duckworth 2013, 2014) which allowed us to fully explore the learners' motivations and barriers. Dialogic care was an integral aspect of the methodological approach.

Transformative teaching and learning experiences are largely hidden from view because their impact falls outside the metrics that drive further education policy and underpin funding in the UK (Duckworth and Smith 2018b). Their wider impact remains unmeasured by blunt assessment. For that reason, we argue that adult education and literacy programmes should be viewed through the lens of transformative teaching and learning as this makes possible a reclaiming of educational space and purposes that do not objectify students in instrumentalist ways.

In current neoliberal conditions, educational achievement in schools has been reduced to an institutional quest to improve measurements and metrics in the service of a grand narrative centred on human capital accumulation. This grand narrative views the future primarily in national economic terms. We should not be surprised that these conditions result in the mass labelling of great swathes of the nation's children as failures. After all, in 2017, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland the pass rate at GCSE level – the examinations taken at 16 was 66.3% (Richardson 2017). That said, as Bloch identifies, this 'Real' is in process rather than being fixed. All parts of our education system, we might think, should hold to a central purpose of catalysing learners' hope. This research study revealed that, despite significant funding cuts and the objectifying force of a neoliberal skills discourse in the UK, adult literacy and adult education more generally, continues to give primacy to such a role.



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