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# **Narrating their liminal journeys: the stories of women 'returning' to education**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

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To adopt a woman's perspective means to see things one did not see before and also to see the familiar rather differently.

Joyce McCarl Nielsen

## Abstract

This thesis examines the learning experiences of fourteen mature women entrants who successfully completed a Higher National Diploma or degree in a Further Education College in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. The women were all from non-traditional backgrounds in that they had left school with few or no qualifications and had returned to education later in life. They all had other competing demands on their time such as families, partners and employment and they were the first generation of their family to gain a Higher Education (HE) qualification. The focus of the study is on the one hand to give a voice to the women and to let them talk and interpret their experience of early education and then of college. On the other hand it focuses on what we, as adult educators, can learn from the successful journeys of non-traditional women entrants and how this can inform our professional practice.

The students were interviewed using semi structured interviews in order to ascertain how they accessed education as adults, the difficulties they encountered and the coping strategies that helped them successfully complete their studies. Liminality was used as a heuristic tool to examine the women's educational journeys. Concepts of identity, transformative learning and resilience were explored through their personal narratives.

It appears from the findings that gender still adversely affects choice. For women this means less choice of what to do and when to do it. Whilst the women attempt to shape their own biographies anew through education, this is done against a background where their domestic responsibilities still take precedence. Despite this, the supportive and trusting relationship with lecturers contributed to the efficacy of the learning experience, as did the incremental route from FE into HE. For some women the presence of a supportive partner or a significant other appears to have played a part in their success.

In terms of professional practice, an understanding of the women's journeys is essential if we are to put systems in place to effectively support them and to help them stay. Consideration of this may also help in navigating the tenuous

and unsettling journeys which the women take in actually getting to college in the first place. Finally, as adult educators, we should be aware and engage more actively with the political process. Awareness of the link between funding and policy is crucial if we are to develop, not only Scotland's young workforce, but marginalised learners who may not fit in with the current policy priority.

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ann Murray', is written over a horizontal line.

Printed Name: Ann Murray

# CHAPTER ONE

## Rationale

### 1.1 Introduction

My interest in the issues recorded in this dissertation began in the late 1990s when I started work as a lecturer in one of the Further Education (FE) colleges which comprise the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The study has its roots in the realisation that many of the women who had come to college after a significant gap in formal learning and who had few or no qualifications were successful<sup>1</sup> in 'second chance' education. The women also appeared to be responding to ways of thinking and learning which I, as their lecturer, could only describe as critical and reflective. I began to question what had happened with their 'first chance' at education and why their stories were different the second time round. What, firstly motivated them to study at a time in their life when they had many other factors to deal with and secondly, what made them more resilient this time round?

English (2013) believes that thinking critically involves an understanding of the 'other' and an ability to think critically for oneself without being subjected to the authority of others. I wondered if their maturity and lived experience had contributed to a heightened awareness of the 'other' and given them this criticality and the confidence to embrace learning the second time round. In considering this I was reminded of Brook's (2006) discussion on how much of women's skills remains hidden and how they cultivate particular knowledge and skills through their nurturing role. My research questions (Section 1.4) are built around those early ruminations. My investigation is therefore based on an understanding of education for women as one which recognises the balance between their learning and their lived experience, analyses the barriers that exist and examines the support mechanisms that helped these women successfully complete their courses and embrace learning as adults.

The women were all from what is often termed non-traditional backgrounds as far as higher education (HE) is concerned in that they were all over 30 years of

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<sup>1</sup> Success is defined as successful completion of an HND or a degree.

age, female and from less advantaged backgrounds. Some were studying part-time, whilst others were studying full-time and they all had other competing demands on their time such as families, partners and employment. In most cases their route to Higher Education (HE) involved taking an access course prior to embarking on their HE course. All participants did all or part of their study online and in all cases they were the first generation of their family to gain an HE qualification. Their backgrounds were mainly, but not exclusively, characterised by poor experiences of school, low achievement and low parental expectation.

## 1.2 Locating the Study



Figure 1 - Map of the Outer Hebrides

Source:  
<https://petronatwo.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/hebrides-map.jpg>

This study is located in the Outer Hebrides<sup>2</sup>, a remote archipelago, off the North West coast of Scotland. The total population of the Outer Hebrides is approximately 27,400 (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2015). The island chain is 130 miles long, 30 miles from the west coast of the Scottish mainland with a total land area of 289,000 hectares and is one of the most sparsely populated in Europe (Third Sector Hebrides, 2004/5). The college which the women attended is situated in the administrative centre of Stornoway which has a population of approximately 10,000. The college serves the

islands of Lewis and Harris, with some students coming from the small islands in the south.

Traditionally there has been a strong religious culture in the islands (Thompson, 2005). The islands of Lewis in the north and Harris and North Uist in the south are predominantly Protestant Christian. In South Uist and Barra the communities are predominantly Roman Catholic. There are fifteen church services most Sundays in the town of Stornoway alone and usually a Gaelic and English service in each of the villages on the island. There is also a weekly

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<sup>2</sup> Also called the Western Isles and Eilean Siar in Gaelic.

prayer meeting which church members<sup>3</sup> normally attend. In Stornoway the majority of services are in English but two to three are in Gaelic. There is also one Roman Catholic service, one Mormon and one Pentecostal service each Sunday in Stornoway.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of the church on a child growing up in Lewis. I had been brought up to go to Sunday school every Sunday, unless I was ill, with my two sisters and my brother. We were instructed to walk to Sunday school in a sedate and respectful manner (something that did not always happen). The boys wore their best clothes and, even at a young age, often wore a tie. The girls also wore their best clothes and hats and gloves were *de rigueur*. Although I wore trousers as a child this was unacceptable for church or Sunday school. My parents were adherents rather than members of the church and as I grew older I joined them in church occasionally. I was also under the observation of my maternal grandparents who were both church members and who were loving but strict and to whom religious observance of the Sabbath, as it was known, was central to their lives. As a child I was acutely aware that Sunday was a day that was different. No-one cycled their bikes, played outside or hung out their washing and whilst inside we were expected to be quiet and read a book. Sometimes we were allowed to watch television but never if my grandparents were about. As a child I remember whistling one day and being told off in Gaelic by my granny: 'A whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men' was her response. The message was clear - whistling was unnatural and inappropriate for a girl.

Until relatively recently there were no shops open in Stornoway or the surrounding villages on Sunday. There is now one shop open until 4.00 pm in Stornoway which sells petrol and basic provisions. Most of the restaurants are now open on Sunday and flights and ferry sailings on Sunday are now a feature of modern life in Lewis. A visitor visiting the island, however, would still see a marked difference between a Lewis Sunday and a mainland Sunday, especially in the villages where little has changed.

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<sup>3</sup> Members are those who take communion in the church as opposed to adherents who attend but do not take communion.

In terms of the home life, most women with children did not work outside the home. In line with biblical teaching, men were considered to be the head of the household and women were generally quiet and deferential. At dinner or when anyone was visiting, the men were served first (by the women) and if a minister came to visit the best china came out and he would be welcomed with the finest of fare. I, along with my two sisters, was expected to clean up after every meal. My brother was never asked as boys in Lewis, at that time, were not expected to do what was considered 'women's work'.

This was therefore the background which I grew up in. A background in which the influence of the church was strong and where there was a clear positioning of women 'after men'. This was something I did not question until I was in my teens when I started to feel the injustice of a woman's role in a traditional Hebridean home. I have included this here to help contextualise the later discussions, especially the interviews with the women as they all grew up in the Outer Hebrides and experienced similar positioning through the culture and their gender to greater or lesser extents.

To contextualise the study I should outline something of the demographic of the Outer Hebrides: the average gross weekly wage for full-time residents in the Outer Hebrides in 2002 was £399, which is 6 per cent lower than the Scottish average. According to the CACI (Consolidated Analysis Centers Incorporated) 2003 Wealth of the Nation Report, average household income was £23,400, placing the Western Isles 3<sup>rd</sup> equal lowest out of 121 UK postcode areas (Third Sector Hebrides, 2004/5). The 2014 CACI Wealth of the Nation Report (Tate, 2014) indicates a slightly improved position with the Outer Hebrides still in the bottom 10 postcode areas but at number seven, indicating a rise of four places (*ibid*). The interesting aspect in this statistic from an educational perspective is that, despite this apparent poverty, the region has traditionally produced a higher number of graduates per capita than anywhere else in the UK (Herald 20/1/05). However, this figure is not broken down by gender and appears to apply to the traditional young student who obtains the requisite qualifications for entry to university and leaves the island to study. In 2010/11, 66 per cent of school leavers entered Further or Higher Education (Nicolson Institute Handbook, 2011). This is higher than the Scottish average of 60.6 per cent (Scottish

Government Statistics, Accessed 2015). In contrast, the women this study focussed on did not leave school with the qualifications required to enter university and their early educational experiences were, in the main, marked, largely, by poverty, deprivation and lack of interest. Despite this they were successful in gaining the qualification they set out to achieve, often surpassing their original aims and intentions.

I was aware throughout this study that complete objectivity was unattainable. I knew many of the students personally, some of whom I had tutored and I was personally and professionally interested in their success. It is also common to meet students socially. Distance was therefore not possible nor was it desired. Whilst recognising this, I was sincere in my quest to discover what factors helped the women succeed in their studies and in gaining an understanding of the varied and complex mechanisms underlying adult education for women and how they both contribute to and conspire against a successful outcome.

In my examination I plan to illustrate the temporal and transformative aspects of the student journey as the women manage the transition between their lives before becoming students, aspects of which they still hold on to, navigate their new identity as students and finally exit, leaving the status of studentship behind them. It is this idea of crossing a threshold from one state to another which has led me to consider liminality as a heuristic tool for framing their journeys.

Liminality was first used in social anthropology as a way of examining the rites of passage in the transition from childhood to adulthood in Arnold Van Gennep's (1909) seminal work 'Les rites de passage'. It was later developed by Victor Turner (1967) to represent the transition between 'two relatively fixed or stable conditions' (Turner, 1967, p.93) where the person is in a temporary state of ambiguity but is moving towards a stage where 'the passage is consummated' (p.94). In the liminal stage the person is 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967, p.96) having left the old life but not yet assimilated into the new life. In a similar way the student is in an 'interstructural' (Turner, 1967, p.93) situation when they are going through '...a process, a becoming and ...even a transformation' (*ibid*). This movement between two fixed conditions in which a



transformation occurs has stimulated my interest with regard to adult women's education and led me to examine Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative education. I wondered if inhabiting this liminal space in which they had knowledge of one fixed state whilst striving towards another where there was the possibility of a new future, allowed them to challenge the status quo and the space they had, until now inhabited. What appears to be clear is that there is no going back to the former state; just as the initiate cannot return to being an adolescent boy after his rites of passage, the student going through a transformative liminal cycle often involving disorientation and disequilibrium (Dewey, 1910) cannot return to an old perspective once a transformation has occurred.

Fox and Allan (2013) refer to the process of reflexivity on the doctoral student's journey as 'one of unbecoming and becoming' (p.1). They explain the unravellings that occur in unbecoming and the 'moments of re-forming' in becoming. This has clear resonance to my own personal educational journey on this EdD but has also encouraged me to view the liminal nature of the students' journeys and our different unravellings and re-forming as significant learning points. Arnold Van Gennep's (1909) framework will be adapted and used as a structural tool. Van Gennep used a three-part structure: separation, the liminal period and finally reassimilation as the initiate came back into society with a new identity as an adult. Van Gennep's separation differs from Turner's (1967) account of liminality in that the initiate does not separate entirely and radically from their original social position in the way Turner describes the initiation of adolescent boys into men. The rituals Turner observed involved mutilation and circumcision which were carried out by older men who were often masked. At the end of the ritual the child has metaphorically died and been reborn as a man after which they are reintroduced (reassimilated) with their parents and friends in their new status. However, whilst I am not trying to suggest that mutilation and circumcision should sit side-by-side with the liminal stage of studentship, it would be wrong to think that the students do not leave anything behind, nor that there is no pain involved: For transient periods, they leave their lives as mothers, wives, daughters and workers and take on the identity of 'student' which in itself often leads to uncertainty and fear where 'their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary identities' (Turner,

1967, p.7). They find themselves sharing classrooms and online study groups with women and men from all kinds of social backgrounds and with whom they might not otherwise have much contact. Once started there is clear progression in this ritual which involves passing through a cultural realm which has little similarity to what they had experienced before. The vocabulary is often different, the technology unfamiliar, essay writing skills have to be learned and the relationship with tutors and their peers is uncertain and ambiguous and often links back to previous negative experiences of education. They find themselves navigating uncharted waters in which unpredictability and uncertainty reign. They are neophytes with new and evolving identities where passiveness and humility often characterise their early journeys but from which confidence and awareness gradually emerge as they move from their 'current self' to their aspirational identity (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009).

One of the factors influencing the student journey is the social dimension: the environment which these women grew up in was generally not conducive to, or supportive of, study and aspirations for a university degree were often considered 'above them'. This focus on success in second chance education is unusual and has received little attention over the past 20 to 30 years. Lawrence (1984, p.201) reminds us of this gap in the research on women's education:

The literature on women and education has rightly concentrated on the issue of equality of opportunity, looking particularly at why women often do not succeed in education. Rather less work has been produced on the effects of education on the women who do succeed at it.

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) believe that we are missing an opportunity by concentrating on the negative aspects of education. They suggest that we should be examining what is right rather than what is wrong with education. Despite these assertions being made a number of years ago, little appears to have been done on the topic in the ensuing twenty to thirty years. There has been some research by Edwards (1993) which has examined the experiences of mature women students but this has concentrated on the family and social relationships. Kramarae (2001) has also investigated the experiences of mature women students but her focus has been on their experiences of online study. Other research by Reay (2003) has explored working class women who returned

to study and has examined the women's motivation for returning to study and the barriers which they encountered. This study, in contrast, focusses specifically on success in second chance learning for women and, in particular, on the transformative elements of this learning journey through the metaphor of liminality.

The discourse surrounding adult learners and the positioning that occurs through the use of terms such as 'women returners' and 'second chance' education should also be recognised. The women are positioned through society and policy and they also often position themselves as failures in education. Parsons (1995) reminds us that language is often used as a political tool as 'language comes to shape the way we make sense of the world' (p.151). By positioning the women as 'returners' or 'second chance' learners we may be putting up additional barriers to learning which may link back to previous negative experiences and thus be in danger of sabotaging their learning before it gets off the ground. Added to this is the difficulty in actually funding their education: lack of finance for many women returners is a significant barrier and the prospect of taking out a student loan, when the women may already be in a situation which is defined by poverty is difficult and often frightening (Bowl, 2001). There is also the added obstacle associated with their roles as mothers and often lone carers, which can further reduce choice through inflexible timetables and lack of available and affordable childcare.

Despite having questioned the term 'women returners' above, I have chosen to continue to use it throughout the rest of this dissertation as part of my argument is about the positioning of women and therefore it is appropriate to continue to use it. However I do bear in mind the limitations and power dimensions associated with its use.

I outlined a little of the cultural and religious background to the study earlier. This impacts on the social structure in that the responsibility for looking after children and elderly relatives in the Outer Hebrides continues, largely, to remain the responsibility of women. This can result in long periods out of full-time work and an associated depletion of work-related skills. When women do decide to return to work they often feel ill-equipped to compete in the job market. For

some women this may provide the impetus to embark on a college course. This decision, as mentioned earlier, is not always an easy one. It can be a very difficult and disorienting experience to willingly submit to an environment which did not serve them well the first time round. Tomlin and Blakely (2008) remind us that there is an important difference between educating adults and children in that 'adults possess accumulated knowledge and experience that can either facilitate or hinder the learning experience' (preface, vii). This is not a new view: as far back as 1926 Eduard Lindeman suggested that adult education 'begins not with subject matter but with the situations and experiences which mould adult life' (cited in Brookfield, 1995, p.222). Much later, Knowles (1992) points out that 'to adults their experience is *who they are*' (p.58). Eraut (1994) draws this together when he reminds us of the close link between how we use knowledge and how it is learned and it is only by understanding the 'contexts of its acquisition and its use that its essential nature is revealed' (p.19).

It is this integration of learning with life that this study examines and how it is connected with persistence in 'second chance' education, recognising that this 'second chance' is for many women a first chance (Murphy, 1973). As discussed above, the women are often referred to as 'women returners' but as Willy Russell (in Pye, 1991) questions - why should they have to return?

Education should never have been allowed to become something that has a definite beginning and a definite end. The very concept of 'returning' should not be one we recognise because education itself should be ongoing, without beginning or end (Foreword to Pye, 1991, p xiii).

Russell's argument might well have come from any of the policy papers over the last two to three decades which emphasise lifelong learning and human capital as the main drivers toward a strong economy. Various Scottish Government papers, such as *Opportunity Scotland* (1998), *Opportunities for Everyone* (1999a); *Scotland: Towards the Knowledge Economy* (1999b) and *Opportunities and Choices* (1999c) emphasised the centrality of lifelong learning. However, I think it is safe to say that the concern expressed by Russell in Pye (1991) above is more concerned with the liberal view of education as a fundamental right rather than as the link between economic prosperity and education. What I mean by liberal is in line with what Nussbaum (1997) calls the 'new' liberal

education which has critical thinking and respectful argument at its core, in other words it is 'learning for the enrichment of life' (p.297). This is very different from the neo-liberal argument which has an economic rationale firmly underpinning it. The progression of the neo-liberal policy appears to have been skilfully executed through the lifelong learning agenda which became a dominant theme over the last three decades. The UK-wide Dearing Report (1997) was one of many reports which emphasised the role of education in economic prosperity. This report emphasised that it was not just about increasing access to HE but of *widening* it to include 'disadvantaged' social groups. This fuelled a policy agenda for the incoming Blair government (1997-2007) to increase demand for HE from previously under-represented groups and FE colleges were in the ideal position to meet the policy drivers (*Scottish Government, 1999a*). The Kennedy Report, *Learning Works: widening participation in further education* summed it up when the authors stated that:

Further education has a unique contribution to make to widening participation in post-16 learning and the creation of a self-perpetuating learning society (Kennedy, 1997, p.25).

The Fryer Report, *Learning for the Twenty-first Century* (1997) echoed this: 'If lifelong learning is to become a reality, FE will lie at its heart' (p.373). In my context, working in a Scottish FE college, this heightened profile on education was underlined with the special report on Scottish Higher Education, prepared as part of the Dearing inquiry - the Garrick Report, 1997. This report highlighted the contribution which FE colleges could make to the provision of HE in Scotland. This was timely given the relatively recent changes in the control of the FE sector with the incorporation of colleges in 1993 and more recently with the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The Scottish Parliament placed the control and development of Further Education in its Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. This was particularly significant in that future policy which would impact on FE now had a 'lifelong learning' ethos firmly underpinning it and the lens was now being directed at women returners as Jenkins (2004) indicates when he states that lifelong learning is 'often regarded as playing a key role in maintaining and enhancing the employability of women returners' (Executive Summary).

Ten years on from this policy the lens has moved away from women returners and towards the 16-19 age group with another Scottish Government paper on opportunities. This time, *Opportunities for All* (2012) with a clear emphasis on training and skills for work and less of a commitment to the mature adult returner which brings into question the 'all' in the policy. The clear shift towards training for those classed as NEET (not in employment, education or training) appears not only to replicate 90s educational policy but also fails to recognise that categorising otherwise discrete data and disregarding the richness and complexity contained therein, is likely to produce inaccurate information. Furlong (2006) reminds us that within the NEET category there is a wide variety of experiences, characteristics and needs and to group them all together so the privileged who may choose to be out of work are categorised alongside those who may require complex and distinct forms of intervention to aid them back to work, is seriously flawed. The failure to problematise this aggregation may lead to wrong assumptions being made and policy decisions being taken on the basis of unsound and incomplete information. Part of this problem, I believe, lies in the desire for the UK to become a learning society, a concept which has been around for a long time but which is difficult to pin down. One of the few definitions is provided by Coffield (1994) who interprets the learning society as:

...one in which all citizens acquire high general education, appropriate vocational training and a job ... while continuing to participate in education and training throughout their lives (p.1).

This definition is, perhaps, more akin to how I, as an adult educator, would define the learning society which includes lifelong and lifewide learning (Field, 2012). However, I would question the simplicity of this statement as it appears to suggest ease of transition and accessibility to education, yet denies the very real and tangible barriers which many non-traditional entrants have to overcome. However, in Coffield's defence, I should say that the word 'appropriate' and the absence of an economic rationale suggests that his argument does not follow the neo-liberal direction evident in much of the policy on lifelong learning.

Almost two decades on from Coffield's definition we have the Scottish Government's (2012a) *Post-16 Transitions: Policy and Practice Framework* and it

would appear that as with *Opportunities for All* (2012) the discourse has departed from an inclusive one and given prominence to the 16-19 age group. This policy appears to be a rather unrealistic one which ignores that progression among FE students is non-linear, fragmented and unstable (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). However my main concern is that, with the emphasis placed on the 16-19 year old that education will become less easy to access by those women returners who are already marginalised in the workplace and often looked upon as 'an aberration from the 'norm'' (Herman and Webster, 2010, p.200) in that they have not had an uninterrupted career model. There must be a deep questioning of why the widening participation agenda has not done more to encourage marginalised learners such as adult women returners to engage with education and also examine the effects of privileging resources to a certain age group: an action which, by its very nature, actively excludes others.

If we examine the rhetoric around widening participation and the creation of a learning society we might shed some light on why some groups are privileged over others. I will argue in the next chapter that it is a policy drive which has efficiency and economic development at its core, rather than the concept of 'human flourishing' (Nussbaum, 2001).

Swain (2012) draws our attention to the changes in funding in 2013 which mean that access courses and level 3 qualifications such as A levels, will no longer be subsidised for mature students. Swain points out that this will have a greater impact on women, the disabled and those from ethnic minority groups. Although, for the first time, mature students studying for at least 25 per cent of a full-time degree will receive access to a loan, the fear about taking out a loan and paying it back is very real for such disadvantaged groups (Kelly and Slaughter, 2012). King (2014) also draws our attention to the lack of government support for part-time study and raises concerns that as the number of entrants plummet, courses are likely to be withdrawn thus disadvantaging the 'would-be part-time student' (p.2) even further. Statistics from the Higher Education Funding Council show this clearly when they report that part-time UK and European Union undergraduate students in 2013-14 are almost half what they were in 2011-12 (UEFC, 2014). The data from Universities UK (2012) appear

to support this, indicating that whilst participation in HE is rising generally, it is declining for the over 30s as indicated below.

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201408d/>

Fig 11 Trends in total student numbers by age group, 2002-03 to 2010-11

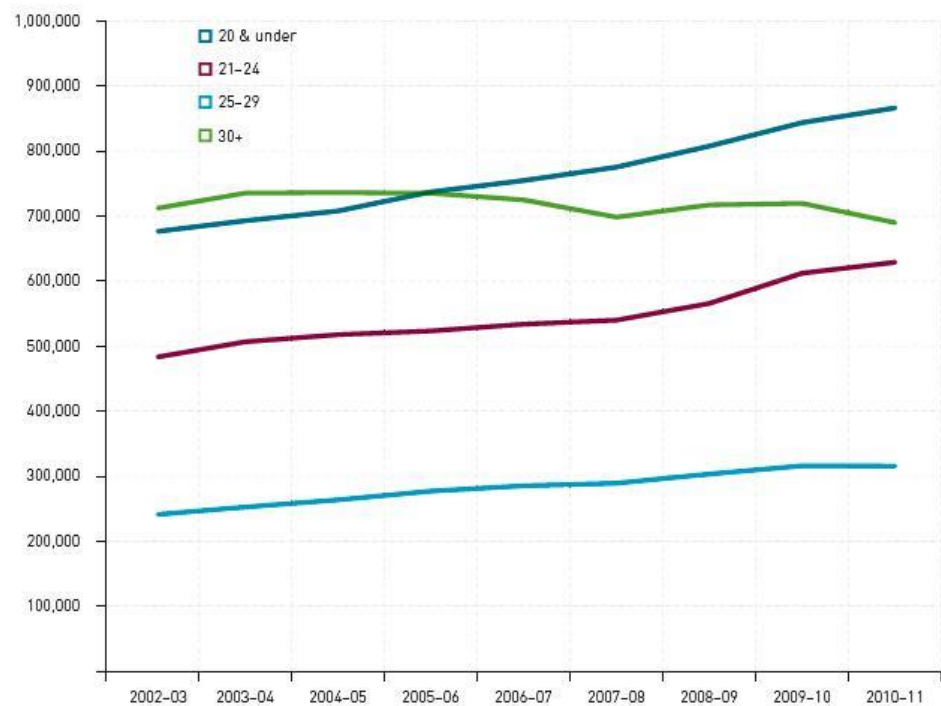


Figure 2 - Trends in total student number by age group, 2002-03 to 2010-11 (UK figures)

Source: Universities UK (2012, p.13)

The data below from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicates a similar position with a slight spike in 2011/12 but since then a steady decline. Universities UK (2013) also report a decrease of 79,000 in students over 30 between 2003/04 to 2010/11, whilst also reporting a rise of 388,000 from students under 30 for the same period. From this we may surmise that the widening participation agenda is indeed successful but not for the mature women entrant.



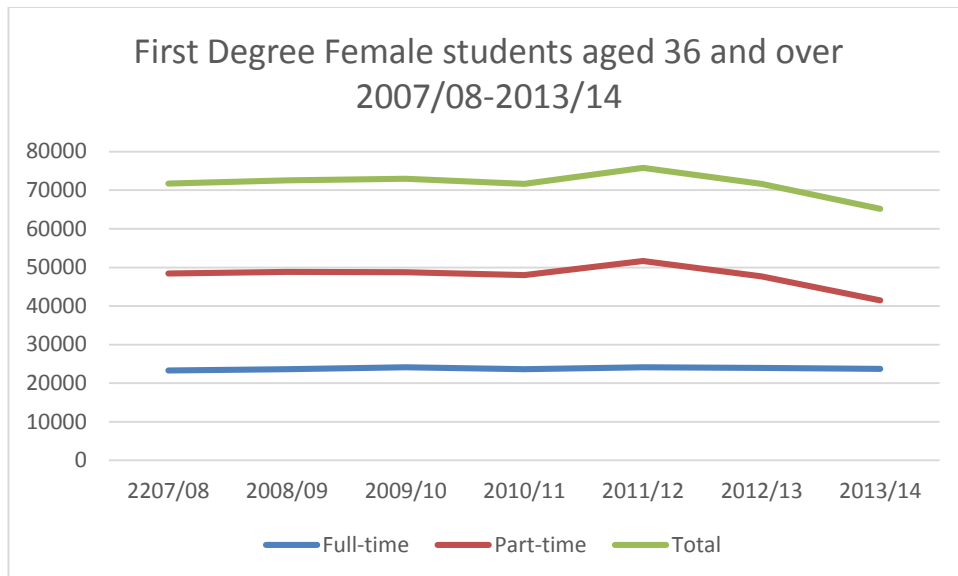


Figure 3 - First Degree Female Students aged 36 and over, 2007-08 to 2013-14 (UK figures)

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2015)

This is a worrying trend and it appears that the policy focus on the 16-19 age group may already be having an impact on the mature, often part-time, adult returner. This is worth bearing in mind as we turn to discuss the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) where there has traditionally been a higher than average number of adult women returners on undergraduate degree programmes. I will now outline the ethos and history of the UHI as it links in with inclusion and online learning which all the women interviewed experienced to greater or lesser extents.

### 1.3 The UHI

As a new university the UHI has been clear about the requirement to address issues of access and blur the boundaries between training and education and think afresh about education in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It was set up in 1993 after Professor Sir Graham Hills produced the Hills Report (1992) which outlined the remit for the new university. The UHI was to be significantly different from other Scottish universities in that it was based on a federal, collegiate university underpinned by technology and which incorporated eleven FE colleges and two research institutions situated across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Tizzard, Minty & Newton, 2001). This is significant as it allowed access to education to those who, up until then, had their educational

choices limited by geography and social situation. In the autumn of 1996 the Millennium Commission awarded the UHI a grant of £33.35 million, one of the largest single awards in Scotland, to assist with the physical infrastructure, buildings and the formation of an area network for information and communications technology (O'Donnel, 2011). This network was significant on two counts. Firstly it provided the communications conduit which had the potential to democratise knowledge through access to education for a large yet sparsely populated area of Scotland. Secondly, the delivery of that education was predicated on a new model which sought to move away from traditional ways of teaching based round a single institution and develop a personalised learning experience. At its heart lay a belief in online communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1986) and a focus on the use of technology in new and innovative ways to support the economic regeneration of the Highlands and Islands (Hills and Lingard, 2004). In 2001, the UHI was designated an HE institution formally known as the UHI Millennium Institute and in the summer of 2008 the UHI was granted degree awarding powers. Finally in February 2011 university status was awarded by the Privy Council when UHI became the University of the Highlands and Islands. The UHI has outlined its aspirations in its mission statement, as outlined below:

To be a distinctive and innovative regional university of national and international significance: a university with a pivotal role in the educational, economic, social, cultural and environmental infrastructure of its region and which reaches out to the people of the Highlands and Islands and the rest of the world through its research and teaching (UHI Strategic Plan, 2012).

This mission statement, whilst useful in that it gives a *raison d'être* for the new university, is interesting in that it fails to encapsulate the role of technology in UHI despite the original blueprint of the Hills Report. As mentioned above, technology is a fundamental feature of the model as it allows the student to access expertise from across all the academic partners through a virtual network rather than a particular university building. This was a significant enabler for many of the women interviewed, especially those with young children or with significant caring roles at home. Kramarae (2001) believes that technology is becoming more and more fundamental to the way in which today's student engages with education to the extent where women in colleges 'have evolved

from a statistical rarity to women slightly outnumbering men overall in undergraduate programmes' (*ibid*, p.4). Azaiza (2012) reminds us that, for many women, online education is not a choice, it is the only option. Azaiza's research examined the difficulties encountered by Arab women in accessing education due to the strong patriarchal culture and restrictions associated with purdah which meant that women could not share classrooms with men. The women involved in this study did not suffer from such restrictions but there are, nonetheless, areas of commonality in terms of their restrictions and lack of choice as a result of their domestic responsibilities. Whilst Kramarae's research was referring specifically to online education, the shift appears to be a general one with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2010, reporting that the number of female students in tertiary institutions had grown twice as fast as men since 1970. Kramarae's research was carried out in the United States but figures in the UK show a similar pattern with the gender ratio indicating a 15 point difference between males and females in 2012-13 with female students at 57.5 per cent and male students at 42.5 per cent (Universities UK, 2014). It is difficult to ascertain how much of this rise is attributed to online programmes as more and more colleges and universities offer all or elements of their programmes online. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) note that in the 1960s almost 70 per cent of suitably qualified males were entering HE compared with only 40 per cent of suitably qualified women. By 2004/05 female student were in the majority.

The following table shows the split:

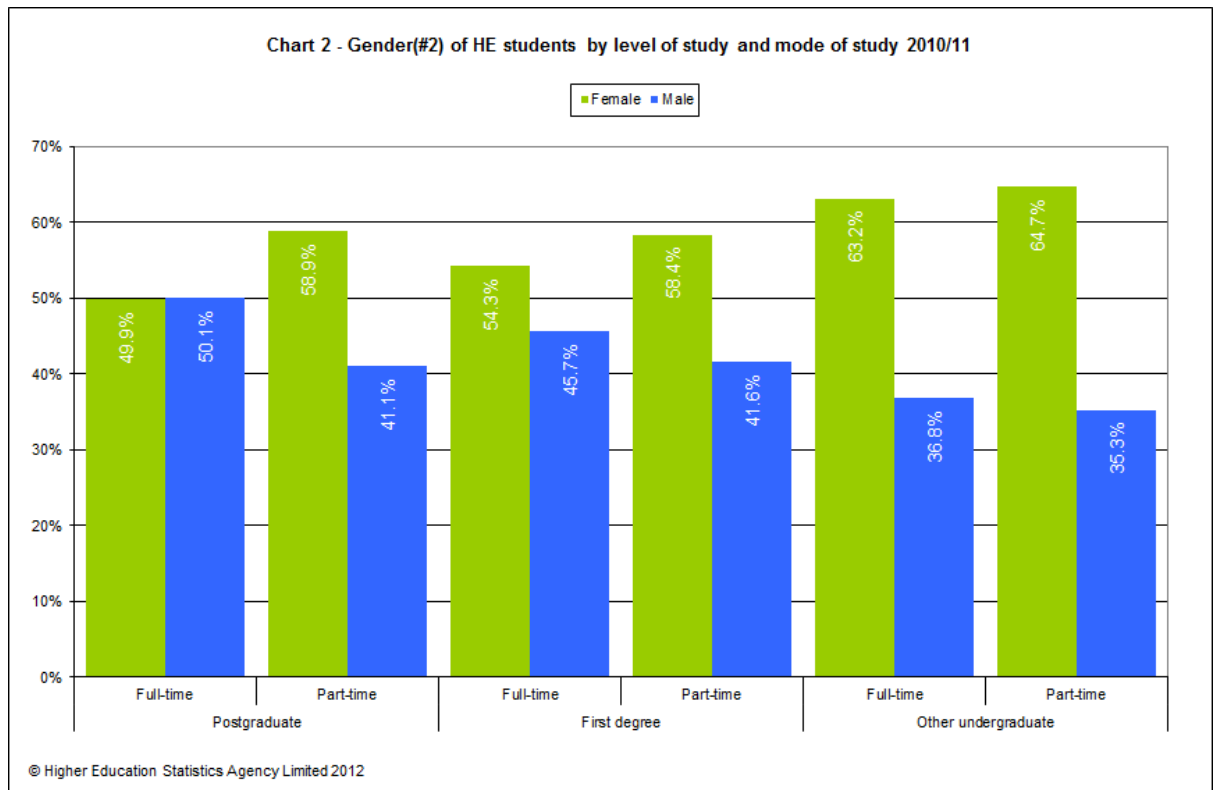


Figure 4 - Gender of HE students by level of study and mode of study 2010/11 (UK figures)

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

The subjects women are selecting appear to be different in the UK, with the sharpest divide being in veterinary science with 75 per cent of students being female. Women also outnumber men in law at 66 per cent and in languages at 67 per cent. Men outnumber women in computer science, engineering and technology (Ratcliff, 2013). This reflects the pattern identified in Kinzie's (2007) research which acknowledges the increased enrolments of women in college so that they are now in the majority but also recognises the underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Kinzie believes that this is not a matter of academic ability but that 'there appears to be a complex constellation of factors that constrain women's participation in science and mathematics' (p.84). Kinzie takes into account her own personal experience and gendered choices and comes to the conclusion that women's choices in relation to science are 'mediated by gender and shaped by systems of inequity such as classism, racism, and sexism' (p.89).

This background information is given to demonstrate that although women are accessing education there still appears to be a divide (in the UK at least) in the subjects studied and this may suggest a restriction of choice of what to study through traditional 'norms' and gendered choices. Leathwood and Francis (2006) remind us that participation in lifelong learning is highly segmented across the globe with women gravitating towards community education and the caring professions and men towards the vocational, technical and work-based learning. Leathwood and Francis also recognise that 'gendered patterns of access, participation and outcomes...remain stubbornly persistent across the field of lifelong learning' (p.1). It is worth bearing this in mind as we consider the context in which adult women return to study. A context often characterised by family and work commitments and, frequently, online study, which are squeezed into the hours remaining of the day or night. All three areas are time consuming and expect total commitment. Coser (1974) coined the term 'greedy institutions' for organisations which are:

characterised by the fact that they exercise pressures on component individuals to weaken their ties, or not to form any ties, with other institutions or persons that might make claims that conflict with their own demands (p.6).

In a similar vein to Coser (1974), Edwards (1993) and Kramarae (2001) also draw on the work of Hockschild (1989) who recognised the boundaries between women's work in the home and at work. Hockschild introduced the metaphor of the 'second shift' to refer to women who 'work one shift at the office or factory and a 'second shift' at home'. Hockschild quotes one interviewee who articulated how her home life '*felt* like a second shift' (cited in Kramarae, 2001, p.3). Kramarae builds on this metaphor and adds 'education' to the equation as a third shift and also another dimension in the form of online education.

Traditionally adult women who have accessed education whilst holding down a job and managing family commitments have grappled with inflexible class schedules, inadequate childcare, lack of appropriate housing, and lack of reliable transportation (Furst-Bowe, 2000 cited in Kramarae, 2001, p. 5). As mentioned earlier, (pp.24-25) the development of online education has given some women access to education where they may otherwise have found it

difficult and in some cases impossible. There are two points to note here. Firstly, the pressure of home, childcare and employment is in danger of relegating their education to the third shift and secondly we should remember that access to technology is not equally distributed in society and therefore not everyone can take advantage of the opportunity to study when and where it suits them. So, whilst the rise in women accessing education is good news, there is a concern that their choices are still restricted and also that the structural issues which many women face may adversely affect their ability to actively engage with education. The other concern is that mature women returners may become less of a priority through the policy focus on the 16-19 year old and therefore resources will not be directed in their direction. Naidoo (2007) refers to the work of Hall (2001) and adds another dimension when she reminds us that online education is very susceptible to further commodification and rather than allowing access and inclusion, the gap between rich and poor is likely to widen. We should therefore be careful when putting forth an argument for online education as the panacea for adult women returners. There is also a requirement to understand the barriers to accessing education for marginalised adult women such as those of lack of knowledge, fear and poverty (Bowl, 2001). Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) note the dominant discourse of the student as one which is 'white, middle-class and male' (p.261) and point to the fact that women students from non-traditional backgrounds are 'disadvantaged by an institutional culture that places them as 'other'' (*ibid*, p.262). As far back as 1999, Barr pointed out that 90 per cent of the participants on popular education courses were women yet their voices appeared to go unheard. Botton, Puigvert and Sánchez-Aroca. (2005) add another dimension when they remind us that there may be another form of silence occurring. They use the term 'other women' to refer to women who have not gone to college or university and who, through this, were silenced and remained outside the spaces for public debate:

Those of us who are housewives, domestic workers or factory workers, because we do not have academic degrees, do not have spaces in which our voices can be heard (Foreword, xi).

Whether or not it is as straightforward as exclusion and silence through lack of qualifications or whether there is a reticence in laying claim to this space where

there is an absence of qualifications, is uncertain and it is fair to say that this may also be true of men. Sawicki (1991) draws on the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, both French psychoanalytic theorists and adds another dimension to Botton's et al.'s (2005) analysis. Sawicki suggests that Western cultural discourses are unmistakably masculine and that women have no choice other than to 'speak in a masculine voice, construct a new language, or be silent' (p.1). There is some evidence in the interviews that follow that the exercise of power through early education has silenced some of the participants and limited their choices and that this exercise of power has been applied by both men and women.

This leads us to question where feminism is in the twenty-first century. Germaine Greer in the foreword to Ann Oakley's (2005) 'Gender, women and social science', believes that 'for the vast majority of the world's women liberation is not even a gleam on the horizon' (vi). Greer goes on to say, 'what is surprising and depressing is how relevant her (Oakley's) analysis of the basic mechanisms of women's oppression still is' (Oakley, 2005, p.vi). This is a depressing picture but there are some more optimistic voices. Hooks (1994) echoes Paulo Freire's belief that despite environmental restrictions the classroom remains a source of possibility:

[where] we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand ...an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p.207).

Gouin (2009) also envisions a more hopeful future as she draws on the work of Foley (1999) on informal learning in social action. Gouin uses the terms 'social action', 'social struggle' and 'social movement' interchangeably to delineate the ways in which women engage in social transformation in ways which do not resort to protest or revolution but which are based around organising within community institutions and organisations. Gouin draws on Faver (2001) who defines social action as 'a wide range of behaviours that are aimed at challenging existing power relations and changing the status quo' (cited in Gouin, 2009, p.158). This is a definition which takes in the essence of my study as women move from one stage in their lives to engage with adult education and

find ways of coping and drawing on support mechanisms which demonstrate a different way of being, of knowing and of engaging which allows them to break through the barriers and envisage a new future. However this optimism is a cautious one as we uncover some of the oppressive and restrictive forces which threaten to sabotage what might otherwise be a rich, valuable and transformative learning experience.

One of those oppressive and restrictive forces is that of housework. The responsibility for domestic work does not appear to diminish as the women embrace learning. Edwards (1993) reminds us that women often tackle their domestic responsibilities with as much vigour as their studies 'so that all different demands were met with a high degree of motivation and determination' (p.11). Edwards draws on her own experience as a student where she wanted to 'study successfully and still be a 'good' wife and mother' and I recognise aspects of this in my own journey and in my students' accounts which makes me question what has happened since 1993. Federici (2012) suggests that by transforming housework into an act of love and something which was natural to women, it was destined to be unwaged 'work that reproduces us and valorises us not only in view of our integration in the labour market, but also against it' (p. 2). Nussbaum (1999) reminds us of the low perception of domestic work when she draws on the empirical work of Susan Okin (1989) who believes that because housework is unpaid or poorly paid that it contributes to 'women being devalued and having less power within the family and outside of the household' (Nussbaum, 1999, p.135). Despite this being written in 1989, we will see many instances where this still exists in the interviews that follow. This devaluing of 'women's work' (an expression frequently used pejoratively unlike 'men's work' which carries the idea of power and importance) whether domestic or academic is troubling especially when we consider our earlier point, that women make up the majority of adult learners (Spencer, 2006).

It is the reality of these forces that concern me in this dissertation. Successful participation for adult women in education will depend, at least in part, on the ability to combine study with other aspects of their life. The quality of their educational experience will depend, not only on their ability to manage the



many competing and 'greedy' demands on their time, but on their ability to overcome previous negative experiences of education.

## 1.4 The Research Questions

The aim of this qualitative study is to investigate through an interpretivist framework which is informed by narrative analysis (Elliott, 2005) how women returners from non-traditional backgrounds access tertiary education and, once there, what makes them stay to complete their programme of study. How does their identity as students contribute to this and affect the way they learn, view and talk about their experience? At the end of their liminal journey, how do they reflect on their experience of being a student and how do they imagine their future?

There are four key research questions:

1. How do women from 'non-traditional' backgrounds access tertiary education?
2. How do women returners view their learning and how does it relate to the rest of their lives?
3. What support mechanisms, both internal and external, enabled them to successfully complete their course?
4. How do they reflect on their experience and imagine their future?

## 1.5 Theoretical Perspective

As a practitioner in FE and HE, this research has given me the opportunity to try to understand on a deeper level why women wish to return to learning. It has also led me to consider my own fundamental beliefs, values and assumptions and consider how they underpin the study. My values and beliefs clearly informed my choice of topic and my relationship with women returners as I too had returned to education as an adult with a young child. I was also

aware of significant differences in that my early experience of education was largely positive and my parents expected me to go to university after leaving school. My theories of learning have developed over the last thirteen years through my experience with adult learners but they have been largely unformed and silent until reflecting on this research and my personal value system. I now recognise that my epistemological position has moved from one which valued objectivity in research to one which values the subjective and reflexive nature of experience. Gergen (1985) points out that the social process is the foundation of reality. Thus, we can only understand the world if we understand the context:

...social constructivism values the role of the person in contributing to the whole but recognises the influence of the collective in creating the individual. There is a synergistic relationship between the collective and the person without which both cease to have meaning and relevance (cited in Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p.24).

Recognition of this subjectivity in the research is important as we take our own values and 'ways of being' (Mezirow, 2000, p.60) to the research. Mezirow uses the term 'habit of mind' to express this 'way of being'. Ways of being are clusters of meaning schemes - sets of immediate expectations, beliefs, feeling and judgements that shape our interpretations. A habit of mind is 'a set of assumptions - broad, generalising, orienting dispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience' (p.17). A habit of mind is a way of seeing the world based on our experience, background, personality and culture (Cranton, 2006) and this 'becomes expressed as a point of view' (p.18).

Mezirow (2000, p.18) suggests that:

a point of view comprises of meaning schemes - sets of specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments - that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality. Meaning schemes commonly operate outside of awareness.

This idea that our point of view is, consciously and unconsciously, shaped by our biographies has challenged and deepened my thinking of my position as researcher vis-à-vis the researched. As I considered Mezirow's concept of meaning schemes I came to the realisation that not only was I interpreting what

I saw and heard in a particular and personal way but that the students' interpretations had this nuanced and problematic turn which only they owned and which I could only touch on. This knowledge gave me a heightened awareness of the power dimensions inherent in any research project and I have tried to be aware of my own meaning schemes throughout but I am aware that this can only ever be partial. Richardson (1994) writes from a postmodern perspective and notes that 'our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it - but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves too' (p.520).

I became aware of this repression through my writing and as the project progressed and I wrote and rewrote I began to consider how my values played in to the research methodology and how I could see the 'familiar rather differently' (Nielsen, 1990, p.20). Richardson's (1994) belief that form and content are inseparable and that writing is an integral part of the discovery process held resonance for me. Richardson (1994, p.516) believes that:

Writing is (also) a way of 'knowing' - a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it.

In a similar manner, Barr (1999) posits the view that 'writing in itself is a 'method of inquiry'' (p.4). This became significant to me as I thought about my research and began to write and inquire about the theoretical perspective. It began to become clear to me that I had a reticence about calling it 'feminist' research. I felt that I did not wish to label it and I had to question why this was the case. Initially, aspects of what Toni Morrison described as an attempt to 'open doors' rather than close them was important to me and I found myself agreeing with Morrison's rejection of the use of the term 'feminist' in her book 'Paradise' as described below:

Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book - leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity... I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. (Morrison in interview with Zia Jaffrey, Jaffrey, 1998, online).

Initially I echoed Morrison's feelings and felt I did not want to label my study or write a 'feminist tract' (*ibid*) but as I developed my writing and clarified my thinking I began to question this interpretation and felt that instead of being open I was closing a door and repressing a part of myself. I was struck by the way in which some women who wished for equality disliked and did not identify with the term 'feminist' and I found myself betwixt and between, agreeing with aspects whilst feeling discomfort with some of the more radical aspects of feminism. I sought for a vocabulary which fitted in with how I felt and I came to the conclusion that the word 'feminist' was being hijacked and imbued with a meaning that many women could not connect with. Implicit in this were notions of power, privilege and a particular radicalisation of gender which many women do not identify with. Olsen (1996) reminds us that there are many definitions of what a feminist is, some of which are conflicting. Ramazonoglu and Holland (2002) suggests the difficulty in defining feminism links to the difficulty in seeing women as active agents in change. Whilst this is an important aspect, there is also a requirement to understand that living as 'male' and 'female' means inhabiting different realities and that being a feminist requires one to imagine occupying the powerless positions in society for women (Menon, 2012). If we are to consider the future as one in which women are active agents of change, it means understanding the feelings of powerlessness, poverty, 'othering' and the absence of a voice which are a feature of many women's lives. My definition of feminism therefore gives this lack of power a central place and, as with most definitions of feminism, a belief that women should have the same opportunities, powers and rights as men and should not be subjugated by men (and women) on account of their gender, whether this is intellectual, physical or emotional.

Sawicki (1991) suggests that 'we must continually ask ourselves why we write. What do we hope to achieve through our writing?' (p.2). Through this writing I have begun to think deeply about how feminist writing can resist the common model of domination and consider in depth the inequalities that exist. Mohanty (2003) suggests that traditional liberal and liberal feminist pedagogies disallow historical and comparative thinking, radical feminist pedagogies often singularise gender, and Marxist pedagogy silences race and gender in its focus on capitalism. Mohanty (2003), in a similar way to Barr (1999), looks to create

pedagogies that allow students to see the complexities, singularities, and interconnectedness between communities of women such that power, privilege, agency and dissent can be made visible and engaged with' (Mohanty, 2003, p.243-244). This is also my aim, that by surfacing those issues women can speak with a more optimistic, just and confident voice.

Foley (1999) suggests that learning 'enables people to make sense of, and act on, their environment, and come to understand themselves as knowledge-creating, acting beings' (p.64). I therefore had to shelve other meanings of 'feminism' and claim for myself one which included equity, opportunity and a visioning of a growing healthy and confident voice for women; all values which I subscribe to. This is not, therefore, a work of 'silent authorship' (Holt, 2003) but one in which I will use my 'own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions' (Holt, 2003, p.2). Barr (1999) believes that 'the effacement of self is ...a kind of cheat since it obscures from the reader (and more often than not, the writer) the inevitable locatedness of all research' (pp.4-5). With this in mind I have attempted to bring to this study my own awareness of the links between my personal values and the ways in which I interpreted what I saw and heard.

However, settling on a satisfactory theoretical framework still eluded me. Le Compte and Preissle (1993) state that 'theorising is simply the cognitive process of discovering or manipulating abstract categories and the relationship among these categories' (p.239). Strauss (1995) puts it more simply when he notes that theory provides a map or model of the world. He goes on to say that whilst theory is a simplification of the world, it does serve to clarify and explain some aspect of how the world works. Eraut (1994) sheds more light on this when he reminds us that '[b]oth the theory and the process of theorising must be demystified' (p.59). Eraut goes on to distinguish between private theories which '[a]re ideas in people's minds which they use to interpret or explain their experience' (p.59) and public theories which are published in books. Eraut admits that at times it can be difficult to distinguish between them both. Eraut's definition of educational theory includes elements of both private and public theories but also, and this is where it has resonance for me, it includes an evaluative element in addition to the interpretation and

explaining. Eraut believes that '[e]ducational theory comprises concepts, frameworks, ideas and principles which may be used to interpret, explain or judge intentions, actions and experiences in educational or education-related settings' (p.60). It was this process of interpretation which led me to the realisation that I had some freedom in how I was constructing and developing my own particular theoretical perspective and that, not only was I being given licence to do this, it was expected of me.

Silver (1983) reminds us that in developing a theory we experience a shift in our own mental structure and 'discover with startling clarity a different way of thinking' (p.4). To understand a theory 'is to feel some wonder that one never saw before what now seems to have been obvious all along' (*ibid*). Elements of this come home to me as I began to gain confidence and take ownership over my work. Silver (1983) admits that her definition of theory does not sound very scientific but she believes that formal definitions tend to rob theory of its beauty. As my study is a qualitative one which examines feelings, emotions and experiences through a narrative framework, the scientific approach held no value or attraction. Eraut (1994) posits the view that we select the theories we want to use according to 'utility or ethical principles' or 'by more intuitive criteria like personal preference or fittingness' (p.64). It is this fittingness which has led me to choose a feminist narrative framework to analyse the student journey. This framework I felt would give the women more freedom to tell their own stories and recognise their learning journey and see the positives that emanated from their stories. There was however considerable cognitive dissonance and wrestling with theories before I came to a place of settledness and my disequilibrium became equilibrium (Dewey, 1933). This reflects English's (2013) discussion which draws on Dewey and Herbart's concept of education in which the learner has an inner struggle which involves perplexing thought, confusion and frustration as an essential part of the learning process. I have become acutely aware of this personal process as I have sought to understand my students and how their stories have forced me to question my own values and judgements. This has been painful at times but it has also been extremely rewarding, allowing me insights and a

heightened sensitivity to my own and my students' journeys and the process of intellectual development which this has involved.

## **1.6 Structure of the Dissertation**

I have outlined the focus of my research and the theoretical perspective I have adopted and how this relates to my values and beliefs. Chapter Two outlines the policy context. Chapter Three relates this policy context to the literature on transformative education for women, narrative inquiry and persistence in second chance learning. Inherent in the discussion is the liminal experience of studentship and the deeply embedded, social and historical processes of barriers to education which have been particularly insidious in terms of women's education. In Chapter Four I outline the methodological framework which underpins this research. Chapter Five gives a short pen picture of the women in an attempt to draw together the data and give some coherence to the women's stories. Chapter Six begins the process of analysis which Chapter Seven continues, revisiting the research questions in light of the literature review. Chapter Eight draws this together and also discusses the limitations of the research and the impact on my professional practice and also the implications for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Policy Context

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I plan to review the policy as it affects the adult woman returner. My main focus is on the marketization of education. The fundamental change in philosophy in education over the last thirty to forty years from a liberal education to a neo-liberal one has, I believe, given power to the privileged and further marginalised the adult women learner and restricted their choice through gendered narratives which fail to problematize and identify the inequalities that exist.

It is difficult to find a starting point for the change in discourse from a liberal view of education to a neo-liberal one where the marketisation of education began to hold the hegemonic position. Davies and Bansel (2007) suggest that finding a starting point for the change in discourse from liberal to neo-liberal is difficult because the concept of neo-liberalism has emerged at different times and in different guises over the past 30 years. However they also remind us that as a form of governance, neo-liberalism first emerged in the 1970s as a result of the perception of those in high finance that democracies were ungovernable. The 'Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies' by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, (1975) was the policy response to this perception. According to Davies and Bansel, (2007) this report posited the view that 'democratic citizens must be made more governable and more able to service capital' (p.250). As with many attempts to persuade, the rhetoric was skilfully presented as the 'acts of responsible governments introducing measures necessary for individual, institutional and national economic survival' (*ibid*).

The point about servicing capital is interesting in terms of its overspill into education. Porritt (2005) links this shift in focus to the perception of the electorate that Keynesian economic policy had failed and the opportunity was now open for the discourse to move from an interventionist model to the market led model promoted by Friedman and Hayek. This model emphasises the role of big business in revitalising the economy and although first advocated by



President Carter in the US it began to grow momentum under Reagan's educational reforms in the 1980s (Brown, 2011). This was emulated very quickly by the Thatcher government (1979-1990) which began to impose neo-liberal reforms on institutions that were perceived as underperforming (Sautson & Morrish, 2011). This efficiency drive or 'march of the market' (Brown, 2011, p.11) was soon to be directed at HE. In order for education to be efficient, it required a highly trained workforce and secondly it required to be resourced. The resourcing was to come from tuition fees, which were introduced in 1998 and the maintenance grant being replaced by loans. This did not go unnoticed and many commentators expressed concern about the neo-liberal shift (Barnett, 2011; Brown, 2011; Leathwood and Read, 2009; Tedder and Biesta, 2008; Naidoo, 2007; Field, 2006). Barnett (2011, p.42) expressed concerns that the pedagogical relationship between the student and the teacher would be damaged through the focus on economic development. He believes that:

learning requires that a student give of themselves, give themselves up to the material and experiences before them such that they can form their own authentic responses and interventions (*ibid*, p.42).

This is in line with Nussbaum's (1997) belief in the cultivation of humanity through a liberal education with the emphasis of 'owning the mind'. In a similar manner Sir Frederick Rees, Principal of the University of Cardiff from 1929 to 1949, quoting Miall (1889, p.54) states that:

the maintenance of the democratic state depends on the disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the mental discipline which free men learn in their search for it. (cited in Holford, Warmington, Eastment, Brine, van der Veen, Kirar, Finn and Molosi, 2010, p.273).

This is an important point and one which has concerned me throughout this educational journey, linking as it does to my belief in transformative learning. I will touch on this briefly in this chapter and develop it further in Chapter Three. One of the reasons why colleges and universities have moved away from this vision I believe is linked to the unhealthy emphasis on league tables and other economic measures of success. This model of education has the student positioned as a customer consuming education in order to further economic development, rather than developing a critical and inquiring mind. Lyotard

(1979) saw this paradigm shift coming when he noted with caution, that knowledge was in danger of commodification and through this it would cease to be an end in itself and thus lose its 'use-value' (p.4). This poses a fundamental question for adult women's education, if education is now a service industry planned and controlled by global capitalism, is there anything we can do as adult educators to ensure the student experience is one which concentrates on the wider aspects of education and its intrinsic value rather than something that is chosen on the basis of market desire?

## 2.2 A New Language of Learning

Tedder and Biesta (2008) refer to this shift as representing a 'new language of learning' (p.1). They reject the notion that education is a commodity or 'a thing' for consumption' (p.1) and remind us that there is more to learning than what is 'acknowledged in the economic definitions of lifelong learning' (p.1). As an adult educator, this notion that education is seen as an economic transaction is problematic for me on two counts. Firstly, it jeopardises the relationship between what colleges and universities teach and what the student learns by setting the agenda and taking away choice. This is a particular concern for adult women returners. A second and related point is the worry that it may lead to a more unequal and fragmented society. Morgan (2013a) reports that whilst the participation rate for HE for people in manual occupations has risen from about 4 per cent in 1963 to 20 per cent in 2000, that participation rates for richer students have increased to an even greater extent. This has effectively widened the gap further between the rich and poor and the relative chances of going to university as a poor student have actually worsened over this period (*ibid*). Barnett (2011, p.46) picks up this point when he reminds us that markets seldom work on a level playing field:

In an unequal society, individuals' capacity to participate in higher education will be lessened by the development of a market situation. In turn society becomes even more fragmented.

This is an important point, not only because of the inequalities it brings in its wake, but because the danger is that if we move towards a training agenda where students are 'skilled up' but unable to critique or challenge the status

quo, it will have serious implications for future education and especially for marginalised learners such as women returners. It is useful to bear these factors in mind as we look back on the political landscape of the late nineties and observe the well-orchestrated, yet subtle change of direction: 1997 saw the Labour government sweep into power after 18 years of Conservative rule. There was a perception among the electorate that the Conservatives could no longer be trusted to deliver public services such as health and education. The stage was thus set for Blair's pledge: 'Ask me my three main priorities for government, and I tell you: education, education, education' (Blair, 1996). It is easy to accept this rather plausible view of the way ahead for government and to assume that it came as a response to the wishes of the electorate. However, if we look further back we discover that this policy was a progression of the neo-liberal Thatcher and Reagan policies as mentioned earlier; policies which reflected the growing global context that British politics were operating within.

Carr and Hartnett (1996, p.155) identify education, as a political and economic tool, as having made its transition from low to high importance during the Thatcher years. The reasons behind this seemingly innocuous emphasis on education for economic development, remains unclear until much later. Szakolczai's (2009) development of Turner's (1967) notion of liminality may be seen as appropriate here. A key feature of liminality is the 'trickster', the trickster is a mythical figure who flits betwixt and between and who can often be looked upon as the solution to a problem when in reality they are the perpetrators of confusion. Szakolczai (2009) reminds us of how 'in a liminal situation where certainties are lost, tricksters can be mistaken for charismatic leaders' (p.155). In a similar vein Borrows (1997) suggests that 'the trickster offers insight through encounters which are simultaneously altruistic and self-interested' (p.27). There are aspects of the trickster evident in the neo-liberal manipulation of educational policy which through an interplay of altruism, power and uncertainty, tinged with morality, there was a 'fit' being orchestrated which ensured the acceptance of education as a marketisation discourse was complete. Whether the Thatcher or Blair governments saw themselves in this light is unclear but history indicates a clear move from an explicit liberal emphasis on education to a focussed market approach and this agenda was skilfully and persuasively advanced.

English (2013) gives a useful insight into how this was communicated when she draws on the work of one of the founders of modern educational theory Johan Friedrich Herbart. She notes that Herbart held the view 'that morality is not just the 'highest' purpose but the 'whole' purpose of education' (p.4). In a similar vein, Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) draw our attention to the fact that engaging in education has a moral dimension which is linking to social justice. This moral dimension is persuasive; the idea of the individual investing in themselves not only for themselves but for the good of society had an optimistic and positive appeal. The timing of this discourse was important; the outgoing administration, which was perceived as having failed, was being replaced by a new economic order which was being portrayed as young, dynamic and forward looking. On the verge of a new century we had the prospect of 'New Labour, new Britain' (Blair, 1995). We cannot ignore the role of the media in this as 'the media orders what publics regard as important issues' (Parsons, 1995, p.113). New Labour were thus very adept at shaping the agenda by 'constructing' [or highlighting] the problem in order to justify the solution (Edelman, 1988). Unfortunately, whilst the rhetoric was about the good of society, morality as defined by Herbart (in English, 2013) and Taylor et al. (1997) appears to have been disregarded.

The new importance attached to education thus had two strands. Firstly, the government's (Conservative initially but latterly New Labour) ideological stance which appeared to suggest that the underlying reason for the decline of the UK lay in its lack of skills. This was underlined in various policy documents such as the Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI) White Paper which stated that: 'The UK, and particularly Scotland, cannot compete in the modern market place on the basis of a low-cost, low-skills workforce' (DTI, 1998, p.3). Why Scotland is being singled out is unclear but other policy documents continued along similar lines which was really an extension of the 'human capital' (Schultz, 1961) argument, with the link between competitiveness, skills and employability becoming more aggressively expressed:

It will .... be vital for young people to have the ability to learn and acquire new skills. This will be the key to future employability' (Scottish Government, 1999a, p.2).

Secondly, there was a movement from mobility of labour to mobility of capital. It is now widely accepted that we are no longer an industrial society but rather a post-industrial or information society and, more recently, a 'knowledge society' (Duff, 1998, Duff, 2004, Lor & Britz, 2007) with knowledge as the new economic resource. In other words the 'means of production' is no longer capital, natural resources, or labour, but knowledge. Advances in technology played a large part in this and the link between globalisation, competitiveness and education began to be articulated more forcefully. Supranational organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNESCO and in particular the European Union (EU) were echoing this turn and a plethora of terms began appearing which linked the two concepts: the 'knowledge economy'; 'knowledge workers'; 'knowledge society'; 'the learning society'; 'the information age'; 'the theory of human capital' and, of course, 'lifelong learning' itself. The strength of the economic argument was gaining power and local, national and international bodies were coming together to inform and mould the policy making. The marketisation of education was being put forward as the key to economic development. Blair (1998) reinforced this with his assertion that 'education is the best economic policy we have' (p.9). One could argue that the altruism of the trickster was being articulated clearly and its success as a discourse was thus more likely to be secured. Fairclough (1992) touches on this when he cautions that '[p]ower does not work negatively by forcefully dominating those who are subject to it; it incorporates them, and is 'productive' in the sense that it shapes and 'retools' them to fit in with its needs' (p.50). It is this retooling that is important here as actors become agents through 'ownership' of the policy, thus making its success as a discourse more likely.

This was significant because it meant a radical shift in focus for the Labour government; government policy now had to incorporate aspirations towards economic efficiency and wealth creation with a reassertion of Britain on the global stage and, most significantly for some, the destruction of socialism. This would have been unthinkable under previous Labour governments but under New

Labour there appeared to be a clear recognition that the world was in a stage of transition; the fall of communism with the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, the growing use and scale of technology and a heightened awareness of the impact of environmental issues, all appeared to contribute to this sense of change. The Labour government, it would appear, was aware of the burgeoning globalising sphere in which governments, local and national, now had to operate and compete, and that old Labour would not be able to deliver in an environment where the drive was to extend markets into every aspect of the economy. As Porritt (2005, p.14) puts it, 'Like it or not ... capitalism is now the only economic game in town'. If Labour was to seize power it would have to be under a new regime in this changing world - 'pre-existing political ideologies [had] lost their resonance' (Giddens, 1998, p.1). The idea of a 'good' society where there is equality of opportunity rather than, as the old socialist model proposed, equality of wealth, appeared to be the way forward. Redistribution should now follow educational lines rather than financial and this educational direction in the new economy would feed into redistributed wealth but the emphasis is not a local one but a national and ultimately international one. Giddens (1998, pp.109-110) makes the point that education is not able to reduce the inequalities in society, and the power of the state is declining in this new global society. Despite this, the rhetoric seems to suggest that education is central to reducing the inequalities in society. The UK now had to compete on a new and rapidly expanding level, with demands placed on them by a new master, that of global markets. One of the vehicles for delivery of this competitive agenda was lifelong learning to which I now turn.

## **2.3 Lifelong Learning**

I briefly discussed my concern in Chapter One about the shift away from lifelong learning to a focus on the 16 to 19 age group and what essentially amounts to a training for work agenda rather a liberal education. I will now develop this in more detail.

The belief that education should be lifelong is a recurring one in the literature and in current policy debate as discussed below. It is often taken to be something new but as Malik (2012) reminds us, whilst the concept is not new,

the accountability to multiple stakeholders is, as discussed under 2.1 above. The articulation of the concept with regard to adult education began to be discussed when Basil Yeaxlee drew on Eduard Lindeman's classic *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926) and produced an examination of non-vocational forms of lifelong learning in 1929 (cited in Smith, 1996, 2001). Lifelong learning was then explored in various forms of adult education over the next three decades until, in the 1970s, it began to be adopted on a wider scale when UNESCO took up the idea and Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Retrovsky, Rahnema and Ward prepared the report 'Learning to be' in 1972. This policy document took more of a 'cradle to the grave' approach to lifelong learning and was significant on two counts: Firstly, an international organisation was heralding a strong belief in lifelong learning with the creation of a learning society at its heart and secondly, this learning was to be redefined:

Educational systems must be thought out afresh, in their entirety, as must our very conception of them. If all that has to be learned must be continually reinvented and renewed, then teaching becomes education and, more and more, learning (xxxiii).

However Field (2012) reminds us of how, exactly twenty-five years after the publication of 'Learning to Be' (1972) the OECD issued its own report in 1997, 'Lifelong Learning for All' and the discourse changed from a liberal one with the emphasis on the development of the individual who has 'ownership of their own thought and speech' (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 293) to a disempowerment and a lack of freedom of what to study; the emphasis being on the good of society - national and international. Thus two fundamental ideas - the learning society and lifelong learning were beginning to converge, but not in the way Faure et al. (1972) had intended. Field (2006) refers to this seismic shift from a liberal view of education to an economic rational underpinning personal development as 'the new educational order' (p.133). This new educational order leaves lifelong learning with a more nebulous definition which appears to vary depending on who is writing about it. Field (2000) questions whether the term is useful or not: '...isn't this [lifelong learning] rather a loose and all-encompassing term, which stretches too far to have much purchase on reality?' (p.7). There appears to be an assumption that

lifelong learning speaks for itself and a definition is therefore not necessary. However, as Coffield (2000) reminds us: we can read acres of print about lifelong learning without ever coming to a definition of what the term actually means. One definition which attempts to do this is given by the European Commission (2003). Lifelong learning for the EC encompasses:

...all forms of learning, including: formal learning, such as a degree course followed at university; non-formal learning, such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace; and informal learning, such as inter-generational learning... (Europa online, 2003).

The Commission believe that engaging in lifelong learning gives individuals the ability to take more control of their lives and allows them to become more active participants in society. This is congruent with my own values and beliefs about adult education; it promotes the kind of learning I would be in support of with aspirations for the development of knowledge and the critical thinking skills mentioned earlier. It also includes formal and informal learning across life and the concept of 'taking control of [one's] future' is an optimistic and engaging one for education. In a similarly optimistic vein Field (2000) defines lifelong learning as 'a beautifully simple idea'. Field goes on to say, it is '... by and large, a good thing. We need to do more of it, we need to make it much easier than it currently is, and we need to value it much more' (p.7). This view has a certain logic and resonance and to a large degree fits in with my personal philosophy and how I view my teaching. I hope that, as students leave college, that this will not be the end of their formal (and informal) learning and that they will continue in developing themselves and progressing their learning where possible. However, there is a danger in the way in which the message is communicated. Smith (2000) reminds us that the term lifelong learning is an 'extra-ordinarily elastic term that provides politicians and policymakers with something that can seem profound, but on close inspection is largely vacuous' (p.1). It would appear that, not only is lifelong learning something we should all engage in, it also appears to have a moral imperative creeping in which suggests that education can ameliorate for the ills of society with the sub-text of empowerment, freedom and a better and fairer society. The DfEE (1998, p.7) put it this way:



Learning ... helps [to] make ours a civilised society... It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings.

This leaves me with a little bit of a dilemma as far as my research is concerned. I would consider myself a lifelong learner; I am wholly in support of the concept and indeed I have benefitted from many of the policy initiatives. However, statements such as the one above which suggests the centrality and empowerment of the individual and an assumption that sectors of the population who have previously been excluded from education will be able to access this 'equality of opportunity' is at odds with my research. The seemingly insurmountable barriers, which the women in my study have had to overcome in order to even access this learning in the first place have not been recognised. Kleinman (2000) reminds us that 'for many people deemed to be socially excluded the fundamental problem is poverty, not education' (cited in Edwards, Armstrong and Miller, 2001, p.420). Similarly Mezirow (2000) discusses the requirement for free and full participation in discourse and the central role of values such as freedom, equality, tolerance, social justice and rationality. He reminds us that:

Preconditions for realizing these values and finding one's voice for free, full participation in discourse include elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence. Hungry, homeless, desperate, threatened, sick, or frightened adults are less likely to be able to participate effectively in discourse (pp.15-16).

This reflects Abraham Maslow's (1948) belief that there is a hierarchy of needs (1943) and it is only when lower order needs are satisfied that an individual can move up the hierarchy to the higher order needs such as self-actualisation as shown below. Self-actualisation is the epitome of the developmental self where the individual is doing what they are capable of and what is personally fulfilling and rewarding.

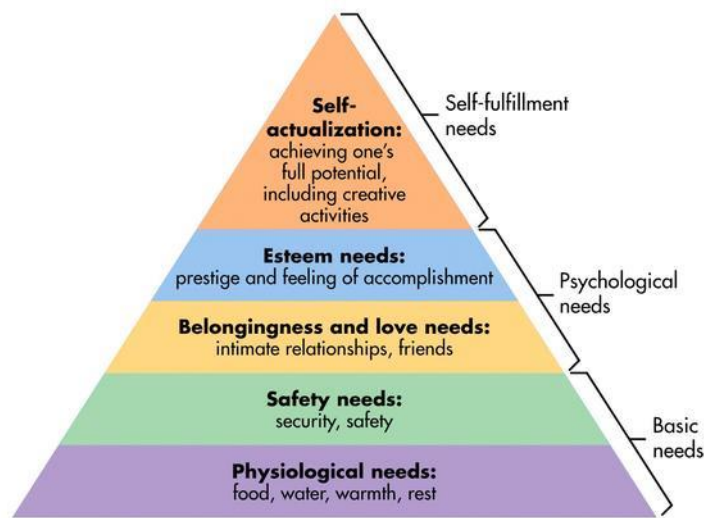


Figure 5 - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Source: <https://freetobefamily.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/maslow-creative-commons.jpg>

Whilst I have some problems with the linear nature of this model, it does help to illustrate that, in most cases, basic needs require to be satisfied before an individual can progress. However, the normative model in the policy appears to be a top-down approach where you can almost place education on the individual and this will transform the individual and their place in society. The life experiences and barriers to learning have largely been ignored in the discourse. There is also a questionable underlying assumption that students will carry out some kind of cost benefit analysis and then opt for the most lucrative career path. Clearly, 'passions, instincts and subconscious feelings and anxieties' (Parsons, 1995, p.275) come to bear on the process of educational pathways. West (1996) also notes that there are factors beyond economic rationality at play in the choice of what to study. His research reveals that a significant number of students from marginal groups and from deprived communities choose courses in the humanities and social sciences which may not be the surest way into employment. Field (2000) picks up this point in his examination of adult education. Field believes that some adults returning to education after a long gap are not driven by economic reason but that educational activities '...are purchased as a result of choice; unlike schooling...' (p.138) This is an important point in terms of my research as the current compulsion to engage in learning and direct that learning to the economy rather than to a course of choice can

have serious implications for learners with fragile learner identities (Crossan, Field, Gallacher and Merrill, 2003). Edwards et al. (2001) draw on the work of Coffield (1999) and caution that not everyone will 'want to be included in what is on offer' (p.425). Field (2000) adds another dimension when he deconstructs his 'beautifully simple idea' and reminds us that the amount of political interest in lifelong learning should sound a warning and 'put us on our guard' (p.8). Field goes on to say:

...when subjected to closer inspection, much of the policy interest in lifelong learning is in fact preoccupied with the development of a more productive and efficient workforce...[and] by a desire to raise the nation's economic competitiveness and improve its standard of living, defined in largely material terms (*Ibid*).

Biesta (2008) underlines this when he reminds us that the economic mandate underlying lifelong learning has affected the legitimization of adult learning; it is no longer about learning for personal development and empowerment or 'for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity' (p.1) but instead the rise of 'the 'learning paradigm' has been accompanied by an emphasis on learning for economic progress and development' (*ibid*).

In 1976 Illich and Verne wrote an essay which criticised developments in lifelong education and suggested that by the year 2000 education would be a mega-machine existing for the exclusive benefit of the 'capitalists of knowledge' (p.13) and that every aspect of human existence would be the subject of an educational course. This appears to have been prophetic - education is now a service industry planned and controlled by global capitalism and, we are told, necessary for economic growth. As individuals in the knowledge society, in order to keep abreast of the changes occurring, we have to be lifelong learners and as Tight (1998, p.484) puts it: 'it is our fault if we have not participated to date'. An almost Orwellian discourse was beginning to be articulated through the policy texts, where only those equipped with the necessary skills and education would survive in this brave new world of lifelong learning. The dystopia which Huxley (1932) viewed is writ large in the policy which suggests that individuals should invest in themselves, via education and training, as part of an ongoing process of self-improvement. However, it is not a case of

education for education's sake as the DfEE suggest above. The direction that this education should now take is predicated on economic development and where the responsibility for achieving and often paying for one's 'adult learning' is based firmly on the individual. This has been at the forefront of current government policy which suggests that Scotland is moving towards becoming a 'learning society'. An emphasis has been placed on increasing the percentage of the workforce holding qualifications. There are various reasons put forward for this but underpinning them all, is the argument that a skilled and/or educated workforce is positively correlated to a high degree of economic development and this is where the argument becomes uncomfortable for me for three reasons: firstly, the choice of what to study is, I believe, a fundamental human right which, if taken away could result in the devaluing of areas such as music or art because the link to economic prosperity might not be as clear. Secondly, it appears to ignore that fact that learning occurs informally as well as formally. Finally, it ignores the barriers to learning for many working-class women who are too busy earning to allow room for learning (Jackson, 2003). Jackson believes that working-class women's opportunities for learning will always be limited in a system which is structured 'within patriarchal capitalism, driven by market forces and ideologies based in inequalities of gender, race and class' (p.375).

This looks like it may be exacerbated with the current policy focus on developing STEM expertise to meet the needs of the future labour market. The Wood Commission Report (Scottish Government, 2014) clearly articulates the importance of this and makes it clear that 'science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) will be increasingly important in the years ahead' (*ibid*, p.32). This raises concerns that this emphasis, coupled with the male dominance in STEM subjects, may devalue qualifications in the arts and humanities, areas which are often attractive to women (Bradley, 2000). Jackson (2003) reminds us that what constitutes 'knowledge' is not neutral and that 'what counts as knowledge is determined by those who have the power to create and uphold dominant discourses' (p.368). The current policy discourse does not bode well for working-class adult women returning to education with inhibiting factors such as age, gender and social class. It also ignores that the 'Learning Society is grafted onto existing, historic oppressions and inequalities. It is a new basis on

which social divisions are re-established and re-legitimised' (Morley, 2002, p.91). This is particularly insidious in terms of adult women returners as Jackson (2003) notes when she reminds us that:

structural barriers to participation in lifelong (l)earning are ignored in a debate that has nothing to say about the gendered, raced and classed divisions of labour. Indeed, in a 'learning society' that privileges knowledge-based commercial and industrial economies, working-class women are at least doubly disadvantaged (p.367).

Despite the Commission's altruistic definition above (p.46), it would appear that rather than 'all forms of learning' being valued, it is formal, certificated learning that this concept of lifelong learning strongly focuses on and values. Jarvis (2000) puts it succinctly when he states:

As the discourse for lifelong learning gains credibility, other forms of learning are regarded as less than 'real learning', unless they are accepted through systems of accreditation of prior experiential learning, etc. When the learning has been accredited, then it becomes 'real learning' (p.5).

Edwards, Miller, Small and Tait (2002, p.528) echo this when they suggest that what constitutes learning is open to question:

....people may well be learning, but not what is valued, nor in the ways that are constructed as of value in policy terms, such as the more readily auditable activities accessible through routes leading to assessment and accreditation.

Can we therefore, along with Field (2000), say that the term 'lifelong learning' is a bit of a misnomer? Is it not formal certified or accredited learning that the policy actually focuses on - not, as its title and some of its interpretations may suggest, 'informal' or democratic liberal education (Nussbaum, 1997). There is some evidence which suggests a positive link between upskilling the workforce and achieving economic growth (Mincer & Ofec, 1982, Barro, 2001). However Noonan and Wade (2013) indicate that the claims are perhaps overstated and that broad based competencies are more important than very specific skill sets. Hunushek (2013) examines the school system and attests that it is the quality of the education rather than the quantity which is the important factor. It would

therefore appear that the link is not as clear as that outlined in the policy documents.

This link between human capital and economic development is not a new concept. According to Coffield (1999) this is a simplified version of the theory of human capital which came to dominate debates about the importance of education in promoting economic development after the publication of the ideas of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964). Coffield (1999) reminds us that we have forgotten the reservations put forward by Becker that the economic argument should not be the paramount one and by buying into this particular model we now have a 'degraded version' which 'has assumed the status of conventional wisdom' (p.481). Despite this note of caution it appears that lifelong learning is now part of the central discourse. However, if we were honest and called it, 'learning for economic development' or 'learning for certification' it would not have quite the same 'buy in'. The term 'lifelong learning' as it is currently used in education is value laden - there is a clear sense that it is something altruistic and valuable and that it is intrinsically *good* and this is where its power lies.

This link between productivity and wealth is not new. Throughout the ages various philosophers have pondered on the role of the state and the link between knowledge, property, power and the 'good city'. From Plato's 'Republic' (Voegelin, 1957) though to Francis Bacon's book 'New Atlantis' (Bacon, 2008) the philosophy that knowledge is the foundation of a good society (Parsons, 1995 pp.43-45) has been a central educational plank. More recently, Michael Foucault's (1977) discussion on the link between power, knowledge and discourse has taken the argument forward. The kernel of the argument is not therefore new: The link between knowledge, power and society has been discussed, reworked, contested and rewritten throughout the ages. What is different and worrying in the current discourse is that people may be 'valued' in relation to their contribution to the economy with a market value attached according to that contribution. Coffield (1999) criticises the consensus that lifelong learning, on its own, has the power to solve a wide range of educational, social and political ills. Coffield highlights how, rather than being a leveller, it can be divisive, exacerbating

social inequalities and creating 'a sharp divide between valuable and non-valuable people and locales' (p.484). In a similar way Edwards et al. (2001) reminds us about the limitations of this approach:

Positioning education as the 'root' of exclusion and maybe even the route to inclusion suggests a simplified causal relationship that might make sense to education ministers trying to secure resources from treasuries around the globe, but excludes possible alternative analyses of the situation' (p.426).

As far back as 1970 Ivan Berg cautioned on the flaws inherent in this approach. His study refers to the USA but is arguably, just as relevant to Britain. He asserts that the critical determinants of work performance are not the level of qualification, but personal characteristics and job conditions. He criticised the mechanistic interpretation of the relationship between education and employment and the belief that it is individuals' educational achievements that decide what kind of job they get. Heinz (in Coffield, 1999) picks this point up and states that 'educational credentials are used primarily as screening devices by employers'. In a similar vein, Giddens (1998) recognizes that whilst training in specific skills is necessary for many jobs, more importance should be given to the 'development of cognitive and emotional competence' (p.125).

Leach (2014) expresses similar concerns but her focus is on adult and community education. Leach believes that by making adult and community education part of the 'tertiary landscape' (p.705) it is now firmly steered by educational policy which means its role is severely narrowed and 'its emphasis has shifted from empowerment, equity, active citizenship to preparation for employment and skills for work'. Alheit and Dausien (2002) also caution on 'the new educational order' (Field, 2006, p.133) which has lifelong learning at its centre and where there are greater inequalities 'than was ever the case in bygone industrial societies' (p.8) especially with regard to gender, class and age.

This governmental control on how and what to learn has reflections of Hobbes' Leviathan (1651) where, in order to maintain a viable working society there must be a substitute/artifice in the form of the state which will have absolute authority and the power to 'punish deviants' if they threaten the stability of the

society (Stringham, 2007, p.341). Whilst we are not quite at the stage of punishing those who do not engage in lifelong (l)earning (Edwards, 1999), the current policy direction is in danger of pushing the agenda for education in a direction which reduces choice for students when they become neo-liberal 'manipulatable [men]' (Olssen, 1996, p. 137) and where adult learners who 'never had the chance to learn how to learn will not make any effort to acquire new skills late in the life course' (Alheit and Dausien, 2002, p.8). The learning society has become part of the current economic and political discourse of global capitalism in which people are human resources to be developed through lifelong learning, or discarded and retrained if their job is redundant. Education has, therefore, become both the 'cause' of the inability of corporations to recruit employees who have the necessary knowledge and skill to perform in the competitive knowledge-based labour market and, paradoxically, the 'hope' that these corporations have that they can produce new commodities in a more efficient manner. In this, the educational system is both 'the problem and the solution to the economic crisis' (Shor, 1986, p.108). Likewise, social inclusion and lifelong learning have become conjoined as '...social inclusion through economic inclusion through lifelong (l)earning' (Edwards, 1999) becomes the mantra. The concept that 'freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human' (MacPherson, 1962, p.264) appears to be disregarded. I will take this point of freedom a stage further as we now move on to discuss social inclusion as it appears as the nebulous twin of lifelong learning in much of the policy literature.

## **2.4 Social Inclusion**

Social inclusion has been put forward by the last Labour government (DfEE, 1998 & 1999) as the route to economic development on the one hand and also the answer to unemployment through education. This offer of learning opportunities, it was thought, would allow for a more inclusive society where those at the margins of society could avail themselves of the opportunities for learning and through this find a route into employment. This sounds perfectly plausible and as Edwards et al. (2001) remind us, lifelong learning is generally constructed as a 'good' thing, a sign of virtue (p.418). Edwards et al. (2001) are encouraging us to look behind the policy on social inclusion and question its



validity. They remind us that the issue of inclusion relies on exclusion to validate it and that there should always be freedom of choice for individuals. Edwards et al. (2001) go on to say:

policies on lifelong learning are themselves in part premised on the contribution education and training can make to promoting an inclusive society (p.417).

However, as we discussed above, education is not something that can be put on like a cloak - the ability for people to engage in learning requires confidence, maturity, safety and economic and emotional security. As mentioned before (p.30), 'Hungry, homeless, desperate, threatened, sick, or frightened adults are less likely to be able to participate'. (Mezirow, 2000, pp.15-16). This is significant for this study: The group I am concerned with are women who have returned to study as adults and whose identity as learners are often unformed and hesitant. Crossan et al. (2003) suggest that:

people whose identity as learners may be fractured, or informed by periods of absence from and possible antipathy towards education and training, are not likely to create learning careers in an unbroken, linear manner (p.57).

Crossan et al. (2003) go on to describe how those who have had fractured learning careers often suffer from a lack of confidence with regard to engaging in the process of learning, and in some cases there may be even be hostility towards educational institutions. 'If they do become involved, their commitment to the process may well be tentative, and engagement, if it does develop, will only emerge over time' (p.58).

This complexity and development over time does not appear to be recognised in the policy literature. Reardon (2011) notes similar concerns to Naidoo (2007) when he warns us that the academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor has widened significantly over the past fifty years and that 'the achievement gap between high and low income families is roughly 30 to 40 per cent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier' (p.1). Reardon's research was in America but there appears to be similar trend in the UK with the Guardian reporting that 'just one in three

disadvantaged students hit the government's GCSE pass target, compared to over 60 per cent of their better-off peers (Adams, 2015, online).

## 2.5 Conclusion

It appears therefore that, despite interventions, the gap is widening between those with access to more and more education and those with little or none, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. In 1972, Sir Keith Joseph referred to a 'cycle of deprivation' (Welshman, 2005) whereby inadequate people are said to become inadequate parents who rear inadequate children. Coffield and Sarsby (1980) questioned this concept and changed the metaphor from the *cycle* of deprivation to the *web* of deprivation, which they believe more accurately depicts the dense network of psychological, social, medical, historical and economic factors which have either created or perpetuated the problem. It is therefore not enough to show increased spending on education in a very narrow area - other social factors (poverty in particular) need to be addressed in order to allow equity and access, and a thorough analysis of where the money is going and how effective/ineffective it is, requires to be carried out.

If the allocation of public resources is not challenged and we accept that the market led approach which holds that competition will lead to greater efficiency is taken at face value, the inevitable outcome will be a shift from an academic to a financial criterion. Success will no longer be based on contribution to knowledge but measured according to 'the number of student 'customers' captured and the degree of research income generated' (Naidoo, 2007, p.5). This narrowing of what constitutes learning and who defines it should concern us as adult educators, not just from a liberal democratic stance but from a futures perspective. The significance of this for the future of education cannot be downplayed as we recognise that academics now have to respond to their 'paymaster' who are various and supranational - the OECD, UNESCO and the EU, to name but a few. These bodies play a role in influencing policy and appear to favour the market-led approach which reduces the freedom and autonomy teachers and lecturers have in terms of what and how they teach. The market is thus shaping education rather than education shaping the world

(Samuel, 2011). In the HE context students are now identified 'as 'customers', a development that further reinforces the idea that a degree is a commodity that (hopefully) can be exchanged for a job rather than as a liberal education that prepares students for life' (Willmott 1995 p.1002). There are winners and losers in this new language of learning as we see government spending on adult education reduced by 40 per cent since 2010 (Okolosie, 2015). Again, the winners under the new policy are the privileged and the losers are the poor, female and those who have previously fallen through the educational cracks. The requirement for the political lens to move from a competitive one to one which focusses on the social or cultural good is now more critical than ever.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Literature Review

#### 3.1 Introduction

Studying the ‘underdog’ has a long history in qualitative research (Gouldner, 1968, Jensen & Lauritsen, 2005). To some degree this research follows this paradigm in that, as mentioned in Chapter One, the women who participated in this study left school with little or no qualifications and accessed education later in life. However, where this research differs from a focus on the ‘underdog’ is in its emphasis on success in second chance education. I will refer to this as persistence in second chance education, as the women who participated in this research had many barriers to contend with and many instances where giving up would have been easy. Despite this they persevered to gain the qualification they set out to get and in some instances exceeded their original aims and intentions.

In exploring second chance learning for women I make use of the concept of liminality within a feminist narrative framework to understand the process of transformative education for the women involved and how they recounted their stories. This research is concerned with the women’s journeys, the disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) they encounter, the emotions and experiences that motivate and often thwart their attempts at learning and how this impacts on the actions that they take and how they look back and talk about the process of studentship.

This section should not be seen as an all-encompassing literature review which sits on its own but, rather as a framework which outlines the literature relating to the macro themes in order to give a background and set the context for the research. I touched on transformative education in Chapters One and Two and this is continued here as the overarching theme of this dissertation. Liminality is looked at in the context of change through the student journey. Persistence in second chance education is examined in order to learn about the less tangible issues which students face in their attempt to access education the second time round. There are further sub-themes introduced in the analysis section which

attempt to deepen and develop the topics in this section. The policy section in Chapter Two also informs the literature review as do the sub-themes that are developed in the methodology and analysis section. Finally the section on reflexivity in Chapter Eight is another important part of the literature as it deepens and problematises my own educational journey and professional development.

### 3.2 Crossing the Threshold

Throughout this chapter I will examine transformative education as a process of crossing a threshold into a space where there is freedom to imagine and explore and transform (Meyers and Land, 2005; Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx, 1997; Dewey, 1933). As mentioned in Chapter One, I will use Turner's (1969) concept of the liminal space - on the threshold but neither here nor there - as a heuristic tool in examining the process of studentship (Field, 2012). Interestingly, Mezirow (1978a) in a similar way to Turner (1967) draws on existential thinkers, Hegel and Marx and refers to a cycle with three components: alienation, reframing and contractual solidarity. In Chapter One I mentioned Van Gennep's (1909) three-part structure: separation, the liminal period and finally reassimilation as the initiate came back into society with their new identity. Mezirow's concept of alienation is similar to Van Gennep's 'separation' in that it is alienation from prescribed social roles whereas reframing is where the learner restructures their conception of reality and their place in it. This involves a redefinition of problems and a recognition of the need for action and an associated change in values. The concept of agency comes through this stage when the learner 'recognizes the possibility of effecting change through one's own initiative' (Mezirow and Rose, 1978, p.105). Finally the 'reassimilation' referred to here as 'contractual solidarity' is the stage where '[i]t becomes possible to participate again in society - or in its reconstruction - but on one's own inner-directed terms as defined by the new meaning perspective' (*ibid*).

This idea of 'one's own inner-directed terms' (*ibid*) takes in Cranton's (2006) view that it is the learner who chooses to transform, demonstrating what Allard (2005) refers to as 'fields of action' i.e. a field in which she could exert a degree of agency and autonomy' (p.730). It is my hope that examining 'second chance'

education from this perspective will give a voice to women who wish to change the status quo and who dare to dream of a different future which often involves an iconoclastic stance with regard to historic images of failure and oppression.

The conceptual lens through which I view transformative learning is that of liminality. Firstly, I will examine the liminal nature of the student journey as outlined in Chapter One and secondly the role of the government as ‘trickster’ (Turner, 1967) as they influence and imbue policy with an economic mandate which is far removed from the liberal view<sup>4</sup> of education and where democracy is traded off against economic efficiency (Lauder, 1991, p.417). I mentioned Biesta and Tedder’s (2008) discussion on the rise of the ‘learning paradigm’ earlier. Biesta and Tedder remind us of the link between policy discourse and the allocation of public funding for adult education and thus the availability of what constitutes ‘valuable’ adult education. This links back to Chapter One where I discuss Coffield’s (1999) discussion of learning as social control and Bernstein’s (1970) discussion of how society ‘values’ some above others as it deflects the argument from the social and economic structures and places it firmly with the individual, families and communities. Biesta and Tedder (2008, p.1) also question the rise of the ‘learning paradigm’ and the struggle over the definition of what constitutes ‘worthwhile’ learning and who is allowed to define what this is. I briefly discussed in Chapter Two how learning occurs formally and informally and Biesta and Tedder (2008) touch on this when they remind us that it is important to highlight:

the broad range of processes and practices that occur in the lives of adults so as to show that there is more to learning than what is acknowledged in the economic definition of lifelong learning (p.1).

I write this literature review at a time when the Scottish Government’s educational focus is firmly on the 16 to 19 age group (Scottish Government, 2012). I briefly expressed my concerns in Chapter One about the post 16 framework and the move away from lifelong learning as it was articulated by Faure et al. (1972) to ‘the new educational order’ (Field, 2006, p.133) with the focus on a particular age group rather than on adult education in general.

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<sup>4</sup> I am again referring to the view of liberal education as discussed in chapter two.

I will return to this throughout this chapter as policy is significant in terms of whose voice is heard and whose opinions, rights and desires are privileged over others. Conroy (2004) discusses the ‘conceit’ that undergirds much of government policy and reminds us that this is where the danger lies. In this lack of awareness lies a dangerous implicit acceptance which using Turner’s (1967) imagery can be charismatic and which can pull people in its wake through its very plausible rationality. However, as with much of government policy, when we examine it more closely this very rationality is called into question as we look for research which firstly, supports the change in focus from adult education per se to the 16-19 age group and secondly, supports the link between training (which is what the new focus amounts to) and economic development. My main point here is in the implicit power of policy and how concepts become normalised and remain uncontested through the persuasiveness of the language and that by remaining ignorant of the impact of policy on transformative education (Mezirow, 2000) for adult women, we have effectively bought into the policy and become agents of the change ourselves. Borrowes (1997) brings in the trickster imagery and reminds us that the trickster takes partial ideas and assists people in kindling their understandings and the unformed argument becomes formed in a particular way. An awareness and understanding of this may help us to see how and where power and rhetoric combine in a seemingly simplistic and natural way but which ultimately is extremely powerful, as it persuades us to share a particular world view through the pervasiveness of the language (White, 1984).

### **3.3 Persistence in Adult Women’s Education**

The UHI Strategic Plan 2012-17 recognises the importance of transformation through education, when it lays out its purpose as: ‘To have a transformative impact on the development and prospects of the region, its people and its communities’ (p.5). Despite this aspiration the UHI has the lowest retention rates in Scotland according to published statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Accessed November 2013). The UHI recognise the requirement to ‘increase student retention and progression rates to the national benchmark for comparator institutions’ (UHI Strategic Plan, 2012-17, p.9). It

could be argued that any institution which offers flexible access to higher education for non-traditional participants is inherently more likely to have lower retention and completion rates. Nevertheless, it is obliged to provide appropriate support to promote student success. Thomas (2012) concluded that this support should not be targeted on the basis of student entry characteristics as they are not a reliable indicator. Instead it should be mainstreamed so it reaches all. This is a move away from a 'student deficit approach' to an 'institutional transformation' model (Thomas, 2012, p.74). Systems are therefore required to monitor participation and performance to identify students at risk of withdrawing and action taken when 'at risk' behaviour is observed. Thomas (2012) and Anderson (2011) both stress the importance of accurate information to improve student persistence: information about the rates of engagement and persistence of students at the course level and information about what support measures students actually value and their perceptions of how well this support is delivered. However, as mentioned in Chapter Two, much of the focus has been on why students are not achieving. In contrast to the approach, this research examines why they stay, or persist, in second chance education.

Seidman (2005, p.14) defines student retention as the 'ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation'. Resilience in education is part of this journey which is conceptualised by Seidman (2005) as the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from the beginning through to the completion of their degree. Steinman (2007) believes that *persistence* refers to the desires and actions of a student to remain enrolled whereas *retention* refers to the ability of an institution to keep a student enrolled (pp. 27-28). Steinman posits the view that as the outcomes are identical, the terms may be used interchangeably. However Hinsliff-Smith, Gates and Leducq (2012) remind us that retention has a more institutional dimension than persistence and wish therefore to make a distinction between the two terms. Reason (2009) also believe that it is a mistake to conflate the two because the percentage of students which colleges and universities retain is a quality indicator, which is used to indicate how the institution is performing. 'Persistent, on the other hand, is an individual phenomenon - students persist to a goal' (Reason, 2009, p.660). Reason (2009) goes on to point out that, keeping



a focus on this helps us to concentrate on the wide number of influences such as student pre-college characteristics and experience which shape student persistence rather than discrete conditions, interventions and reforms. Whilst this model may be useful in that it highlights the multiplicity of factors that may contribute to persistence in education it ignores the complexity of these factors. However, one area which I feel should hold a higher profile when it comes to understanding persistence in education is that of dispositions. Reason (2009) draws our attention to the lack of research into disposition as a clue to student persistence. Reason defines disposition as ‘personal, academic and occupational goals; achievement, motivation, and readiness to change’ (p.662). Much of the work on disposition is usually attributed to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who used the term ‘habitus’ for lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action (Bourdieu, 1984). Field (2012), recognised disposition as a central feature of habitus. He describes it as ‘the variety of enduring orientations and forms of ‘know-how’ that people pick up from their social experiences and everyday lives’ (p.8). In a similar manner Morgan (2013b) described habitus as ‘... a set of internalised dispositions that reflect cultural norms and values and guide individual or group thought processes and behaviour’ (p.3). Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) bring in the educational dimension when they interpret habitus as a synonym for clusters of attitudes which can influence engagement with education and training. McMillan and Reed (1994) in a similar way to Reason (2009) believe that dispositions such as, self-efficacy, goal orientation, personal responsibility, optimism, internal expectations and coping ability will influence resilience, especially with ‘at risk’ students and that such dispositions should be encouraged through a supportive environment which encourages and recognises achievement.

Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) raise an important point when they note that ‘dispositions inevitably reflect the social context in which they are acquired’ (p.109). This should be borne in mind when considering the link between dispositions and resilience. However, to get back to Reason’s (2009) model; by singling out dispositions, I do not wish to ignore the importance of socio-demographic traits and academic preparation and performance (Reason, 2009) but I do wish to place more emphasis on dispositions as the less tangible aspect of the students’ academic journey and therefore worthy of study. However, I

am aware that this can never be a blueprint; all that informs the student is malleable, changeable and subject to many variables such as health, financial status, childcare issue, marital status to name but a few, which may contribute to or detract from resilience. Where this model may be helpful is in analysing and attempting to draw out the complexity of the student journey and perhaps give some insights into what they value and how it contributes to resilience and persistence in second chance education.

Research on persistence by Hinsliff-Smith et al. (2012) revealed an interesting picture. Hinsliff-Smith et al. (2012) researched persistence in a nursing programme where mature adults accessed the programme through an access course. Their findings indicated that there were three main areas which were significant in helping students persist with their learning. These were, 1) coping strategies; 2) pre-entry advice and guidance and 3) pre-entry institutional interventions. Hinsliff-Smith et al. (2012) noted that their findings were at odds with what they expected and noted that levels of persistence remained high when compared to younger traditional entrants to university despite the presence of 'marginal incomes, low self-esteem and academic confidence' (p.1). Hinsliff Smith et al. (2012) also note the importance of career advice in making informed choices about their programme of study as well as a range of pre-entry interventions which the students felt had helped them when they were in danger of dropping out. The interventions included meeting academics, guidance on completing personal statements and application forms, financial seminars, mock interviews and structured visits to the university. Other coping strategies were associated with childcare, family support and balancing academic and domestic demands.

Maynard and Martinez (2002) remind us of the importance of understanding this support network. Their research revealed strong links between student persistence and the organisational culture of learning and teaching. Maynard and Martinez (2002) identified some key characteristics of high performing and low performing programmes. They found that teachers of programmes with high retention and achievement.

- Work in autonomous, self-monitoring teams
- Have complementary skills and commitment to students
- Respond positively to staff development and management processes
- Recruit students with integrity
- Have a relatively negative view of students' abilities but make every effort to motivate and inspire them
- Identify at-risk students early and address literacy and numeracy needs
- Believe in preparing student-centred schemes of work
- Have high quality induction programmes
- Ensure assessment is rigorous and that students have a clear understanding of the assessment procedure and criteria and enable student to experience early success
- Value students as individuals
- Particularly value student feedback and observation of classes (p.5).

This link between student persistence and the culture of learning and teaching is an important one for us as adult educators. Anderson (2011) underlines this when he concluded that any interventions to improve persistence, retention and success must begin with the development of staff abilities to address programme weaknesses as opposed to looking to address perceived weaknesses or deficits in the students themselves. Thomas (2012) agrees that the importance of creating an organisational culture of belonging, where students are engaged in the academic sphere through student-centred learning and teaching and co-curricular opportunities, which enable all students to persist and succeed, is a key factor and that learning opportunities should be varied and based on 'real-world learning' (p.31). However, whilst these support strategies are important, they tend to ignore the importance of the personal characteristics of the individual students. Reay, et al. (2009) believes that personal characteristics reflect strongly on student persistence. Their research uncovered a range of experiences of fitting in and standing out in higher education for working class students in UK universities. For some people this involved combining a sense of belonging to both middle-class higher education and working-class homes, with confusion about their identity as a student. Research on working class girls has also emphasised the gendered nature of the constraints on their occupational choices (Deem, 1978; Sharpe, 1994; Skeggs, 1997, Crossan et al. 2003). This topic will be revisited in Chapters Five to Seven as we see evidence of this from the interviews.

### 3.4 Adult Student Identity

According to Kasworm (2005), the majority of the research on student identity has been on the traditional young adult and has ignored the 'complex maturation and experiential base of lifeworld-shaped identities of the adult collegiate student' (p.3). This relates to Lawler's (2008) view that as well as our personal identity we also have a social identity, as members of one or more groups but also that we recognise with Kasworm (2005) that identities are connected and often fluid as they move from one sphere of life into another. Howarth (2002) reminds us that 'identities are *continually* being negotiated and challenged at an inter-subjective level' (p.19) and that this is informed through the representation of others in our socially claimed group. This is clear in Kasworm's (2005) work where she questions the nature of adult learner identity in an intergenerational collegiate classroom. Kasworm uses the metaphor of the 'connected classroom' (p.2) to represent the social and psychological space for learning which connects one's adult life to one's academic studies and adult student lives. Kasworm (2005) recognises the complexity of this for the adult women returners and suggest that for the adult student there is a work of co-construction occurring where adult student identity and agency are 'anchored within these students' contextual beliefs of the mission and goals of community colleges as places of 'second chances' (p.6). Reay et al. (2009) report similar findings. They use the concept of 'institutional habitus' (p.108) to examine the experiences of working-class students' at university and posit the view that working-class students do not have the same feeling of entitlement which their middle-class peers have. This Reay et al. (2009) believe, means that working-class students and those from ethnic minorities in the UK are more likely to go to post-1992 universities because of a closer sense of identification to the institution and other students than they would have with the pre-1992 universities. Later work by Kasworm (2010) examines the experiences of working-class adult students accessing HE at a research intensive university and notes that 'adult student identity is multi-layered, multi-sourced, evolving, and at times, paradoxical in beliefs of the self, position, relationships, and learning-contexts (p.143). The desire to fit in for adult students is evident in both Kasworm's (2010) and Reay et al.'s. (2009) study and this will be explored in more detail when we analyse the interviews in Chapters Six and Seven. It is also

an area worthy of further research as we attempt to increase retention from previously unrepresented groups (Yancey, Ortega and Kumanyika (2006) and challenge the ideology of power and privilege in the pre-1992 universities. Such ideology reproduces the view that universities are for the privileged and learning in such locations 'allows the holders to enter into the elite, which reproduces social exclusion to the benefit of that elite' (Leahy, 2012, p. 169). Williams and Filippakou (2010) investigate the elitism of the pre-1992 universities based on 'Who's Who' membership and suggest that UK HE should be viewed as a series of concentric circles with elite institutions at the centre and a series of circles of increasingly wide bands of universities and colleges surrounding the elite with those furthest away from the centre having the least value as far as setting graduates on an elite career is concerned.

Leahy (2012) draws on Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and adds another dimension to the consideration of habitus and field when she suggests that the boundaries of a field may be subject to change and that the 'native' members 'develop and re-develop their feel for the game to prevent new players from entering the field' (p.170). This is a concern for adult women's education and one which is echoed by Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) when they indicate that working-class and minority ethnic students are more likely to attend post-1992 universities and also that there is a gender issue with women also more likely to attend post-1992 universities (Leathwood, 2004).

This perpetuation of exclusion for women is one we will see many facets of as we examine their educational 'choices' in the interviews that follow. Despite this the women appear to have embraced the identity of student as something that was collective and positive but also individual in which they were agents with power within the field (Bourdieu, 1984). Castells (2010) reminds us that identities become 'identities only when and if social actors internalize them, and construct their meaning round this internalization' (p.7). This can be difficult when students feel they do not fit in and where they have issues with low self-esteem and time constraints (Studdard, 2002). This relates to my earlier discussion above about students not fitting in and also to Bourdieu's (1990) discussion of habitus and field where Bourdieu posits that when the social field and the habitus do not match the individual feels like a 'fish out of water'

(Leahy, 2012, p.176). The adult women student is therefore going through a disconcerting phase where their identity is changing and where they feel betwixt and between as we will see in the analysis of the interviews that follow.

Jenkins (2014) argues that identity is not what one has but what one does and defines it as 'the human capacity- rooted in language - to know who's who (and hence what's what)' (p.6). Jenkins also notes the link between identity and emotion and what we relate to. Howarth (2002) makes the link between positive social identities and self-esteem and believes that understanding the impact which others' representations have on the construction of identity is crucial in understanding the changing nature of identities in today's world. Howarth believes that identification and re-presentation are 'delicately intertwined processes of one's collaborative struggle to understand, and so construct, the world and one's position within it' (p.20). This is interesting when we consider Maynard and Martinez's (2002) points above on the link between student persistence and a positive culture of learning and teaching and also their view that a sense of belonging from the students and the staff is a key feature for improving retention and achievement. Thomas' (2012) review of successful retention interventions in the UK higher education revealed that a sense of belonging was a key feature of persistence. The key aspects of this sense of belonging, according to Thomas are:

- Supportive peer relations;
- Meaningful interaction between staff and students;
- Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; and
- An HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals (pp.14-15).

In a similar vein, Smith (2003) drawing on Lave and Wenger (1991) examine the cognitive processes and conceptual structures involved. They ask: 'What kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?' Learning, they believe, involves participation in a community of practice where knowledge is constructed through the perspectives of others (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). Knowledge is thus co-constructed and negotiated on the one hand, and situated in the participant's professional practice on the other. This concept of belonging, meaningful group membership and an evolving positive

identity appears to be a dominant theme in all accounts but perhaps more explicitly in Thomas' (2012) account who notes that having a strong sense of belonging to HE, through engagement which 'is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose that all students participated in' (p.12) was an important factor. Goodyear and Ellis (2007, p.340) emphasise the social context of learning and state that: '...a great deal of learning and performance is influenced - sometimes subtly and sometimes in more powerful ways - by the social and physical context'. This is strongly related to the theory of social capital to which we now turn.

### **3.5 Defining Social Capital**

I briefly mentioned human capital in Chapter Two and the link between developing human capital and economic development. I will now briefly outline a linked concept; that of social capital. The concept of social capital has had a long history but it is over the last three decades that it has emerged as one of the most prominent concepts in social science. The origin of the term is attributed to a number of people. However the first usage of the terms seems to have been with Lyda Judson Hanifan's discussions of rural school community centres (Hanifan, 1916). Hanifan used the term to describe 'those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people' (p.130). Hanifan was particularly concerned with the cultivation of good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among those that 'make up a social unit'. Bourdieu (1984) and Coleman (1988) developed the theory by examining the social context. Bourdieu, in the 1970s related it to social theory and used it to describe how membership of certain communities could be beneficial to individuals. Coleman, in the 1980s, linked it to educational theory and used it as a way of describing a resource which pertains to individuals as a result of their social ties. However over the last fifteen to twenty years, much of the debate has centred round the Harvard Political Scientist, Robert D Putnam's research. Putnam (1995) defined social capital as:

the features of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (p.66).

In all interpretations there is a suggestion of surplus value from the investment. Lin (1999) emphasises this link between capital and investment and points to the work of Karl Marx as a way of understanding the surplus value generated. In a similar way to viewing income as a means to purchase a commodity which benefits the individual firstly and the group secondly, social capital's power lies in the collective and in utilising good will and pursuing shared objectives. Putnam and Coleman saw a link between the concept of social capital and that of human capital which also suggests a surplus through investment in education. The concept of 'human capital' is usually attributed to Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964). Becker (1992) defines human capital as 'the skills, education, health and training of individuals' (p.1). As mentioned earlier, human capital appears to have at its heart individual responsibility and the importance of investing in one's own education. Social capital, on the other hand, has more of a community focus. Schuller and Bamford (2000) touch on this when they describe social capital as:

..the mutual reciprocity and trust that exists in the community... It is social capital that enhances communities' ability to manage the economic and human capital. In communities with a high level of social capital .... Each person is seen as being capable of providing something of value to other members of the community (p.7).

It also appears that those with access to a high degree of social capital often also belong to other advantageous social networks. The link between being better off financially and the ability to eat more nutritiously, live in a cleaner environment and have access to better education is clear. So whilst we may hold with Putnam's assertion that where social capital exists 'trust and social networks flourish, individuals, firms, neighborhoods, and even nations prosper economically' (Putnam, 2000, pp. 319-325), we do accept this with caution and an awareness that there are other complex social factors also at play. Becker (1998) reminds us of the importance of family. 'It [family] is the foundation of a good society and *of economic success*' (italics mine). He goes on to say 'to understand human capital, you have to go back to the family, because it is families that are concerned about their children and try, with whatever resources they have, to promote their children's education and values (p. 3). Putnam echoes this when he discusses how child development is powerfully



shaped by social capital: 'Trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group, and larger community have far reaching effects on their opportunities and choices, and hence on their behaviour and development' (Putnam, 2000, pp. 296-306). However, I would again sound a note of caution here as not all families try to promote positive experiences for their children. Families in themselves do not automatically foster good relationships. It is the essence of what actually happens in families and how relationships are formed and developed that is the important factor here.

In his article 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', Coleman (1988) touches on the complexity of this relationship between social capital and families when he discusses how social capital is used in the creation of human capital. In his study he tried to demonstrate how access to social capital in the family and in the community affected the educational development of its youth. Coleman believed that 'social capital was not a single entity, but a variety of different entities' (Schuller & Bamford, 2000, p.2). However these different entities had two elements in common. Firstly, they not only allow the members of the 'social organisation' to behave in a certain way but facilitated the members' actions. Secondly, there was some form of social structure. This social structure had one purpose, but an important aspect of it was a mutual sharing and connectivity among members. I will develop this further in Chapter Seven as it links to transformative education to which I now turn.

### **3.6 Transformative Education**

Mezirow (2003, p.58) defines transformative learning as:

Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference - sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) - to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change.

Mezirow (1991) believes that transformative learning is the most significant developmental task for adults and the goal for all adult educators should therefore be to help adult learners to transform. The outcome of this transformation according to Mezirow (2000) is independent thinking and central

to this process is that of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991). Learners should be encouraged to critically reflect on their assumptions and then either change their perspective or consciously reinforce their previous views (Cranton, 2006).

This concept of perspective transformation and possible self-transformation for the learner inevitably means changing their 'meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions)' (Mezirow, 1991, p.167) and engaging in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p.167). This however, can be a very painful and isolating experience as they negotiate their identity anew and where there is often an incompatibility with the learners' new identity and that of their family and friends. It may therefore be 'contested and thus has to constantly be re-assessed and re-negotiated under new social power relationships' (Norton, 2013, p.195). Turner (1969) brings in the concept of liminality as he outlines the space where uncertainty reigns yet where perspective transformation occurs when he states:

If liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutiny for the central values and axioms of culture in which it occurs - one where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are undone (p.156).

If we consider the outcomes of this for adult women returners we can see the significance for our role as adult educators; the ability to cope and instigate change in one's self and others; transformed and meaningful relationships; an increased desire to engage in education; better career trajectories and generally, a better quality of life (Bennetts, 2003). According to King (2009) perspective transformation is an example of 'significant learning' and part of this lies in the recognition of the centrality of emotions. King (2009) believes that significant learning challenges learners to reach their full potential whereby:

academic learning challenges are not restricted to objective facts; instead, new knowledge interfaces with the individual on a personal basis....it is as though the world opens before them again for the first time' (p.6).

Mezirow (1985) developed his theory of perspective transformation to take in the concept of self-directed learning. A self-directed learner participates freely in dialogue in order to test perspectives against others and make adjustments where necessary. More recently, Mezirow (2006) defined the process of transformative learning as a rational process of learning within awareness. While recognising most of the process of learning takes place unconsciously, Mezirow et al. appear more comfortable acknowledging the transformative learning process within our conscious awareness, 'that saves transformative learning from becoming reduced to faith, prejudice, vision or desire' (p.133). In a similar way to King (2009), Boyd and Myers (1988) explore the more affective, emotional and spiritual aspects of transformative learning. Similarly, Dirkx (1997) refers to the process of transformative learning as a process that ultimately seeks to 'integrate the mind and soul' and acknowledges the affective and emotional aspects. Yorks and Kasl (2006) believe that feelings are integral to this transformation and:

...not only must they [feelings] be dealt with when they arise, but feelings must be intentionally evoked and engaged when the educational purpose is to foster transformative learning' (p.46).

This is significant for this study as emotions feature strongly in feminist thought, 'including epistemological inquiries into the emotions as modes of embodied knowing' (Cates, 2003, p.326). Cates reminds us that emotions have a cognitive dimension, involving thought, judgements and evaluations. In a similar manner Nussbaum (2001) reminds us that '[e]motions shape the landscapes of our social and mental lives' (p.1). In a later work Nussbaum (2013) argues for the centrality of cultivating emotions as a foil against the darker sides of our personalities and argues that emotions 'are intelligent responses to the perception of value' (p.253) and by cultivating emotions, rather than regarding them with suspicion, we should recognise their role as an essential part of human intelligence rather than supports for intelligence. Nussbaum (2001, 2013) believes that an understanding of this can lead to, not only a more just and compassionate world, but also to a deeper understanding of emotional development.

Part of this understanding means grappling with the ‘messy material of grief and love, anger and fear, and the role these tumultuous experiences play in the good and the just’ (Nussbaum, 2001, pp.1-2). An understanding of this can help us as supporters of transformative learning as we engage with, what can often be an intensely threatening emotional experience as learners navigate their way through their emotions and situate their learning in new communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1986) which are constantly shifting and changing and their identity and safety needs (Maslow, 2014) are often called into question. Crucial to supporting this journey is an understanding of the role of supportive and encouraging relationships. Taylor and Cranton (2012) believe that in facilitating transformative learning, educators should push learners out of their comfort zone toward their ‘learning edge’. In doing this, educators may be consciously pushing the learner to ‘the edge of knowing’ (Berger, 2004, p.338) which is ‘the most precarious - and important - transformative space’ (*ibid*). In this transformative space adult learners may find themselves in a liminal space between knowing and unknowing which is constantly moving and being redefined and where the learner is constantly stretching the limits of their knowing. Understanding this, according to Berger, is of central importance to our work as transformative educators.

Malkki and Green (2014) develop the emotional aspects of learning. They refer to the emotions generated by this process of uncertainty as ‘edge emotions, as they appear when we are forced out of our comfort zones or are at the edges of it’ (p.9). This is a critical point for us as adult educators as, on the one hand we understand the importance of encouraging edge emotions and the inherent riskiness and questioning of identity implicit in this which may result in transformative learning. However, on the other hand, we also have a nurturing role which builds trust and care and promotes the creation of sensitive relationships among learners (Taylor, 1998). This tension between pushing the learner to discover and nurturing them to build confidence and overcome previous negative experiences is a delicate one. Taylor (1998) believes that the relationship between the learner and educator is crucial if transformative learning is to occur. For education to be transformative, educators should be role models, co-inquirers and critical friends, experienced co-learners, respectful guides and compassionate helpers (*ibid*). Openness and a willing to

disclose personal experience are therefore essential characteristics for adult educators (Taylor and Cranton, 2012). Brookfield (2009, p.134) advises that as adult educators we should be 'as transparent as possible of one's motives, agenda, and directions' and that we should be constantly questioning our own practice - '....before I ask any student to do something, I first ask how am I trying to do it' (Brookfield, 2009, p.131).

The important point is that the adult learner should be challenged and changed in fundamental and significant ways. The dilemma that presents itself involves the person seeing themselves - perhaps for the first time - and, importantly, taking action to work towards a solution. In some cases no action may be taken but this will also be a choice and it is 'the choosing, the deciding, that is crucial for personal development' (Mezirow, 1978a, p.105). Schon (1995) used the analogy of a performance to conceptualise elements of this choosing and deciding. Schon recognises how surprise triggers reflection, both to the surprising outcome and to the knowing-in-action that led to it.

It is as though the performer asked himself, 'What is this?' and at the same time 'What understandings and strategies of mine have led me to produce this? The performer restructures his understanding of the situation ...On the basis of his restructuring, he [finds] a new surprise that calls for a new round of reflection and experiment' (p.35).

Schon (1995, p.36) referring to Dewey (1910) puts it this way, 'the proper test of a round of inquiry is not only 'Have I solved the problem?' but 'Do I like the new problems I've created?'. In a similar way Field (2012) uses liminality 'where actors are granted a certain bounded freedom to explore and experiment with new identities' (p.8). Both Schon and Dewey consider the exploratory aspects of learning. This is a key point and one which relates closely to Mezirow et al.'s (1975) publication which highlights the 'significance of adult education on a personal level in helping adults acquire a new sense of meaning, self-concept and direction in their lives' (p.15). This, I believe is a central goal for adult educators and one which has the potential to open new possibilities through which learners may gain a clearer reflection of themselves in the process of learning and possibly loosen any negative attachment to their stories and thus help them to move on.

It should be mentioned that Mezirow's work has come under criticism for concentrating on the individual and failing to recognise the role of social change and personal transformation, where the individual and social transformation are inherently linked (Taylor and Jarecke, 2009). This is a point which should be borne in mind when we consider how race, gender, class and culture impact on learning (Taylor, 1998). Freire (1996) argues that all educational policies and practices have social, political and cultural implication; in other words, they either perpetuate exclusion and injustice or assist learners in constructing conditions for social transformation. This, as I hope I have evidenced in the last chapter is a key point for adult women returners who are being increasingly marginalised through current government policy. Despite such constraints their narratives or 'inner scripts' (Plunkett, 2001) propelled them forward often in very difficult situations. They were thus displaying what Freire (2001, p.35) describes as 'conscientization'. Freire defines conscientization as 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions' in order to 'take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (*ibid*). Conscientization required developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action and this interlocking of reflection and action Freire termed 'praxis'. According to Freire (2001) adult learners can utilise knowledge for their own emancipation through challenging preconceived notions and expectations and critically reflecting on them. Askew and Carnell (1998) draw on Habermas and state that 'reflective activity with critical intent is ... the heart of the process which frees the human mind' (p.64).

English (2013) also draws out the importance of reflection when she argues that discontinuity and struggle are essential features of learning. She makes a distinction between the objective and the subjective character. 'The 'objective character' comprises all the choices one has made thus far in one's life. This side of oneself is objective because it is already formed through choices that, to a large extent have become habits and routines. The 'subjective character' refers to the reflective self, who judges the objective self, potentially critiques past choices and creates new rules for future conduct' (English, 2013, p.7). English believes that if we make a conscious

decision to act differently from what we have in the past we are ‘following insights of our subjective side’ (*ibid*).

Mezirow (2009) discussion on Habermas’ distinction between instrumental and communicative learning has similarities to English’s subjective and objective character. Instrumental learning according to Mezirow et al. (1990) is task oriented problem solving which involves a good degree of reflection as we learn through trial and error and consider different ways of doing things.

Communicative learning, on the other hand, is less about learning to do and more about understanding the meaning of what others communicate.

Communicative learning involves ‘values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy’ (Mezirow et al. 1990, p.8). Reflection is also crucial in communicative learning as it iterates between the parts and whole of what we try to understand and searches for new meaning schemes which give validity and coherence in relation to a meaning perspective (*ibid*). Instrumental learning seeks to change the environment whereas communicative learning seeks to reach mutual understanding as a platform for action.

Brookfield (2000) builds on Freire’s work and argues that critical theory, in particular ideology critique is central to critical reflection and, by implication, transformative learning. The process of critical reflection as ideology critique focuses on enabling adult learners ‘to penetrate the givens of everyday reality to reveal the inequalities and oppression that lurk beneath’ (Brookfield, 2000, p.130). For adult learners to challenge ideology they must be aware of how it lives within them and works against them by furthering the interests of others. ‘Without this aspect of ideology critique, the process of clarifying and questioning assumptions is reflective but not necessarily critical’ (Brookfield, 2000, p129). The important point here is that transformative learning and the associated process of critical reflection as ideology critique may have the potential to enable adult learners to gain a voice and begin to challenge the roles they have up until now inhabited.

Despite Mezirow’s (1978b) initial research of women in a re-entry programme to college, more recent research on transformative learning has failed to focus

specifically on women (Irving and English, 2011). In *Woman's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1996) proposed a theory of development tracing the struggles of women to gain a voice and claim the powers of mind. Belenky and Stanton (2000) further argue that Mezirow's theory of transformation while it provided 'an elegant, detailed description of one important end point...it does not trace the many steps people take before they 'know what they know'' (p.72). There are also concerns that transformative theory overlooks the reality of adult learners' lives (*ibid*) as mentioned above.

Women may feel alienated and estranged when returning to higher education; in reaching a deeper sense of happiness difficult learning journeys are often experienced (Martin in Gouthro, 2010). Reflecting on his original research Mezirow (1978b) states 'these women are in transitions' who are 'overwhelmed, often, by doubts about their ability to function in an unfamiliar and demanding world' (p.1). I have been constantly reminded of this in my research with my students as they come in contact with their personal disorientating dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) and realise that their 'present constellation or configuration of self is inadequate' (Malkki and Green, 2014, p.7) and they 'glimpse the possibility [of] stepping into a new world' (*ibid*). Malkki and Green (2014) remind us that there is often resistance to this new world as the possibilities it offers mean disengaging with the status quo, the comfortable and the familiar and taking a '...'jump' from one existential plan to another' (p.7). This is in contrast to Mezirow's belief that one negotiates disorientating dilemmas through critical reflection which suggests that the learner is at a mature level of cognitive functioning (Merriam, 2004).

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths (2011) remind us that adults approaching the learning experience are in the middle of a process of growth, rather than at the beginning of it and because of this they bring with them a package of experience and roles which should not be ignored. Burton et al. (2011) draw on the work of Tynton (2005) who reminds us that a mature student studying at HE level is studying as an extended part of life rather than as new stage. Merrill (2004) also reminds us that the outcome of transformative learning for adults is



developmental and that it is not the process of transformative learning itself that is important but the intellectual development that emanates from it. This position very much undergirds this dissertation and with this at the forefront of my mind I will now go on to discuss the methodology.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the research process taken in this research. The methodology adopted will be discussed and the ethical issues associated with the study.

I outlined the theoretical perspective in Chapter One as it relates to my own values and assumptions. Crotty (1998) reminds us that we must be able to justify our choice of method and methodology as this is something that is closely aligned to our theoretical perspective. The methodological approaches I adopted are common within social science research generally - qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviewing is a broad term used to denote a family of interviews that share the common purpose of studying phenomena from the perspective of the respondent. Because my research is focused on feelings, attitudes and personal beliefs a qualitative inductive approach, where there was an iterative relationship between the theory and the data was the most appropriate. A feminist narrative methodology was chosen to surface the issues which are unique to women and the power dimensions which exist. Self-expression is at the centre of narrative where there is freedom to talk about difficult subjects and where issues of gender, culture and power can be freely explored. This approach ties in with my personal value system as discussed in Chapter One and shifts the power from the researcher to the researched, something which is in line with feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Griffiths (1998) draws out the importance for educational researchers to concentrate on working with rather than on 'or even for' (p.111) people who inhabit specific circumstances. Griffiths believes that this approach helps to deal with the 'arrogance presupposed in some forms of knowledge, and their implications in structures of dominance and oppression' (*ibid*). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recognise the importance of the person of the researcher as an

'instrument' whilst Denzin and Lincoln (1994) remind us that '[t]he observer had no privileged voice in the interpretations that were written' (p.9). This approach was central to my study and to the narrative approach I adopted although I do discuss limitations to this approach later in this chapter.

The intention and focus of the research was never to uncover a 'truth' or objective view of reality as, on the one hand, this was incompatible with a qualitative approach and, on the other hand, I recognised that there was a certain level of arrogance about taking this approach which was at odds with how I felt as a novice researcher. I now recognise my own becoming and unbecoming (Fox and Allan, 2013) through the process as I unravelled, re-joined, separated and relinked aspects of myself that had been - up until then - obscured and silent. I too was finding my voice.

Interestingly, although qualitative research has become more prevalent over recent years with a move to what Bron (2007, p.12) terms the 'turn to biographical methods', the definition of research according to the Oxford online dictionary remains stubbornly positivist:

The systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions (Oxford dictionaries online).

I highlight this because my journey on this EdD has been one which has led me to seek out facts as a place of safety and understanding, a place where the 'experts' who knew what they were talking about defined, clarified and codified the definitions of research. I have since discovered that sticking rigidly to a particular paradigm only serves to perpetuate the status quo and is in danger of missing out on the complexity associated with the adult woman learner. Tedder and Biesta (2009) refer to the 'biographical turn' as not only a new research methodology in the study of adult learning but also an attempt to:

bring different *dimensions* of the learning of adults into view, and to understand these dimensions in relation to transformations in late- or post-modern societies, without reducing them to such transformations. (p.1)

There has been a marked rise in the field of adult education research of the use of biographical and life history approaches. This pronounced 'turn to biographical methods' (Bron, 2007, p.12) can be understood in part as reflecting contemporary interest in working with biography as a way of constructing 'meaning and authenticity' from people's experiences of a rapidly changing modern world, but it is also a means of articulating the stories of people who may be marginalised in traditional forms of research yet whose stories may enable us to develop a more nuanced understanding of learning and educational processes (Field, 2012, p.7).

Closely related to this interlocking of power and rhetoric is the interplay between identity and how the women recounted their stories. I was keen to hear the voice of the student in a way which empowered them and allowed them to 'recapture their experience, mull it over and evaluate it' (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1995, p.19). I have therefore been acutely aware throughout this process of the importance of retelling and have tried to remain true to the issues that were important for the women interviewed. Carter (1993) reminds us that stories are 'a mode of learning that captures...the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs'. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that 'retelling...is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new direction, and new ways of doing things' (p.189). Lawler (2008) suggests that narrative gives us an opportunity to understand and place identity in its relationships with others and thus helps in understanding how people make sense of their stories:

Narrative analysis is embedded with a hermeneutic tradition on enquiry in that it is concerned with understanding: how people understand and make sense of their lives and how analysts can understand that understanding (Lawler, 2008, p.14).

This has been a key element in my own student journey as I have, in turn, sought to uncover my students' educational journeys. Part of this is what Lawler (2008), drawing on the work of Ricoeur (1991), defines as the '*plot*' in narrative analysis, '*plots are productive within the work of narrative. A plot only becomes a plot through the active work of emplotment*' (pp.14-15). Lawler continues to draw on Ricoeur who describes the three elements in emplotment as the synthesis between: many events of one story; discordance and

concordance; and two different senses of time. Lawler's point is that it is emplotment which makes the account a narrative. Thus 'identities are *produced* through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day' (p.13). Biesta & Tedder (2008) draw on the work of Bruner (1990) and suggest that '[n]arrating one(s) life story can therefore be understood as the act of constructing 'a longitudinal version of the Self' (Bruner, 1990, p.120, cited in Biesta, 2008, p.3). Biesta & Tedder (2008) also note that some people get 'caught' in their story and that this can prevent them moving on and can prevent future learning. Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler (1992) make an interesting point which links to this when they remind us that we generally gravitate towards people who will affirm our sense of self-identity. According to Swann et al. people with positive self-conceptions are more inclined to seek favourable evaluations whereas people with negative self-conceptions are more inclined to seek unfavourable evaluations. If you have a self-identity that is fragmented, fragile and negative, you may therefore seek out interactions with people who will affirm that perception (Swann et al., 1992; Hixon and Swann, 1993).

The narrative approach is useful here as we consider how, as adult educators, we can mitigate against this and help the women communicate what is important to them. Our focus in narrative inquiry is often how we can learn and move on from our stories but if a student is 'caught' in a particular and 'strong' (Tedder and Biesta, 2009) version of themselves this can be a very difficult perception to shift. I will return to this in Chapters Six and Seven, where I analyse the stories which the women recounted. The important point is that people's lived experiences are important learning events and, whilst 'learning processes can become voyages of discovery for both learners and teachers' (Alheit, 2009, p.283) we should remember that they can also be thwarted or stymied by past negative experiences. The centrality of experience should be borne in mind when we approach adult education rather than a focus on a competency based approach. Mezirow (1978a) alerts us to the dangers inherent in a competency based approach which pays little attention to the lived experiences of the adult women returner. Mezirow suggests that rather than looking for behaviour change through a competency based framework which is evaluated against certain dictated objectives what we should be looking for in

adult education is a movement and a change in perspective in the way in which someone views themselves and their relationships. Mezirow et al., (1990) developed this concept of perspective transformation further when he introduced self-directed learning as a trigger for transformative learning. 'Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built' (p.1). Mezirow et al., (1990) made a distinction between 'meaning schemes' which were 'habitual, implicit rules for interpreting' and 'meaning perspectives' which were of a higher order in that they 'refer to the structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience during the process of interpretation' (p.2). In a similar vein, Sarbin (1986) reminds us of the centrality of past experience when he points out that in constructing a narrative, human predicaments and attempted resolutions are central to the plot structure. This is a key point with regard to this study and how the storyteller's lens interprets this into their own frame of reference and sense of the world.

Schon (1995) poetically describes the difficulties inherent in undertaking qualitative research which he describes as complex and 'messy' in nature. Schon (1995) makes a distinction between the manageable problems of quantitative research and 'the problems of greatest human concern' which are qualitative in nature and difficult to understand and uncover. According to Schon the researcher has a choice:

shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to his standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous in any way he knows how to describe? (p.33).

This question of rigour taxed me in the early stages of my dissertation; my previous teaching had been in computing and business where facts, statistics and objectivity held the elevated position. Schon (1995) helped to move my thinking forward when he suggested that: 'We should ask not only how practitioners can better apply the results of academic research but what kinds of knowing are already embedded in competent practice' (p.34). I became keenly aware of my own kind of knowing as I progressed through this dissertation and the dawning

realisation emerged that the important aspect of the data collection was the perception of the participants as they looked back on their education and related it to their experience as adult returners. It was therefore their opinions, attitudes and beliefs about certain topics (Rubin and Rubin 1995) that were of interest to me and how they threaded these together to make their own particular story. This is where the semi-structured nature of the interviews was important; I wanted the participants to feel free to discuss the areas they felt were important to them. This could never be a project with a tight and rigid criteria, which could be categorised and quantified, instead it became one where perception, narrative and reflection became central. I recognised a move in my perspective as I encountered my own dilemmas which has moved me from someone who initially reified the quantitative over the qualitative to someone who, using Schon's imagery, has moved from the high ground to the swamp. Through this process I recognise the responsibility and difficulties inherent in exploring and where possible surfacing, not only myself, but the voices of those who inhabit the margins (Baughter, 2008, p.257).

The basic epistemological position which I have adopted has been summed up by Radnor (2002, p.91) as one that proposes that knowledge is socially constructed in a world of multiple constructed realities. The knowledge I hoped to gain would be constructed through listening to the different views of the people interviewed, viewed through the lens of my own teaching experience, my gender, my experience as an adult returner myself and my understanding as a tutor and a continuing learner at the time I did the research. This approach could never be an objective one but rather one where the emphasis is on the subjective as discussed in Chapter One. Phillips and Burbules (2000), although discussing a post-positivist approach, point to the centrality of the social dimension of social science research in which 'variables' interact in a complex manner that may be susceptible to multiple causations and interpretations (pp. 14-25). Reality is complex and multifaceted representing, not an ordered or linear pattern of events, but an intricate, changeable and interchangeable process. Richardson's (2000) metaphor of the crystal appealed to me as I considered the way in which the social and the personal interact:

...Crystals grow, change, alter....refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different direction' (p.934).

This touches on some of the complexity of the individual and how he or she interacts with society in a multiplicity of different ways. Seale, Gubrim and Silverman (2003) believe that '...a story that develops increasingly consistent and coherent notions of identity is exceptional rather than exemplary' (Squire, 1999, cited in Seale et al., 2003, p.22). This study recognises that learning is not all about knowledge, but also about motivation, emotion, engagement and social interaction, all areas in which story can play a central role. Indeed it is argued (Young, 2001) that 'story represents a fundamental structuring of human experience, both individual and collective' (cited in Aylett, 2006, p.1). The methodological basis for this study is, therefore, one where the researcher attempts to see the world through the eyes of others and where the lives of the participants are 'told in being lived and lived in being told' (Carr, 1986, p.61). Sarbin (1986, p.3) defines narrative as:

A symbolised account of actions of human beings that has a temporal dimension. The story has a beginning, middle, and an ending...The story is held together by recognisable patterns of events called plots.

A slightly less linear process is described in Denzin and Lincoln (2005), referring to the work of Susan Chase who described narrative as 'retrospective meaning making' and who defines narrative inquiry as an 'amalgam of interdisciplinary lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods - all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them' (p.641).

I mentioned earlier how I felt that narrative was appropriate for a feminist study. In the case of adult women returners there needs to be an understanding of the way in which women are positioned and position themselves within social contexts which lead to differing educational outcomes and how past experience impacts on this. The opportunity to explore this through narrative and storytelling is a significant one for feminist study as it gives the women a voice and allows them to imagine a different future as they



reflect on the past (Engdal, 2005) challenging and surfacing existing and often oppressive power relations.

I have discussed narrative and storytelling to describe the recounting of the personal experience as told by the women. Sarbin (1986) refers to a 'story' whilst Chase (2003) refers to a 'narrative'. Riley and Hawe (2005) draw on the work of Frank (2000) which gives us a helpful distinction between story and narrative when they describe narratives as the analysis of the stories where the researcher's role is 'to interpret the stories in order to analyse the underlying narrative that the storyteller may not be able to give voice to themselves' (p.227). This 'interpretation' can lead to questions of whose voice is actually being heard - the storyteller or the researcher as he or she constructs their narrative. Lemke (1997) examines how researchers construct verbal data and reminds us that it is the transposition of the language that people speak into the activity of analysis that makes it research data and through this process we are taking context specific discussions which can be displaced and reshaped by the researcher:

Data are only analysable to the extent that we have made them part of our meaning-world, and to that extent it is therefore always also data about us (pp. 1175-6).

This interpretation is not, therefore, value free and should not be viewed as 'facts' about the researched. This understanding is crucial if we are to be as true as humanly possible to the essence of the stories. Narratives are shaped by the social and cultural context in which the narrator lives and by conducting a narrative analysis, we wish to understand both the social world and the narrator's part in it. Darlaston-Jones (2007) remind us that it is not possible to separate the researched from the researcher and that we should recognise that the research process is one of co-construction and partnership where 'with our respondents we create an interpretation of his or her reality' (p.25).

## **4.2 Choosing Participants**

Participants were chosen for a specific purpose; they were female non-traditional entrants as outlined in chapter one. I sent a letter and a

questionnaire to all students who had graduated in 2008-2009 (Appendix 1) and who were born prior to 1980 telling them about the study and the sample I was interested in i.e. women who had left school without the requisite qualification to go to college or university and who had accessed HE as adults. I enclosed a self-addressed envelope for the return of their consent slip (Appendix 2). On receipt of the consent slips I rejected those who had achieved highs as I wished to concentrate on the lower achievers on leaving school. I contacted the women by telephone and discussed the study and asked them when and where they would be willing to be interviewed. In this way it was not arbitrary but planned and deliberate (Cohen and Manion, 2000) and satisfied the needs of the research. It could be argued that the sampling method was unrepresentative of the wider population and that it was 'deliberatively and unashamedly selective and biased' (Cohen, et al. p.104). Whilst this may be valid criticism, I defend the choice on the basis that the sample chosen allowed me to capture unique information on success in second chance learning in a particular culture and at a particular time. It was also important that it would inform my professional practice by highlighting issues which were unique to this particular group of students and the college in which I work.

With this in mind I will now move on to discuss the interviews as the women place their experiences in particular social and cultural contexts (Garro and Mattingly, 2000) with an awareness that narrative cannot reproduce experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). What we can learn from the interpretation of that experience can, however, provide insight into how we approach adult women's education. It also gives the women the opportunity to interpret their own experience in an informal setting in the form of a story. This often allows them to make sense of their experience as they reflect on it and communicate it to another (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000).

### **4.3 The Interviews**

In total I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews in which the women looked back and reflected on their experience of early education and also their educational experience in college. These fourteen interviews form the core of my data and all names have been changed to ensure anonymity. I had a list of general questions (Appendix 3) that I hoped to cover in the course of the

interview. Sometimes I deviated from the script as the students' responses demanded and sometimes questions were skipped because they had been covered elsewhere. I began to think of the interviews as conversations and began to refer to them as such, reflecting Oakley's (2005) view that the interview is essentially a conversation. This demonstrated 'the way in which life itself can be (come) an object of learning' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007, p.3) and how the participants were reframing by the very act of telling. The participants also interviewed me from time-to-time asking about various courses and how they could realise their plans for the future. I felt that the setting for the interview was also important; most of the interviews took place in a home setting (mine or the participant's) and were usually accompanied by coffee and biscuits and sometimes lunch. Finch (1993) reminds us of the importance of this when she states that:

One is therefore being welcomed into the interviewee's home as a guest, not merely tolerated as an inquisitor' (p.167).

Finch (1993) also suggests that women are more willing to share more of their personal experiences if the listener is interested and supportive and particularly if the listener is a woman. She believes that this may be related to women's domestic role which is often subject to intrusion and questioning by social workers, doctors, insurance agents etc. and there was thus an openness and willingness to discuss and share their thoughts and views. One aspect that struck me forcibly in the course of the interviews was how much the women were willing to share with little prompting from me. Finch reminds us of the potential for exploitation of this trust, and argues that techniques for listening and establishing trust must not become separated from feminist ethics and politics. I believe that knowing my students and having a shared cultural background created a culture of trust and eased communication but when reflecting on the data this raised questions of ethics for me. I will return to this later in this chapter and in the final chapter.

Interviewing women in social research is well documented. Oakley (1990) challenged positivist research methods 'which emphasized 'objectivity,' distance, and 'hygienic' research uncontaminated by the researcher's values

or biases' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008, p.330). Oakley (1990) argued that the establishment of 'rapport' in order to gain the interviewee's trust and elicit information was unethical as it established a power relationship which was heightened when there was 'social distance' between the two women. Oakley argued for a less hierarchical relationship in which the interviewer was prepared to reveal something of herself, impart information when it was helpful to do so, and work to establish a more equal, mutual relationship (Oakley, 2005). Oakley (1990), Finch (1993) and Birch and Miller (2000) argue for the centrality of empathy and the establishment of trust in interview situations. They feel that genuine interest in and engagement with the interviewee coupled with a willingness to try to understand the life experiences of the other can lead to a more democratic and successful interview. In a similar way Gerson and Horowitz (2002) argue that successful in-depth interviewing requires the ability to create trust and mutual commitment within a relatively brief time-frame. Gerson and Horowitz (2002) draw similarities with therapeutic conversation:

Indeed, the intensive, in-depth interview more closely resembles the therapeutic interview of clinical practice than the highly controlled, closed-ended questionnaire used in social surveys ... The best interviews become a conversation between two engaged people, both of whom are searching to unravel the mysteries and meanings of a life (p.210).

This move towards a more democratic style of interviewing where respondents are transformed into co-equals carrying out a conversation has a certain resonance and fits with my desire for equality between the researcher and the researched. However, as mentioned above, I am also aware that there is a degree of arrogance in this statement as I claim to speak for the women I interviewed and therefore by this very positioning I placed myself in a position of power. Oakley (1999) reminds us that qualitative approaches have been aligned to less powerful social groups. However because of features of the qualitative paradigm, researchers who use these methods 'are in a position of more power over the researched and the research 'product' than is often acknowledged' (p.165). I also became more aware of how I was sharing aspects of my own life stories with the participants as Oakley discusses.

Oakley (1990) outlines this move towards a more reciprocal style of interviewing and claims that:

...the formulation of the interviewer role has changed dramatically from being a data collecting instrument for researchers, to being a data collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched (p. 49).

Whilst I am in favour of the balance of power shifting more towards the researched as I mentioned in the opening paragraph to this chapter. I do, however, question how realistic this is. Ribbens (1989, p.590) remind us that 'In the end it is the researcher's project, and there are limits to which the women researched can see it otherwise'. There is another aspect to this 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (*Ibid*). Perhaps my sharing aspects of my life - my dropping out of my first FE course, my later education, my obstacles as a woman, status as a mother, learner, carer and full-time worker may have led the participants to trust and identify with me. Whilst I did this with an open and honest approach, I was aware that I did want to engender trust in my participants and I did use my own experiences to identify with the women. Through the study on this EdD I have become keenly aware of the dangers inherent in this approach. Finch (1980) raises this issue of identification in her research on clergymen's wives (Finch, herself, was a clergyman's wife at this time). She emerged from her interviews thinking that women should be taught how to protect themselves against interviewers like her. In a similar manner I had to ask myself if I used this 'reciprocity' to get more 'rich' information and if my interest in empowering women to make decisions which are best for them and their families make me complicit in exposing them in a relationship which may ultimately be exploitative. Again I was reminded of power positions. I was granted entry into private lives and histories and what I did with those stories was based on the trust between the interviewee and me. The ethical and moral responsibility to the participants in the study came home to me and I felt ill-prepared for the task in terms of how to adequately carry out the research and what aspects should be given pre-eminence - what I felt was important or what I felt was answering the research question? Darlaston-Jones (2007, p. 21) remind us of the difficulty of interpretation:

no-one can see the world in exactly the same way I do. All that an observer can do is *interpret* my actions through his or her understanding of what he or she *thinks* my world is like.

Prior to the interviews I told the participants about the study and that it was part of my doctoral studies. The interview schedule was designed to take the participants through their early experience of education and the forces that impacted on their education. I had hoped that the participants would become more comfortable about the process as we went through the interviews and that the college experience was best placed in the middle of the interview. I did not change the wording of the interview questions in any great detail but some women went into more details in some areas of their life and this naturally led to further questions and often longer interviews. When I thanked the women for participating, most of them said they enjoyed it, reflecting Phoenix's (1994) assertion that 'many women enjoy being interviewed by women interviewers' (p.60).

I quite enjoyed that, it's not very often you get to talk about yourself and someone actually listens (laughs) (Alice).

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

I have listened to each sound file at least twice in making the transcript. This gave me a real sense of each woman's voice, so that I felt in conversation with them. Some of the stories were uplifting and others were harrowing to listen to. I found that in some instances I found it difficult to remove myself from the women's voices and I would wake up with a phrase going round in my head, unbidden, repetitive and extremely disconcerting. This would lead to further questions about where I may be falling short or not living up to the expectations of others (Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton, 2006), most importantly the students themselves. I was experiencing part of what Dirkx et al. (2006) calls the 'inner world' where:

deep feeling and emotions...erupt into our waking lives with a force that surprises even us... [but where] its presence seems shrouded in a veil of fog, a kind of opaqueness that stubbornly conceals the source of the voices that pierce the dark surround of this inner world (p.126).

Despite the difficulty inherent in this, I found that listening to the women's voices was invaluable as the research progressed and I found that certain themes have emerged in my own mind through the telling and links have been made to my own personal liminal journey.

I typed up all transcripts myself because of the sensitive nature of some of the information, but also to familiarise myself with an area which I felt hesitant and uncertain about. The process of defining themes was an iterative one where the transcripts revealed themes and the voices revealed other nuanced aspects of the stories. I read and reread through each category, looking for connections and differences. This was a difficult process as I questioned how authentic my retelling of the stories was and I wondered if I was privileging some themes over others and if my interpretation of the heightened voices, excitement, puzzlement and sadness were justified. This analysis, forms the basis for the next chapter.

One question which has remained uppermost in my mind has been the theming and coding of the data. Even the word data leaves me feeling uncomfortable. I recalled how I would start one of my classes with a question about 'what is data?' Inevitably the answer would come, 'information' to which I would reply 'ok, so what is information?' This would lead to a discussion about the differences between data and information and an explanation of data as the fragments which make up information. The idea of theming the data was uncomfortable for me as I felt I was fragmenting the women's voices. I questioned if I would or could ethically and legitimately 'join up' the data. I have thus, within this framework, shifted constantly between the themes and the voices to try to tell the stories in the best way possible.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) draw out attention to the importance of context when they remind us that in order to understand any phenomenon we need to understand it in relation to the 'time and context that spawned, harboured and supported it' (p.189). This richness of response I felt could be best contextualized through thematic analysis but not through a tight coding of data

but a more intuitive approach. Chase (2011) reminds us that because narrative interviewing emphasises the narrator-listener relationship it moves away from the traditional theme-oriented methods of analysing qualitative research. Whilst I recognise that the emphasis is on the 'voices *within* each narrative' (Riessman, 2008, p.8) I still feel that themes can emanate from this but I am aware that this should not be my focus. The dawning realisation that there was not a 'correct' way of doing qualitative research came home to me; there was only my way with my data and I had to recognise that this was the case and take ownership over it.

Rabinow and Sullivan (1988) go on to caution us of the dangers associated with a preoccupation with the 'idée fixe' as it drives researchers away from concerns with the human world and directs them in the direction of a sterility and purely formal argument and debate (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1988). They urge 'a return to the human world with all its lack of clarity, its alienation, and its depth, rather than continuing the search for a formal deductive paradigm of the social sciences' (p.5). Rabinow and Sullivan (1988) suggest that we should move away from having a paradigm for the social sciences. They state:

We contend that the failure to achieve paradigm take off is not merely the fault of methodological immaturity, but reflects something fundamental about the human world (p.5).

In a similar vein, but in the context of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Murphy (2007) summarise a conversation with Elliot Mishler where Mishler notes that we cannot police the boundary of narrative inquiry. Mishler believes that 'the field... will be defined from within the different communities of narrative inquirers with researchers picking up on each others' work that helps them address issues salient to their own research problems' (p.636). If, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, the essence of the study is about how humans experience the world then the narrative approach must surely be employed in as free and open a way as possible. Clandinin and Connelly put it simply when they state:



if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively...[experience] is what we study and narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it (p.17).

Reissman (2008) dismisses the notion of a paradigm with 'standards or criteria' in qualitative research and warns students away from the 'paradigm warfare' (p.185) as it can 'paralyse and, in my view, simplify what are complex validation and ethical issues all investigators face' (*ibid*). Reissman encourages students to cross boundaries where appropriate and not be bound by one approach. Throughout this dissertation I have found this to be difficult through a preoccupation with the 'idée fixe'. By calling it narrative analyses, I felt I was subjugating feminist analysis and vice-versa. I now recognise the lack of ownership over my work as I battled betwixt and between. Reflecting on this process now shows a clear hesitation in making a stance for it being what it is, an attempt to tell the stories in the best way possible through my eyes as interpreter. Fox and Allan (2013) discuss the process a doctoral student goes through in finding 'her tentative and emerging authoritative voice' (p.3). English (2013) in a similar manner recognises that this discovery process involves not just questions of power and agency but a complex weaving between different genres all situated within qualitative research and which inhabit the 'swampy lowlands' rather than the 'higher plains' (Schon, 1995). I recognise this as I reflect on my attempts to wrestle between theory and my own value system reflecting Mezirow's (1991) disorientating dilemmas. Eventually my methodological approach became clearer and I experienced Silver's (1983) wonder about why I didn't see it before.

## 4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was applied for and granted by Glasgow University (Appendix 4). All the women interviewed were told that they were free to withdraw at any stage in the study and they were presented with a Plain Language Statement (Appendix 5) which outlined the study in plain English and which they signed to indicate consent. All participants (Appendix 6)

knew that their names would be changed and anything which identified them would be removed or changed. Everyone signed the Consent Form and no one expressed any concerns.

I had agreed that I would send the women a transcript of the completed interview by e-mail and that they would have a chance to comment or amend anything which they felt was inaccurate. Twelve out of the women interviewed replied and indicated that they did not wish to alter anything but the other two did not reply. This concerned me on two levels. I questioned if it was ethical to use the data from the two women who did not respond and secondly I questioned whether there was a power dimension between interviewee and interviewer which meant that nothing was changed. I decided to use all fourteen of the interviews as I had outlined the procedure in the consent forms and all the women had given their consent to use the data. However throughout this process I questioned the power relations and the responsibility of interpretation. My earlier ideal of openness, emotional engagement and trust (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) became ill-defined as I considered these issues. I was aware that ultimately it is the researcher's interpretation which appears in print. This interpretation exercised me, both from an ethical and a feminist standpoint: I echoed Stanley and Wise's (1983, p.2) concerns, 'you have these ludicrous pieces of research where the researcher finds out the *truth* about other people's lives for them' (italics mine). Stanley and Wise were referring to positivist research here, and whilst there may be a different ethos underlying the positivist approach, it is still wise to '[r]ecognise the degree of control and power the researcher has over the research process' (Brayton, 1997, p.5). Fossey, Harvey and McDermott (2002, p.729) emphasise this role when they note that:

qualitative analysis involves more than simply coding data: developing an understanding of qualitative data requires conceptual level processes of exploring the meanings, patterns or connections among data that involve the researcher's own thoughts, reflection and intuition.

This deeper conceptual analysis presented a significant challenge for me as, other than a pilot study, I had limited experience of interviewing for research purposes prior to this. I was concerned about using my own thoughts and that I

might 'mould' the response to try to answer my research question, rather than give the participants the freedom to say what they wished. McNamee (2001) caution on the dangers inherent in tightly framing the context:

in prioritising the questions or areas of research, researchers can silence or marginalise the very concerns and cares that those, whom they claim to speak on behalf of, wish to express most forcefully (p.314).

Fontana and Frey (2000) add another dimension to this when they remind us that asking questions and getting answers is extremely difficult and that 'no matter how carefully we word the questions or how carefully we report or code the answers (p.645), the spoken and written word always retains a residue of ambiguity. Standing (1998) adds another level of complexity when she reminds us that few of us write in the same way that we speak. The reporting or coding of the research cannot, no matter how much we try, move away from the interpretation of the interviewer. Nevertheless, as mentioned in Chapter One, this was a genuine and realistic attempt to find a way in which the women could be given a voice to interpret and reflect on their learning and their life and construct their own narratives and thus create meaning for themselves. However I do recognise that this can only ever be partial.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

It became clear to me at an early stage in the process that the women's stories were an essential element in the construction of the interview. Søren Kierkegaard observed that 'life is lived forward but understood backwards' (in Geertz, 1995). Chase (2003) argues that the most effective form of interviewing does not ask for sociological information, but asks questions that 'invite the other's story' (p.282). The women were documenting their experience from particular and personal standpoints and reflecting on this as they interpreted and reinterpreted their stories. This became very important material in my understanding of their own versions of themselves and their lives and it led me to consider the narrative in more detail. Birch (1998) talks of the interplay between story and identity: 'it is the telling of life stories that gives the individual a sense of who she or he is, a sense of self' (p.172). In a similar vein, Lawler (2002) reminds us that 'neither researcher nor researched can

fully access or inhabit a past which is inevitably gone' (p.249) and therefore the past is 'interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of the person's knowledge and understanding of it' (*Ibid*). In this way, the women were telling and retelling their stories and constructing their experience and meaning. Jackson (1998) reminds us of the constructed nature of recollections when she states that:

Memories are not already there in story form, rather it is in story form that we construct and reconstruct our memories - and these stories are historically located and mediated (p.54).

This is an important point, as I shall argue later and one which I became aware of as the research progressed. I became aware of my own 'meaning perspectives' not only in hearing the stories, but in the way I represent them. My earlier wish for impartiality came home to me as I realised that it is impossible to tell or retell a story, without some interpretation. Geertz (1973) criticises the reductionist approach to research and believes that the analysis of human action is an 'interpretive science in search of meaning, not an experimental science in search of laws' (p.5). I became very aware of this as I recorded, transcribed and coded the data, I was engaged in an interpretation of my own by the very act of writing and interpreting. I found this very taxing as I sought to give the participants a voice and tried to capture every um, repetition and hesitation but the dilemma presented itself that the very act of punctuation and comments such as 'voice lowers' represented my interpretation. Standing (1998) explores the issues that arise as we write up research and raises questions of how we write and who we write for. The dilemma Standing presents is how we represent the voices of the women in our research. She questions 'how we write our research in a language which is acceptable to the academic community but does not alienate the people who took part in our research' (p.186). She also reminds us that by focussing our writing on an academic community we are in danger of reinforcing and contributing to inequalities of power. Standing took the conscious decision to 'tidy up' some of the extracts which she used in her academic writing, and I have taken a similar decision - not altering actual words, but taking out my own sounds of affirmation so that the two voices were not confused and also sometimes taking out the ums that I had so carefully included in the transcribing stage, where I felt it aided the clarity of the discussion. Through this I have tried to remain true to the women's voices but

through the interpretation and discussion tried to develop themes in a more academic manner aware of the danger that by 'gaining a wider definition (or academic credibility) you must often lose part of the 'authentic' voices of the women in research' (Standing, 1998, p.194).

I also became acutely aware through this process that I was telling my own story; I now recognise that the questions I asked indicated issues that I felt were important as a women returner myself. Parr (1998) believes that researchers approach the research process as academics on the one hand but on the other as people with personal histories. The effect this can have on their theoretical perspective can be a sharpening sensitivity to the participants' lives or one of shaping or silencing their voices. I believe my positioning and my own 'upheavals of thought' (Nussbaum, 2001) have helped me in my endeavour to do the former. This process has also led me to a heightened awareness of the process of interpretation, and to own it; to recognise the fictional and constructed nature of my accounts, and to explore and make transparent the process of co-construction that leads to a written text.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Pen Pictures

#### 5.1 Introduction

The next three chapters present the analysis of the interviews with the women and it is their considerations and reflections that is of paramount importance here. I was aware throughout the process of interviewing that I was privy to a great deal of personal information, some of it I have used and some of it is left unreported, raising further questions of ethics about the process as discussed in the last chapter. I have used bold and italics to indicate where the women expressed some emphasis and spoke with a louder voice. The italics indicate some emphasis but not so loud as that delineated in bold. The interviews took place between August 2010 and January 2011.

This chapter offers a pen picture of each of the participants. Chapter Six outlines the journeys and presents the women's voices through the predominant themes. Chapter Seven looks at the transformative aspects of their journeys in light of the literature review and the research questions. It has been a constant battle for me to try to accurately represent the women's voices and I have oscillated between different styles as I have attempted to represent the voices and the feelings. I have been aware of the 'flatness' of the written word and have been frustrated by my inability to adequately represent the spoken word with all its acoustic clues and emotions. The only way to be true to the voices of the women would be to embed the sound files in the text. This, however, would negate my assurance of confidentiality and present raw data, rather than the analysis of the data. What is presented in this chapter is, therefore, an attempt to stay true to the women's voices whilst also indicating an awareness of the limitations inherent in this.

I mentioned in the last chapter my concerns about the fragmentation of the story through the attempt to theme the data. In order to overcome this concern I will give a short pen picture of all the women interviewed as I feel this will give a more coherent backdrop to the analysis and helps me square the circle with

regard to my own values and my attempt to tell the story in the best way possible. The pen pictures are not intended to be a representation of the women interviewed but rather my interpretation and overall impression of the interviews and its contents from my perspective as the interviewer.

## **5.2 Pen Pictures**

### 5.2.1 Morag

Morag was in her mid-forties at the time of interview. She spoke quite quickly and interspersed her recollections with Gaelic words and phrases. Gaelic was Morag's first language and she went to school with only a smattering of English. She does not, however, refer to this as a hindrance to her learning. Morag had a lot to deal with in her private life; her husband was an alcoholic and she cared for her elderly mother and father. She had a difficult relationship with her mother but her father was supportive of her and was keen to see her 'better herself'. Her journey to college also meant a daily 100 mile round trip over difficult terrain which could be treacherous in winter. Morag describes her husband's alcoholism:

yeah, I had to contend with that as well, which was harder - that was the most emotionally draining experience I would ever, that I would never wish on anyone. It's a very emotionally draining illness that you could, you know.

Morag was in her early forties when she embarked on a Business degree. She had worked as a Carer since she had left school but decided to do the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) course as her children were learning computing in school and she felt she was in danger of being left behind. This led to her successfully completing an access to degree course from which she graduated with her degree in Business Administration.

Morag reflects on her early years in school which involved repeated absences due to severe asthma. When she returned to school after each episode she found she had fallen behind and this pattern was exacerbated with every absence. She

refers to herself as a ‘truaghan’<sup>5</sup> who was not allowed to take part in physical education or playground sports. As she got older and entered secondary school she felt she was burdened with housework and also work on the croft. This, she believes, also affected her ability to progress her education:

I was falling more and more behind in school because you are going home and not allowed to study because you had to do croft work - peats, cows, whatever else you had to do.

Morag discusses the resentment she felt when she had to do the housework whilst her brothers were excused:

I remember once my brother being sat with my father going through his spelling and going through the English work while I was standing ironing. There was no word of *my* homework.

Morag’s resentment appears to be directed towards her mother:

He [her father] used to always say - look it’s equally important that you get yours done too. But no, the ironing had to get done first. She was more of a dictator, I think, than he was when we were growing up, yeah, yeah.

Morag’s father was 87 and in a wheelchair when she graduated but he managed to stand when her name was called out for her to receive her award. Morag recollects how he had tears in his eyes when she put on her robes. She told me of the moment and how he expressed his pride in her. ‘I brought six of you up and I never thought I would see any of you graduate’. Morag reflects on her brother’s account of the graduation and remembers how delighted her father was for her:

Oh he was just delighted, I remember after graduation ceremony -- I didn't see it because I was sitting down at the front but my brother was saying you should have seen Dad - he was on his feet before you even got on your feet yourself, clapping away there - he was just so delighted and he said (laughs) I got a photo of Dad, never mind you on the stage I just got a photo of Dad standing up on his own amongst all these people, you know....

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<sup>5</sup> Gaelic for ‘a poor soul’



This was quite an emotional moment in the interview as Morag shared with me the feelings she had at the culmination of this stage of her study. Morag is now working for the local authority and working towards a postgraduate qualification.

### 5.2.2 Abby

Abby was in her late thirties at the time of interview. This was one of the longest interviews as Abby went into great detail. This interview more than any of the others, deviated from the questions into other areas of life and one question led to another in a very natural way.

Abby had had a succession of part-time jobs whilst she brought up her three daughters. She came to college to do an Office Technology course and enjoyed it so much she asked a lecturer if there was another course she could do. An HND in Business was suggested but Abby was reluctant to embark on this as she felt it was too difficult. The lecturer she spoke to had taught her on her previous course and expressed the opinion that Abby was 'more than capable' of doing the HND. With this belief in her, spurring her on, she enrolled on the HND.

Abby's primary schooling was 'generally happy' but 'there was an element of being really scared of the teachers right through primary'. Abby had to leave home and stay in a hostel when she was fourteen, only going home on the weekends<sup>6</sup>. Abby feels that this adversely affected her education as she did not get much sleep in the hostel and was always tired in school. She also felt overwhelmed by the secondary school as it was so big. Abby feels that her maths teacher's attitude adversely affected her ability to achieve her Standard Grade.

... he bullied the boys but he was quite (pause) um almost perverted in his behaviour you know he was just, .... he would be looking down your shirt and looking under the desk at your legs, you know and when you're on first year and second year, you know, he was just horrible. We misbehaved as a result of that cos that was how we retaliated - we were

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<sup>6</sup> If children lived over 30 miles from school, they stayed in a hostel with other school children. This was run by teachers and there was a separate hostel for girls and boys

quite badly behaved but it wasn't ..... you couldn't then go home to your parents and say we've got this teacher and he's horrible and he's this and he's that because it would have been *your* fault, you know.

I understood Abby when she said that 'it would have been your fault' as I had grown up in the same culture where the word of the teacher was supreme and wherecrofting families, often with little education, felt they could not challenge the authority of the teacher. This may have been down to their own perceived lack of education or social standing, but teachers, ministers and doctors were not to be argued with. Abby goes on to explain this and her realisation, years later, of the impact this teacher had on her, and her friends', education.

It wouldn't have been the teacher that would have been at fault and I only realised, I think it was maybe 3 or 4 years ago. 7 of the girls who were in together we just went out for dinner one night because most of them aren't living here and we went out for dinner and we went back to a pals afterwards and we were talking about, you know, our school years and all that and it was only that night that we all realised that none of us had got our maths standard grade on fourth year and none of us were particularly stupid, you know, we got all our other qualifications but none of us - well, myself and another girl never even bothered sitting maths standard grade so because of that man.

Abby completed the HND in Business Administration and would have liked to have gone on to do the degree but she was successful in securing an administrative position with the local authority. Abby was enthusiastic about her experience of college, repeatedly saying how she enjoyed learning and how she would like to do something else in the future.

### 5.2.3 Amy

Amy was a quietly spoken woman in her early forties who had recently completed her business degree. Amy had embarked on her degree when her children were very young; her son was three years old and her daughter was eight months.

Amy did not enjoy school, describing them as not 'the best of days'. Amy reflects on the insecurities she felt as a child, 'I guess, now looking back, I felt insecure, both my parents drank and this was something that had a profound

effect on me'. Amy believes that what was happening at home adversely affected her education:

when you've got that going on emotionally, you can't, you know you can't set your mind on your schoolwork in the same way as child.....you just *can't*.

Amy reflects on her parents' marriage and how her mother was 'too weak' to leave her father who could be physically and mentally abusive to her. 'It made me sure I wasn't going to be the traditional wife'. Amy's husband had opposed her decision to go to college, yet he too embarked on a degree with the Open University half way through Amy's course of study. Amy felt undermined by him and felt that his study always took precedence over hers.

I used to type his essays, even though I had my own - my job, the house - that had, of course, to be perfect and the kids! But he had to have his rest because of course his job was *so much* more stressful than mine!

Amy made the decision to leave her husband and at the time of interview she was considering a new business venture. I see Amy from time-to-time and her business appears to be doing well.

#### 5.2.4 Jenny

Jenny was in her mid-forties and appeared to be quite confident and outgoing. She laughed a lot during the interview and answered my questions in a very direct and friendly manner. Jenny had become a hairdresser after leaving school. She began to teach personal care at the local school in the early 90s and when the school closed she decided to embark on her degree as a pre-cursor to the Post Graduation Diploma in Education (PGDE) as she wanted to teach. However on completion of her degree, Jenny secured a position in Health Promotion so decided not to pursue the teaching qualification.

Jenny did not enjoy primary school. She is not sure why this is and suggests that the teachers were not interested in her or teaching. She enjoyed secondary school more and felt that her secondary school teachers were more interested in what they were teaching. Jenny felt inspired by her English teacher - 'she had

respect for us and that to me was a good place to be, em, so yeah, she inspired me’.

Jenny describes how she had a ‘set to’ with her maths teacher because she wanted to take maths but was told she could not because she was a girl. Jenny’s father went to see the maths teacher and was told ‘he was being bloody minded and he shouldn’t expect his daughter to be able to do maths’. This was in the early 80s and Jenny speaks about how annoyed she was that the boys were allowed to take maths but she was not. Despite her father’s intervention Jenny was not permitted to take maths. Jenny enjoyed her time at college, especially the online elements which allowed her to work part-time. She enjoys her job with Health Promotion but has not ruled out the possibility of the PGDE for future study.

#### 5.2.5 Linda

Linda was in her mid-thirties and had two young daughters of nine and eleven at the time of the interview. Linda expressed the feeling that she was pleased to contribute to my research. She worked as a nurse at the local hospital and her motivation to study appeared to come from the fact that she had applied for two positions in the local hospital and had been unsuccessful. In both cases the feedback from the interview was that the successful candidate had a degree. Shortly after the second interview, Linda saw an advertisement for the degree programme and her employer agreed to pay half of the costs so she embarked on a BA in Health Studies. Linda was working 20 hours a week as a nurse and the degree was available online so this suited her work and family circumstances.

Linda enjoyed school but describes herself as ‘middle of the road’ as far as early education is concerned, ‘I scraped by and that was it’. Linda was supported in her study by her husband and she feels this was a key factor in her success. Linda enjoyed her experience of college and would like to study more when the children get older. Shortly after completing her degree, Linda secured the promoted post she sought prior to doing her degree.

### 5.2.6 Jane

Jane was a vivacious woman in her early thirties who spoke very quickly and poked fun at herself constantly. She describes herself as a 'rebel' and 'the black sheep of the family' in her younger days. Her elder siblings had all stayed in school until 6<sup>th</sup> year and gone on to university on the mainland. Jane, in contrast to this, 'didn't care for education - I'm supposed to have fun, I'm young, I'll get a job later, so that was me'. She describes how she fell in with a 'bad crowd' and put her parents through a lot of heartache.

Jane had her first baby on the first year of her degree and another two followed during her time at college. She switched to part-time as the course progressed and her responsibilities grew. Her partner left her a few weeks after her first child was born. She describes the experience as 'tough' as she also lost her father during this time whom she describes as 'great'. She was in danger of giving up at this time but her friend said to her 'get that degree, your dad would be proud of you' and she responded to this by saying, 'that's all I needed to hear and I thought, I'm going for it'.

Jane is not working at present, choosing instead to stay at home and look after the children. However, she is proud to have the degree behind her and hopes to do further study when the children are older.

### 5.2.7 Maggie

Maggie was a quiet woman in her late thirties who had come to the college to do a National Certificate in Business and Information Technology. This course is classified as an 'access' course and allows progression to the HNC. Maggie came to college with a friend. Both women worked part-time in the local hospital and Maggie felt that she would not have 'had the nerve' to come to college if it was not for her friend.

Maggie has two children and a disabled husband who had recently been injured at work and had lost his job. His injury meant that he was in bed for a large proportion of the time. Despite this Maggie persevered towards her goal with quiet determination.

Maggie's father had been a violent alcoholic and her upbringing was characterised by poverty and abuse. She outlined how, as a young child of about seven, she had woken up to the screams of her mother and had run down the stairs to see her father beating her mother violently with a fire poker. Maggie tried to get him to stop but her mother shouted at her to run for a neighbour:

...through long wet grass in my bare feet I ran, as fast as I could, I must have been about seven, I ran, in my nighty - I just wanted to protect my mother from him.

She expresses how she hated her father and 'wished he would die'. Her mother, on the other hand, she tried to safeguard and support. As she got older she tried to protect her mother from her father by sleeping with her and locking the bedroom door.

Her experience of primary and secondary education was a negative one where she was bullied and where she struggled. 'I struggled with all areas, I went to school with nothing and I came out with nothing'.

When I thanked Maggie for coming to the college to talk to me, she said she was pleased to do so and she said she had loved her time at college. 'Yeah, it was fantastic, it was great (quietly). I loved every bit of it, *every bit of it*, I loved coming every day, yeah, I must admit'.

Maggie secured a management position on leaving college and this has given her yet more confidence. I see Maggie from time-to-time and every time I do so she asks about the college and enthuses about her time there.

#### 5.2.8 Kareen

Kareen was in her late forties at the time of interview. She ran her own business along with her husband whom she describes as 'a very good man'. I had taught Kareen so I knew her as a student and she greeted me warmly when we met. Kareen was the first woman I interviewed and I was unprepared for her story.

Kareen had been abused as a child by her father from the age of five. Kareen refers to the abuse initially as ‘mental, physical, it was every form of abuse’ and then she says ‘and then, of course, sexual abuse then’. Kareen had not told anyone about the abuse but the knowledge that her father had been abusing her eldest daughter was a pivotal moment for her. She discusses how seeing the doubt in her husband’s eyes when their daughter spoke about the abuse was a turning point.

Angie was in a lot of bother when she was younger, into drugs and everything and then one Christmas she told me and anyway of course I had to tell him - I saw the doubt and I couldn’t allow him to doubt her, cos *I know, I know*, so I **had** to tell him.

She had moved to the Outer Hebrides when she was fourteen. By this time she had been in a total of thirteen different schools and her experience of education was overshadowed by the abuse: ‘when there’s abuse that’s all you can think of, all you can think of’. She explains the relief she felt when he finally stopped abusing her: ‘he was finally the person I wanted him to be’. I found this rather puzzling but I did not want to interrupt Kareen at this stage and as the interview progressed other themes emerged and took precedence. Kareen then went on to explain how he started abusing her eldest daughter: ‘but.... little did I know, little did I think, that he would, he would move on to my eldest daughter’. This was the stage where Kareen finally reported her father to the police and at the time of the interview her father was in prison. Kareen recalls how she was positioned by her father:

One of his forms of abuse, from a very young age was to tell me how stupid I was, time and time again and often in company. When you’re told this repeatedly, how can you, how can you think you’re anything else?

Kareen completed the HND in Business Administration and would now like to do a history degree in her spare time ‘just for me’.

### 5.2.9 Shona

Shona was a quiet woman who did not elaborate much on the answers and we, more or less, stuck to the interview script. This was one of the shortest interviews.

Shona came to the college when she was in her late thirties and graduated with a Gaelic degree. She describes her experience of school initially as 'pretty care free' and then 'actually it was quite strict but enjoyable'. She didn't struggle with anything at school but addresses the gender bias early on in the interview, 'girls did Home Economics and, you know, Secretarial and the boys went on and did Science'. The use of the words 'went on' suggests that progression was for the boys and not the girls. This was a theme she stuck to in the interview, that girls were good at some things and boys were good at others.

I think you were probably more aware when you were in Secondary school that em - you know, maybe you were being divided into girls and boys and you know what the girls were supposed to be good at and the boys were expected to be good at and I think definitely, when it came to making choices for going to the secondary, the girls were steered towards Home Economics and Secretarial and away from - em any of the Sciences and that sort of thing.

Her father did not encourage her and did not attend her graduation. Shona describes him as 'very old fashioned' and 'of the view women don't really know much about anything'. Her mother 'was probably different' and 'was keener that we tried different things'. Shona got pregnant at sixteen and got married and 'at that time - that was it'. Two years after this she had another daughter and when the children were in school she started doing home-help and evening care. Shona then started working as an assistant in a playgroup and did a few courses 'just to keep my mind active'. She then started considering teaching in Gaelic medium education and this is what led to her coming to college to do her Gaelic degree. Her intention was to do a PGDE after graduating with her Gaelic degree but to date she has not done this.



#### 5.2.10 Catherine

Catherine was in her mid-forties at the time of interview. She had enjoyed school and felt that she could have done better at school if her parents had pushed her more: 'I do wish I had worked harder but possibly if your parents had been more on your case, you know, pushed you a little more, just to work, you know'.

Catherine had completed a BA Hons in Child and Youth Studies and she had selected the course on interest: 'it was very important to choose a course you enjoy - because otherwise it was, as I say, become a bit of a chore and you wouldn't have the enthusiasm, you know'. However she also considered that it would lead to a career in teaching or social work which were the areas she was interested in. She felt that as the children were getting older she had some time to devote to doing something new and that 'you can only clean your house so much and I thought it would be nice to do something'. She thoroughly enjoyed her time at college and refers to the online element as excellent and 'that was the main reason I chose that course'.

Catherine's sister had already returned to study in her 30s and was now a teacher. Her sister's experience encouraged her and 'spurred me on'. Catherine successfully completed her degree and continued to do the PGDE and is now employed as a primary teacher.

#### 5.2.11 Nicola

Nicola was in her mid-thirties at the time of interview. I had taught Nicola so I knew her quite well. Nicola described herself as a child 'eager to please' in primary school. She did well in primary school and was recognised as 'bright'. The first two years of secondary went well and she was a high achiever but on 3<sup>rd</sup> year her sister became very ill and was hospitalized for six months. Her home life was also deteriorating at this time as her father was a 'raging alcoholic'. Her parents subsequently split up when she was fourteen years old and she started 'skiving off' school. Her mother was now working full-time and any spare time she had was devoted to Nicola's sister who was beginning to get better. With her mother's attention on her sister and her work, Nicola had more

licence to 'skive off'. Prior to this Nicola had been in all credit classes but she started to 'go off the rails' and soon left school and started working in the local supermarket.

Nicola left the island when she was 21 to work on the mainland. She met her husband there and settled in Glasgow. When she was pregnant with her first child she made the decision to return to Lewis as she did not wish to bring her child up in a city.

Nicola had a supportive husband and a mother who helped out with the children and believes that they were both very important in helping her to complete her degree successfully.

Nicola is now in a supervisory position and talks about her time in college enthusiastically, encouraging other women to seize the opportunity to study.

#### 5.2.12 Anne

Anne was in her early forties at the time of interview. She spoke of her Christian faith in terms of helping her in her return to education. She was one of eight children and she came to college in her late 20s to do an access to degree courses and subsequently a BSc in Computing. Anne had been bullied at school and this led her to 'skive off'. Anne did not have much parental support when she was in school and she puts this down to the fact that she was one of eight. She received 'special reading' in school and recognises the stigma associated with this.

I had support with reading, three groups, they had three groups and if you were in a group you knew you weren't so good.

Anne wanted to join the Navy when she left school so she put Nautical Studies on her school choice form but when it came to the new term she was told that she was in Catering. Anne did not want to do catering and when she questioned this decision, she was told 'Oh you can't go into those classes - they're boy's classes'. Anne went to college initially, to learn to type but this led to progression to an HNC and finally a degree in Computing.

Anne has been unable to secure a job in Computing and is currently working in the local supermarket. She is disappointed in this and continues to apply for other positions which require a degree.

#### 5.2.13 Alice

Alice was in her mid-forties at the time of interview. She appeared confident and at ease and keen to share her experiences with me.

Alice had been ill as a child with repeated absence due to a hole in the heart and had missed a good proportion of her early schooling. Despite this she managed to catch up by the time she had reached primary five and was regularly getting firsts in the weekly tests. She loved reading and would 'devour' books. Alice describes herself as 'painfully shy' as a young girl and lacking in confidence. She feels that her education gave her the confidence to try things and 'put herself forward'. Alice's father was a strong influence on her education and he was always delighted when she 'got a first'. Alice reflects on this:

When I got a first, I couldn't wait, couldn't wait to get home - I'd run up the starran<sup>7</sup> and burst in shouting Daa, Daa - never Ma you know, and he would be delighted, he'd swing me round and tell me how clever I was. And if he wasn't home I'd be jumping about till he got in (pause) I loved the feeling of, I dunno, I loved the way it made me *feel*, you know ...I can even feel it now! (pause). Pride, I suppose.....

Alice remembers how she was in 'the top section' in Maths and English when she went to secondary school but soon became interested in boys and the studying took second place. Alice started to skip school with a couple of other girls and then left at sixteen. She started working on a Youth Training Scheme when she left school but she found the work repetitive and boring. Her father died when she was nineteen and this had a big impact on her and she expressed the feeling that she had let him down and always in the back of her mind was the feeling that she 'just might be able' to do a degree. She embarked on a Gaelic degree when her children had gone to school and this led to a PGDE. Alice is now

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<sup>7</sup> Gaelic for path

teaching and feels she is working in her 'dream job'. Alice's daughter is now in university and her son is hoping to go to university in two years' time. Alice feels she has changed the fortunes of her family. Her husband also successfully completed a degree shortly after she finished hers and Alice describes him as a big support.

#### 5.2.14 Kay

Kay was in her early forties at the time of interview and she had completed an HNC and gone on to do the degree. She had enjoyed both primary and secondary school and was regarded as 'clever' by her teachers. I had taught Kay and knew her quite well so the conversation was easy and we shared lots of moments of commonality and humour throughout the interview.

Kay had left school at 16 and had followed her career choice as a horse rider and trainer but she was adamant that she did not want her children following on this path as it was such hard work. Kay outlines the moment when she thought about retraining as she reflects on her employer's father's comments:

...it was her dad who said to me one day 'you know you're far too bright for this, what are you doing here' because I had a long conversation with him one day and he said 'why are you doing this for, why are you doing this, do you not ever feel that you could go back to study and better yourself?' I had never thought that I might be any good, you know, I just - that had been my life and I never really thought very much about it, em, and he said really you should think about getting some qualification.

Her husband had done a course at the college and encouraged her to go and find out what was on offer.

and when we moved back to the island, Murdo started saying, as well, you know, why not instead of going and doing a job that you don't need qualifications for like Co-op, Tesco - why don't you go to the college and retrain.

Kay's children were starting nursery at this time so she decided that it would be a good time to start studying. Kay was very nervous about coming to college but once she got there she found the lecturers friendly and helpful and she enjoyed studying.

Kay successfully completed the HNC in Business Administration and then progressed to the Business degree which she also completed successfully. Kay feels that her husband's support was a key factor in her success. She is now doing a postgraduate qualification whilst working full-time.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The women's stories underline the importance of a social constructionist approach for feminist interviewing. Mary Gergen (2013) believes that it is through collaboration and co-operation that discourses are produced and that this relational process allows women to create their own reality. This is an important point for this study as the women shape their understanding as they reflect on their experience in the light of where they now are. This has reinforced my view that understanding the context in which women return to study is crucial if transformative education is to occur. The rich information which the women shared offers some insight into how the college environment aided their transitions back to learning. Understanding the emotional aspects of returning to learning is important as is the fragility of this transition and the factors which helped them stay. However, I am aware that the pen pictures are my construction and that although, I have tried to be as true as possible to the women's accounts, they still remain my interpretation.

I will now move on to discuss how the women appear to reframe their understanding of their learning and their place in it and participate again under new inner-directed terms as defined by their new meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1978a). By doing so I hope it will reveal in more detail the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that underlie the women's experience and how narrating it can help them understand the contexts in which it occurred and that this can help in moving forward and engaging again with education.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Analysis One

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will start with the women narrating their experience on their first day in college. In this way it is taking the first of Van Gennep's (1909) stages - separation, as they leave the familiar and embark on their educational journey, suffering challenges to their identity along the way. It will then go on to look at the factors which impacted on their journeys. It is important to recognise the importance of this for the women and the significance and often, fear, associated with this which links to Mezirow's concept of 'alienation' (1978a). As adult educators, we often consider colleges as safe and welcoming spaces and sites for transformation; the idea of going to college is a positive and aspirational one and despite some worries many of the women expressed this. However as Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) remind us, gaining a learning identity can be 'complex and contradictory' evoking 'feelings of displacement, anxiety and guilt' (p.569) alongside the more accepted responses of 'hopeful anticipation, pleasure and self-esteem' (*ibid*).

Some of the women had positive early educational experiences and it may be that they drew on this as their journey developed. However some of the women appeared to be temporarily 'caught' (Biesta & Tedder, 2008) in their past identity and found it difficult to move on. An understanding of this may help inform the pre-entry process and allow us to put measures in place to encourage those with a less than positive experience of early education to embrace learning the second time round and move forward educationally, often for the first time.

#### 6.2 The start of the liminal journey: Aspirations and Identity

The start of this journey is a significant one for this study as they gain a new identity and begin their educational journey. Their space in between or 'realm of pure possibility' (*ibid*, p.97) is undefined, often filled with fear but also open

to interpretation - their interpretation, and it is this which forms the analysis in this chapter.

All the women expressed feelings of fear and nervousness about their first day at college. Alice seems the most confident with a mix of nervous trepidation.

I don't know, I think probably a mixture of apprehension and excitement - not sure of, if I would succeed but glad to be trying (Alice).

Alice's excitement about starting the educational journey may link back to her positive early school experience as outlined in the last chapter and her father's involvement in her education, thus reflecting Desforjes and Abouchaar's (2003) belief that positive parental behaviour and their involvement in their children's learning is clearly related to a positive school outcome. Alice also documents her husband's belief in her and it may be that this also had a positive influence.

Jenny said she was 'terrified (laughter) - it was worse than my first day in school'. Abby also used the word 'terrified' to explain her experience but the encouragement from a lecturer persuaded her to try thus reflecting Howarth's (2002) negotiated identity where the lecturers opinion was valued and which allowed for a 'new meaning perspective' (Mezirow and Rose, 1978, p.105):

I was terrified! I was (pause) I didn't believe, although I thought - if she [a lecturer] thinks I can do it maybe I can do it but still didn't really believe that I was, that I could do it.

Kay expresses similar sentiments about her first day at college:

Terrifying, to be honest with you - the day I drove up, the first day I drove up into the car park I drove and went to go back out again - I thought why am I putting myself through this, I was so scared, cos I hadn't spoken to anybody, no-one on my course or anything, I just felt so out of control, I just didn't like the feeling at all, but then I forced myself to park the car and then I got out and I thought, well I've done that - I've got to go in and I walked in .....

This feeling of fear and being 'out of control' is something that is often overlooked as we design courses which we hope will appeal to women returners and concentrate on the content but ignore the difficulty and fear associated

with actually coming to college for some women. We can also see elements of the difficulty in starting the journey with Kay's attempt to come to college for the first time and how emotions feature strongly. Kay demonstrated 'edge emotions' (Malkki and Green, 2014, p.9) when she recalls that she was scared to go into the college and that she felt out of control and 'didn't like the feeling at all'. Yet she forced herself to go in and thus began her journey of learning which, at the time of writing, was still continuing.

A few of the women were worried that they might be viewed as too old to be going to college. Nicola and Anne expressed concern about being the oldest in the class:

the one thing that I was worried about was would I be the oldest one in the class and everyone was saying there's always older than you and I was the oldest in the class and that was the one thing I didn't want to be going back (Nicola).

Anne expresses the comfort she felt when she saw that there were other mature students:

I felt nervous but when I went into the class and I found that there was Sylvia, who was slightly older than me and there was also um, what's his name - there were two of them who were mature students, so there were several mature students and I didn't feel like the complete idiot (Anne).

The idea of not feeling 'like the complete idiot' because there are others around your own age is an interesting one and it may link back to identifying with your peer group and finding strength in similarity and fitting in or gravitating towards the familiar. Kasworm (2005) believes that adults returning to education are taking personal risk with their identity and self-worth with the decision to enter the college classroom which suggest that they are personally negotiating their understanding of their 'presence in a youth-based environment' (*ibid*, p.7). Woodward (2003) defines identity as 'a self which has particular desires, anxieties and needs' (p.2). Linked to this is the tendency for people to gravitate towards people who will affirm our sense of identity, as mentioned above, and this can have negative as well as positive consequences. Tajfel (1972) develops this when he brings in the concept of social identity which he defines as 'the



individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership' (p.31). There appears to be elements of this in the women's early entry to the college as they look for affirmation and assurance. There is also the desire to succeed which with some of the women appears to be stronger than the need to belong. Morag expresses this very clearly when she states:

I'd made up my mind, one day at work, when I saw changes coming into the work, ...so, then I thought, right I need to go back to college. After making sure things like my mortgage had been paid off and my children were in school I thought, well how am I actually going to do this? I would have to travel to Stornoway, every single day which was, you could say, 100 mile trip every day. I thought right, get up early in the morning, I can do this. So I planned in my head how I was going to do it, because it was going to be ... the biggest thing for me and I've got to commit to this and if I commit to it, I **have** to see it through.

In a similar way Nicola, discusses how she found the online chat a distraction:

Cause they do this chatroom thing and I'm not into that in the least I really did not gel with that I found that a lot of the strong characters took it over and it was like a céilidh<sup>8</sup> they were talking about going out for a drink and this and I'm like - look I don't have time for this and I came here to learn for an hour not to listen to you organise a night out!

Nicola and Morag's focus was firmly on the learning and they did not express such fear about coming to college. Baxter and Britton (2001) argue that the decision to return to study for mature students is also an attempt to 'shape their own biographies and identities in a reflexive way' and that they 'have self consciously made decisions about themselves and the future course of their lives' (p.89). This has often meant a great deal of personal sacrifice as we can see from Morag's account as she sought to fund their own education whilst also putting in place strategies for coping whilst she was attending college.

Amy also appeared to be determinedly shaping her own biography on the one hand with age as a defining factor but also looking through the eyes of another as she reflected on the advice a friend had given her:

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<sup>8</sup> Gaelic for a social gathering

Apprehensive, yeah apprehensive but I remembered a friend saying it's largely application not ability and that always stuck with me and I remember always thinking I will work really hard at this, I will apply myself and I will do it - if it's largely about application then I will apply myself as hard as I can and failure is not going to be an option. I was not going into it at that age and stage to fail, it just wasn't an option.

This idea that 'failure was not an option' came up more than once and the determination some of the women expressed came through clearly and that they were pleased to be learning. This is linked to praxis (Freire, 2001) where it is not just action based on reflection but that there is a determination and commitment to succeed. Carr and Kemmis (1986) remind us that praxis requires 'wise and practical judgement about how to act in this situation' (p.190) and we can see this in Amy's account above.

### **6.3 The Liminal Period: Gaining a Learner Identity**

Morag expresses her desire to belong 'in this world of learning'. So whilst being a student appears to have involved fear and anxiety, the actual label 'student' was an identity which the women embraced. Morag speaks about the sense of freedom she derived from being called a student:

The identity of the student to me gave me a sense of freedom, it gave me, I often used to think about student, student, particularly when I used to have a student card and even at the age I was and then I would ask is there a discount for students and they would say 'yes', if you produce your card kind of, so yes it gave me a sense of freedom, I think, to be a student, I loved the title, I loved being what I was, It gave me the ability to do what I wanted to do and that knowledge knowing I could do it - to be a student, particularly a full-time student, yeah, I felt as if I was something, I was achieving something or about to achieve something.

In this we can see a process of 'reframing' (Mezirow, 1978a) occurring as the women enter the liminal stage of their journeys and leave the fear associated with separation behind. The feeling that they are on the cusp of something new becomes a recurring theme in their accounts as we see in Morag's account above. Alice also discusses the possibility of a new future whilst Amy talks about

working towards a goal. In both cases there is the feeling that getting an education will change them.

I don't know, I didn't really think of it but I liked that I was doing something that might change my future, I guess I put more emphasis on the degree and gave it more value than it actually had, once I had it I thought anyone could do this - anyone, it's just a case of putting your mind to it (Alice).

I didn't mind at all, in fact I quite liked it... I think the fact that I was doing something, I think there was a good feeling about being a student because I was working towards something that was credible and good at the end. And I must have had something in order to be a student, it's not just everybody that would have been a student at my age' (Amy).

Both Jenny and Nicola consider their multiple identity as student, mother and wife and relate it to their other roles and present identities.

A little bit odd at first but, yeah, it was nice to say 'I'm a student' I actually quite enjoyed that label and to actually say, I'm a student, housewife and mother (laughter) was even more ... (Jenny).

It was funny, it was funny although obviously I still had a part-time job it's funny when you're in college cause I don't know it's a really weird identity - I'm so used to being mum and wife and working - and then it's me here and by myself and it is a very strange thing to get used to, but you get used to it very quickly and the life you have in college the studying and the learning and all that is so different to what you are doing and when you leave the building - it's very strange but it's good (Nicola).

I quite liked being a student, yes, yes, it sounded like something I wanted to be or I should have been when I was 16 or 17 but no I was quite happy, I was happy enough being a student, definitely - I didn't mind that at all, at least then I felt I was doing something with my life (Kay).

Jane notes the difference between doing an HNC and a degree and feels more comfortable with the identity of student when she was doing her degree:

When you're asked what you do and you say - I'm a student, it felt strange, at my age you know saying that - people asking oh, where are you working and saying I'm not I'm a student, I'm in the college, I'm doing a degree, seemed better than the HNC, cos I really felt old doing my HNC but it didn't feel so bad doing my degree because there's lots of people older than me doing it, loads, there's a phenomenal age range in it.

Although the research did not specifically target first generation entrants to HE all participants fell into this category. Christie et al. (2008) investigate the experience of non-traditional students entering university and the vulnerability and insecurity they feel. Christie et al. (2008) suggest that their learning journeys are a process of identity formation which is often uncertain and affected by a range of psychological factors and that the 'emotional dynamics are most pronounced amongst students with no previous familial experience of higher education, where there is no reservoir of knowledge to draw upon' (p.569). This might help in explaining why some participants spoke about being terrified.

The desire to fit in for many of the women was a factor as Anne, Shona and Nicola demonstrate. Malkki and Green (2014) remind us that the micro-processes should be of interest to us from a first-person point of view, rather than the traditional, holistic and third-person approach which often ignores 'the psychic turmoil that it [transformative learning] necessitates' (Malkki and Green, 2014, p.3). Whilst the entry to college may have involved a disorientating dilemma, it appears to have been the 'psychic turmoil' of life that catapulted them into education in the first place and the desire to change their place in it. Morag described her wish to move from the status quo:

I was determined that I was going to leave my 'I am nothing' to 'I'm going to be something I'm going to do something', that was what made me go into further education in the first place, I knew I had to move out of this label of just being a woman that had married and who wasn't qualified to do anything, so I knew I had to move out of that, that was my first thing.

Through the recalling and re-presenting she was engaging in identity work; challenging her present identity and envisioning a new identity where she was 'going to be something'. In this way she is demonstrating what Castells (2010, p.9) refers to as a 'projected identity'. Edwards (1993) reminds us that for women, in particular 'education has been looked to by some as an escape route from domestic life and second-class citizenship into the public sphere' (p.1). This desire to change was evident in many of the women's discussion but it was articulated more clearly in Kareen, Morag and Maggie's account. Maggie reflects on her move from one identity to another.

I loved it, because I loved everything about it, it was a new lease of life, it certainly did, it was just amazing. And I think, people - yes when we were younger and that they talked about us and they're this and they're that and whatever and they haven't got this and they haven't got that...

Kareen's identity work appears to occur when she finally reports the abuse and she felt she could now 'move forward'. She tells of the disorienting dilemma of hearing her daughter had been abused by her grandfather (Kareen's father) and seeing the doubt in her husband's eyes when their daughter told them about the abuse. This was the catalyst that gave Kareen the courage to report her father to the authorities. Kareen goes on to talk about how she dealt with the abuse.

With me, I never thought about it, it was pushed so far back and when I did tell (pause) it took two days, two whole days and the main feeling I felt after each session was how tired I was, I was just so tired after each session, I was just so tired I could have gone on the floor and slept.

Kareen discusses the relief she felt after telling and that she felt she was 'no longer a victim'. This moving from one identity to another appears to demonstrate 'resistance identity' (Castells, 2011, p.9) as she became an agent of change herself (Bourdieu, 1984). As she explained I began to understand her earlier comment when the abuse stopped that 'he was finally the person I wanted him to be'. There appears to be an acceptance of the way things are on the surface and a 'burying' of the abuse 'so far down where no-one could touch it'.

.... I was still a victim until I reported him but *not now, not now* and I can't believe, how *could* I have thought like that, how could I *have believed that, but not now, no - not now*.

The stark contrast between the two identities is an interesting one as her identity prior to reporting him appears to be one of powerlessness and acceptance whereas after the report it is a strong and powerful identity which challenges where she was positioned by her father.

The way I feel today, you know (long pause) I know I'm not stupid, although all my life, you know, that's how I felt, even as an adult, as a mother, you know, being, as long as you're a victim as long as you feel like one and act like one, I mean, it's always going to keep you back but since then I've moved

on and um, the reading I do and doing my business and the accounts I keep, the VAT returns, *I know* I'm not stupid.

The sense of moving on is very clear throughout Kareen's account. Maggie also presents a contrast of identities and a moving on. She tells of how her father's voice would come to her, telling her she was useless.

No, no, nobody ever said it to me but the voice inside my head did, it would say you're useless, you'll never manage that but I think that was just from my father again, you know...

This was interesting as she does not appear to remember anyone saying it 'no, nobody ever said it to me' yet she goes on to situate her perceived lack of ability with her father's voice. Maggie tells of how, when her father died, the voice accusing her stopped and this was when she thought of going to college.

I suppose until Da died, and then all of that sort of went away, you know, I always carried that with me even up until he died it was just like he was always there, accusing me. He did, he took all of that [confidence] out of us and made us feel, sort of like nothing, so yes it was good to come here and actually gain that, you know, qualification.

### 6.3.1 Greedy Institutions

Morag talks about the tiredness she felt but also the determination which drove her forward.

the demands my family were putting on me I think was the hardest, my husband's illness was harder still because, you know, he's an alcoholic so that was hard (raises voice) that was one of the things that motivated me to move forward and do it, that was what made me ...but then, at the stage ... did I ever feel that I was never going to move on, no, because my determination was going to ... although I was tired, although I was physically just dead beat I knew my determination in my head was making me move forward and reach that goal in one way or another.

Alice also refers to the tiredness and also the pressure not to fail.

It was tiring, I remember the tiredness over everything else. I fell asleep at my computer many a time and James would come up with a cup of coffee and I'd be slumped over the computer. I don't think I was very productive - I remember reading things over and over and not understanding anything and feeling - a sense of panic, I think, yes panic because I couldn't afford

to fail this course. I was paying for it myself and we had hardly any money. I went back to work full-time when my daughter was 6 months - I didn't want to, I really didn't want to but we needed the money.

The women demonstrate through this journey how each greedy institution (Coser, 1974) fights for their attention and how their study is constantly relegated to the third shift (Karamarae, 2001). Hinton-Smith (2009) remind us that returning to study as an adult can be 'tentative and fraught with fear of failure' (p.115). Stone and O'Shea (2012) remind us that, as well as these worries, mature aged learners make sacrifices 'in terms of leisure time, social time and even time to sleep' (p.100) and that this is particularly complex for women.

### 6.3.2 Parental Encouragement

Many of the women felt that, had they been encouraged by their parents, they may have done better in school.

Kay was the second eldest of six children and her parents had got married very young: her mother was only sixteen years of age and her father was nineteen. She feels that because they were so young they never really pushed her and only cared if she was happy.

I wish they had kind of said, cos I can see that when I was at school I was bright enough to do better, you know I definitely was bright enough to do better than I did but because I didn't study I didn't get fantastic grades and my parents never ever said you know if you work really hard you can make a really good life for yourself, go on to university, study, you know get a really good career - they just said, as long as you're happy, so I think a lot of it came from just them being very young themselves and them not having been educated themselves.

Alice expresses similar sentiments but also recollects how her father helped her with her schoolwork when she was younger.

I don't know - I think I always wanted to do one [a degree] and looking back now I think if I had been pushed a bit more in school, I think I would have done, but my parents didn't really push me and I left school at 16 and got a job in an office, which was fine at the time but there was always a feeling that I could do more.

Alice goes on to discuss the support she got from her father but how she drifted away and stopped bothering.

Also, my father used to always go over things with me at night as well and I was well prepared, especially with maths but as I went to the secondary I don't think my father felt so comfortable with the maths or maybe it was just that I was getting older and a bit rebellious I don't know what it was, probably a combination of things, but my performance in school began to deteriorate, I just wasn't working, I was more interested in boys and clothes and makeup. I still feel though that if my parents had been more involved I may not have fallen so far back, they didn't go to any parents' meetings or anything and by the time I was on fourth year I was skiving school and not really bothering.

Catherine had a positive experience at both primary and secondary and enjoyed school but also felt that her parents did not push her enough. She felt that she had the ability to go to university on leaving school but was not encouraged to do so.

...it's been fine, I must admit but I do wish I had worked harder but possibly if you parents had been more on your case, they were no different to any other parents, but if they had been, you know, they could have pushed you a bit more, just to work, you know.

Nicola recognises how her mother was preoccupied with other things in her life and how this adversely affected her education. Nicola also notes that her mother also recognises this.

And my mother says that as well now - she said to the two of us [Nicola and her sister] 'I should have pushed you - I should have made you stay' (Nicola).

### 6.3.3 Socioeconomic Status

Davis-Kean (2005) examines how socioeconomic status, such as parents' education and income has an impact on children's academic achievement through the parents' beliefs and behaviours. According to Guo and Harris (2000) there are two models which are used to explain the mediating effects of poverty on children's intellectual development. The first one is the financial capital model which suggest that as an impoverished family has little by way of financial



resources, it then follows that 'children growing up with fewer resources tend to do less well in education and other aspects of life'. (p.431). The second model examines the family processes and, according to this model, 'economic hardship diminishes parents' ability to interact with and socialize children in ways that are beneficial to their well-being' (*ibid*). It would appear that both elements had a bearing on many of the women's experiences. It is, however, difficult to gauge which factors were more predominant than others and how the cultural background exacerbated or alleviated their struggles.

As well as the feeling that parental involvement might have helped them do better at school, there is also some recognition that they had a lower expectation from them, sometimes this was attributed to gender and sometimes to their parents' lack of education and social standing. Anne links the size of her family and the perception that her parents would not help with homework to her being side-lined in school.

Well, I was one of eight children, and I found that the teachers didn't really bother with children from big groups if you were, oh well, you know, the parents aren't going to bother with their homework or whatever and they, I personally found was that they stuck to the ones that were bright in class.

Anne mentions how in school she used to get 'special reading' and I asked if she felt there was a stigma attached to this.

It did, I felt that in some ways and then in Primary 4 you went and got private - you sort of got private lessons - everyone knew you were going.

This perception that everyone knew you were going suggests a feeling of inferiority and stigma. Morag, in a similar way, discusses the stigma attached to being 'left behind' due to her asthma and repeated absences.

I was quite ill when I went into school with asthma which meant I was off quite a lot and I would fall behind and there was a stigma attached to it, being left behind.

Morag goes on to describe how she felt that more attention was given to those with a higher social standing in the community. This relates to my earlier

comment that the word of the teacher was supreme (p.105) and poor crofting families often felt they had no voice in terms of their children's education.

My memory in school -- see if you were the daughter or son of a minister of a doctor you always got that little bit of special treatment from your teacher, especially if your teacher was local, you know, if your parents were somebody or something was standing in the community, if you are a lowly crofter's daughter you didn't get as much attention there was a lot of that in school and I think a lot of that followed us all the way through. You were a nothing anyway...

Maggie also makes this link to social standing and discusses the way in which the teachers did not bother with her because of her background and the fact that she was not very clean in school.

You know we used to go to school with no socks, no shoes, probably smelly, I don't know. I can't remember that far back but certainly because of that the home was dirty because he bullied her so much and, you know, all these little things and then people saw that and it was like a stigma for a very long time.

Goffman (1963) referred to a stigma as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' and which reduces its owner 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (p. 3). We can see elements of this in the women's accounts. Crocker, Major and Steel (1998) take a more context specific stance to Goffman's global one and define stigma as an 'attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular context' (p. 505). Whereas Stafford and Scott (1986, p. 80-81) propose something which is time specific and contrary to the 'norm' where a 'norm' is defined as a 'shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time'.

I mentioned in Chapter Two Coffield's (1999) concerns about lifelong learning exacerbating rather than bridging the divide between those with access to a high level of social capital and those who do not. Coffield criticises the move of responsibility to the individual and the move towards a 'new moral economy, where some people are treated as more 'desirable' than others' (p.485). This focus on the individual has echoes of Bernstein's (1970) research which was concerned that compensatory education suggested a lack in individuals, families and communities and not in the social and economic

structure itself. Bernstein suggested that the very notion of labeling children as 'culturally deprived' suggested that the parents were inadequate and that everything that made up their culture was devalued and rendered of less significance. The overspill into education was that:

Teachers will have lower expectations of the children, which the children will undoubtedly fulfil. All that informs the child, that gives meaning and purpose to him (sic) outside of the school, ceases to be valid or accorded significance and opportunity for enhancement within the school (Bernstein 1970, p.345).

There appears to be some evidence of this in Anne, Morag and Maggie's account. Amy does not articulate feelings about poverty or social standing but she does suggest a deviation for what is 'the 'norm''. There is also some evidence of this negative link between expectation and attainment in Maggie and Anne's accounts above. Amy does not use the word stigma but refers to feeling inferior and, again, the link to a 'norm' in which she does not fit in with, comes through in her recollections.

I remember (strong voice) thinking - father was on the bus and he was dirty - the job he was doing was dirty, um and at that point just thinking ugh - everyone else's parents they're clean, (pause and emphasis) which they probably weren't but that was the way I felt and yes, feeling almost inferior as a result.

#### 6.3.4 The influence of gender

Gender stereotyping was a theme that ran through many of the women's stories. Morag reflects on how the gender bias was evident very early on in her family life and how boys were treated differently to girls.

The boys were treated in the way that everything was done for them. We had to do male and female work. Not only did we have to look after the boys -- tidy up their rooms. But we had to make sure that all the washing was done for the Saturday or whatever and they had no machines and, of course, craft work as well.

Morag goes on to discuss the expectation for boys to be breadwinners and the girls to be wives.

Yes, because they were boys. They were more concentrated on for schoolwork because they were boys and they were the breadwinners. They went out into the world to become breadwinners. The girls were, well you will be a wife anyway, you know you've got a man to look after you so you don't need education ... it was left to the woman to look after the menfolk but ensure that the menfolk did what they had to. So they were allowed to do their schoolwork, while we were still standing doing the ironing.

The idea of men going out in into the world while women stayed at home is clear throughout Morag's account. Morag also reflects on how the world of work was male.

In school accounting and maths were always associated with boys and bankers. Bankers where always men, you know, and people who worked in the figure world were always men, you know, figures and shares. Businessmen were always businessmen they were never women, you know, you would never get a woman who was a businesswoman it was always, way back then, it was always a male that had the top jobs it was always the male that had the best jobs and, no matter how clever the woman was.

This reflects Edwards (1993) observation that women's 'natural' sphere was the home where they would carry out the domestic and caring work for which they were suited 'while men were predominant in the public world of paid work, politics, formal education and so, for which they were 'naturally' suited' (p.19). Despite being written in 1993 its currency still remains depressingly real. Anne also recollects the lack of choice available to girls and how instead of doing Nautical Studies her friend 'got pushed into Secretarial and I got put into the Catering'. Anne knew she did not want to do Catering so she decided that she would like to join the Army but was told. '“Oh you're not clever enough', you have to have so many A Levels and Highers and I thought, OK fine then, I'll be a driver, then they said 'well actually you have to be 5 foot 4 to get into the Services' and I'm 5 foot 3½ so that was that'.

This resilience despite the gender stereotyping was heartening on the one hand but on the other hand I felt a deep dismay that this had happened. I was also distressed to hear that this was still happening in the late 90s. Shona expressed how her daughter's choice of career was subject to similar positioning. Shona attributes this to the age of the teacher.

You know, if sort of them are nearing retiring age they are still in that mind set, cause I know that my daughter, the eldest one she's an optician, when she was going through school um - when she was on P7 she was asked what would you like to do? And she said 'I would love to be an optician' and her teacher said 'well you have to be very clever for that and to do that and it's usually the boys who do that'.

Shona also noted the gender bias in her upbringing (p.111) and how her father felt that women 'didn't really know much about anything'.

## **6.4 Support Networks**

### 6.4.1 Significance of Children

One of the themes which emerged was that the women were doing it for their children as well as for themselves. Linda discusses how she is a role model for her children and she feels that if she gave up it would set a bad example for her children.

You know when I think of the age Sue [daughter] is now, to say that to her 'yeah, I did do it but och I wasn't..' you know it wouldn't look very good for her to think -well my mum started that but she never bothered finishing it and you know it might have an effect on her to think, well it's ok cos my mum did that - yeah, so I suppose there's that too.

Kay mentions that when she went round the College car park and was tempted to go home because she was out of her comfort zone it was the thought of what she would say to her husband and children that forced her to go through the College doors.

I just thought, if I don't, if I don't go in, what will I say to Murdo and the girls, so I forced myself and then once I was in the building I knew I'd be ok, yeah.

Amy refers to her degree as a 'benchmark' for her children.

... I remember often thinking that at least this is a benchmark for the children, especially when Andrew [Amy's husband] started doing his as well um, I think I thought of it as a benchmark for the children, you know, if we both have degrees then at least that's a minimum aim for them whereas my parents didn't have a degree or a professional qualification so maybe that it would be a benchmark for them.

Jane expresses the opinion that having children makes 'you want to better yourself'.

I don't know if I would have carried on if I didn't have the children. I don't know if I would have thought that I could better myself but when you've got children you want to better yourself.

Alice, in a similar way to Amy, feels that if she had a degree then her daughter might aspire to this. She also refers to the thought of a degree being too far out of her reach. Yes, despite this Alice completed her degree and went on to do a postgraduate qualification.

I think I had the feeling that if I had a degree it would be something she could more easily aspire to. I also wanted a better future for us all and I felt that if I did a degree I would get a better job, but I think more than the job was the value of having a degree, sometimes it seemed almost too wonderful that I would have a degree, I sometimes couldn't think about it because it seemed so far out of my reach and it scared me slightly.

#### 6.4.2 Partners as Supporters

The other area where the women were often supported was with their partners. Alice discusses how her husband always believed that she was 'smart' and that she would succeed. She also outlines how this was added pressure but ultimately it did help her to achieve.

Yes, James has always been really supportive, he was always *hugely* supportive of my decision to study. I could never have done it if he hadn't been there, you know just to take over and let me go off and study - sometimes he used to annoy me because it was like he put me on a pedestal and he would say things like 'Och, you'll do it Alice, you always do' and I would say 'But, James this is different, it's really difficult so don't keep saying that' but he would always say it anyway and he really believed I could do it so in a way that was added pressure and in another way it was good to know he believed in me, so yeah, his support was hugely important in my getting my degree, definitely.

Kay also cites her husband's support as significant and when she thought of enrolling in an NC, he encouraged her to aim higher.

Murdo said to me, don't do an NC it's just a waste of a year, you can go straight into the HN, I know you can.

Some of the other women spoke about their husbands as being 'quite supportive' (Abby) or 'he was quite happy for me to do it' (Jenny) or 'yeah, he was fine with it - as long as it didn't interfere too much with him' (Abby). Morag's husband expressed the view that 'you'll never do this. I'll give you six months and then you pack it up because there's no way you're going to cope.' Morag is quick to point out that she does not feel this was a slight on her academic ability but that she was taking too much on and there was also the added worry of losing a wage.

No he never saw it academically, that I wouldn't do it, but it was just that I was taking on too much. He said there's no way you're going to cope with that and, besides, how are we going to do this financially if we have to lose a wage.

Amy also had a negative reaction from her husband when she said she was going to college. Amy had her own business at this time which she was intending selling.

So his reaction was, kind of - 'you're crazy, you can't do that'. I said I can, just watch me. And I did!

#### 6.4.3 Support from Lecturers

Another area which was mentioned often was the support from the lecturers and the facilities of the college reflecting Maynard and Martinez's (2002) belief in the importance of the organisational culture of learning and teaching.

It's really, well I'm always singing the praises of the college here and yeah, it's a super facility and I think you get more help here because it is a small college, Yes, you're a name and not a number (Linda).

I felt very well supported in the college, I think the secret is getting women in, you know breaking through that barrier, cos once they're actually in, certainly at the college I think everybody is well supported (Kay).

Morag outlines what helped her in moving forward.

The lecturers were great, fantastic lecturers, they were great at encouraging you and in coming down to your level and that gave me the opportunity to do (pause) they would throw questions your way that would make you open up and question you like, when I was giving you this assignment do you really understand what it means? - throwing things like, em, questioning and asking if you are interested, so yes, yes, the support was fantastic.

Morag goes on to explain how she managed her learning and the concept of being a self-directed learner comes through with the knowledge that there is support from the lecturers when she needs it.

I think for me a lot of it was - I did a lot of reading, I studied a lot. Everything I learnt on a daily basis I will go over and over again. And things I didn't understand, by this stage, you would Google it or go on the Internet and I knew how to go onto the Internet and look for these things and if I still didn't understand it then I would go back to my lecturers, who I knew, would have the time.

Abby makes the contrast with school and recognises the power of the lecturer's perception of her ability as something which encouraged her to enrol for the HND.

In school I came across more negativity than positives, um, (long pause). I think that quite possibly I wasn't aware of positive influences until I came to the college here because it was two lecturers here that persuaded me that I was capable of doing, um the HND. They were really encouraging and it was the first time anyone had been positive about my ability, so that was really the first, really, really positive, you know - *aimed at me, personally*.

## 6.5 Confidence.

Most of the women expressed an increase in confidence as they looked back on their educational journey. Linda outlines how she felt about doing the degree and how it gave her more confidence.

I think doing the degree, em, I feel was a great achievement for me at the time, I feel it made me, well I can do that, you know and it probably gave me confidence, you know even getting out of the ward I was in. I probably wouldn't have, if I hadn't done the degree I would probably still be working



there, just trundling along with everybody else and not trying to better myself.

Anne talks about how her faith and maturity was a factor. Morag also discusses an increase in confidence but also a wish to help others engage with education.

Well I have a lot more confidence now that I am a Christian as well - it's changed me an awful lot - um - I don't know - I just think you have been round the block a few times and you realise what life is really like about and the important things in life are not what you thought when you were sixteen and seventeen (Anne).

Yes completely, it's given me more confidence and it's now given me the ability to encourage others, I say, if you want something badly enough your determination will see you though there's nothing that can't be achieved with determination and patience (Morag).

Jenny refers to her increase in confidence and her different outlook on life whilst Alice discusses how she feels she now has a voice.

I'm the same person but em, I'm definitely more confident that I was when I left school. I think now I would not baulk at the idea of taking on any more challenges. I've even played with the idea of going back to college to do more, you know, that would have just horrified me at the time when I left school, so yeah I'm a very different, not a different person, but a different outlook on life (Jenny).

Yes, I am a lot more confident now than when I left school. When I left school I was a bit of a scardy cat, I would never have spoken up in a gathering of any sort and although I'm still quite shy I will speak up if I have to and I think people listen to me (Alice).

## 6.6 Incremental Route

It appears from the interviews that in the majority of cases the incremental route from FE to HE facilitated their progression. There were a few of the women, Alice, Amy, Jenny and Shona who knew they wanted a degree and were completely focussed on this goal. However the majority of the women appeared to have 'tested the waters' by doing an FE course first and 'surprised' themselves when they found it accessible and this gave them the confidence to progress to another course at a higher level. Anne outlines how this step-by-step approach helped her.

It was really beneficial for me if someone was to say to me you are going to start college and you are going to do your BSc - I would have said 'What - no way' but I think when I found I had finished the first year and I thought well I'll sign on for the next year and then I waited to see how I did but half way through each year you kind of knew that you were going to aim for the next one.

Linda, also feels that the incremental route helped her. 'Yes, it was a lot more accessible, having the diploma, moving on to the next...'.

Morag took nine week's holiday to do the ECDL and she outlines her experience and the importance of one of the lecturers encouraging her.

Yes, I think it would have been the way I did it where I took my whole 9 weeks, like I said, I did my ECDL and I passed my ECDL, that to me was like getting a degree there and then you know the first thing I'd do it all on my own and then I bought a computer and was practising all those things at home and then I'd been speaking to one of the lecturers and I said it was best nine weeks of my life, it was fantastic and she said 'well why don't you, what's stopping you?' and I said I don't have the qualifications and she said that this will take you on to do the first year as a mature student. I said 'you're kidding, you're

kidding', so I filled in the application there and then. And I've never looked back, never looked back.

Kay expresses how the incremental route felt safe to her.

Yes, yes, with the option to just stop if I felt. I wanted to feel - safe - and that I could cope with what I was doing at the time and then as I do each qualification then I feel a bit more confident to go on and do the next, if you see what I mean. (Kay)

Nicola, looks back on her journey, having just completed her ordinary degree.

Yeah, definitely it's good that if you want to carry on, but I don't think I would have - I couldn't have thought about doing a degree - no - but it's amazing once you get into it the whole studying thing it's really good and to be honest now I'm starting to think about Honours.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

The rich information gleaned from the women's stories offered insights into how they navigated their educational journeys and how barriers were worked through and negative associations were overcome as they moved from positions of powerlessness to positions of power. As they recognised elements of their own development and attainment of certain skills their confidence increased. There appears to have been a cumulative effect as the growth of one capability impacts on another and had a positive effect on intellectual growth and confidence. Their stories indicate that participation in education for second chance learners is transformative and inspiring and my hope is that their voices communicate this to the reader.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Analysis Two

#### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I continue the analyses of the interviews but look more specifically at the transformative aspects of the women's journeys. I begin by examining how they accessed education as non-traditional learners and the significance of identity, persistence and dispositions. I will then examine the role of emotions in transformative learning and also how they navigated their new identities and reflected on their journeys.

Throughout this dissertation I have been interested in finding out who and what influenced the women in terms of accessing education as adults and what made their experience different from school. In this way I was operating in 'binary oppositions' (MacLure, 2003). MacLure posits that:

Binary oppositions are one of the key ways in which meaning and knowledge are produced....One 'side' achieves definition - comes to meaning - through its difference with respect to a (constructed) "other" which is always lacking, lesser or derivative in some respect (p.10).

Through this approach the women were contrasting their success in college with their lack of success at school. They were not, however, simply constructing their experiences from a purely better or worse angle, they were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in an effort to recognise the complex social forces which impacted on their early education. Their retelling and often reconstruction of their past through their own narratology has helped them to understand their experiences and how this impacted on their earlier education.

#### 7.2 Reassimilation

Maggie reflects on how she had no confidence in school and was scared to answer a question:

You know, growing up we had no confidence and still, you know there's some things, well maybe not now but certainly there was at that time you know scared even to answer a question in class in case I got it wrong, you

know, I wouldn't - I ***hated*** standing up and talking in front of people, I just hated it.

Maggie appears to be recognising how she felt as a child being asked questions in class and there is some indication in the 'maybe not now' that she sees a change. As mentioned above it is the participants' own story and how they construct them that is important. Maggie reflects on her experience of college where the student identity appears to have been a positive experience for her and where she is constructing her identity through the eyes of another:

But when I became a student it was like, Wow! That's what they used to say, you know 'she's doing really well' positive things came out of it.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000) using narrative as a way of interviewing can help people to examine themselves through 'the evocative power of the narrative text' (p. 748). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) believe that through the telling a rich description of the participant's world emerges and that it is the meaning people bring to the stories that gives it value. Davies and Harré (1990) add another dimension which comes through in Maggie's recollection. They note that who one is shifts, depending on the positions made available in particular social settings and discursive practices and that it is the joint action of all the participants as they 'make (or attempt to make) their own and each other's actions socially determinate' (p.45). What Davies and Harré mean by discursive practices is the process by which cultural meanings are produced and understood. Davies and Harré examine how people are positioned and how they position themselves in relation to discourse and how there is a relationship between position and 'illocutionary force' (*ibid*). Maggie indicates this relationship in the above quote where she is seeing herself through another's eyes and where she is recognising and articulating the transformation that has occurred. When we consider the earlier part of her response: 'when we younger and they talked about us and they're this and they're that and whatever and they haven't got this and they haven't got that' we recognise the historic cultural positioning which she brings to this new understanding. Van Gennep (1909) refers to this as 'reassimilation' as the person exits the liminal period and is reassimilated into society. Mezirow (1978a) refers to this as 'contractual

solidarity' where the individual can participate again in society 'but on one's own inner-directed terms as defined by the new meaning perspective' (p.105).

This also links to how the women were subject to 'interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another' (p.48) and 'reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself' (*Ibid*). This aligns to the two versions of power outlined by Yoder and Kahn (1992, p. 382). Yoder and Kahn believe that power can be conceptualized 'in two ways: 'power-over' (domination) and 'power-to' (personal empowerment)'. Traditional considerations of power often interpreted it as the ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests (Weber, 1946). Under Yoder and Kahn's definition this would be 'power-over'. The two areas hold resonance for this study as the women have demonstrated 'power-to', despite being positioned in many instances in places where there was 'power-over' them. There is clear recognition that they were positioned by their gender and culture and there seems to be some evidence that they were also complicit in this positioning and in the production of 'jointly produced story lines' (Davies and Harré, 1990 p.48). However despite this they did become agents for their own change with their decision to come to college. In this way they were active in changing the story line and in recognising that what they thought were personal failures were actually 'socially produced conflicts and contradictions shared by many women in similar social positions' (Weedon, 1987, p.33) and that '[t]his process of discovery can lead to a rewriting of personal experience in terms which give it social, changeable causes' (*ibid*).

Davies (1991) writing from a feminist poststructural perspective defines stories as '...the means by which events are interpreted, made tellable, or even liveable' (p.43). This is similar to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) point that in the retelling there is also reliving. There was evidence with many of the women interviewed that they were 'caught' in a particularly strong version of their story (Tedder and Biesta, 2009) and that this had negative and positive consequences. In both Maggie and Kareen's case, they had been given a very negative version of themselves by their father but one in which a disorientating dilemma forced them to question the status quo. In Kareen's case it was the abuse of her daughter by Kareen's father and the subsequent decision to report him to the

authorities. In Maggie's case it was the loss of her husband's job which threatened her life-world. Taylor (1997) believes that there are various triggers for perspective transformation and rather than a disruptive dilemma there can be an integrating trigger which recognises that something is missing in their lives. In trying to 'find this 'missing piece', the transformative learning process is catalysed (Clark, quoted in Taylor, 1997, p.39).

Kay expresses elements of this when she discusses how she wishes the degree was something she had done earlier but also expresses the opinion that it was good to be doing something with her life. Alice, in a similar way, reflects on the fact that she 'always wanted to do one [a degree]'. There is also a sense that, with some of the women, their roles as mothers may have provided the impetus to 'better yourself' (Jane). Linda refers to how it would not be a very good example to her daughter if she just gave up and Amy feels it is a 'benchmark' for her children and Alice, in a similar way to Amy, feels that having her degree would be something that her daughter could 'more easily aspire to'. In some cases it is the support of a partner or the encouragement of a lecturer that spurs them on. Mezirow's (1978b) concept of a disorientating dilemma may therefore be rather linear and limited to adequately describe the complexity of transformative education. Alice appears to have demonstrated this wish to add and improve and she cites her feeling that 'in the back of my mind was the feeling that I could have done better and gone on to study'. Maggie's experience of her husband losing his job appears to be her disorientating dilemma but rather than allowing this to hinder her it appears to propel her forward as she sees a way out of 'being in the gutter'. In a similar way Morag recognises the changes that are occurring at work and articulates how she wants to leave the, 'I am nothing' and change it to, 'I'm going to be something, I'm going to do something' (p.123), thus effecting change through her own initiative (Mezirow and Rose, 1978). There appears to be a point in the women's stories where they realise that they have 'power-to' change things and forge a different path. This is particularly marked with Morag's and Kareen's response; Morag discussed how she was determined to 'move out of this label of just being a woman that had married and who wasn't qualified to do anything' (p.123) whereas Kareen discusses the feeling of relief at having finally told the authorities about the abuse and the recognition that she was no longer a victim

(p.121). Gouthro (2010) highlights how mature women returners are often going through a process of identity construction which often involves conflict as they attempt to gain a sense of independence and develop a sense of identity that is not determined by their role as wives and mothers. I will now move on to discuss the incremental route from FE to HE as many of the women expressed the opinion that this was key to their success.

### **7.3 FE into HE**

In terms of this study the incremental route from FE into HE appears to have provided an accessible route back into education. In 2005, Sir Andrew Foster described FE as the ‘neglected middle child’ (Diamond, 2012) of British Education. It is my hope that this dissertation will demonstrate the centrality and importance of FE for women returners who had negative experiences in school but who were successful as adults. The FE route, for many of the women interviewed, offered an accessible route back in to education and offered them a safe environment in which they could recognise and value their existing skills and develop further ones in a supportive environment which places the learner at the centre of their education. The support received from partners, parents and lecturers was significant to a greater or lesser extent among the women but there still appears to have been a great deal of ‘time poverty’ (Reay, 2005, p.90) as the women attempted to continue with their domestic responsibilities at the same level as before and their study got relegated to the ‘third shift’ as discussed in Chapter Three.

One of the areas which appears to have been significant is the support that the women were able to draw on from various people throughout their educational journeys which appears to have spurred them on and helped them in challenging the status quo. In this way they were shaping their identities anew and raising their expectations. Thomas and Quinn (2006) report from an international perspective and suggest that students from non-traditional backgrounds have access to more limited information from families and friends. Whilst this may be true, the close-knit nature of the islands may have mitigated against this as the women appear to have made use of strong bonding social capital through friends, family and in Abby and Morag’s case (p.104 & 135) the college staff. In



this way the college was part of the linking social capital which allowed the women to progress. Maggie illustrated this point clearly when she indicated that she loved her time at college and that it had given her a new lease of life (p.124). This suggests not only recognition of a change but also recognition that people see her as different but not in a negative sense, in a positive one and that her capabilities are also different (p.140). This again appears to demonstrate Davies and Harré's (1990) 'discursive practice' as she actively produces her 'social and psychological realities' based on her sense of culture and social positioning, recognising her past and seeing the transformative elements of her education through others' eyes but also recognising and owning it for herself.

Sen (2001) discusses how poverty can be understood as capability-deprivation and there is evidence of this in Maggie's story as her father undermines her and her experience of education is blighted by her feelings of inferiority and poverty. Sen (2001) reminds us that people should have the ability 'to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value' (p.291). Nussbaum (2001) develops Sen's account of capabilities and reminds us that the real measure of a just society is not the level of economic growth but the ability for people to carry out fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Nussbaum defines this as 'capabilities' i.e. what they can do. Nussbaum believes that 'if we ask what people are actually able to do and to be, we come much closer to understanding the barriers societies have erected against full justice for women' (p.33). Nussbaum goes on to discuss how agency and freedom are 'particularly important goals for women, who have so often been treated as passive dependents' (*ibid*).

This lack of agency comes through in Kareen's story. Kareen shows the move from one way of seeing herself and another when she recalls that she 'was still a victim' to 'no longer a victim'. This positional move extends to the way in which she now saw things. She describes the sea on the night after she reported the abuse: 'it was shimmering and sparkling and the hills were so green'. Kareen describes how she did not see the colour in everything prior to reporting the abuse and how she did not realise this until she had reported the abuse and then 'suddenly, everything was light'. There appears to be a 'turning around of

the soul' (Scott, 2014, p.495) where she feels her environment and her place in it is fundamentally changed. She questions her father's belief that she was stupid and comes to the conclusion that: 'I knew I wasn't stupid'. Her determination to get her HND appears to come from this and there is a suggestion that her old concept of herself has metaphorically died and she is working through and developing her new identity as 'no longer a victim'. Kareen uses the analogy of a story to describe this:

What I always try to do is look forwards. It's like when I read a book and like my pal she'll read a book and she'll say oh that's terrible, oh, that's awful! And I said to her - Sylvia - *go to the beginning after you've finished reading it - go to the beginning* - where they've started to *where they've reached* - that - I said, is what you look at (Kareen).

This brings me to a related area, that of identity, persistence and dispositions.

## 7.4 Identity, Persistence and Dispositions

Biesta (2008) defines identity as 'one's sense of self' and theorises this 'in terms of the dispositions people have towards themselves and towards their life and learning' (pp.2-3). Egan (2004) makes the link between identity and learning more explicit when he notes that through the process of learning one is not only learning new skills but is learning and re-learning the self by constructing and reconstructing an identity. This was evident in Alice's account (pp.122&126) and also in Kay's as she reflects back on how she was exploited and now sees what happened in a different light 'at the start - I was totally exploited but I didn't see it but when I look back now, I was totally exploited'. In a similar way Abby wishes she had worked harder at school: 'when you have to go to school it would be nice to think, well, I couldn't have done any better and when I look back I think yeah, I could have, if I had worked, you know'.

I discussed Reason's (2009) belief that the type of dispositions students have may go some way to explain why they persist in education (p.48). Reason's model delineates the college experience as represented by the organisational context and the peer environment which includes, the classroom experience, the out-of-class experience and the curricular experience. Feeding in to this is student pre-college characteristics and experiences such as socio-demographic

traits, academic preparation and performance and student dispositions. The combination of these factors interacting with the college experience determines persistent. This is an interesting point as we consider the liminal journey of the student and how they move from and between confused and unformed identities as a student whilst, at the same time, developing their identity as an achiever and freeing themselves from the past failures in education. Amy outlines this as she reflects on gaining her degree, which she refers to as something which is 'tangible' to her and which was different to what she had achieved in the past in terms of her business success.

I just felt that I had achieved something that I had always wanted to achieve and that I was leaving with something, whereas I left school with three O' Grades and, you know, I didn't feel that I had really achieved anything, whereas that was a very different feeling, yes very different.

We can also see aspects of this sense of achievement as the women consider their identity as students: 'I was achieving something or about to achieve something' (Morag) and 'I was working towards something that was good and credible in the end' (Amy). The women also address their multiple roles and show awareness that they were all part of different and evolving role-based identities, such as learner, wife, mother, daughter, worker, carer, etc. Some identities rise to prominence whilst others are subsumed as the environment and the context changes. There is recognition that identity is not fixed but subject to specific environments and contexts and that it is also characterised by constant change. The significance of her identity as a student was drawn out for me when Nicola said 'It's me here and by myself' (p.122), a phrase which I felt exemplified freedom, autonomy and agency and there is also the feeling that this is a new way of being for Nicola. Kay, also gives a positive account of studentship but she links it to her past as something she 'should have been' but also considers the identity of student as active and 'doing something with my life' (p.122). Field (2012) reminds us of this process and cautions that we should 'seek to understand university studenthood as a liminal process, in which newcomers may legitimately explore and experiment with their identities, including their cultural and social allegiances, without serious risk' (p.10). Whilst Field, in this case, is looking at traditional young entrants to university this also has resonance for mature women returners.

Nicola recognised the progress she has made:

And you know it's um when you look back on your HNC and see how much you have learned and at the end of third year you really look back and think I've really challenged myself and I've really developed my skills (Nicola).

This process of constructing and reconstructing identity is crucial in helping adults acquire a new sense of meaning, self-concept and direction in their lives (Mezirow, 1975). If education has the potential to open up new possibilities and truly be the 'practice of freedom' (hooks, 1994) then learners should be encouraged to gain a clearer perspective and reflection of themselves in the process of learning. I believe that reflexivity is a central concept here; Barr (1999) talking about her own feminist pedagogical practice states that 'personal experience is not immune from reflection, re-interpretation and critique' (p.4). If this is the case, an opportunity presents itself for adult educators to develop this approach in order to help the learner's self-image expand and experience a growth in confidence as they recognise significant learning points and envisage a new future where autonomy and confidence - perhaps for the first time - characterise their journey and become an integral and essential part of their lives. Abby recognises this shift in perspectives when she states:

I think now I realise that I'm capable of more than I did then. I think I've got more of an awareness of, you know, what I can do.

Morag talks about a sense of freedom and worth:

it gave you a sense of freedom a sense of worth or a sense of belonging somewhere so you belonged in this world of learning, and that you are moving forward and you were part of it.

Part of this journey is intimately tied up with emotions to which I now turn.

## **7.5 Emotions and Transformative Learning**

Taylor (2000) alerts us to the centrality of emotions in education when he reminds us that transformative learning 'relies on the affective dimension of knowing, such as developing an empathetic view of other perspectives and trusting intuition' (Taylor, 2000, p.303). In a similar way, Taylor and Jarecke (2009) make the link between transformative learning and emotions and refer to transformative learning as a 'messy, time-consuming, emotionally laden, risky and replete with particular potholes and ill-structured problems' (p.278). Scott

(2014) takes this further when he draws on Plato and refers to the fact that at the centre of each person is a spiritual core, called soul, where the deepest impulses and energies that drive the personality lie. Scott reminds us that in some cases 'these impulses may have been turned in the wrong direction, by the distractions and degenerative influences in a person's life' (p.485). We can see elements of this in many of the women's stories as they grapple with poverty, abuse, alcoholism and sexism. Kareen reflects on how she became someone else:

On the abuse side you don't look at it - you bury it, you completely bury it, em, pause, um yes, difficult to explain really um it's like you're not who you are you know, you're someone else and it's just everything else is washed out.

According to Scott an understanding of 'what the student is going through inwardly' (p.486) is crucial if transformative learning is to occur and this may involve caring for them as they go 'through the sometimes dark passageways that lead them to a larger sense of identity' (*ibid*). Whilst Kareen went through this process she expressed how she needed to talk about her experience and how it helped her to do so.

I try to talk about it to Billy<sup>9</sup> but he wants to leave it. Billy is a very quiet man, you know he is a very good man but he's very quiet and he would rather not say anything if he thinks it's going to upset you, you know so he's never really, he's never really gone in depth with it with me, you know. I've left it with him, you know, I've told him - I've done what I have to and now it's his turn for when he's ready.

The other important aspect which comes across in many of the women's accounts is what Dirkx (1997) refers to as "soul work" or "inner work". We see this in Kareen's account when she refers to how the colours were brighter after the abuse (p.144) and goes on to say 'it was like living in a tunnel and for me, and you know there's never a light at the end and all of a sudden it's all light'. Dirkx believes that central to transformative learning is an understanding of how 'we have come to think about and understand our senses of self, our senses of identity, our subjectivity' (Dirkx, et al., 2006, p.125). Dirkx et al.'s view of transformative learning seeks to 'integrate the soul and the mind'

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<sup>9</sup> Kareen's husband

acknowledging the importance of the affective and emotional aspects. There are clear elements of this in the women's stories and also evidence of great pain and soul searching as we see above in Kareen's story and also in Maggie's discussion of her lack of confidence and her reticence to answer questions in class. Maggie goes on to outline how she is now more confident and she attributes this to her progress in college:

Me, now yes (emphatic) I'm much more confident, much more confident. I think - knowing I was passing the assignments and getting good feedback, that really helped me and, yes, it was a hard slog at times but, bit by bit I would ask about things and I wouldn't be stuck and the group were great too, we helped each other.

This brings me to Malkki and Green's (2014) point that whilst transformative learning is what adult educators want for their students, 'the difficulty of this journey is often neglected' (p.1). Nussbaum's (2001), as well as highlighting the role of emotions in learning, also outlines the importance of belief in one's actions as key features in achieving our goals: 'emotional health requires the belief that one's own voluntary actions will make a significant difference to one's most important goals and projects' (p.5). Field (2012) draws out aspects of this when he draws our attention to the requirement to make transitions as a feature of today's world through the shifting global and social landscape. This inevitably means uncertainty and insecurity and raises questions of learner identity and how we educate. An understanding of the role of emotions in education is therefore important and more especially for those who have had poor early experiences of education. Understanding something of the complexity of these factors can help us in supporting adult learners. We should also remember that it is only the learners themselves who can become agents of the transformation and this conscious or unconscious decision is affected by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks and Kasl (2006) believe that there is a 'healthy interdependence between affective and rational ways of knowing' (p.27) and that central to this transformation is the experience of 'profound changes in how the learner understands and relates to some significant aspect of his or her world' (p.33).

It is with this in mind that I turn to the research carried out by Mezirow and Rose (1978) on women's re-entry to education, the results of which led to the development of Mezirow's (1978a) theory of perspective transformation as discussed in Chapter Three and also to the earlier discussion on social constructivism in Chapters One and Five. This theory involved a fundamental rethinking of the way in which people look at themselves and their relationships and a recognition that they are caught up in their own life histories in a unique and particular way. Through this lens they learn about how their new experiences (of learning) are transformed and assimilated into and by their past experiences.

Many of the women expressed the feelings that they would like to engage in further study at a later stage in their life. All the women said they had enjoyed their educational experience and how different it was to school. I mentioned Mezirow and Rose's (1978) research on women's experiences of college re-entry programmes above and the development of the concept of perspective transformation. This, as I hope I have indicated, is central to my belief in adult education and its related concept of self-directed learning. An understanding of this perspective transformation was and remains important for me and for my research. The freedom of the self-directed learner to enter freely into dialogue in order to test perspectives against others and make amendments where necessary is an important one for adult education and through this process emotions feature strongly (Malkki and Green, 2014).

Also central to this is the experience of critical reflection. Brookfield (2000) reminds us that critical reflection in and of itself is not sufficient in itself to promote transformative learning; it may help in understanding and thus gain a deeper understanding and a more informed view of what they do and why but transformative learning is not inevitable. However, Brock's (2010) research found the highest incidence of transformative learning was reported by those who had experienced critical reflection.

The philosophy underlying the Post 16 framework with its emphasis on increasing 'the proportion of young people in learning, training or work' (Scottish Government, 2012a) appears to ignore this criticality, concentrating instead on a

cost/benefit analysis which forgets that the goal of adult education is to guide people to transform (Mezirow, 1991). This is a concern from a feminist liberal pedagogy which looks for opportunities for transformative education through what Freire (2001) terms 'conscientization' where adult learners become critically aware of their social reality and use their existing frame of reference to give them power to re-appropriate dominant knowledge for their own emancipation (Freire, 2001). Freire (1996) reminds us that educational policies and practices have social, political and cultural implications. Freire's two points that educational policies and practices either perpetuate exclusion and injustice or assist learners in constructing conditions for social transformation, align closely to my argument. The skills agenda put forward through the post 16 framework not only thwarts the process of transformative learning but may lead to more marginalisation and a compulsion to engage with a prescribed offering which does nothing for the needs of those it proposes to address. My other point is that its acceptance as a discourse becomes invasively and persuasively acceptable through an economic model which may look progressive to the policy makers but which, in reality, is not only repressive but is also exploitative and divisive, increasing and exacerbating inequalities rather than alleviating them.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

Fairclough (1992) reminds us that 'texts as elements of social events ... have causal effects' (p.8). When we examine the discourse surrounding adult education from the late 70s onwards we find the argument coming forward for the good of society with terms such as efficiency, value for money, the customer and the consumer beginning to become commonplace and a general acceptance of a management style of delivering education becomes plausible through the link to employment, which I discuss throughout this dissertation.

Linked to this is the idea that 'domination occurs where the power of some affects the interests of others by restricting their capabilities for truly human functioning' (Lukes, 2005, p.118). Aspin and Chapman (2007) quoting OECD Ministers, remind us that lifelong learning was originally conceived for three purposes: 'economic advantage, an inclusive and democratic society and personal autonomy and choice' (p.1). Over the years this version has been



subsumed by the rise of the 'learning paradigm' (Biesta, 2006) where learning has economic progress and development at its core. As Biesta reminds us, this has affected the allocation of public funding for adult education and thus reduces the choice of what is on offer. This subtle change of direction has huge implications for adult women returners where the essence of their development lies in the deep questioning and searching which occurs as they grapple with their evolving identities and where they are finding that 'good things can happen inside the soul where no one sees' (Weatherly, 2007, p.385).

Biesta & Tedder (2008) and Field (2012) remind us of this shift in adult education from personal development to economic development. Field points out that the policy focus has moved from lifelong learning, as proposed by Faure in 1972 for personal development and social progress, to a vehicle for economic growth and competitiveness. Field (2012) raises two interesting points about lifelong learning. He draws on the work of Hake and Schedler (2004) who believe that 'all lifelong learning be understood as transitional learning' (p.4). Alheit and Dausien (2002) also believe that lifelong learning and lifewide learning are 'tied at all times to the contexts of a specific biography'. The concept that learning can be lifewide as well as lifelong takes in the idea that people, at different times in their lives, inhabit and learn in different spaces, 'such as in the home, school, work, community and other' (Desjardins, 2003, p.206). The timeframe and the spaces for lifewide learning therefore intersects and intermingles with who we are becoming, who we are and who we were. Field (2012) reminds us that transitions 'must be understood as being both biographical and social, and as having a variety of biographical and social dimensions' (p.10).

As Stone and O'Shea (2012) highlight the 'calls for widening access may have increased university participation but this participation is still situated within limits imposed by ideologies' (p.97). It is also clear that the gap has not closed between those with access to HE and those without but that it has in effect 'widened and disproportionately benefitted children from relatively rich families' (Blanden and Machin, 2004, p.231). This makes the success of the women returners all the more remarkable and, as I alluded to earlier, it raises serious questions for adult women's education.

Baxter and Britton (2001) remind us that 'to be educated' is to stake a claim to a new identity. There is clear recognition throughout these accounts that the women are on a journey and that their identities are being challenged as they are forced to think and explore in ways they have not done in the past; an often painful and solitary experience. There is also recognition that they are shaping their own biographies in significant and empowering ways. Finally they are treading a different, often difficult and new path and in that there is hope alongside the challenge.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Implications and Conclusions

#### 8.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I firstly, reflect on the liminal journey I have gone on to complete this EdD. I will reflect on how my identity has been fundamentally challenged and changed and the impact this has had on my professional practice. Secondly, I will revisit the research questions in the light of the last three chapters and address how they have been answered. Finally, I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this dissertation and the implications for further research.

Through this process I have gone on my own personal liminal journey reflecting Deegan and Hill's (1991) belief that writing a dissertation is a liminal journey of the self. Throughout this journey, I encountered confusion, uncertainty and a questioning of my own values, beliefs and assumptions. Tennant (2005) reminds us that all transformative learning has a dimension of knowing oneself and bringing to 'conscious awareness previously repressed or hidden feelings or thoughts' (p.108). I experienced this discrepancy 'between self-concept, self-esteem, and ideal self' (*ibid*) as I sought to make connections between the stories, some of which were painful and poignant whilst others seemed quite ordinary. As my research progressed my understanding developed as muddy depths gave way to glimmers of light and I experienced elements of Schon's (1995) action reflection cycle where I wrestled to and fro in what I felt was a strange and unconnected way and where some of the information challenged my original assumption and caused me to revisit and reassess my initial considerations.

The women's stories gave me a heightened awareness of the inequalities that exist and the powerless places which women often inhabit. I was conscious through this process that the early feminist focus on the centrality of women's experience was an oversimplification which led to it often being dismissed. However, I was also aware that in this particularity there were many diverse and complex layers which were worth uncovering and recounting. Moreover, I

felt that narrating one's own personal student journey could allow dimensions of their lives that previously had been hidden to be surfaced and marginalised aspects to be privileged. In keeping with feminist thought I have tried to surface and reflect on my own identity as a researcher through the process of this dissertation. This has often challenged and troubled me but it has allowed me 'to see things one did not see before and also to see the familiar rather differently' (Nielsen, 1990, p.20). Through this identity work I have become aware of the importance of 'feminist consciousness' (Stanley and Wise, 1983) which argues that women's experiences constitute a different ontology or way of making sense of the world and that the social dimensions of power are writ large on women's educational experiences. The research questions emanated from my initial statement in Chapter One when I began to question what was going on in my classroom and what had happened with the women's 'first chance' at education and why their stories were different the second time round. When I started out I did not plan a feminist study but as my interviews revealed various forms of oppression linked to gender I had no choice but to attend to my developing consciousness.

I now find it difficult to understand why I did not see this at the outset and if I was to undertake this study again I would plan a feminist study from the beginning. I do not think this would have made much difference to the questions and the responses I got but it would have given me a greater awareness of the issues related to gender and I would have familiarised myself with the literature much earlier. It may also have given me better insight into the issues which are unique to women as in some instances I was unprepared for the stories. This leads me to questions about how to prepare novice researchers to deal with traumatic responses and I am unsure there is any other way than to go through the ethics procedure and learn by doing. Punch (1994) cautions that there are two approaches to research, one that cautions:

Without adequate training and supervision, the neophyte researcher can unwittingly become an unguided projectile bringing turbulence to the field, fostering personal traumas (for researcher and researched), and even causing damage to the discipline (p.83).

The other, suggests that the novice researcher just gets out and does it. Punch advocates the latter, especially with regard to areas such as feminist research. This is the approach I would advocate but I would approach the process with a lot more caution, sensitivity and knowledge the second time around. I will now address each research question in turn and give a brief response to how I have approached and responded to the questions.

## **8.2 The Research Questions**

### **8.2.1 Research Question 1**

How do women from 'non-traditional' backgrounds access tertiary education?

One thing that surprised me was the level of fear which the women articulated on their first day at college and feelings of being 'out of control' (Kay) just by coming to college. However, as I now reflect on this, I can see more clearly how the women were subjecting fragile learner identities (Crossan et al. 2003) to the danger of further impairment and how the challenge to their identity was very real. On reflection now I feel I should have explored what was 'terrifying' and tried to get more insight into whether it was the college environment, the fear of failing, or the study itself?

The other area that appears to be significant, is achieving through the incremental route from FE to HE. Most of the women felt that this helped them 'try out' education and 'once you pass one thing, you think, yes, I've done that and you just go on from there' (Anne). Embedded in this process is 'thick trust' (Putnam, 2000, p.136) where the women appear to trust their lecturers to help them when they need it, reflecting Hinsliff-Smith et al.'s point about lecturers supporting and motivating 'at risk' students and also Maynard and Martinez's (2002) view on the importance of developing a supportive culture of learning and teaching.

As well as a lack of power, the gendered nature of early education comes through and the lack of choice of what to study. Morag recognises how the language of the workplace appears to reify men (p.131) and also the positioning in the home when she had to attend to the ironing and her brothers did their

homework (p.103). Anne and Maggie also recall how they were expected to do gendered subjects such as secretarial or catering (p.130). I now question whether their educational pathways might have been different if they had not been subjected to such positioning by their gender. This positioning is evident in Kinzie's (2007) research when she questions if girls and women really can be whatever they want if they work hard enough and want it badly enough. She reminds us how entrenched the stereotypes of what it means to be female have been historically when she recalls her own experience of growing up in the 70s and playing the board game 'What shall I be?'. The choices available of careers were: air hostess, model, nurse, ballet dancer, teacher or actress. This acceptance of gendered choices and lack of agency appears to be evident in many of the women's accounts. However as they reflect and look back on their educational journeys they surface the inequalities that existed and question issues of 'power-over' (Yoder and Kahn, 1992, p.282).

Uppermost in mind with regard to this research question is the difficulty in actually accessing education in the first place and the importance of being aware of the fear associated with learning for those with fragile learning identities and whose early experiences of education was negative. Interwoven with this are the cultural and social difficulties which further impeded their ability to engage.

### 8.2.2 Research Question 2

How do women returners view their learning and how does it relate to the rest of their lives?

All the women stated that they had enjoyed their experience of college and Maggie discusses how she values it, how she enjoyed her time in college and how she would recommend it to others.

I value it more now after going through it, that was probably the best for me, *the best* part of my life, so far - well in terms of education, definitely, loved every minute of it and I would recommend it to anyone.

Jenny also discusses how she values education and Nicola discusses the impact her education has had on her.

Yeah, I value education a lot more and I think it's something I'm always trying to instil in my children now as well, trying to get them to see, I mean it's difficult to tell kids anything (laughs) but you know just getting them to understand what education is about and to link it with everyday life (Jenny).

I'm really amazed at myself sometimes I'm thinking where did I get all this from it's obviously through the studying and it does give you different skills - definitely it does (Nicola).

This level of enjoyment the women expressed as they reflected back on their educational journeys surprised me as I considered the level of organising they had to do in order to get to college in the first place. Alongside this sat their family commitments and, often, previous negative experiences of education, all of which might have led them to a different conclusion.

Reay (2003) contrasts the experiences of mature working class women students and identifies the 'idea of a student lifestyle, with its combination of independence, dependence, leisure and academic work' (p.308) to be totally alien to the experiences of the women she interviewed. Whilst there are many similarities with the women I interviewed and the women in Reay's study, especially in terms of time poverty and a lack of 'care of the self' (p.301), the identity of 'student' was one which the women in this study appeared to embrace. They frequently contrasted it with their other roles, often taking in the wider context of other parts of their lives, as carers, mothers and workers. This entailed crossing boundaries and flitting betwixt and between their different roles and identities.

The idea that failure is not an option is one that came up more than once and it appears that Amy could not let herself consider failure. All her energy and focus was on passing her exams and the advice of her friend appears to have focussed her mind on her determination to succeed. Another aspect of this appears to be an emphasis, not just on passing, but on doing well. Kay puts it this way:

One time I got 65 per cent and I phoned my lecturer and I said 'I'm really disgusted with that - I'm horrified' and he said 'It's a really good pass, you know, 65 per cent is an excellent mark', but I put so much pressure on myself - I can't relax that wee bit, just to pass because then I think 'what was the point in doing the course if I'm only just passing?

The women also documented the feeling that if they dropped out it would not be a good example to their children and also if they gained their qualification it might be something their children could aspire to in the future. Reay's (2003) research into working-class women returning to education notes that the women often saw themselves as role models for their children but also notes that this was framed in a discourse of 'good parents' (p.309) which helped them to deal with their guilt and feelings of 'being selfish' (*ibid*). This was not articulated in this study. However there were examples of the women meticulously ordering their domestic life which may suggest an element of guilt in devoting time to study. Catherine spoke about how 'the house had to be tidied, tea on and beds made, then I would sit down' and Morag discussed how she managed everything and froze meals in order to get to study when she got home. There may be a bit of a contradiction here in that they valued their learning and in many cases, 'thought it was the best thing' (Maggie) but it was often pushed to the margins after everything else was done and relegated to 'the third shift' as discussed in Chapter Three. The exhaustion many of the women expressed reflects this as each 'greedy' (Coser, 1974) institution fought for their attention. Edwards (1993) remind us that mature women students have to put the same effort in to their studies as young 'bachelor boys' (p.63) and that they are under pressure, not only to achieve success but, to show 'that their educational work is not affected by their family commitments, and that their family lives are not suffering because of their studies' (p.63).

### 8.2.3 Research Question 3

What support mechanisms, both internal and external, enabled them to successfully complete their course?

The support mechanisms appear to be varied from supportive partners to positive early experiences, even just the encouragement from a lecturer in Abby's case appears to be significant (p.104). Heenan (2002) notes that support from other family members is a key determinant in mature students completing their courses. On a related note, Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) state



that mature women students organise their study round their families and ensure that the families' needs are met first and also note that the success of this strategy is dependent on having a supportive partner. The significance of a father or grandfather comes through in Morag's and Alice's accounts and with Kay it is the influence of her employer's father who tells her she is too bright to be training horses. This is then reinforced by her husband. Most of the women expressed supportive partners as key in their success.

The motivations from the women who did not have strong supportive partners appears to be more difficult to uncover. In some cases there was little support and the determination the women demonstrated was noteworthy. In the case of Amy she drew on the advice of a friend and focussed on 'application' whilst Morag and Maggie seem to have had an inherent determination and a strong focus on their goals. The college environment also appears to have been an enabling factor which the women reported and especially the support from the lecturers which was considered to be very different from their experiences in school. Reay (2003) reports similar findings and suggest that the old universities have something 'to learn from some of the new universities in terms of making non-traditional students feel welcome' (p. 311).

#### 8.2.4 Research Question 4

How do they reflect on their experience and imagine their future?

There is recognition by the women of the distance travelled as they reflect on their educational journey. The women all expressed an increase in confidence and most of them a greater belief in their ability. The transformative nature of adult education comes through many of the stories reflecting Mezirow (1997) belief that transformative learners 'move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective and integrative of experience' (p.5).

The picture that emerged as the stories were unpacked was more complex than I had anticipated and the knowledge that we should know more about our students' home lives and past education if we are to really engage in

transformative learning has become a key learning point. I recognise the difficulties inherent in this as the emphasis on delivering and achieving often takes precedence. However being aware of the subtle and not so subtle clues can help us in understanding 'at risk' students and putting measures in place to help them. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2012) remind us that women who have been marginalized and oppressed by the dominant society and by the dominant female norms, have had very different experiences from those of the mainstream' (p.266). As adult educators an awareness of the plurality of experience for adult women returners is important rather than a focus on everything that happens to a student from the moment they enter the college until they leave. By focusing solely on the college environment we may be in danger of neglecting the barriers and background which confront new students, especially where they have had negative experiences in their home and earlier school experience.

Within colleges we need to engage with women returners and hear their stories if we are to put in place structures and policies to support them. We should not, however, expect these stories to be easy to hear or to reveal, simply because we ask them and we should also remember the power dimensions inherent in this asking and in the retelling. It is also important that we do not 'mould' our questions to illicit the response we expect but that we leave the women to speak about what they think is important and what they want to reveal. As adult educators we also need to question the policy decisions and target setting and constantly ask what this means for our learners. I will now briefly address the policy dimension as discussed in Chapter Two and address the lessons learned.

### **8.3 Policy**

One important lesson is that we, as adult educators, should be aware and engage more actively with the political process. Awareness of the link between funding and policy is crucial if we are to develop, not only Scotland's young workforce, but marginalised learners who may not fit in with the current policy definition. Taylor et al. (1997) believe that we should have an interest in and explore the values and assumptions which underlie policies and the power

relationships that underpin them and ask, “‘in whose interests?’ and “‘who are the winners and losers?’” in any particular policy initiative’ (p.37).

When we consider reports such as the *Education Working For All! Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Report* (Scottish Government, 2014) we should have such questions at the forefront of our mind. There appears to be no winners and many losers in much of the current government policy and initiative such as the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 (Scottish Government, 2013) appears to be restricting choice even further. The marginalised learner is forced to come to college (now often outwith their area) to train for something which the politicians think the economy and therefore the country requires and the mature student is squeezed out as colleges are forced to prioritise full-time students over part-time (Marshall, 2013). Jarvis (2000) saw this coming when he noted that with the emergence of the ‘knowledge society’ the nature of vocational education was changing and that general adult education was becoming marginalised even though there may be a greater need for it than ever before (Jarvis, 2000, p.5). This is a worrying change of direction which again runs contrary to the social inclusion and the lifelong learning agenda and which is further disadvantaging those women who, in the past, could grasp this ‘second chance’ but who under the new proposals may find that they now have a much lower priority as far as accessing further education is concerned.

The women I interviewed have not suffered from this additional barrier to learning but I feel it worth mentioning in terms of future access to FE and therefore HE. This should not, however, downplay their achievement or suggest that their entry to FE was an easy one. I do, however, have concerns about access for such students in the future.

## **8.4 What the study has achieved**

The study presents a profile of fourteen female adult returners who successfully completed their chosen course. It examines the factors which helped women from non-traditional backgrounds to achieve in tertiary education and concentrates on what made them succeed rather than the usual focus on failure.

It is also situated in a remote Hebridean island with its own particular culture and lifestyle.

It has given some insight into how adult women access education and the factors that make them stay. In particular it has revealed that colleges can be fearful places for those who have not had any previous experience of FE and HE and that, as adult educators, we should consider how we can mitigate against this. It has also revealed that gender still adversely affects choice. For women this means less choice of what to do and when to do it. Whilst the women attempt to shape their own biographies anew through education, this is done against a background where their domestic responsibilities still take precedence. Despite this, the supportive and trusting relationship with lecturers contributed to the efficacy of the learning experience, as did the incremental route from FE into HE. For some women the presence of a supportive partner or a significant other appears to have played a part in their success. This study may also be of significance for those who do not have the courage to access FE and HE because of fragile learner identities (Crossan, et al. 2003). This, in itself, can help us put structures in place which may help those marginalised learners to engage with education. However, completing this study has highlighted how difficult this can be.

The complexities of why people succeed in learning is still unclear. Aspects, such as the support from a partner or a significant other appears to have helped some of the women succeed and persist towards their goal. However there are some instances where there was little support yet there was a determination to succeed. There are therefore some aspects which would benefit from further research. This brings me to the strengths and weaknesses of the research to which I now turn.

## **8.5 Strengths and Weaknesses in the Research**

Whilst I have discussed the move away from objectivity to subjectivity earlier, it still raised questions for me. I had taught some of the women and I knew others through the tight-knit island community. I was also doing this with a vested interest, that of gaining a professional doctorate. I spoke about letting the

women's voices come through but I was also aware that it was my interpretation that would be in print and this interpretation challenged me. Hooks (1990) highlights this tension between the researcher and the researched:

...tell me about your pain, I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk. Stop. (pp. 151-152).

Whilst recognising this I question how else we can conduct feminist qualitative research. Woodward (2003) reminds us that when conducting feminist research one of our tasks 'is to see how (and where) issues of emancipation... and empowerment ... are possible within the research process' (p.38). I feel that narrating their own stories has helped the women to understand and reflect on their educational journeys. I have benefitted from hearing their voices, although this has been difficult at times. In some cases I may have over-identified with the women's accounts as their stories became intertwined with mine. My position as a lecturer may also be considered a strength and a weakness as I knew the women and had taught some of them and this can, on the one hand, lead to a better understanding and a more comfortable approach but, on the other hand, because of perceived notions of power it may lead to some distortion of the stories. I do not feel that this happened but I am aware that this could be the case.

My gender and my understanding of the cultural background was a strength and also my ability to understand Gaelic as some of the women lapsed into Gaelic from time to time. I also understood the social positioning which the women referred to. All the women were from the Outer Hebrides and I have contained my analysis to this. This is both a strength and weakness in terms of my professional practice. This is the environment in which I work and which I wished to uncover at the outset of the study. I am, however, aware that this might limit the usefulness of the research.

At times throughout this doctoral journey I found it difficult to detach myself from what I was writing. I have attributed this to the strength of the women's voices. I could hear their voices through the text and I returned to the

transcripts from time-to-time for clarity and to ensure I was, as accurately as possible, representing what was said. However, as I look back on this stage of my dissertation, there was great value in this as I began to reflect on the voices and really grapple with the injustices on the one hand and the resilience and bravery of the women on the other.

As I now reflect on this and consider my own assumptions at the outset of this study I have a heightened awareness of the difficulty in separating out the researcher from the researched; the danger of not hearing the voices you are responsible for representing and the power dimension which this inevitably raises.

## **8.6 Personal Impact**

The impact on me personally is difficult to overstate and I am aware of my own 'perspective transformation' as I have gone on this journey. The valleys I have inhabited at times where I have contended with myself, various theories and the women's voices and come to the conclusion that I was deeply lost have now become valuable spaces in my learning. Holliday (2002) suggests that in discussing issues relating to qualitative data analysis, 'the melange of social life is so complex, research is already one step away from reality' (p.100). I had to loosen my grip on an ontology which was drawn from objectivity and facts to one which moved into the swamp of messy, slippery, dark and undefined logic.

## **8.7 Implications for further Research**

In terms of future research there are a number of areas I would like to explore. The first is that of the link between emotions, especially edge emotions and transformative learning and how this varies for different groups of women. Another area, also related to emotions, is Nussbaum's work on the intelligence of emotions and the capability approach outlined by Sen and Nussbaum. I have observed great capability in the women I have taught and interviewed, yet their experiences and opportunities have been stymied and thwarted by the power dimensions that exist. The opportunity therefore exists for adult educators to resist the dominant ideology which subjugates women and relegates them to the 'after men' position and surface the very real historical and power dimensions

which are ingrained deeply in our society. We must question and keep questioning why injustices are continuing and how the allocation of resources to certain groups above others exacerbates this.

## 8.8 Conclusion

As adult educators we need to understand the less tangible aspects which may contribute to the women's desire to access education against the odds, later in life. The policy has been outlined as a backdrop against which this occurs in an attempt to caution against the normalization of policy and to surface the neo-liberal policy drive which suggests, choice, freedom and empowerment but is very often acting against those whom it claims to represent. Understanding this in terms of adult education helps us to challenge the very real and tangible issues which women returners have to contend with in their journey back to education. I feel that examining the liminal journeys of students and the places they inhabit through a narrative framework can help us to understand these issues. More importantly it can help the women to understand their own educational journeys through their own developing confident and reflective voice.

My question at this stage in my own educational journey is how the status quo can be challenged and changed? How, on the one hand, can women have the educational freedom of men; the opportunities to grow, learn and freely articulate their views? On the other hand, how can we get the FE and HE sector to recognise the subtle way in which policy pervades all that we do? Many FE lecturers have come through the FE route themselves and do not feel they have the knowledge or power to challenge the various policy initiatives. It is therefore accepted as received wisdom. The losers unfortunately are the marginalised and in the case of this study the adult women who wish to return to education. The inclusion agenda and its nebulous twin that of lifelong learning is further exacerbating the situation and as I hope I have illustrated above is leading to new and insidious ways of exclusion.

The knowledge that to contribute to this research the women have given, not only their time, but shared personal and painful experiences with me is not

taken lightly. I am aware that my award is an EdD and their contribution lies in the pages of this dissertation but other than that it is unrecognised. If they recognise the intellectual development that has occurred through the retelling and the envisioning of a better future, then the women and I will have positive outcomes. In terms of a professional doctorate I hope that this dissertation will allow further and deeper insights into women's educational journeys and how this journey is navigated, negotiated, influenced and achieved.



## APPENDIX 1: Sample Letter

[Date]

Dear [Name]

I am currently undertaking a research degree with the University of Glasgow which examines the experiences of women who return to study as adults and who successfully pass their chosen course.

I am contacting you as you have recently successfully completed your [award] and I would be interested in finding out about your experience of the college. I am particularly interested in what factors helped you to gain the qualification and how, as a college, we can learn from your experience.

If you are willing to contribute to this research, please fill in the attached short questionnaire and send it back in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. The interviews will last a maximum of an hour and all information will be confidential. You can withdraw from the interviews at any stage without giving a reason.

If you would like an informal chat about the research, please give me a call on 01851 770360/07733 028 241 or e-mail me at [ann.murray@lews.uhi.ac.uk](mailto:ann.murray@lews.uhi.ac.uk)

Your comments are essential to the success of my research and I appreciate your support with my studies.

Kind regards

Ann Murray

Enc.

Please circle the category or categories that applies to you:

I left school with:

4+ Highers

1-3 Highers

4+ standard/O'Grades

1-3 O'Grades

No qualifications

Other, please specify .....

I would/would not<sup>10</sup> be willing to participate in this study.

**Address filled in automatically**

Please indicate any changes below:

Name .....

Address .....

Address .....

Postcode .....

Day Telephone .....

Evening Telephone .....

Mobile Telephone .....

E-mail address .....

---

<sup>10</sup> Please delete as appropriate

## APPENDIX 2: Consent Form



The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

### Consent Form

#### Title of Project:

How does the experience of further or higher education affect women's perceived identity?

#### Name of Researcher: Ann Murray

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I consent to conversations being audio-taped and understand that copies of transcripts will be returned to me for verification. I consent to a pseudonym or personal identifier (a number) being used throughout the research or in any publications arising from the research.
4. I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

_____	_____	_____
<b>Name of Participant</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>
_____	_____	_____
<b>Researcher: Ann Murray</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>

## **APPENDIX 3: Interview Questions**

### **Proposed Outline of Interview Questions**

**Please note that I intend to conduct conversational interviews and so have only noted general themes/questions here.**

#### **Dissertation Questions:**

**How does the experience of further or higher education affect women's perceived identity?**

1. How would you describe your school days?
2. Did your parents/family support and help you in school?
3. Did you feel you struggled with some areas at school?
4. Did you get outside support when you struggled with anything?
5. Who did you feel was important to you in your early years and why?
6. Can you tell me a little bit about how you felt about going to secondary school?
7. Did this change – how, why?
8. When you were younger, what did you want to be when you grew up and why?
9. Were there any difficulties which you had to overcome during your youth?
10. Was there a person who made a difference to you educationally?
11. How would you describe yourself on leaving school?
12. Do you think the fact that you were female affected your experience of education?
13. Can you tell me a little bit about why you decided to embark on this course?  
Who was significant and why did you decide to do it now?
14. Did anyone oppose your decision to go to college?
15. How did you feel on your first day at college?
16. What made you think you could succeed at college?

17. How did you feel about being defined as a student?
18. Did you find the peer support beneficial?
19. What aspects of the teaching did you find beneficial/difficult?
20. Did you find the incremental route to your degree beneficial (NQ, HNC, HND, degree)?
21. If you had to sign up to a degree initially and there were no HNC/Ds but only 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year degree courses, would this have changed your attitude to study?
22. Do you think you are very different now to when you left school? How, why?
23. Has your experience of FE/HE affected how you see yourself?
24. Has it changed what you value?
25. Is there anything else that you think I should have asked you about? If so would you like to tell me now?

## APPENDIX 4: Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY of GLASGOW

Faculty of Education

Ethics Committee for Non Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

### EAP2 NOTIFICATION OF ETHICS APPLICATION FORM APPROVAL

**Application No.** (Research Office use only)

EA1363 - 2

**Period of Approval** (Research Office use only)  
2011

11 May 2009 to 30 September

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Date: 27 May 2009

Dear Ann,

I am writing to advise you that the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee has reviewed the amendments to your application, reference EA1363 for 'How does the experience of further or higher education affect women's perceived ability?'

I can confirm that the submitted amendments have been accepted, and all issues have been addressed.

Please note that although you have already been strongly advised to remove personal contact details, it is noted that you have not done this.

As stated in the approval notification of 11 May 2009, you may proceed with your data collection.

You should retain this approval notification for future reference. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me in the Research Office and I will refer them to the Faculty's Ethics Committee.

Regards,

Terri Hume  
Ethics and Research Secretary

## APPENDIX 5: Plain Language Statement



University of Glasgow | Faculty of Education

The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

### Plain Language Statement

#### 1. Study title and Researcher Details

Title:

How does the experience of further or higher education affect women's perceived identity?

This research is a requirement of the Doctor of Education at Glasgow University. My present supervisors are Professor Penny Enslin and Dr Nicki Hedge. They can be contacted at 0141 3330 3238/5492 respectively.

#### 2. Invitation paragraph

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you are willing to take part in this study it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.*

*Thank you for reading this.*

#### 3. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to try to understand something about the experience of women returning to study after a gap of 5 or more years. The duration of the study will be approximately two years but your involvement will be in year one only, that is between September 2009 and May 2010. You will be contacted once or twice over this period. Each session will last for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. However, you may contact me at any reasonable time (see below) during the course of the study.

#### 4. Why have I been chosen?

I am examining the experience of women who have studied at one of the academic partners comprising UHI Millennium Institute (UHIMI). As a past or present female student at UHIMI your experience is relevant to this study. I will be looking at the experience of women from a variety of courses across UHIMI.

#### 5. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.

#### 6. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will take part in a conversation where you have the opportunity to discuss your past educational experiences. I will ask you about your early experiences in school and the level of support you received from teachers and family and how you feel this has affected your later choices. You will have the opportunity to discuss these experiences and explore the people and events that have been significant for you. You will also have an opportunity to discuss the low and high points of your recent college experience and how they were significant for you. I would also like to discuss with you why you persevered and if you think this has changed how you now see yourself. This will take about 45 minutes and will be audio taped and typed up. After the results are typed up I will check with you to see whether or not you agree with the transcript and you will have an opportunity to change or delete any part of it.

#### **7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Computer files and transcripts will be anonymised through the use of an ID number. Any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. Computer files will be password protected and pseudonyms (fictitious names) will be used where it is felt inappropriate to use ID numbers. All information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at Lews Castle College.

#### **8. What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results will be part of my dissertation but all information collected through audio-taping and transcribed from those recordings will be destroyed by shredding at the end of the study. All computer copies will be deleted and the electronic trash can will be emptied. The results are likely to be published around September 2011 and a copy will be available for your viewing online or if you require access to a hard copy, a copy will be available at Lews Castle College. You will not be identified in any report or publication.

#### **9. Who has reviewed the study?**

The project has been reviewed by the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee.

#### **10. Contact for Further Information**

*I can be contacted at 01851 770360 between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm. You may also like to contact my supervisor Nicki Hedge on 0141 330 5492. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research project you may also contact the Faculty of Education Ethics Officer Dr Georgina Wardle at [g.wardle@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:g.wardle@educ.gla.ac.uk)*



## APPENDIX 6: Details of Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Qualifications on Leaving School	Final Qualification studied at College	Year of Study	Age on interview
Morag	4+ Standard/O-Levels	Degree in Business Administration	2005-2008	44
Abby	4+ Standard/O-Levels	HND in Business Administration	2005-2008	38
Amy	1-3 O-Grades	Degree (Hons) Business Administration	2004-2008	44
Jenny	4+ Standard/O-Levels	PGDE <sup>11</sup>	2007-2008	44
Linda	1-3 O-Grades	BA in Health Studies	2002-2008	35
Jane	1-3 O-Grades	BA in Health Studies	2003-2008	32
Maggie	No qualifications	HND in Administration and Information Technology	2006-2008	39
Kareen	No qualifications	HND in Business Administration	2006-2008	49
Shona	1-3 O-Grades	BA in Gaelic	2006-2008	37
Catherine	4+ Standard/O-Levels	PGDE	2007-2008	45
Nicola	4+ Standard/O-Levels	BA in Business Administration	2005-2008	35
Anne	No qualifications	BSc in Computing	2005-2008	41
Alice	4+ Standard/O-Levels	PGDE	2007-2008	43
Kay	4+ Standard/O-Levels	BA in Business Administration	2005-2008	42

<sup>11</sup> Postgraduate Diploma in Education

## APPENDIX 7: Permission to use Tables/Figures

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Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs copyright free image from wordpress.co.

Permission to use tables is shown below from HEA and Universities UK:

**From:** Rebecca Haslam [<mailto:rebecca.haslam@hesa.ac.uk>]

**Sent:** 20 October 2015 12:08

**To:** Ann Murray <[Ann.Murray@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:Ann.Murray@uhi.ac.uk)>

**Subject:** RE: Permission to use data for study purposes

Hi Ann,

Yes, you may use this chart, so long as you keep the reference to our agency as the data source at the bottom of that chart. We would be grateful if you could also cite the URL of this chart's location too.

Many Thanks,

Rebecca

**Rebecca Haslam**

**Senior Information Analyst**

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

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**From:** Ann Murray [<mailto:Ann.Murray@uhi.ac.uk>]

**Sent:** 19 October 2015 18:08

**To:** Information@HESA <[Information@hesa.ac.uk](mailto:Information@hesa.ac.uk)>

**Subject:** Permission to use data for study purposes

I am requesting permission to use Chart 2 on Gender of HE students (shown in the link below) by level of study and mode of study 2010/11 for a Doctor of Education I am doing through the University of Glasgow.

[http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2411&Itemid=278](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2411&Itemid=278)

Kind regards

Ann

Universities UK

Permission obtained from Gareth Morgan at Universities UK on 23.10.15 to use the data on page 23 with the source documented.

Permission obtained from HESA Rebecca Haslam on 21.10.15 to use the data on page 24. HESA data enquiry 37926.

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