**Women learners: second chance, second choice or empowered agents?**

**Introduction**

This paper draws on empirical evidence obtained from a pilot study within the UK Further Education sector (FE) with adult women learners on vocational courses. The purpose of the study was to investigate what ‘values and aspirations’ women learners in this context articulate as important to them and how this relates to their lives. This study was being conducted against a backdrop of sharp funding and course cuts in this sector, which have significantly reduced learning opportunities for adult learners. The narratives emphasised the complex inequalities that women learners face and the importance of education not just for financial security but also for well-being.

‘Second chance’ has been a pervasive discourse within the further and adult learning sector in the UK and one which learners in the study identified with initially. The life history narratives are used to problematize the concept of ‘second chances’ and related to this point how educational ‘choice’ is experienced in intersectional ways. Encouragingly, the reflexive nature of the interviews facilitated learners to critically evaluate their previous positioning of themselves as passive recipients of education, ‘lucky’ to be given a second chance. Rather, many learners describe shifts in their thinking about themselves as lacking or failing to more positive narratives of empowerment, agency and hope.

**Review of the Literature**

The dominant discourses of improving ‘global competitiveness’ by investing in ‘human capital’ (the right skills) have been evident in education policy ( (OECD, 1996). In the UK, targets to improve adults’ highest level of qualification have been successful and participation rates of adult learners reached a peak of 6 million by 2004 (Skills Funding Agency, 2012). More recently though, year on year cuts to FE budgets and the introduction of loans for adults has seen participation rates decrease from some 3.5 to 2.3 million between 2009 and 2015 (AoC, 2015; SFA, 2016). The rationale used for the funding reductions has been based on poor return on investment (Blanden, Buscha, Sturgis, & Urwin, 2012); the global economic recession and ‘low quality courses’ (Wolf, 2011). These cuts have adversely affected numbers of learners on lower level courses, which have declined by 22% in the last year. These cuts have disproportionately affected adult women learners, who consistently represent the majority of all adult learners in the UK FE sector (some 58% in 2015 and 61% in 2005 were women) (SFA, 2016). The FE sector, offers adult learners an opportunity for a so called second chance to gain educational opportunity they missed out on, to retrain for a new career or to help them re-engage in the workforce after being out of paid work. Recent cuts in FE are responsible for limiting important opportunities for women to overcome vulnerabilities associated with having had long career (employment) breaks, few qualifications or both; in the process their plight has become hidden.

The multiple social and economic benefits of lifelong education and training have been well documented. Research with mature women learners at university has emphasised the challenges of being working class (Reay et al, 2010; Skeggs, 1997); negotiating conflicting demands (Merrill, 1999) and child care (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Yet in the FE sector, the experiences of ‘mature learners’ on ‘Access to HE’ courses are more visible than those who choose vocational provision. This reflects the policy rhetoric of encouraging non-traditional learners to participate in HE through ‘Access’ routes. Studies of adult learners on ‘Access programmes’ have focused on learner identities (Brine and Waller, 2004; Waller, 2010); collaboration and personal agency (Busher et al, 2014) and the structural constraints of women learners (Reay et al, 2002).

More generally in the adult and FE sectors, the complex nature of adult learners’ educational trajectories and their ‘learning identities’ have been the emphasised in a study by Crossan et al (2003). They describe how ‘learning careers’ for adults are not necessarily linear and learners sometimes take a step back to move forwards. All of these findings are potentially useful for policy makers; however, much less is known about the specific experiences of women learners on vocational courses in the FE or VET sectors.

Recent empirical research paying special attention to women learners in the VET/FE sector: Wright (2013), Parr (2000) in the UK context; Powell (2014) in South Africa and Daniels (2010) in Australia. These studies have made ‘visible’ the ‘softer’ benefits experienced by learners, such as improved self-esteem, confidence and well-being in addition to gaining qualifications. In the differing contexts Parr (1996; 2000) and Daniels (2010) draw on empirical data to advance a critique that dominant patriarchy is responsible for many of the structural barriers for women learners. Parr’s feminist perspective focuses on the traumatic experiences of white women learners (university and FE), arguing that they are oppressed by dominant patriarchy and experience trauma that impacts on their educational biographies. Whereas Daniels (2010)is insistent that learning environments are inherently dominated by masculine principles that women learners must make their home lives invisible in order to be successful. More empowered accounts have been explored in recent research, these suggest that although women learners face structural constraints that they have agency too. Wright (2013) draws on Sen’s capability approach to explain how women learners on child care courses use their agency to negotiate structural barriers and in so doing successfully integrate their work and home lives. In the South African VET context, Powell (2014) is persuasive in her argument for using the capabilities approach as it not only takes account of the structural constraints affecting learners but recognises that learners are ‘agential’ also.

Research exists about the women learners on university courses, much less is known about those in the FE sector especially those on VET courses and where it does exist there is a bias towards white women. There is a need to understand why learners return to so-called ‘second chance’ education choose vocational courses, how this relates to their adult lives and the potential impact of policy for adult learners. This is not only relevant in the current UK policy context but contributes to a broader debate about VET, inequality and its ‘value’ for adult learners. By *giving* voice to women learners who participate in vocational courses, the aim of this study was to make visible what they stand to gain from vocational courses.

**Methodology**

The aims of the pilot study with adult women learners in the FE sector were two-fold, firstly to ascertain their ‘values’ and ‘aspirations’; secondly, to identify the ‘barriers’ they must navigate. The literature review highlighted the limited voice that is afforded to adult women learners, particularly those on lower level courses in the FE sector. Furthermore, research in the UK context has focused on white (working class women) learners; there is a need for research in the field to reflect the diversity of women learners in the sector.

The study involved in-depth life history interviews with nine learners on a variety of vocational courses (foundation to advanced level) at three FE colleges in the UK. The sample of learners represented diverse ethnic origins who were aged 25-50. Biographical methods were used to gain a sense of how learners’ lives had impacted on their educational trajectory and why they had returned to education at this point. These methods have been widely used in feminist research; particularly those related to adult women learners (Waller, 2010; Wright, 2013). The aim of the interview style adopted for the pilot was to place women’s ‘voices’ at the forefront allowing respondents to talk freely and reflexively. I opted to follow the advice of feminist researchers Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007) focusing on the framing of questions as open themes or topics which gave the respondents greater agency to discuss what was important to them. Reciprocal discussion helped to put the respondents at their ease and minimise potential researcher – respondent power imbalances (Reinhartz, 1992). In order to facilitate historical recall and as a ‘temporal artefact’ life grids were co-constructed during the interview to document memories (story) that were important to learners about their education, family, finance, housing, health, hobbies and relationships. The life grids used were adapted from those recently used in educational research (Abbas, Ashwin & McLean, 2013); which have origins in health studies (Parry et al, 1999); therapeutic counselling (Bell, 2005) and social work (Wilson et al, 2007). The co-construction of the ‘life grid’ assisted in the participants’ deep reflection, whereby they made connections about their lives during the interview as an active process of story creation (Riccoeur, 1992) and ‘narrative’ learning (Goodson & Sikes, 2006). Clearly with biographical approaches ethical issues are paramount and an on-going concern, it was necessary to constantly reflect about the impact that recalling life stories may have on participants to minimise potential distress.

**Learning as a second chance**

The term ‘second chance’ education conjures up images of an opportunity to make a fresh start or turn over a new leaf, perhaps achieve a better life. Re-imagining one’s life in these terms has connotations of hopefulness, aspiration and achievement. In contrast for some it may represent needing to start again because of their previous negative educational experiences. The discourse of ‘second chance’ features strongly in policies for lifelong learners, in the UK, OECD and EU. Similarly it can be found in policy initiatives targeted at underemployed youths who are ‘not in education, employment and training’ (known as NEETs). The UK Further Education sector has been described as an enabling environment where learners (of any age) can have a second chance to realise their educational potential. It has acquired this reputation because of its broad curriculum offer that includes vocational as well as academic qualifications (from secondary certificate to advanced levels) that may not have been achieved earlier. Courses that attracted adult learners were timetabled to promote engagement. Using the language of the capabilities approach, further education and VET gives learners the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Powell, 2012; 2014) particularly for those who could not imagine re-engaging with education. Evidence to support the internalisation of the ‘second chance’ discourse emerged from the data; whereby women learners reflected on the opportunities that they had been given to re-engage with education. Describing how they reached a turning point in their lives and that FE and VET gave them an opportunity to invest in their future.

Kirsty, a woman in her early thirties explains how losing her long-term employment was difficult and how this had affected her confidence, but describes how being given another ‘chance’ to do something different had helped

*“I was* ***lucky*** *to get in here. I came here thinking I would hope for the best, now I think I can do it” Kirsty.*

Kathleen, who grew up in a traveller family explains that education and going to school was not a priority for her family when she was younger. Even though she had tried to complete the same vocational course at 16, she describes how she couldn’t settle and was unaccustomed to being in one place and following institutional rules. But becoming a mother had motivated her to try again:

*“I come from a traveller community, moving around all of the time meant I had got nothing, I had got no certificates. This course gives me* ***the chance to become*** *independent for me and my little girl”. (Kathleen)*

Whereas Safina (aged 47), may be described as having taken multiple chances to become independent from her family and escape violent relationships. Constraints in her personal life had made it difficult for her to convert the skills she had acquired (on various VET courses) into employment and independence.

*“I consider* ***myself richer*** *as a result of having been given this* ***chance****, making the right choices with the support and help from the college” (Safina)*

However, as the narratives unfolded there was a dissonance between their current views as being lucky to gain a ‘second chance’ and their recollection of the past, which suggested a lack of ‘first chance’. The learner narratives act as a reminder that conceptualising a ‘second chance’ education is problematic and not straightforward. Rather, for many learners their ‘second chance’ represented a third, fourth or many more so-called chances in education. The educational and life histories shared by the women learners demand that the discourse of ‘second chance’ education is critically considered. Firstly though, it is important to define what is meant by the term ‘first chances’ in education; for the purposes of this paper it is education trajectories from school, to college and university at typical ages (this would be from aged 5 to around 21 years of age in the UK). Theorising what a successful first chance might be is also difficult, but it seems reasonable to suggest that it is the achievement of full potential during childhood and early adulthood.

Much theoretical research has concluded that there is a link between inequalities and educational outcomes. Policies have sought to minimise the effects of educational inequalities during school years; however, they cannot always mediate the effects of traumatic life events on learners. Learners reflected on how key events such as divorce, separation, death of a parent, mental health issues, job insecurity and abuse had been significant events affecting their learning. Critical life events such as these not only impacted learners at the time of the event, but they continued to have a rippling impact for many years to come. The difficulties learners experienced in their first chance education are multidimensional and complex. Debbie and Safina suffered long term bullying at secondary school, which made them unhappy and this was compounded by their responsibilities within the home.

*“I did really well in primary school, until my mum and dad separated. I moved back from America and started a new school where I was bullied a lot. My dad was really depressed so I had to do everything and that affected my grades I think”. (Debbie)*

*“I was from a big family, when my grandma got ill in India my mum left me to look after everybody at home when I was 12 it was hard. I hated school I got teased because I wore glasses. I came out with very little” (Safina)*

Similarly for Kathleen not only was her education limited by being on the road, but losing her mother and being placed in foster care made returning to school in her early teens difficult.

*“I didn’t really go to school we were on the road (travelling) a lot, then when my mum died at 42 me and my sister went into care. I tried to come to college whilst I was at school but I just wasn’t used to being in the same place”. (Kathleen)*

Interestingly in order for learners to receive public funding for a ‘second chance’ in FE and VET they must undertake qualifications at a higher level. All of the learners interviewed stated how important it had been to ‘retake’ previous levels whilst they gained confidence. Those who were most vulnerable were learners with a second language, in long-term unemployment, single parents or those with previously low attainment. Funding cuts has resulted in diminished options for adult learners to take lower level courses whilst they re-adjust to being back in education. Being able to access lower level courses can be used to develop vocational skills whilst developing other skills or gaining confidence. Fazia used the level 1 to help her to improve her English skills.

*“I started this course on level 1 [elementary] after I done my ESOL course. I still needed to get better at English before I could become a good hairdresser. It’s been hard but I am getting there – I want to do Level 3 [advanced] level next” (Fazia)*

Similarly, Debbie enrolled on a lower level qualification in order to gain study skills and confidence as a learner.

*“Even though I had Advanced level qualifications, I knew I had to get high grades to get on the uni course and that is why I did intermediate level again. I am under no illusion that I am superwoman I am not!” (Debbie)*

Opportunities for adult learners to gradually re-enter education via lower level programmes is reducing, although it is impossible to say for certainty, it is probable that this may act as a barrier for those who need to grow in confidence before re-engaging. Furthermore, if adult learners are to get a genuinely realisable ‘second chance’, policy needs to respond to this by allowing adult learners to develop gradually by providing opportunities at all levels not just higher-level provision.

**Second choice?**

The life grids were used to gather data that learners considered critical to shaping their educational trajectory and ‘why they found themselves on the course at this point’. What became clear from the data was the extent to which the ‘first chance’ could be considered a realistic and achievable one based on the complex inequalities that these women learners had faced in their youth. Learners understood their upbringings in ‘gendered’ ways, where domestic pressures and caring responsibilities shaped their identity and education, for some this meant missing vital educational chances in order to support the family. Trajectories were shaped not only by what their parent’s expectations of them were, but also by their own understandings of what it is possible for young women *like them* to achieve. These findings resonate with those of the Skeggs’ study (2000) on how white working class women returning to education position themselves and what they ‘should do’. This was the case for Debbie who (Goodson, 2006)described her family as ‘very working class’ and the first to go to university:

*“I started a degree when I was 18, it wasn’t the right course for me but my mum and sister kept telling me you cannot do it. I was wavering and I should have stuck it out or changed course. I started to believe I could not do it, so after a term I gave up, came home and worked in a shop like they expected me to”. (Debbie)*

In addition to ‘classed’ identities, many women learners stressed the part that race, culture, ethnicity and age had played in their educational trajectories. Parental expectations were often lower than the aspirations the learners had for themselves. This example presented by Fazia was echoed by a number of other learners who felt powerless to escape what was expected of them and that they must keep the status quo.

 *“I was doing well at school in Pakistan, I wanted to be a doctor. But then my parents want me to get engaged and married at 16. Then I moved to England and hard work started in the home. I am sad about that but I had no choice”. (Fazia)*

In contrast Hatty had lower aspirations than her middle class professional parents had for her, resulting in her going to university before dropping out to follow her dream:

*“I always wanted to be a hairdresser, but my parents were professionals and wanted me to do something with my life. So I reluctantly went to university, I hated it so I left. They were disappointed about me doing this course, but they are coming around to the idea now they see how much I love it”. (Hatty)*

These narratives and others emphasise the complex ways that learners mediate their first choices to fit in with what is expected of them. In the majority of cases this meant sacrificing their first choice for something that the learners considered a lower opportunity, this contributed to a sense of regret and having missed out. Learners reflected on how this regret had been a factor in motivating them to re-engaging with education so that they could realise their unfulfilled potential.

**Women as Empowered Agents**

Thus far I have advanced a critique of ‘second chance’ discourse, suggesting that ‘first chances’ may have been lacking and ‘first choices’ may have been restricted. The narratives describe how they had failed to grasp their ‘first chance’ at school and that they were fortunate to have this ‘second chance’; this presents learners as though they are victims or lacking in agency. Although learners initially narrated their lives in this way, as they reflected on their life experiences they emphasised how they have become more agential. Women learners expressed how they used their agency to engage in education so that they could transform their lives. These decisions are complex mediating their everyday lives with aspirations for a better future. Sacrifices are made to re-engage in education, such as having to reduce work hours, leave their jobs and spend less time with their children so that they could participate. A strong theme emerging from mothers the importance of being a good role model for their children.

 *“My girls started to become conscious of where I worked [in retail] I did not want them to be embarrassed. I wanted them to be proud of me. I want to give them a better life. Be a better role model “ (Debbie)*

 *“I gave up work in a dead-end job so that I could get a new career and escape my*

*violent ex partner is still hanging around. I want a better life for my daughter”. (Emma)*

Women who were depressed, trapped in unhealthy relationships or socially isolated used their agency to immerse themselves in education. This was a strong theme within the interviews and one that was shared with great pride. The decision often involved resistance against normative expectations, Fazia talks of how she studied language even though it resulted in ‘a hard life’ with her family.

 *“I was trapped, there was no way I could even talk to people where I lived so I got my language skills and once I have got my qualification I am going to get experience and work for myself”*

Similarly Jane uses her educational opportunity to escape her unhappy life and progress onto further courses

 *“I started here on introductory courses, I was depressed and in a violent relationship. Learning and being on this course gave me the confidence to get out of that”. (Jane)*

Reflecting on their experiences in FE and VET, learners talk of how they have improved and become stronger as a result. They speak positively of how improved mental health and what they have gained from their course has given them a more positive view of the future.

*“I am a different person to what I was then – I was suicidal and now I have a future I know what I can be”. (Safina)*

*“My head wasn’t working properly when I started here, I was all over the place and now I am a different person. More confident. I hold my head up. I talk more. I have got so much to look forward to”. (Becky).*

Although these narratives relate specifically to the UK VET context, they echo adult learner accounts of well-being improvement, empowerment and being role models for their children in Australian (Daniels, 2010) and South African contexts (Powell, 2014). Women learners become more empowered and confident than they originally anticipated, realising that they have more control over their lives than when they started. Foregrounding the potential for learners to achieve greater agency and become empowered is not to deny the existence of the everyday difficulties they experience. Rather, the barriers women learners experience forms part of their identity and many of the learners described how this had made them stronger. Learners had re-evaluated their first chances in education as though they were inevitable and to some extent out of their control. Questioning the taken for granted education assumptions they had *inherited* making them determined to be successful in their education so that they would “not be like them”. This resulted in the majority of respondents casting themselves as having *being the saviour of their own lives* as *heroines* of their own story and in the process taken more in control of their lives.

**Conclusions**

The life histories demand that the discourse of ‘second chance’ be critically evaluated. Although learners initially associated with the discourse describing themselves as ‘second chance’ learners, once they constructed their story they begin to question whether their first chance was a realistic or achievable one. Related to this, learners reflected on the extent to which they felt able to progress from their ‘first chance’ education onto their ‘first choice’ of career or course. There were many examples of learners who sacrificed their ‘first choice’ of career or educational trajectory because of their parents’ expectations. The expectations were not simply ‘gendered’, rather they were more complex than this and were intersected with race, ethnicity and class. Learner choice as adults was often their ‘second choice’, based on what they felt most likely to achieve or for a career that was most likely to fit in with other responsibilities. Whilst women learners have significant structural barriers to negotiate in order to participate, learners use their agency to overcome complex barriers and inequalities in order to succeed their chosen path. For women with vulnerabilities, the discourse of ‘second chance’ is not necessarily a prime concern; rather what is important is that they have educational opportunities to change in their lives for the better.

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