

Further education in England

Transforming lives and communities



Women's stories of empowerment and empowering
Vicky Duckworth and Rob Smith

Foreword



International Women's Day provides the opportunity to reinforce the importance of women's access to further education and its impact on their well-being, their families, the local and wider community.

The UCU Transforming Lives and Communities research project offers an illuminating and powerful lens to expose and share the experiences of female further education learners and teachers across Britain. It provides a critical platform for the rich narratives to stimulate dialogue on the barriers women face in the private and public domains of their lives which shape their learning journey. The voices also expose and offer transformative pedagogical approaches for empowering women.

Vitaly, the research reveals further education as a powerful driver of empowerment for women in its emancipatory form. It is a catalyst for agency and transformation. It is pivotal in challenging inequality in often marginalised and silenced communities and working towards social justice.

Sally Hunt
UCU general secretary

INTRODUCTION

Access to basic education is a fundamental human right. Ensuring this right is a reality for girls and women needs a commitment at a local, national and International level.

The challenge for educators, policy makers and all stakeholders is how to ensure this is addressed. The aim of this International Women's Day report is to provide a lens on gender, learning and empowerment.

BACKGROUND

This research aims to understand and provide evidence of how the further education (FE) sector is vital in transforming lives and communities in 21st century Britain.

The study provided learners, teachers, parents and employers with the opportunity to tell their stories, linking the distinctness of FE to the impact it has on individuals, society and the economy, and strongly drawing out the role of the teacher in making a difference to quality teaching and learning. The research data provided a rich source of evidence for the empowering and inclusive work undertaken in FE for sector representatives and policy makers to draw upon.

This report presents some of the findings in relation to women's stories of empowerment from the research project.

CONTEXT

- The project makes use of a digital platform that enhances its democratic and dialogical approach to knowledge production.¹ A key aspect of this is the use of video recorded interviews which are edited and posted on a Youtube channel.² These are then linked to the project website.
- The project website features perspectives from learners, teachers, FE leaders, employers and learners' families, including parents and community members.
- Participants' ages span from 15 years upwards. They are consulted throughout, before their narratives are placed in the public domain. Their views about final videos are sought and the videos re-edited in response to their viewing and recommendations.
- The focus is on learners' stories of transformation through access to and participation on FE courses, their prior educational and social experience (including their socio-economic background) and



CLAIRE

*Further education
has put me on
the right path.
(Claire, learner)*



ABI

My life had come crashing down. I heard about this course.

Further education changed my life.

(Abi, former FE student, now HE student)

teachers' accounts of their role in scaffolding transformational opportunities and its intergenerational, community impact and wider impact.

- There is also a strand that connects to funding; this is an aspect that impacts on the ability of FE providers to create the social and pedagogical conditions in which transformation can occur.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The project aims to provide answers to the following questions:

- How does FE provide routes to higher education for learners who would not otherwise access higher education (HE)?
- How does FE offer learners the chance to engage in education at multiple stages of their life course, recognising that their relationships to employment/education are not always predictable and linear?
- Which approaches and strategies are utilised to successfully support the integration of recent arrivals to the UK through provision of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)?
- In what ways does FE provide vocational education at all levels on a holistic personalised basis that are successful in providing learners with the confidence, knowledge and skills to progress in the public and private trajectories of their life?
- What is important and particular about the learning experiences offered by specialist FE provision eg land-based, arts, SLD/ SEN provision, and provision for excluded 14-16 year olds who want to follow vocational courses in colleges in preference for school?
- How can the efficacy and appropriateness of the current funding and accountability regime be improved in order to develop a model that supports transformative further education?

RESEARCH APPROACH

This is primarily a qualitative study to capture the rich narratives of the learners and teachers. The diversity of further education necessitates an exploration of the views of the teachers and learners underpinned by a broad analysis of sectoral policy.

Our study will consist of:

- Further education colleges across England being identified and invited to participate in exploring the key research questions.
- A descriptive analysis of teachers focusing on their views of what makes an 'excellent' teacher and how transformational learning is implemented in the classroom.
- Qualitative interviews with current and previous learners from FE courses. The aim of the interviews was to explore the experiences of present and previous learners in relation to studying and being successful in FE and their progression routes from a range of starting points into HE, training and employment, with a particular focus on identifying the enabling and challenging factors for learners.
- In total 50+ interviews have been conducted so far: 10 interviews were conducted with current learners; 10 were with former learners; 19 with teachers and managers. The interviewees came from 11 FE providers. The interviewees came from 12 discipline areas. The interviewees shared a range of experiences of the power of further education to offer transformational learning and teaching that impacted on the learners, their families and the community.
- We have collected rich in-depth case study evidence on impact including the 'ripple effect' of FE work - that extends beyond the classroom door - into families and local communities.
- We have undertaken focus groups with current teachers and learners about the impact of 'excellent' teaching.
- We are also carrying out a series of in-depth interviews and gathering reflective written responses from local and national FE professionals and funding experts as a field lens to ascertain views on the current funding policy and its implications for the provision, resources and learners' experiences. We aim to provide a detailed analysis of how we came to where we are and point to a way forward that, most importantly, will support and reward transformative education and ensure it continues.
- We invited teachers and managers to provide details of how they work to provide transformational opportunities for learners and the community they serve, and to promote progression routes. We received many powerful examples.



NYOMI

My life has been transformed for the better.

I no longer have to take medication for depression. I have a future now.
(Nyomi, learner)



LUCINDA

The biggest impact is when someone is able to read something to you that they couldn't have dreamt of doing even weeks before.

*A college saying 'Yes' when everyone else has said 'No' - that's a big thing.
(Lucinda, offender learning tutor)*

- We have participated in events with sector-wide bodies, education providers and colleagues to consider how the findings from the study can be drawn upon and used to inform national and institutional policy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Listening to women's stories

The study allowed us to explore the link between gender and learning. For example, we focused a lens on gendered divisions of capitals in the learners' lives and how these shaped their learning journeys. It also opened up a space to shine a light on the resistance and transformation in the women's lives. The analysis revealed that, for example, a number of the women had conformed to patriarchal gender norms across childhood and adulthood. The notions of what it means to be female and male were entrenched in the women's trajectories. As adults, the females took the caring roles which they had established in childhood. The mothers did not challenge this symbolic violence, even though the role of mother and carer constrained them and their freedom. However, these mothers were aware of the fulfilment and enrichment that being a mother brought to their lives, which outweighed the constraints.

The findings from the research also revealed how gendered capitals can be transformed into powerful capitals outside the private domain of the women's families. The learners had an awareness of expectations for them to go into unskilled and un-stimulating jobs. However, rather than being passive to this route, they resisted this pathway by pulling on gendered capitals of 'caring' and linking this with confidence and qualifications that they had gained at college progressed to careers, for example, health care professions, which offered them choice and agency.

Further findings thus far

- The lives of a diverse group of learners as they undertook educational programmes offer a key insight into the strong link between people's lives and their engagement in learning and impact on their families and communities.
- It recognises how a number of women bring with them significant barriers, including negative prior experiences of education and

experiences of symbolic and physical violence. Further education addresses this aspect to achieve transformative results.

- **Labelling** In the study, labelling was a key theme. For example, Marie, Katie and Anita all experienced labelling at school. For some students this stemmed from undiagnosed dyslexia but in others, it related to other aspects of perceived identity - such as originating from an estate with a particular reputation. One learner commented: 'people like us, from our housing estate, were looked down on'.
- **Underachievement** This labelling led to a lack of aspirations, under-achievement, self-doubt and anger. The women we encountered in our research often felt pathologised by their experience of secondary education. Goffman's (1963) work on stigma facilitates the exploration of the relationship between the learners' interactions, individual attributes and labelling.³ Stigma is socially situated and may occur when an individual is identified as deviant and linked with negative stereotypes, such as being labelled 'thick' and/or 'poor'. This can engender prejudiced attitudes, which can lead to discriminatory behaviour towards the person. In turn, this can impact on the person experiencing low self-esteem. The stigma process is dependent on the social, economic, and political power necessary to impose discriminatory experiences on the labelled individual or group. Advantaged groups can stigmatise less advantaged groups.

The women's voices illuminated how negative labels were subverted by them and re-worked to gain respectability. For example, the negative label of being 'thick' was challenged when the women experienced success and confidence in learning.

- **Reclaiming identities** FE enabled the women to reclaim their spoilt educational identities, to reconstruct them, to reposition themselves within their personal relationships and to re-enter their families and communities as active and resourceful individuals with hope and renewed status.
- **Empowerment** A number of women shared the courses as pathways to overcoming problematic and painful domestic issues, for example, abusive relationships, alcohol dependency and mental health issues. The impact of violence and its impact on learning is an under researched yet important area. Duckworth



ANITA

It opens up a whole new world. It opens up a whole new you. I'm excited about the future

(Anita, former FE learner)



JACQUI

I was the first one to go to university. Then there was a trickle effect throughout our family.

All of my cousins went after that.
Jacqui (student/teacher)

and Ade-Ojo (2016) exposing how learners' narratives of violence can expose the contradiction, complexities and ambivalences women experience in their daily lives and how they try to make sense of them from their structural positioning as FE learners in a society based on inequality of opportunity and choice.⁴

Indeed, the analyses of the learners' past experiences is crucial in explaining the interconnectedness of violence and trauma and how it impacts on the women in the private and public domains they inhabit and travel through.

College and the female friendship were a means of overcoming patriarchy. The nature of patriarchy determines access to the role in, and use of networks. Addressing the gender relations and inequalities is necessary for making useful statements about the link between social networks and vulnerability.

- Further education is also beneficial in the positive effect it can have on mental health and well-being.⁵ For several of the participants, further education offered a lifeline that helped in their recovery from a mental health issue. Transformative education is drawn from and situated within individual and communal resources. The positive impact of the transformation extended to their family circumstances.
- The women's narratives, transitions and trajectories are those of reflexive individuals. The politics of education and its link to learner identity and empowerment are explored from the standpoint of how the women's everyday lives have been shaped by the lack of and development of education. Their subjectivity and agency were vital contributory factors in their growth and success. This is not to downplay the importance of structural factors - rather it is to recognise that both structure and agency are important in shaping the role of further education across life course transitions.⁶
- Low levels of educational achievement lock individuals into a cycle of poverty and dramatically lower employment prospects.⁷ Engagement in further education ruptures this cycle.
- Further education provision, for example ESOL, provides an opportunity for the integration of marginalised and often silenced communities.
- FE offers a stream of social capital which enriches women's lives, enabling the formation of supportive bonds with other learners.

- Further education brings about transformation in the selfhood and social identities of learners with few or no qualifications, reintegrating them as active survivors with renewed hope and determination in our country's rapidly changing economy.
- Further education is a powerful vehicle to drive forward social justice.
- The sharing of the women's stories of resistance and empowerment provides role models and a tool for consciousness raising for other learners in the local, national and international domain. This engages learners and communities in mutual learning and development of knowledge which offers the potential for raising hope and working towards social justice.



KIM

When Adam went into college, I was worried for him. But he called me to tell me how well it was going.

He's done really well. He has grown up. Now he's looking at things he can aim for.

(Kim, pictured with son, Adam)

Teachers

- **Challenges** Realising the transformative potential of further education remains a challenge for teachers - due to funding-constrained environments and the prevalence of managerialist and performative cultures.
- **Transformative education** However, the narratives revealed how teachers actively strove to offer transformative educational experiences despite a challenging context.
- **Relationships** The teachers and their relationships with students were pivotal to transformation. At the core of their practice was a strong ethic around providing pastoral care, accepting students for who they were and believing in them. Some students had never experienced this before and consequently, bloomed.

Employers

Our research revealed:

- recognition that workforce skills development for existing staff pays dividends
- employer investment viewed as repaid by 'ripple effect' within companies
- hands-on involvement in course design with colleges both possible and necessary to ensure responsive curriculum: to increase support for developing IT skills, for example



RIMA

*It was a long journey,
but I've made it.*
(Rima, ESOL then
Access student,
now HE student)

- college staff recognised as having current industry-standard knowledge and skills
- investing in workforce training an important aspect of company resilience.

Experiences of learners on further education programmes

Challenges and perceived barriers to entry

- academic concerns
- experiences of labelling
- low self-esteem
- undiagnosed educational needs
- financial concerns
- practical barriers
- symbolic and physical violence.

Making the decision

- catalyst points eg depression, break up of relationships
- family and friends
- planning ahead
- staying local or feeling secure
- choosing a course
- wanting a new job
- wanting to be a role model for children.

Interviewees' views of what constitutes a great learning experience

- a trusting relationship with the teacher and peer
- tapping into their desire, commitment and passion
- providing opportunities to explore routes into HE; education and training
- experiencing diverse educational environments
- experiencing responsibility and high expectations
- overcoming doubt and taking on challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender, further education and social equality

Women's empowerment needs to be regarded as fluid and taking different forms in the different contexts women inhabit. Education and empowerment is thus positioned as contextual and relational and has particular significance for gender equality and education.

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CHAIMA

Further education
opened my world,
taught me about other
cultures and united
us in learning
(Chaima)

NOTES

¹<http://transforminglives.web.ucu.org.uk/about-this-project/>

²<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkDeirtGCmeBs361BgibXnA>

³Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall

⁴Duckworth, V. and Ade-Ojo, G. 2016. *Journey Through Transformation. A Case Study of Two Literacy Learners*. *Journal of Transformative Education*. 14 (4)

⁵<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/learning-for-life.pdf>

⁶Duckworth, V (2013) *Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners*. Routledge, London

⁷Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2005), *Measuring Basic Skills for Longitudinal Study: The design and development of instruments for use with cohort members in the age 34 follow-up in the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*. London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy

⁸DfE. 2016. *Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England, 2014 to 2015. Statistical First Report 01/2016*



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