

Paper 7

Changing Identities: Working Class Adults' Voices in Higher Education

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on working class adults' voices in higher education in a University that has a tradition of widening access. It is, therefore, a specific and distinctive case study of voices underpinned by a concern for social justice and higher education. The concept of student voice itself has become more widespread throughout the education system and has a variety of meanings and practices associated with it, Fielding and Rudduck (2002). This paper draws on data from a research conducted with adults who had enrolled on Access to higher education courses in Greater Manchester. Research was carried out using a database held at the University of Salford which has been active in the area of widening participation for a number of years. The database contained the names of 6000 adults who had enrolled on Access courses in the sub-region of Greater Manchester and had registered for enrichment courses at the University of Salford prior to their application to higher education. The database contained names and contacts for the years 2000-2006. Funding for the project came from Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance and the Aimhigher Research Network North West. One of the main purposes of the research project was to explore key aspects of agency in the lives of working class adults who engaged with further and higher education for the first time. The data presented here indicates that engagement in formal education such as Access courses involves changing identity for the individuals and the changes are presented through narratives of success. Lifelong learning is a critical aspect of the lives of these working class adults but this lifelong learning is a far cry from the discourse of government policy, (Tedder and Biesta 2008). For many of those who successfully negotiated the transition to higher education by this route there was a keen sense of 'making something of themselves or becoming someone'. In nearly all cases this was because of a sense of a missed opportunity earlier in their lives. These narratives indicated the ways in which support from family, friends, adult peers, FEC and HEI support systems were critical to success. However, engagement entailed a changing emphasis of support in conjunction with a changing identity of studentship. This becoming had effects in relation to the significance of the influence of immediate family at the beginning of the engagement but often moved to a greater dependence on aspects of peer support in higher education. How peer support was negotiated was different for each but there was a sense of class belonging involved that was related to cultural understanding. Support systems in FECs and HEIs were also perceived as critical for some individuals at specific moments of their studentship.

Introduction

As Tedder and Biesta (2008) indicate there is a struggle over the very concept of lifelong learning as the discourse of education has become more economic under New Labour. Ashwin (2006) detailed the changing context of higher education over a longer period and explored the move from an elite to a mass higher education system. He acknowledged changes in student diversity and pointed to the changes in gender composition and the increase in students from specific ethnic minorities who have entered higher education as key aspects of this change. Modood (2006) pointed to the achievements and the differences that we need to be aware of in relation to ethnic minorities and entry to higher education. Similarly, in relation to social class Blanden and Machin (2004) indicated that change and expansion in higher education had not affected all social classes to the same degree. While higher education has experienced an expansion changes in intergenerational mobility have actually declined. This inequality in access has been identified by recent government policies as the result of lack of attainment and lack of ambition on the part of students from working class backgrounds. Blanden and Machin (ibid) indicated that differences in household income were central to understanding the differential outcomes of this expansion.

Widening participation policy has seen the establishment of Foundation Degrees and the e-university by Blunkett (2000), the creation of a national network Aimhigher and the creation of Lifelong Learning Networks. In schools there was a reinvigorated curriculum with the Literacy and Numeracy initiatives and between secondary schooling and further education the Education Maintenance Allowance, a means tested

monetary allowance for staying on in education post -16. Teaching, learning and assessment in higher education has been subject to both increased regulation and increased funding, Ashwin (2006:8).

An example of changing context and the role of Hefce is the Bell Memorial Lecture (Newby, 2004) with the announcement of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). LLNs were to provide coherence for the progression of vocational learners to higher education with a remit to build partnerships and develop progression agreements. This initiative focused specifically on progression from vocational subjects at colleges, as evidence on progression from A Levels indicated that the vast majority who studied A Levels progressed to higher education. HEFCE targets and policy initiatives were aimed at the system's failure to enable transition into higher education. The constraints to transition to higher education were perceived as barriers within the system itself. Questions of identity and of engagement in learning were not perceived to be systemic but individual and thus less open to policy initiatives. However, existing partnerships within the system itself were initially used to develop LLNs in a locality or sub region. The policy initiative of Aimhigher was aimed at stimulating demand in schools and FECs and the LLNs were aimed at changing the supply side of courses and programmes and securing progression agreements between Colleges and Schools and HEIs.

The policy of widening participation to higher education and the target of fifty percent of 18-30 year olds attending higher education were key aspects of New Labour's vision of a competitive knowledge economy in a global age, Ainley (2008). Foundation Degrees were established as providing a different route to higher education, one that involved partnership, employer involvement and work-based forms of learning. (Doyle and O'Doherty, 2006). It is recognised in this paper that learning takes place in many different sites and over the course of an individual's life but the focus in this paper is on engagement with formal learning through a site of engagement by adult learners. In this paper the concept of site of engagement is developed from the work of Scollon (2001). There are three critical aspects to the site of engagement: the origin of the policy initiative, the design and development of the curriculum intervention (Fds, Access courses and APL) and the experiences of the students in engaging with the curriculum or intervention.

Researching Structure and Agency

Given the shifting nature of the policy interventions both within the system and from funding and other agencies outside the education system indicated above, it will be argued that the concept of site of engagement gives a focus for understanding key aspects of structure and agency in educational contexts. In this paper there is a focus on one site namely Access courses and specifically with the experiences of working class adults who engaged in the site. The context of Access courses to higher education is a sub-regional context that developed from local initiatives in the 1970s before becoming accepted as a route into higher education. Access courses have had a significantly different impact in the South West, North West of England and London than for example in the Midlands. However, the number of certified centres which are usually Further Education Colleges (FECs) has not altered significantly over time and the expansion of Access courses does not appear to have been seen as central to widening participation policy.

In the adoption of the concept of a site of engagement I wish to rely on some of the aspects of mediated action that Scollon (1998, 2001) uses. However, the concept is used by Scollon at the micro level of interaction and language use. I wish to adapt this to the meso level of analysis. At this level analysis of actions can be detailed in relation such aspects as course design and course development in response to policy initiatives as well as at the reasons for the engagement of adult learners. In FECs and HEIs there are policy procedures for the development of such courses that constrain, evaluate, monitor and exclude and such procedures are put into practice both prior to and during the courses offered. While this is a legitimate concern of the research and some data has already been gathered from course leaders, employers involved in Foundation Degrees and APL Co-ordinators, the major part of the research has been conducted with adult students in higher education in three of the four sites of engagement. Ainley (2008:616-617) argues that:

Cognitive and structural barriers addressed in widening participation are pathologised with little reference to sociocultural processes of learning among those already in higher education. Instead an emphasis on what is learnt rather than what is taught, can reveal effort, identities and trajectories involved in getting and staying on course that

the recent preoccupation with widening participation has largely ignored. As the age, class, gender and ethnic components of higher education participation change, including 'broken' transitions that disrupt prevailing concepts of cognitive linearity, insight into how learning is constructed can be afforded through the contrasted narratives of learners....

This critical concern frames the concept of student voices within this paper and is reflected in the methodology and the theorising of agency within educational contexts. Biesta, Field, Goodson, Hodkinson and MacLeod (2008) carried out a biographical approach to researching lifelong learning as most of the existing research base in this area focused on institutional practices or how education polices function in practice. Central findings of their research was that learning of some sort was ubiquitous in most people's lives and that:

For a minority the sense of being a learner is an important part of their identity. In some cases this learner identity is focussed around formal education but always with substantial informal learning related to it. Learning is sometimes valued for the outcomes it brings, but people often value the process of engagement in learning for its own sake...(Biesta et al.: 18).

The changing relationship between engagement in formal learning and the way in which this is experienced is the focus of this paper. How do working class adults understand this engagement? Is there risk involved and what occurred earlier in their lives that involves a degree of risk taking in their mid thirties or forties in relation to engagement with higher education? Archer (2007) refers to such matters as projects or the ways in which we deliberate or mull things over and decide to focus on acting in particular ways at specific times in our lives. Social practices are the ways in which we get by as knowledgeable agents in human activity but such practices are related to the ways in which agents perceive opportunities or constraints.

Matters are no different in the social order where many of the projects we pursue necessarily involve us with constraints and enablements. As with the other two orders of natural reality, life in society is impossible without projects; each one of its members has myriads of them every day. Although we do not usually think of such things as catching buses, going to the pub or taking the dog for a walk in these terms. Nevertheless, a change of circumstances can make us realise that this is precisely what they are, precisely successful social practices which have become taken for granted as embodied knowledge. (Archer, 2007: 9).

Archer indicates that when human beings pursue their social projects they encounter structural properties that are activated as powers. In any attempt to develop a successful social practice there are two sets of causal powers interacting. Such causal powers are those of the individuals (subjects) and those of the relevant structural or cultural properties. Structures' causal powers are experienced as constraints or enablements but human causal powers operate reflexively. (ibid:9) In other words our knowlegability of the context in which we act or reflect on how we should act is fallible but nevertheless informs our actions. Acting in the world as human beings therefore depends on what Archer (2003, 2007) refers to as this inner conversation or reflexivity. In her 2007 study Archer identifies a typology of three types of reflexivity that humans possess and the three types have implications for acting in the world. These are Communicative Reflexives, Autonomous Reflexives and Meta-Reflexives. Archer (2007) argues that there are profound implications for social mobility, given that the internal conversation is a lifelong process and that within it there is a sequence related to:

<Concerns → Projects → Practices>

How we understand the ways in which constraints are experienced is related to identity and how we experience and reflect on such constraints. In terms of many people from the working class higher education, structurally is not a part of their lives. Culturally, there is a remoteness or an absence in the day to day concerns of working class people in relation to higher education. So the actions of mainly working class women who decide to return to study and the ways in which they experience constraints to their engagement in higher education is a central focus of this paper. For example, practices related to teaching, learning and assessment may appear to be perceived as distinct and outside their control. Such practices

may be experienced as individual inadequateness related to earlier experiences of schooling. Practices in coping with everyday aspects of caring or family may also act as constraints structurally but be experienced as individualised problems associated with roles and positions within family. The limits of acting on projects can therefore be located within the ways in which learning, transitions between periods of people's lives and socially between spaces FE to HE are experienced and understood. Stones (2001) suggests that we need to understand this as placing limits on actions.

Constraint stems from the 'objective' existence of structural properties that the individual agent is unable to change. As with the constraining qualities of sanctions, it is best described as placing limits upon the range of options open to an actor, or a plurality of actors, in a given circumstance or type of circumstance. [original emphasis] (Stones, 2001:182).

Individuals prioritise and decide by mulling over their concerns and arriving at their projects or ways in which to act in the social context that lead to their social practices in relation to their life course. Human beings cannot act in any way they wish, given their understanding of their contextual constraints such as role, but act in relation to their knowledgeability of such contexts (Giddens, 1984).

In carrying out the research with adults who enrolled on Access courses these theoretical concerns were influential. The decision to study on an Access course was seen as a critical moment of engagement in formal education and a significantly risky one at that. Both what occurred before with early education and the decision to engage at this later stage of life were related. This engagement with formal learning later in life was explored through biography. In biographical terms we were interested in how the decision was arrived at and what it related to in the individual's understanding of their career or life. Early schooling and engagement in education was a key moment in decisions about employment and relationships with family and was related to this later engagement. The individual's understanding of the Access course itself and their experience of learning was also of interest as was the experience of transition to higher education.

The social practices of teaching and learning were explored from the individual's concerns and understanding of this. Finally, we were interested in the ways in which individuals approached the telling of their life stories. How they positioned themselves within their narratives and the ways in which they ordered their concerns through this experience of engagement. This then is a contribution to student voice but quite specifically the voices of the students as adult learners who are mainly women who identified themselves in response to questions about their early lives as working class. Such voices are not often positioned within the context of higher education and are more likely to be visible in research on lifelong learning. However, such voices offer valuable insight into the taken for granted aspects of social practices around teaching, learning and assessment.

Methodology

The project was carried out from September 2008 until June 2009 and was designed to gather data from students who had enrolled on Access courses during the years 2003-2006. A dataset of names and personal information was held at the university and ethical approval and data protection issues were applied for using university procedures. Procedures relating to anonymity were followed as were the holding of data in a secure place. Three data gathering tools were used to contact the adults. Firstly, we used a mail shot that contained a one page survey and a consent form and a stamped return envelop. We posted 3000 of these to individuals at their last known address. This was followed by a telephone contact two weeks after the mail shot and an appointment booking for a face to face or a telephone interview.

Telephone interviews were written up immediately after the conversation finished and filed and face to face interviews were transcribed and filed separately. The returned surveys were analysed and written up as a report for the external agencies and qualitative data was analysed using a thematic approach related to the key questions. We decided, given our theoretical influences, to conduct semi-structured interviews related to six key areas of concern and added a final seventh for the adult learner to contribute. These areas were:

- early education and schooling; the decision to enrol on an Access course;
- the experience of learning on an Access course;
- the transition to first year in a university; teaching and learning in a university;
- present location as a student or in employment, changing identity.

The data presented here concerns a number of the Access adults who identified themselves as working class.

Voices of Working Class Adults: Missed Opportunities

In this section data from the interviews is presented and analysis is provided in relation to key concerns that arose related to engagement.

Karen is in her mid forties and she pointed to the ways in which engagement with education and qualifications have changed over time. Work and marriage were her first concerns when schooling was over and she left with few qualifications. However in the late 1970s there were unskilled and semi-skilled employment opportunities in Mills in Rochdale, Bury and Oldham. When these jobs started to disappear she, like many working class women, moved into caring something she had learned as a mother in her own family. The growth in retail employment and part-time employment is another feature that Karen points to as the changing labour market in certain areas allowed women to work and care. However, there was always the increasing need in employment for qualifications.

My name is Karen and I left school with nothing apart from like needlework and cookery, practical skills because when we were brought up you had nothing and if you wanted anything you had to go out and work. So you were so keen to leave school as soon as possible to get the things that your mum couldn't afford. So I left with nothing and I went into mills when I was younger and things like that to get the things I wanted because it wasn't as hard then as it is now to get jobs. You didn't need all the qualifications you need now so I worked in mills and care assistants and things like that. I got married. I had my family....So I did move on and I worked part time at Boots when my son was growing up and because I could work part-time. Jobs were getting that way where you had to have qualifications where if you wanted to improve your professional working. But I did go to Bury College then and I did my GCSEs in English and Maths.

Karen continued studying and eventually enrolled on an Access course as she had always wanted to be a nurse from early in her childhood. However, the need to contribute to the household and the way to a form of independence from contributing to the family wage as a working class young woman was through the wage. It offered the opportunity to have a portion of the wage for oneself and made more practical sense to work than to study as a young person. Eventually, she moved into employment in social care in a National Health Trust(NHT) and although the Trust funded her training for NVQs eventually the funding was withdrawn.

Well the reason was that after I'd done the courses I was a home help and nursing assistant I got a job working with learning disabilities in X Primary Care Trust. I loved... absolutely loved that job. It was only twenty hours and I could do twenty hours so really I was full time but I was only contracted for twenty hours. I did like your mandatory courses in that and an introduction and foundation in ALDAF. Because I'd took those courses it gave me the incentive to want to learn more and more.

Karen went on to study an Access to Nursing course at her local college and then progressed to university. She found studying at university more difficult than college as the systems for support are different and the numbers on the courses mean that the relationships are different.

I think coming from a college to university you've got to be dedicated because I found in my first year that " what have I got here?" We all communicated as students and we all had similar opinions that university is.....they help you they steer you in the right direction and tell you what you need to be achieving but at the end of the day it is down to you. I think you've got to be motivated to do that and if you're not motivated ...

The requirement of a more independent learning approach meant that reliance on peer support became a necessity. This aspect of the transition was identified by different adults. On Access courses the number

of students is not a constraint on teacher support and feedback and there are both more of a tradition of pastoral tutoring and of the likelihood of feedback on assignments for rewriting. Jane, for example, found the move between the two locations difficult as she hadn't been motivated by school and returned to study to improve her employment opportunities.

University is different and much more relaxed but there is no support in university and students fail modules. I don't think you get taught properly and you're expected to go away and do it yourself. I need a lot of support because I struggle academically and need one to one support. The university offers a workshop on how to do the work but there are too many students in that. I need help at a one to one level....I'm not enjoying it. I'm finding it very difficult. I've failed a module and can't go on to the third year until I pass it. I still intend to be a social worker and finish it. If there was one thing that is needed at university it is more support for Access students like me.

Jane's understanding of teaching at university is that it doesn't support different types of learners such as herself. As an Access student she wants what she calls more explanation or more one to one support. This is what was available in a FEC Access course where the course tutor would have given time for support on essay writing skills and time for drafting and submitting work. However, at university level students are seen as independent learners and the ways and means of learning are available within the university. The support workshop on academic writing or on referencing is usually well attended with close to one hundred students and for Jane this makes it difficult to understand what is required in such a setting. However, despite failing one module she still intends to continue and is still optimistic about completing her course and becoming a social worker.

Bernadette's story is different although her initial engagement with formal education was related to her caring responsibilities. This initial engagement in a sense was the hook for wanting to learn for her as the course was flexible and fitted with her caring responsibilities.

I completed my education with very few qualifications and went to work. Seven years ago I was made redundant and around about that time my mum became ill and I cared for her. While I was caring for my mum I did small courses at college just to improve my education. I did courses such as counselling before I registered on an Access to higher education course. I struggled at first because during the introduction they did physics and chemistry and I wasn't very good at that. But soon I really loved the work we were doing as the course was flexible and I could do it and still care for my mum. There was a lot of support on the college course.

Bernadette found the transition to university and the initial requirements of higher education difficult but was sufficiently committed and engaged to overcome her fears about higher level study. She qualified but her mother passed away and so she took some time out before applying for employment. In her case the support she received from her personal tutor was what Jane had referred to. So the differences in support may be a result of individual subjects differences such as differences in the numbers on the course and the differences in the numbers allocated to teaching staff. Such differences could easily be related to an individual's own conception of what a university student should be capable of. Personal tutoring in both further education and higher education are dependent on the interest of the individual tutor rather than being systematic such as used at the Open University. Bernadette offered the following:

It was a lot different. The assignments were harder, the marking was harder and it took a bit of getting used to. Once you reach the half way stage of the first year it gets easier as you understand what they want from you. In the university there was a lot of support from my personal tutor who I could go to and she would explain some of the things I didn't understand. The subject tutors they weren't really very helpful in that sense. I'm a single parent and my mum died last year but I got through. I passed and qualified last year but I've taken some time out. I'm looking for an Occupational Therapy job but because of the cuts it's not as easy as it was to get employment.

John left school when he was fourteen or rather as he puts it he did a newspaper round to get money and didn't attend much in the last two years. He didn't see the point of school and eventually became a bricklayer.

I went to a comprehensive school in Manchester. I didn't enjoy school at all. I think it was the second year. When I was in the second year my father died so I more or less pleased myself whether I went to school or not because me mam needed a breadwinner in the house so in the third year I'd go to school a bit but I had a paper round but I also had a job working for the ice cream man. That fetched a few quid in so I could pay my mam and in fourth year I never went to school and I left school with no qualifications. I wanted to go for big money but I did listen to my mother and she told me to get a trade which is something my dad always wished he had done. So I got a trade as a bricklayer and went to college and enjoyed college but I failed it the first time round but in my last year I passed everything. I've been a bricklayer for years. I've worked abroad and earned a good booty at it.

John is the classic lad in Willis's (1997, 2001) study of working class lads getting working class jobs. Although his attainment of a skilled trade rather than a semi-skilled or unskilled job goes slight against the eventual jobs the lads ended up in, the rejection of school as a solution to earning a wage is similar. However, his inversion of the mental manual divide and the role of breadwinner when his father died meant that John was destined for labouring earlier than most young people his age. John, after twenty five years 'working on the tools', came back to England from Dubai. He had a problem with his back and took up taxi driving because he couldn't lift heavy weights. He moved from that to caring for his mother when she became ill and following a suggestion from his sister that he should take up nursing he applied for an Access to Nursing course.

My sister worked as an auxiliary nurse in X hospital and she encouraged me to go into nursing. I made some enquiries and I found out it would take about four years as I'd have to go to college to get my GCSEs and university I didn't really fancy it and as I'm a single parent I had most of the year off because I knew I didn't want to go driving again or do anything too heavy. I finally decided and went to college. The only thing I was good at was Maths I was excellent at Maths but my English lets me down a lot. I'd never been on a computer. When they started teaching me these things I really enjoyed it. I took to it and it was one of these things. It was like a drug to me I just wanted to learn and learn more.

John's engagement can be seen against his lack of engagement in his secondary schooling as another example of a missed opportunity. His view of support was different as he benefited significantly from the systems that were in place at the university in his area of study.

I wouldn't say I was bottom of the class but I struggled. I was holding on to everyone's shirt tails more or less. (asked about support) Absolutely fantastic. I went on nearly every academic study session there was for my English and I improved year by year. Eventually, my first assignment I got forty percent and by the time I was in my third year I got a seventy six percent pass. So it's a fantastic improvement really. At the minute I can write good English but I don't speak it very well I find it really hard to ...communicate what I want to say.

Another aspect of support for adult learners is the network they establish within the college or university and there is a sense of who you are and where you belong when John talks about how peer groups are formed.

I've a proper Manchester accent and right from the start ..I'm from X a proper working class area and a girl in our class was from Salford and she spoke exactly like I spoke and had the same sense of humour whereas the others were all a little bit snooty. So we bit it off day one really and we stuck it through all the way through. If she was doing ok and I was down she'd help me and vice versa and it was so ..it was towards the end of the second year and then we started trusting the others if you know what I mean not all there was only one or two we didn't get on with. We've met one another's families. I've changed my friends and social group by the way because my house used to be full of people but most of my old mates are into dodgy things and I just have one or two friends from here now.

John has changed in terms of his identity. He is a Paediatric Nurse and he mixes with fewer people and mainly with people he works with or he met while he was studying. His life outside work has also altered as he states and his lifestyle has changed but some aspects of his class 'habitus' remain. He has moved on in both identity terms and social terms and his achievement although it began with support within his family has drawn on support systems for study skills within the university and peer group.

Stella wanted to make something of herself for her children. She wanted to gain qualifications rather than do dead end jobs and she had a good idea what she wanted to do. She left school with no qualifications and went straight into work.

No I just went straight into a job and I was in a job then till I started having my children and in 1998 I went back into education. I went to X College in Manchester. I went to do English..... Well no, because my children were still too young I was wanting to get my education so that when my children were old enough then I could go out and go to work because I 'm a single parent and obviously there are child care problems but also because I was brought up, because my mum worked, I was brought up in a single parent home. My mum she was never around so we were latchkey kids as they used to call them and so I always said I would never have my kids as latchkey kids so I waited till they were like.. the youngest was fourteen before I would go out. I did part-time jobs you know school dinners a dinner lady and cleaning. I did all those but it was qualification wise that's why I came back.

Stella didn't want to treat her children, as a single parent, the way she was treated so she waited until her youngest child was settled in secondary school before she started doing part time jobs in schools and cleaning. The influence of her early life of wanting to be a nurse, the failure to achieve any qualifications and the influence of her sister all played a part in the motivation to engage in learning.

What it was, I just went in and I said I want to be a nurse a mental health nurse because it always interested me anyway and my sister qualified about six years ago and after chatting with my sister I thought I could do that you know the way I am. I just went in and said I want to go into nursing. They just said we've got an Access course in health and science which will get you into university. I didn't have any A Levels or anything so I wouldn't have got in otherwise.

Returning to study can be quite daunting when there is a period of years between engagement in a formal learning setting. Stella admitted that she struggled with parts of the Access course because of its alignment with the requirements of the Nursing degree.

Yeah it can be quite scary. Well to be honest I didn't think I'd get in. Initially I just thought, I don't know I never have any confidence in myself. I didn't think I had enough in me to get in so. A few of us got interviews. We had to do a personal statement for university and we worked on that for about four months and everyone sent them in and there were a few there that were really I want to go to uni. I wasn't really I was well if I get in I get in because I'm not confident I just thought if I get in great but if I don't I don't. Anyway I got an interview and I was like oh god, I haven't been to an interview for years. I was really petrified but after speaking to the tutors in the interview they just sort of eased your mind.

Stella only applied to one university, the University of Salford, because of her caring responsibilities and her family life there was only one choice. She had studied locally and she intended to continue that. She wasn't confident as she didn't think 'she had enough in me' wasn't capable of studying at that level. This is the perception of constraint as functioning part of reflexivity and it is a key element in understanding how constraint works as people consider their projects in terms of their biographies. However, success in examinations and in the submission of projects and essays has an effect on working class identities when engaged in higher education. The fear of failure is always present but self esteem and the exercising of more control over ones life result from such engagement.

Yeah, especially when you pass. We just got our results today on passing the exams because you are always thinking I might fail. Most of us have passed. It does improve your self esteem if you can do it because I always I'm always negative about myself. I don't think I can do this and I can do that. I always think oh I don't think I can do that. Will I be able to do that?...I went back initially in 1998. The Access course helped me get here and I've got more confidence now. I think my abilities... I've got more knowledge than I had and my abilities I think I can do it. I'm still not really dead confident but ...I've met a lot more people and we do go out for drinks. So yeah the social circle is wider. I've still got the same friends that I've always had like at home but at uni you meet a lot more people even on placement I've got a few people like nurses and mentors that I socialise with.

Support from family in many of the cases was the initial spur to get engaged with learning or as a key change that an individual planned but this for Stella became difficult as she was a single parent.

That was one thing I didn't get and I think it was because I'm a single mother and because all my attention went on to the kids that when I started working well doing work I wasn't spending as much time with them even though I was still doing the usual the tea and everything else but I wasn't spending the time with them I was like saying oh I've got to get this essay finished and I've got to do this and I've got to do that. It was difficult to manage because they would say what are you doing this for? Why are you doing this I don't understand why you're doing this. And I'd say to better myself because I want to get a good job and have a career and look forward to the future. They would say you're getting stressed out all the time. I mean I think now that I'm at the end of the second year they say you know she is doing it and they're that bit older now so. They understand it better that I want to be someone with a career.

Conclusion

Stella struggled because of the commitment to the children and her studies and the initial emotional tension around giving time to the kids was a stressful and difficult time. However, she continued to try to explain that she wanted to be someone who had a career as well as being mum. In her case as well her changing identity meant changing the people she mixed with even though she is still a local and has local friends. Her admission of increased knowledge, more confidence and self esteem mean that her engagement with learning like those cited here has been a worthwhile experience but it has not been easy. Constraints to engagement and constraints while engaged whether real or perceived work as Archer claims reflexively for individuals. Each of the cases here suggests that the transition between Access courses and higher education are individual journeys that are constructed differently by those involved and that their projects are mulled over and evaluated in terms of their ongoing changing identities through the engagement. Those cited are evocative of a larger range of narratives in the research that indicate both change through engagement and increasing control over a sense of what they are becoming.

At different times in these journeys each individual encountered a range of constraints and each had differential access to a range of support mechanisms. Some of these support mechanisms were cultural or familial in the form of a brother or sister but these were drawn on at an early stage of engagement. As the individual progressed the range of material and cultural supports were situated within the organisation of the FEC or the HEI. These were the tutorial system or academic support system which, in some cases and in some areas were very useful, and students drew on these resources to enable their engagement. In other cases they were peer support systems which the students established themselves in order to aid their engagement.

Who they mixed with and how these groups were formed as John indicates resulted from a mixture of cultural understanding of who you were if you were working class who you could trust. Things such as accent, humour became important in deciding who to trust at an early stage of engagement although eventually these moved into the background. Socialising through the course aided self esteem altered during the process of engagement for these working class adults.

Early experiences of education were not very good and almost all left secondary education with little or no formal qualifications. Schooling was rejected by many not in a rebellious manner but more in a passing manner. It passed them by without much passion or engagement in learning and this acted later in life as a constraint reflexively as indicated by Archer (2007) as many of those in the research although engaged in formal learning doubted their ability to achieve. So it is a surprise that later in life their project was to attain qualifications in order to improve their career situation. However, for many of those interviewed the engagement with formal education again later in life was an opportunity not to be missed. Access courses are provided in FECs and are likely to remain an alternative route to higher education. In this paper the voices of working class students who had had little or no formal education qualifications were explored through their experience of their transitions to and engagement with higher education. Their projects (return to learning to gain qualifications) and their understandings of constraints that impinge on such projects remind us of the different journeys that occur through higher education.

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