Jacqueline Dodding

REIMAGINING POTENTIAL

Mature Female Students Attending a College-based Higher Education Establishment in the UK

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Abstract

In this book, I seek to present the lived experiences of mature female students who have re-engaged with higher education. Educational discourse in the United Kingdom presents those students who do not engage with higher education at age 18 as lacking aspiration. My research demonstrates that this is not the case for this small cohort of mature female students. They re-engaged with education when their personal situations allowed them to do so. The inclusion of 'I poems' in the book provides a platform for the authentic voices of the students to be heard, and they are not voices of low aspiration but rather voices of pride in what they have achieved following re-engagement with education. It is recommended that policymakers seek to understand individual motivation rather than dismissing those who do not continue into higher education at age 18 as 'low-aspirational'.

Key words

Lived experience; mature female students; higher education; labelling; Bourdieu; identity; 'I poems'; gender studies; reimagining potential

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Contents

Introduction

In the era of United Kingdom (UK) governmental policies encouraging young people to participate in higher education following completion of compulsory education, this book, which is based on my doctoral research, seeks to discuss the failings of a one-size-fits-all approach to engaging with further study and tells the individual stories of mature female students who initially disengaged from higher education. There is a discourse of being 'deficient' in the UK, should a person choose not to engage with higher education following the end of compulsory education. This label of being 'deficient' is applied to all young people regardless of their socio-economic position. This book seeks to challenge this label placed on people without their knowledge, by presenting a holistic, rather than a reductive, version of the events that conspire to enable or prevent engagement with higher education. The focus of my research was a group of mature female students of lower socio-economic status who did not choose the traditional university route for a multitude of reasons. Through reflection on their own experiences of education and life challenges, this group of mature female students discuss the adversity they faced in continuing in education at age 18, why they re-engaged with education, and the changes wrought on their multiple identities (student, wife, mother, carer) by re-engaging in education. They discuss the impacts on their self-confidence,

self-belief, and self-image – a reimagining of their potential to achieve in education and life. The book introduces the reader to English educational policies which have impacted higher education provision, relevant theories associated with labelling in education, and how these may potentially impact student identity. These inclusions may be applied to all students, but as this book specifically relates to mature female students, their discussion serves to illuminate the stories told here.

There is an autobiographical element to my research, and subsequently to this book, as I was a mature female student who started an undergraduate degree when my youngest child began primary school (the equivalent of kindergarten in the USA – age 4 years), and I recognise the significant impact of educational engagement on my present identity. I acknowledge that my story enables me to empathise with the students' stories explored in this book, but my research allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the enablers and barriers to education that mature female students from lower socio-economic classes (specifically in the UK, but this may also be the case globally) face when choosing whether or not to re-engage with higher education.

Context for this book – mature female students

The experiences of mature female students when engaging with higher education have been much discussed in the literature (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Shanahan, 2000; Smith, 2017, 2018), but there is less focus on why they choose not to continue into higher education directly following compulsory education

and what predisposes them to re-engage as mature students. In the UK, all mature students come under the umbrella term 'widening participation' students. Other categories of students under this umbrella term are young full-time entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, part-time undergraduate students, first generation students, students from ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, students from low-income families, vocational and work-based learners and care leavers (HEFCE, 2000; Moore et al., 2013).

Widening participation became a major strategy for the Labour government in the UK following their election in 1997 and the subsequent publication of the Dearing Report (1997). Labour committed to engaging at least 50% of all 18–30-year-olds in higher education by 2010 but mainly concentrated on the financial support required by students to engage. Mature students were also encouraged to engage, and further financial initiatives were introduced.

While there is a growing evidence base discussing widening participation of students in general and their engagement with higher education, there has not been, until recently, a focus on mature female students' educational trajectories. This has been rectified somewhat with research conducted in Australia by O'Shea (2015), Stone and O'Shea (2019), and more recently Delahunty and O'Shea (2021), who concentrated their investigation on mature female students' educational journeys from the beginning to their engagement with higher education. But there seems to be a lack of research investigating whether mature female students from low socio-economic status groups in the UK simply cannot engage with higher education within the

timeframe determined by UK educational policy due to personal or educational circumstances. In order to address these questions, the focus of this book is, first, 'why mature female students may choose not to engage', and then 'why they may choose to re-engage with education'. The individual stories of the mature female students from my study show how they reimagined their potential to succeed in education, the reasons for their engagement and how success in education wrought changes in their identities.

The mature females who participated in this research were all students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, lived in one of the top 20 most socially deprived areas of the UK, and had disengaged from education following the completion of their compulsory education. They attended a college-based higher education institution situated in the same area as where they lived, and years later, had followed a path into studying for many reasons such as career development, the desire to prove to themselves that they could study at a higher level and the desire to prove to others that they could achieve. The reasons they did not choose to engage with higher education immediately following completion of compulsory education were very individualised for each participant but could be developed into broader themes such as family situation, lack of confidence in their abilities, or undiagnosed learning difficulties. The demographic of the students in my study is representative of those who would normally enrol on a complementary therapies course. However, it should also be noted that in 2021, UK records show that mature students in England were more likely to be female (Hubble and Bolton, 2021).

All the mature female students in my research were 'labelled' educationally. Some examples of this are Lisa and Natalie who were labelled as 'not achieving' in school but following enrolment in higher education, were diagnosed with dyslexia; while Dana was told 'she wouldn't amount to anything' at school which resulted in a major loss of self-confidence. There seems to be an essential human need to label and categorise everything in our world, and educational attainment is no exception. Indeed, Tajfel (2010) writes that:

> *Any society which contains power, status, prestige and social group differentials (and they all do) places each of us in a number of social categories which become an important part of our self-definition. In situations which relate to those aspects of our self-definitions that we think we share with others, we shall behave very much as they do*… (p. 14)

This requirement to label or categorise can sometimes have detrimental effects on those who are labelled. During my research, students discussed how they became aware of teachers and members of staff at school who did not believe they had the potential to achieve further in education. They were partly discouraged from applying to higher education due to the labels placed upon them during their compulsory education and in addition some simply could not engage with higher education due to life circumstances. This combination suggests that more than one barrier could be in place to prevent the mature female students in my research from engaging.

Although the students were unaware of the theories behind labelling, many of them felt that they were simply not good

enough to aspire to study on an undergraduate course. For example, Dana stated during the interview: 'I was always told that I was never really going to amount to anything' while Roz told me: 'I didn't have the support. I just didn't think I was academic at all'. Hebding and Glick (1987) suggest that the labelling of an individual as different can potentially shape a distorted self-perception; in turn teachers, parents and peers may alter their expectations of the labelled person, potentially in a detrimental way. This may further reinforce the label assigned to the individual affecting future interactions, or in educational terms, a label may affect further participation, as people do not willingly subject themselves to situations where they may feel they are labelled or judged. Miller and Satchwell (2006) suggested that students labelled as 'not very academic' at school often had this categorisation following them throughout their further education career (16–19 years education in the UK), and that it may contribute to a 'negative expectancy effect' (p. 135). McGrew and Evans (2003) and Rosenthal (2002) suggest that a self-fulfilling prophecy may only result if a person assimilates the label placed upon them into their self-conceptualisation, potentially resulting in expectations of reduced performance and lowered self-esteem if the label is negative. This 'assimilation' of the label placed upon some of the students in my study was evident, even though they did not perhaps understand that they were being labelled as 'unacademic', 'low achievers' or 'failures' during their schooling.

All the participants in my research initially studied for a two-year 'foundation degree' and then proceeded to study a third year to gain a full honours degree. Foundation degrees were introduced in the UK in 2001 to help broaden widening participation

in higher education and were widely regarded as more accessible than a traditional honours degree (QAA, 2020). The foundation degrees were developed in conjunction with potential employers and were much more focused on employability than a traditional degree course. Their accessibility was applauded, as the foundation degree often did not require any 'A' levels or BTEC qualifications (UK qualifications usually gained at the age of 18 years at a further education college) for entry but valued employment experience and vocational qualifications. Often foundation degrees are offered in local further education colleges that usually specialise in vocational training, rather than in the traditional university.

Why a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not appropriate when discussing widening participation students

The ever-evolving inclusivity of higher education has instigated a political discourse surrounding the participation, or lack thereof, in undergraduate-level study of students who have just completed compulsory education. A prevalent feature of this discourse is that understanding people's aspirations is essential to the explanation of educational outcomes (Sinclair, McKendrick and Scott, 2010). Those who engage with undergraduate degree study are defined as aspirational and wanting to achieve their potential (Department for Education, 2017), while those who choose not to enter higher education are defined as 'low aspirational', 'deviant', 'drop-out' or 'a failure' (Dorn, 1996; Gorard et al.,

2006; Gorard et al., 2012). When thinking about widening participation students in general and mature female students in particular, the 'labels' attached to them present a generalised view of this cohort of students. As will be demonstrated in this book, educational labels are attributed to those who are regarded as 'deficient', yet those who are labelled are often unaware of the stigma attached to the label being assigned to them. Each student brings their own individual educational story. While this may be able to be assigned to a 'label', whether that is 'widening participation student', 'low aspirational', 'deficient' or 'drop-out', the nuances of the individual story for each of the mature female participants in this study will be drawn out to demonstrate the importance of the student's back-story when considering their engagement with education and labelling them in educational terms.

Motivation of widening participation students in general

In this section, I will explore the motivation of widening participation students in general, to provide context before discussing mature female students specifically. Motivations of widening participation students to engage with higher education have been extensively analysed (Adcroft, 2011; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bingham and O'Hara, 2007; Bye et al., 2007; Francois, 2014; Murphy and Roopchand, 2003; Taylor and House, 2010). Taylor and House (2010) suggest that motivation for transition to higher education can be related to the chosen subject and possible future career prospects. For example, those studying computing envisage improved future employment prospects and earning

potential, whereas those opting to study humanities may be undertaking study due to an interest in the subject rather than an immediate career pathway with good salary prospects.

I will demonstrate that some of the reasons given in the studies mentioned above are applicable to the mature female students discussed in this book, but their stories were often much more complex. As well as imagining their career prospects might improve, some of the other reasons that the mature female students suggested were that they were driven to re-engage with education to prove to themselves that they could succeed in education or to set an example to other family members. Some of the reasoning was similar to the findings of McCune et al. (2010) who concluded that among their mature student participants' motivations were a desire to prove themselves, pursue a personal interest in their chosen subject, or seek a higher level of education to enhance career progression.

Research into subject choice amongst widening participation or non-traditional students has demonstrated that they often opt for vocational subjects which will provide a pathway into a graduate job. A good example of this is psychology; Zinckiewicz and Trapp (2004) analysed the reasons for choosing this subject and discovered that psychology attracts more non-traditional students who are mature learners. This was reiterated in Maras et al.'s (2007) study, which examined the motivations of widening participation students at high school who expressed a desire to participate in higher education, concluding that one of the main motivations was material gain rather than the prestige of acquiring a degree-level qualification. Mature-age learners have also been shown to re-engage with higher education to transform

their careers. One example of this is re-engagement to transition into teaching (Bauer, Thomas and Sim, 2017).

Other motivational factors in pursuing further study include the availability of a course they wish to pursue, and the fact that the higher education institution is in their locality (Francois, 2014). It has been demonstrated that mature students often choose a higher education establishment which is close to home due to family commitments and employment (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; McCune et al., 2010). Compton et al. (2006) note that mature students returning to education have often undergone life-transforming situations such as separation, divorce, unemployment or relocation; this may be true, but in addition to previously listed motivations, some students have found that the wider accessibility of further study prompts them to undertake undergraduate study. While mature students may face greater barriers to returning to study than other students, such as fears regarding returning to study, lack of time, financial support problems, childcare issues and possibly a lack of self-confidence (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010), Bye et al. (2007) reported that mature students demonstrated a higher level of intrinsic motivation than those described as traditional. This intrinsic motivation contributed to their university experience being generally a positive one (Xuereb, 2013).

Some notes on theoretical concepts used in my research

As my research was conducted for a doctoral qualification, I had to justify how my whole research project could align with various theoretical concepts. Among others, those that had particular

relevance to the educational and socio-economic status of the student participants in my research were labelling theory and Bourdieu's sociological theories of habitus, field, and capital. However, while these concepts were important to my understanding and defence of my research in my oral viva, I do not want to make them the heart of this book. My passion for my research was that the unheard voices of the mature female students of lower socio-economic status would be heard, and it is with this in mind that I have foregrounded their experiences. I decided, however, for those readers who would like to understand the justification for the use of labelling theories and Bourdieu's concepts to include my reasoning in Appendix 1.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the subject of my research and briefly explained the background and motivations of mature students which can be applied to the mature female students who participated in my study.

1
Mature female students, UK higher education policy and the landscape of college-based higher education

Learning objective 1: To develop an understanding of the literature on mature female students, the concept of possible selves, and the UK policy context of college-based higher education

In this chapter, I initially focus on the choices mature female students make regarding higher education, followed by the introduction of the concept of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). 'Reimagining potential' which is key to my research may be attributed to the concept of possible selves, and the link is explained below. Exploration of UK higher education policy will further support the contention that the one-size-fits-all approach cannot be fully applied to all UK students labelled as widening participation students.

Focus on mature female students in higher education in the United Kingdom

Mature students entering higher education in the UK represent 24% of the annual student cohort, and 26% of the total female student population are mature females (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). It is recognised that most mature females enrol on courses in the caring professions, social sciences or education, often realising they need to upskill to satisfy their employers and keep themselves up to date with their profession's practice (UCAS, 2018). However, the courses mature females study and attain degree qualifications in often do not achieve the salary expectations and professional acclaim that other subjects may command (Welsh, 2020). Although mature female students are less likely to withdraw from their course of study than other students in widening participation groups, evidence suggests that they often have to deal with the pressure of other commitments such as family and employment (Shanahan, 2000).

Withdrawing from a course due to family commitments and pressure is a historical and often gendered issue. Females have historically been conditioned to be the main carer in the family, and while this has changed somewhat, the responsibility still mostly lies with women (Merrill, 1999). In the mid to late twentieth century, the English education system was in part to blame for the reinforcement of this stereotype; at school, females were taught how to run a house and look after their family. Although in England the Butler Act (1944) purported to bring equality to education, in fact the system was segregated both by social class

and gender. Middle-class pupils attended grammar schools and the lower classes attended secondary moderns following failure in the 11-plus examination. Gender segregation meant that even those girls who attended grammar school with the expectation of achieving in examinations and following a career, were taught that this was secondary to their role as a wife and mother. While schooling has become less gendered in its subject delivery and women are often no longer expected to primarily fulfil the role of wife and mother, mature female students often still experience conflict when engaging with higher education. This may be resentment from their partner or husband and family, or the inner conflict which often presents itself when choosing to engage with higher education.

Reimagining potential: Possible selves

Possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) has its origins in the field of cognitive psychology and has been applied widely in education when encouraging school students to engage with how they see their future selves. More recently the concept has been applied in higher education where an implied socially mobile view of a graduate future is ever-present (Henderson, Stevenson and Bathmaker, 2018). Young people are essentially guided towards engagement with higher education throughout their school and college lives, imagining their future selves in employment and what they may need to achieve this. Higher education institutions are increasingly involving themselves in outreach and public engagement activities, promoting the potential benefits of engaging with degree-level education in

terms of social mobility and achieving potential. This 'imagining of future potential' or 'possible selves' when thinking about educational possibilities at age 18 was, as will be shown in Chapters 2 and 3, not an option for the mature female students in this study due to various reasons. These can be divided into internal and external restrictions (Shafi and Rose, 2014). External restrictions included financial circumstances, lack of awareness of higher education avenues to pursue, family expectations to support household income with their wage, and the role of marriage and motherhood. Internal restrictions may also be 'perceived restrictions' (Shafi and Rose, 2014), whereby one person may understand the same or a similar situation as an opportunity rather than a restriction. Internal restrictions suggested by the students in my research were undiagnosed learning difficulties, lack of formal qualifications, lack of self-confidence, and lack of belief in their academic abilities due to previous unpleasant educational experiences.

The application of 'future possible selves' in the higher education sector, therefore, introduces a further dimension of this theory, whereby those who cannot engage with higher education need to think about the impossible as well as the possible. Thinking about what is 'impossible' involves considering the past experiences of a person and the imagined future is then understood with reference to the past (Henderson, Stevenson and Bathmaker, 2018). This is when imagining possible selves moves into the sociological field of psychology, as what is possible to imagine is determined by life experiences and circumstances, by what is known, what seems feasible and what needs to be feared or avoided (Clegg, 2018). Structural considerations, therefore, need to be

considered when assessing why the mature female students discussed in this book, made the decision not to engage with higher education directly following compulsory education. Clegg (2018) further suggests that by moving 'possible future selves' (p. 41) into the sociological realm, it is possible to understand the effects of 'temporality' and 'sense of self' on decisions made about continuing in education. When re-engaging with education as mature students, without exception, each student in my study detailed a moment when they 'reimagined their future potential', whether that was at the beginning, during or following their higher education journey and reflected on this during the interviews.

For many of the mature female students in my research studying for or obtaining a degree qualification impacted their lives in ways they had not anticipated. Some examples of this (further discussed in chapters 2 and 3) include developing the confidence and ability to speak with other professionals on an equal footing, realising that their familial roots did not mean that they could not gain a degree qualification and realising that their previous educational experiences did not need to influence their future potential. This is where 'reimagining potential' is prominent in this book. The students who all had very different experiences in compulsory education and subsequently in post-compulsory education as mature female students, with responsibilities not associated with more 'traditional' students, reimagined their possible selves. Their previous life experience and non-engagement with higher education impacted their sense of self, but their reimagined selves encompassed not only a degree qualification but also self-confidence, motivation, success, greater employability, and becoming a role model.

Political background and policy in UK higher education from post-Second World War to the twenty-first century

The educational policy context which has impacted higher education participation for those groups of students who were traditionally under-represented, and who are currently actively encouraged to participate by policymakers, is discussed in this section of the chapter to provide an overview of significant policy which encourages widening participation in general.

Post-Second World War, the Robbins Report (1963) provided the catalyst for extending university education's availability, stating that:

> *Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.*
>
> (Robbins, 1963, p. 8)

Robbins' recommendation was that higher education should be available to anyone with the desire to engage and the ability to succeed, and that education should be free of charge since any public benefits (that is, for the country's economic output) outweighed any individual private benefits (Robbins, 1963). Another key point of the report was that individuals have different starting points in their education and the government has a function to play in equalising life chances and opportunities (Robbins, 1963). While the sentiments expressed by Robbins were impactful, acknowledging that inequalities could potentially be tackled

through state intervention, it seems that growth in higher education participation was increasingly evident in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century, thus setting the scene for higher education becoming less elitist and more globally available (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993).

Post-war consensus in UK politics shaped the development of the welfare state and in particular educational policy; key principles upheld were those of equality of opportunity and diversity in education (Boronski and Hassan, 2015). While the label of 'widening participation' was only framed in the late 1990s, following the Dearing Report 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' (1997), Robbins' new policy direction for higher education could be acknowledged as the beginning of widening participation in terms of accepting how education could perhaps attempt to address some social injustice. Significantly, however, there was an interruption in the belief that education was inherent in the creation of social justice and equality during the late 1960s and 1970s, specifically during the UK economic recession, with the focus turning to standards in education, global economic competitiveness and anxieties regarding welfare state spending (Boronski and Hassan, 2015).

The election of a Conservative government in 1979 heralded an era of far-reaching economic and social reform, which saw education become more business-like responding to the demands of its consumers (Abbott et al., 2013). This neoliberal educational direction and the reduction in state intervention impacted many areas of education. For example, during the 1990s higher education funding was deemed unsustainable, resulting in the conversion of the education system from the public service advocated

by Robbins (1963) into a more business-like model (Ball, 2013; Ward and Eden, 2011). Power to implement educational policy decisions was transferred from local authorities to central government, and the effects of this were that available grants were gradually eroded and replaced with the student loan system (Abbott et al., 2013). The laissez-faire ideology of successive Conservative governments sought to encourage individual responsibility and choice, self-interest, competition and enterprise (Atkinson et al., 1996; Ball, 1997; Halsey, 2000; Hodgson, 1999; Loxley and Thomas, 2001). The Conservative government regarded market and consumer choice as the most proficient way of distributing resources; further subsequent inequalities were viewed as expected and essential for the efficient management of the economy (Loxley and Thomas, 2001), resulting in the omission from government rhetoric of concerns regarding disadvantage and social exclusion (Ball, 2013).

In 1997 the 'New Labour' government was greatly influenced by what became known as the 'Third Way' (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998; Hargreaves, 2009; Powell, 2000). Tony Blair defined this in the Labour Party's 1997 manifesto as:

> *a new and distinctive approach, which has been mapped out, one, that differs from the solutions of the old left and those of the Conservative right.*
>
> (Labour Party, 1997, p. 1)

The Third Way endeavoured to offer an alternative path to the existing 'Old Labour' policy of high levels of welfare spending and low accountability and the 'New Right' approach, which tended to disregard the effects of lack of employment and welfare