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Original Citation

Tett, Lyn (2016) Learning, literacy and identity: 'I don't think I'm a failure any more'. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 37 (3). pp. 427-444. ISSN 0142-5692

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/21248/

Learning, literacy and identity: 'I don't think I'm a failure any more'

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Abstract

The impact of participation in adult literacy programmes on learners' identities is examined through an interrogation of their past and current experiences and the assessment of the effect of particular pedagogies. The findings show how learners' positive experiences in their programmes had caused them to re-evaluate their previous understandings and enabled the construction of new identities as people that are able to learn. These changes had come about through the challenging of negative discourses, the creation of new figured worlds and imagined futures and the use of a learning curriculum where learners' experiences were utilised as positive resources.

Keywords: adult learning; literacy; identity

Introduction

This article examines the impact of participation in literacy programmes on adult learners' identities through an exploration of their current and past experiences of learning. It also considers the effect of the pedagogical approaches used in the programmes. The focus is specifically on literacy for a number of reasons. First because of the lasting impact on individuals' life chances if they do not have the expected skills and competences required by their society (OECD, 2013). Second negative discourses are associated with adults who have difficulties with literacy where, for example, they tend to be positioned as if they were childlike through describing their lack of skills in terms of children's reading ages (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008). International policy discourses also refer to literacy deficiencies as having a direct and adverse impact on the national good that pose problems for the literate 'others' (OECD, 2012). Finally people that have literacy difficulties tend to internalize these negative discourses and assume that earlier experiences of 'failure' to learn are solely their responsibility (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, and Tusting, 2007). This means that adult literacy programmes provide a strong lens through which to examine the relationship between identity and learning.

Research has shown that identity and learning are closely related through the institutions of the family, education and work that socially shape an individual's outlook and self-image (Warriner, 2010). However, learning identities tend to act as self-fulfilling prophecies, and so play a critical role in determining whether the process of learning will end with what counts as success or with what is regarded as failure. This is because identity as a competent learner is shaped by the complex interaction of a number of factors that include past learning experiences and the mediating effect of family influences upon them (Rees, Gorard, Fevre, & Furlong, 2000), as well as the norms and values of the social networks to which individuals belong (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003). So identities feed into, and are fed by, learning experiences.

Researchers (Cieslek, 2006; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007) have suggested that engaging in learning in adulthood can have a significant role in the formation and re-formation of the identities of participants and consequently of their ability to reach their learning goals. However, a person's activities and choices are both constrained and enabled by their horizons for action and this has a major impact on their decision to engage in learning (Hodkinson, 2004). Thus people bring a particular life history that influences how they engage with learning through the ways it shapes their expectations, hopes, and aspirations. In particular poor experiences of learning at school can have a strong negative effect on a decision to participate in education as an adult (Jonker, 2005).

Much of the existing research into participation in adult literacy education focuses on learners' decisions to enrol in a programme and their initial engagement. However, this research is also concerned with learners' experiences during their programmes and their reflections on the impact of participation. Moreover it draws on observations of classroom practices as well as interviews with tutors and thus provides an in-depth view of the pedagogical approaches used. Thus the research brings a new perspective that enables the development of understandings about the impact of learning and pedagogies on identities over time.

Theoretical framework

In this article I will be drawing on three interconnected theories to frame my analysis. First I draw on a Foucauldian understanding of identity that regards a subject as constituted by the productive power of discursive practices through which the 'world' and the 'self' are made known and knowable (Foucault, 1990, 1991). Functioning through discourse, power produces reality and thus regulates expectations and actions for actors in that structure. From this perspective who one is 'emerges acutely out of the problems with which one struggles' (Rabinow 1997, p.xix). Foucault's conceptualization of power is that it is omnipresent so there is space for individuals to play an active role in constructing meaning through their interactions with the discourses they encounter. All interactions position participants in particular ways in relation to the manifestations of power that act on and through them. This means that it is in interaction that learning takes place and identities are shaped and suggests that research should focus both on the individual's sense of self and identity and also on how these are shaped by, and shape, their agency.

Second I draw on the sociocultural model of language and literacy development, especially the work of Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (1998) to examine how discourses are constituted through practices. They have argued that identities are continually constructed not only by oneself, but also by others' perceptions. This means that identity comprises not only who we think we are, but also whom we act as being in our interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2011, p.2). Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) also contrast *positional* and *figured* elements of identities. *Positionality* signifies the understanding of our position in systems of power and reflects the ways in which symbolisation of identities can be used to direct the behaviour of others and ourselves (Holland *et al.*, 1998 p.128). Position is 'inextricably linked to power, status, and rank' (ibid. p.271) and it is ascribed by locally relevant social structures such as race, class, gender and age that give us greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or no voice at all (ibid. p.129). Identities also entail *figured*

elements, or aspects that relate to culture; they include, for example, symbols and socially shared meanings such as when it is appropriate to say 'please' and how labels like 'gifted and talented' or 'slow reader' are utilized in classrooms. Figured worlds function as contexts of meaning within which social encounters have significance and people's positions matter. Activities relevant to these worlds take meaning from them and are situated in particular times and places. Such figured worlds can also be seen as social constructions of hypothetical scenarios that involve a mobilisation of the imagination in creating agency. So actors might use figured elements of identity to surmount the negative social positioning they have experienced and instead take up powerful literacy discourses to make sense of, and position themselves in, the world.

My third framework relates to the relationships that are derived from participating in particular adult education communities. Here I draw on the work of Lave & Wenger (1991) who argue that to learn is not only to master the techniques and tools characteristic of a practice but also to become embedded into the social structures of that practice. They have also shown how what we learn is influenced by specific pedagogical approaches. They distinguish between a 'teaching curriculum' that focuses on the programmatic priorities and goals of the institution, which leads to the view that knowledge is always mediated through the instructor, and a 'learning curriculum'. This latter approach focuses on the resources, goals, and contributions of the learners' themselves and foregrounds their own ways of knowing and understanding. Wenger (1998) further argued that significant learning is not only the acquisition of memories, habits, knowledge and skills, but also the formation of an identity such that 'we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive' (Wenger 1998, p. 153). There have been some critiques (e.g. Fuller, 2007) of the assumption in Lave and Wenger's (1991) work that learning is conceptualised as only taking place inside the learning community. However, Wenger showed that learning and changes in identity occur in a variety of contexts and leaving a community of practice can also involve 'seeing the world and oneself in new ways' (1998 p. 155).

In relation to this article, then, the insights of Foucault enable the interrogation of learners' evolving sense of their changing identities and how they struggle with the problems they face. At the same time the work of Holland *et al.* (1998) enables the investigation of how far learners have been able to overcome their negative social positioning through the use of symbols, discourses, etc. to construct a different, more positive, narrative. Finally the impact of particular pedagogical approaches to the literacy curriculum will be examined through the socio-cultural lens offered by Lave and Wenger.

Drawing on these theoretical insights I will present the findings from seven literacy programmes in order to examine: how learners are positioned in relation to their own experiences; what opportunities they have to overcome their negative positioning in relation to the power structures that inform the worlds they move in; the impact of particular pedagogical approaches.

Methodology

The data on which this article is based are drawn from a project, commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2008, which investigated the impact of participation in literacy projects in Central Scotland. Seven case study organisations were selected from a possible 28 using the following criteria:

a) They were located in urban areas in the central belt of Scotland, where social and economic deprivation was most concentrated;
b) Organisations had to work with at least eight learners that were participating of their own free choice rather than as a requirement (e.g. in order to continue to receive welfare benefits);
c) They represented three different types of provision: 1) dedicated, stand alone literacy provision, where adults came for around two hours per week tuition with the expressed purpose of enhancing their literacy skills; 2) embedded provision where the literacy learning was amalgamated into courses related to particular interests, for example, football; 3) holistic support contexts where literacies learning, be it dedicated or embedded, formed a part of a whole network of support services available for 'at risk' adults;
d) They targeted learners that other research (Tett, Maclachlan, Hall, Edwards, Thorpe, & Garside, 2006) had shown were the most difficult to engage in literacy programmes due to their undergoing social or vocational transitions or being at risk of not completing their programmes.

This led to the selection of a range of programmes that are detailed below.

Table 1 Case studies

1)	**Dedicated literacy and numeracy provision** run in the evenings in a socio-economically deprived area on the outskirts of a large city
2)	**Health and Literacy Project** that works with people referred by health practitioners because they have poor physical or mental health in order to help address their literacy difficulties.
3)	An embedded course on **literacies and football** that is based in the offices of a football club in the centre of a city that operates on a drop in basis during the football season
4)	**Embedded literacy provision** within an accredited course in a support project for **homeless adults and recovering addicts/alcoholics**
5)	A course for **women that have experienced violence** run on a drop in basis by a women's support project in a large city
6)	**Stand alone, dedicated literacy class** offered at an FE college to people that have learning difficulties or disabilities
7)	**Integrated Literacies in a project for homeless people** run by a voluntary sector organisation for those who have experienced homelessness and have addictions

Observation sessions and interviews were conducted with one tutor from each project who had the main responsibility for the face-to-face teaching (seven in all) and 34 adult learners (five learners from six of the projects and four from one). The learners were an opportunistic sample comprising those who were willing and able to be interviewed and who were broadly representative in terms of the age, 'race' and gender profile of the participating group. Learners' ages ranged from early 20s to late

50s, 80% were White British, and there was a slight gender imbalance in favour of males. Time spent in the programme by participants ranged from six weeks to one year, with the median being six months.

Three types of data were gathered from the projects. First, researchers observed two class sessions for two hours (six weeks apart) and recorded: the methods, types of materials and assessment strategies used; the learner – tutor and learner – learner interactions; the learning support strategies used. Second, tutors were interviewed about their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment immediately after the observed sessions, asked what factors contributed to the learners' continuing participation and what they regarded as the main purpose of their organisations. Finally learners were interviewed near the beginning of their courses and after completion of their learning programmes. Data were gathered from all these sources in order to identify the factors that might encourage or impede learning and its impact on identity. The data from the observations and the interviews with the tutors were audio recorded, notes were made from these recordings and then anonymised to protect individuals. The notes were then entered into a database, transcribed and analysed using the software package 'File-Maker Pro'.

A qualitative approach was adopted, which stems from the epistemological argument that human beings are interpreters of meaning, in which data were gathered from learners through semi-structured interviews in order to explore their experiences. The interviews with the learners used an autobiographical approach so that, as Wedin (2008, p. 762) argues, it was possible to examine the 'perspectives and life conditions of the target groups [and] take local, everyday practices into consideration'. Learners were asked to talk about: their individual life histories including key life events; the influence of key support/learning organizations on their lives; the circumstances in which they were currently situated; their imagined futures. It is acknowledged that any autobiographical recounting is a construction rather than an objective, complete history (Gluck & Patai, 1991) and is a story whose telling is shaped by many factors, especially by the relationship between the teller and the listener. Thus the recounting of the learners' histories was likely to be subject to purposeful and unplanned omissions, however, in spite of these challenges, the story each participant told provided insights into how their previous experiences had influenced their current views of their learning.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns within these interview data so they were first sorted chronologically to construct linear learning histories. Working from the histories, emergent analytic topics became evident. Next, the data were coded by these themes and a secondary analysis was completed and independently checked by two researchers. The categories that emerged from this process were the impact of early school experiences and later difficulties, how experiences of marginalization had affected learners' willingness to engage in literacy programmes and the effect of participation in learning on their identities.

In the next section data derived from the first learner interviews are drawn on to explore these themes with a particular focus on the relationship between engagement in literacy programmes and learners' earlier experiences of learning. Then the data from the observations, the tutor interviews and the second learner interviews are used

to explore the pedagogy and practices that contributed to learners being able to achieve their learning goals and make the changes in their lives that mattered to them. These data are attributed to individual case studies.

Findings

a) Experiences of formal learning

Many of the learners in this study described negative experiences of initial education that had caused them to be reluctant to engage in learning in their later lives and the quotes that follow illustrate the range of views expressed. One learner, for example, remembered having difficulties at primary school. She was very slow at reading but did not feel that the teachers noticed and she thought that they were:

> ...more interested in the bright ones, the ones that could get on...They sort of just left me to one side... I tried to do my best, but I just felt that because I wasn't bright and I wasn't brainy that people just didn't want to know.

In addition people recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected their ability to learn because they felt alienated and unsafe. One said:

> the kids from my Catholic primary school bullied and persecuted me because they said I was a Protestant and all my Dad said was 'stand up to them and learn to fight', but I wasn't strong enough.

These experiences led a number of learners to stop participating in their schools either by being physically absent or not paying any attention even if they were there. For example: 'I was bullied so much… I didn't take anything in - there were so many sniggering remarks and I basically used to sit and doodle all day'. Another learner's memory of education was dominated by the impact of bullying teachers:

> In English and math classes - if you got picked on by the teacher... and you got it wrong - you got hit. So there was fear and no one would put up their hand unless they were 100% sure, and that marks you.

Difficult experiences in educational environments were not the sole causes of problems at school, however. Some rejected schooling because they either did not recognize its value at the time or were raised in homes that were neglectful of their welfare. One learner's experience exemplifies this vividly:

> My Mum left when I was six weeks old and my dad brought me up but he re-married and I wasn't treated well by my stepmother. I don't remember any happy times, birthdays, family times, holidays or even ordinary cuddles. There was just no discipline there so I ended up going off the rails and I started sniffing glue and drinking so I rarely went to Secondary school.

Negative schooling experiences were not universal, with nearly a third of the learners in the study recalling their school days with pleasure and some also achieved well academically. However, at some stage in their lives they had gone into a downward spiral through alcohol, drugs, crime, abuse or a combination of these. For example a

learner who was a recovering heroin user, said: 'I loved drugs but they took me to places I don't want to go back to, like getting food from bins and sleeping in the streets'. He decided he could not go any lower and wanted to get off heroin so went on a methadone programme and from there, to his current programme where literacy was part of his holistic recovery provision.

A phenomenon that several of these adults, recovering from addiction, depression or similar experiences commented on was the effect of these difficulties on their skills and competencies. They had lost abilities that had previously been easy for them. For example, one said: 'I lost all my skills, I lost everything, I was an A student in Maths and English and now I would be an F student'.

Another learner began drinking heavily when his company crashed and he lost all his investments and then:

> ... went downhill very fast... I suffered from depression, my health was bad and I did nothing apart from vegetate. I didn't read a newspaper or add 2 and 2 in eight years and was brain dead.

The learners referred to above were experiencing very difficult life circumstances but almost a quarter of the participants were working, in stable relationships, bringing up children and living as ordinary members of their communities. What they all had in common was of reaching a turning point in their lives; they were working through some form of transition that had brought them into their literacy programme. For example, some were working in low-paid temporary jobs and recognized that they needed to return to learning to improve their skills. Others were experiencing parenting difficulties and similarly recognized the role that learning could play in helping to negotiate more effectively with their children. Several of the learners were recent immigrants to Scotland and were struggling with a new language, customs and the difficult path into employment, so came to learning to help them through this period of adjustment. Crises or transitions have long been recognized as significant triggers to engagement in learning (McGivney 2001) and many of the learners' lives in the study fit into this category. They were returning to learning as a means of enabling them to negotiate their transitions and assume a different identity; to come closer to being the person they aspired to be—a good parent, addiction free, employed, a financially independent adult.

The learners brought with them a diverse range of past life experiences and current life circumstances. What characterised all of them, in spite of this diversity, were negative senses of themselves as learners. A second commonality amongst them was a marginalization from mainstream society and the loss of self-esteem that this produced. At some stage in the past, their experiences of addiction, disability, immigration, worklessness, parenting difficulties had caused them to identify themselves as other than 'normal' in the eyes of significant others and their engagement in learning was part of their efforts to counter these issues. What had led them to participate in their programmes were hopes of improving their material and social circumstances, overcoming personal isolation and low self-esteem, becoming active members of their communities or supporting others, especially their children, to improve their lives.

Having examined the data from the first interviews with the learners I now turn to the pedagogical approach taken by the projects. In particular its role in enabling learners to both persist with their learning and gain (or regain) an identity as a competent learner.

b) Pedagogy and practice

All of the projects had recognized the importance of building on learners' previous experiences in their construction of a 'learning curriculum' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Moreover the curriculum was planned to be as flexible as possible, and both tutors and learners spoke of the importance of this flexibility. One tutor commented:

> There is a lot of variety that she [the student] loves and which makes it really interesting and this helps keep her motivated. Also she is learning what she wants to learn (tutor, case study [CS] 2).

Different learners valued particular approaches so one commented that he liked the way 'the class gets straight to the point rather than me doing stuff that isn't relevant to me' (Learner CS1). In this group (CS1) it was observed that the learners each had their individualised tasks with the tutor providing individual support as the participants required it. Everyone got together over the coffee break to have a whole group discussion for around thirty minutes and then went back to their individual tasks.

In other classes it was the group together that decided upon the topic of the session. For example, in the football group it was observed that:

> the curriculum is animating and builds on the passion of the learners for the sport. Discussion on the curriculum is collective rather than individual with students making suggestions for inputs and activities that the group might focus on. Students are also encouraged to bring in books or news articles that can be the focus of reading and writing activity (Observations CS 3).

The learners' reflections confirmed the importance of group work in building confidence and a positive learner identity as the following comments illustrate:

> The whole group gets on well together and there are no cliques. It gives me a lot of support. Here they build your self-esteem and confidence and help you to think positively so I feel much more confident about what I can do as now I know I'm not thick but I used to think I was (learner, CS 7)

> The ... class shows you a good way to put things across, and you don't feel out of place. You're in with the group so you get involved. When there's three or four of us together, you have to work out tasks, you're communicating with each other and it's very satisfying (learner, CS 4)

Tutors were also aware of the value of group work in encouraging learning. For example:

> With this group we have done some pair and small group work but they actually

> prefer to work as a whole group. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses and are supportive of each other because they have faced the same homelessness and addiction issues (tutor CS4).

> Group work involves a lot more talking than anything else, but I feel that this is a very valuable part of the session and try to encourage participation from all students - by encouraging them to offer their opinions, and also by asking them to bring in examples from home as illustrations (tutor, CS 1)
.

Although the pace of learning varied considerably between the groups, it was almost always responsive to the learning abilities of the adults, and in all cases, learners were supportively challenged to extend themselves by taking small steps with the scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) provided through the help of their tutors and their peers. As one learner said 'they let you do things that you can manage and they know my boundaries but they push a bit to get you to try more things like the couple of sentences I'm saying in the play we are putting on' (learner, CS 2). And a tutor reflected:

> Everyone here is encouraging and wanting them to do well in every aspect of their lives. Most people here are quite negative about themselves and don't think they can achieve anything so we need to help them see that small steps are important and they need to acknowledge that for themselves too (tutor CS7).

Tutors also helped to model the steps that learners should be taking for themselves. For example one tutor in the football group was observed to:

> sometimes ask questions and request confirmation of things that she notices some of the learners appear to be puzzled about or struggling with. When she thinks they are struggling, she asks the naive question and therefore voices their uncertainties that many do not initially have the confidence to do. This does two things; one, it models that asking questions and not understanding are OK and normal, and two, it creates an opportunity to clarify key issues. [We observed] that she had to do this less and less as the group progressed and the learners became more confident in posing questions themselves (Obs. CS3).

The observations and interviews consistently highlighted the importance of the tutors' personalities and attributes. Tutors were able to create warm, welcoming and informal learning environments that put learners at ease and therefore encouraged more engagement in learning. Learners themselves frequently spoke of their appreciation for their tutors and the commitment and support they received from them. For example, one learner reflected:

> I like the informal atmosphere—it makes me feel motivated that the tutors are working so hard to help me. I've already been able to write a letter ... and have had a good result from it. I feel it's the first time anyone's reacted to anything I've said...it made me feel fantastic, like winning the lottery (learner CS2).

Participants in these projects reported that they had changed their dispositions to

learning and altered their learning practices partly because of the positive tutor–learner relationships. For example:

> It's safe here and that makes it easy to talk to the workers who understand how I feel and if you trust a person and they say try this [learning activity] then you do it (learner, CS 7).

> Well I used to just watch TV, now I'm out mixing and learning - I'm not isolated because I'm disabled. I can do things to the best of my ability. We've all got some disability, so you're not embarrassed about things. You feel more acceptable, not an outcast (learner, CS 6).

> Coming here helps me keep on going. I don't think I'm a failure any more... It's making me feel good doing something I wanted to do for myself. If I don't come I could fall on my arse again. It's boosting my self-esteem, giving me more confidence and helping me know I can get a job (learner, CS 5).

These changes were most evident in organizations that provided holistic or 'wrap around' support for the learners that included, but was broader than, literacy learning. Case studies 4, 5, 6 and 7 provided a range of other opportunities for adults to participate in and become absorbed into their community and its practices. Support from staff extended beyond the acquisition of literacy skills so: advice workers built on the newly acquired literacy skills that homeless adults had gained in helping them to apply for housing; rehabilitation workers were able to build on the oral competencies that they saw learners developing in classes; workers in the centre for disabled adults encouraged management volunteers (who were also learners) to write up minutes of meetings. The skills, knowledge and understanding they had gained were immediately and practically helping them to deal with real, challenging tasks in their lives. Conversely, these achievements in form filling, talking, reading and writing were fed back to the literacy tutors in a mutually re-enforcing cycle that enhanced progress and achievement.

A final aspect of pedagogy and practice that was important in promoting positive change was that learners were not seen as passive recipients of teacher knowledge but rather as co-producers of meaning. For example in the 'football group' it was observed that:

> The pedagogy is based on starting with students having their say about the particular football team they support and then helping them to develop some critical awareness about the ideas behind their responses through problem-posing questions. After the discussion students then move on to read and write around this topic. (Obs, CS 3)

And a student from this group said, 'I've managed to get along with a lot of people who support different football teams from me and I didn't think I'd be able to do this' (learner, CS 3).

Creating a positive educational experience involved learners feeling that their issues, circumstances and concerns are both openly acknowledged and valued. For example:

> I just feel so comfortable in here. I mean you don't get judged, criticised, everybody does care about everybody else, even though we've got our own problems... Everybody's very nice and with me, just experiencing that feeling that tells me that maybe it's the right thing to do this. … I've not got a lot of education [to build on], you know (learner, CS 5)

> In this place you're not just a disabled person. You're respected as an ordinary person, as a human being (learner, CS 6).

So most of the learners had worked through previous negative learning identities and were now much more engaged in learning so that, as one learner put it:

> I value education now. My dad always said, - 'stick to it or you'll regret it later in life', and I did regret it because I ended up in a dead-end job that I hated. Now, I'm going on to college to study computing and hope that it will lead to a better life for me (learner, CS 2).

Discussion

At the beginning of the programmes the learners can be seen to be struggling with who they are as they reflect on their early educational experiences. They were positioned as 'failures' and the recognition they experienced was as the kind of people that were unable to learn. These findings clearly illustrate how the learners' identities have been constituted by the dominant discourses of education where people are divided into high or low achievers, intelligent or ignorant, capable or incapable, able or disabled, responsible or apathetic. These discourses can mean that not meeting the demands of formal education is seen as an individual problem and the learners' narratives show that they had internalised this sense of personal failure. This in turn had led to negative learning identities that can 'seem almost impossible to escape' (Youdell 2003, p. 19). Moreover, their negative learning experiences had impacted on how they saw themselves, often limiting their ambitions (see also Wojecki, 2007). Yet, as Foucault (1990, 1991) has argued, power is omnipresent and so there are spaces to construct new meanings. Participants in this study had started to challenge some of the negative educational discourses that had regulated their expectations and actions and had begun to see themselves as capable learners. Although many recounted experiences that had led them to explicitly reject education, various life events and the problems with which they were struggling had led them back into learning. Positive experiences in their programmes had caused them to re-evaluate their previous understandings and enabled the construction of new identities as people that are able to learn. This meant that, although they were all experiencing some difficult life circumstances, they had constructed meaning from the new discourses they had encountered and saw their literacy learning as a resource that would help them to achieve the changes in their lives to which they aspired.

One aspect of this ability to contest negative discourses was the way in which the tutors had used learners' experiences for extended reflection that provided opportunities to question the discourses in which they had been embedded. These new collective discourses, which focused on assets and positive progression, were taken on and so also shaped learners' individual worlds where learning had enabled

'the collective and the common to enter individual activities' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 15). Learners were also making sense of their experiences symbolically as they struggled over the different meanings attached to them and came to see their earlier experiences differently. They were able to make use of a different discursive framework through which to interrogate their experiences and this had enabled them to engage in the authoring of new selves and new social relations and thus new figured worlds. Much of what defines a figured world and its manifestation of disciplinary power are reproduced through the interaction of participants, but because participants are members of multiple figured worlds that are constantly evolving, there are spaces and times within a figured world for dialogic interaction (Holland et al. 1998). In these programmes learners were expected to use their experience as resources for making sense of the world and to question the discourses represented in the texts provided and the experiences they shared. This enabled them to use their new self-understandings to think beyond their own immediate situations and produce sustainable and coherent self-narratives for future use (Lawy 2003, p. 343). In particular learners had been able to imagine different scenarios that foregrounded what they were good at rather than dwelling on their failures and thus they were able to create a new imaginary trajectory and position in the world, outside as well as within, their programmes. They had worked through many of their past negative experiences and gained the competences that enabled them to see themselves as potentially successful learners.

The pedagogical practices that contributed to the formation of a positive environment, thus enabling learners to engage and persist in the achievement of their learning goals, were more likely to develop in those organizations that offered 'wrap around' support. This holistic model created strong communities where the affinities between members, be they tutors or learners, helped them to continue to engage and persist through difficult times. This illustrates how learning arises out of 'the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning ... in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). The frequent references learners made to the value of the group and the tutor and the importance of a safe environment also show the impact on their positional identities. They had grasped the potential to move beyond the former silencing of their voices, enacted through the discomfort they felt in educational spaces, and moved into more productive spaces where their voices were acknowledged and they no longer felt out of place. An important aspect of this was the foregrounding of activities where they were able to develop 'the ability to claim the right to speak' (Norton, 2000 p. 25) and take steps towards the mastery of the powerful literacies to which they aspired.

The learners' narratives also show the importance of the individual's wider experience and how the activities they had engaged in could be used outside of their programmes. This was especially important for those learners that had used their literacy competences to impact on the wider world such as through writing a letter or getting on with people that supported a different football team. Learners particularly valued the supportive relationships between tutors and learners and amongst their peers in enabling them to move through their previous negative views of their abilities. The practices that had been most effective in bringing about these kind of changes operated from a strengths approach to literacy tuition that drew on learners' experiences as a positive resource and thus used a 'learning curriculum' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Identities evolved not only because of changing experiences but also

because of the dialogue that took place around those experiences in ways that promoted social awareness and a critique of existing inequities (Bartlett, 2005). These experiences in turn had led the participants to construct new social roles and identities in relation to one another through active participation in the communities of practice provided through their programmes (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such participation had enabled them to acquire valued knowledge and skills and demonstrate their competence by enacting particular ways of being, thinking, believing, acting, and talking. This had involved building on and extending the knowledge and skills that they had, based on their needs, desires and interests particularly where support, encouragement and constructive feedback were offered by both tutors and peers.

These findings show that by participating in more engaging and positive experiences of learning within caring social environments the learners had begun to narrate a different sense of identity that had evolved in the face of events and reflections on those events (Cieslik, 2006). Within the programmes most of the learners had been recognized as competent, learnt how to engage with others, shared the resources commonly used to communicate and gone about their activities in ways that had given them 'an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 111). Moreover those learners that were on the way out of this community were able to see themselves and the world in new ways. This was particularly evident in those learners that described themselves as 'more acceptable'; 'not a failure'; 'respected as an ordinary person' and shows, as Fuller (2007, p. 26) argues, the importance of crossing between contexts and participating in multiple social spaces in renegotiating identities. The external recognition given by these different contexts had enabled learners to know themselves in different ways and find that what they had previously felt to be unproductive and opaque was now understandable, usable and negotiable (Wenger, 1998, p. 153).

Conclusion

This article has shown the impact of acquiring literacy capabilities on an individual's identity and its role in empowering individuals in making sense of, and (re)positioning themselves in, the world. Whilst the data I have presented are from a small sample in a specific location the analysis does provide insights into the impact of identity on learning and into the forms of practice in literacy learning that can bring about positive changes. The theoretical resources provided by Foucault (1990, 1991) have shown how the productive power of discourses have positioned participants in the programmes in particular ways. In addition Holland and colleagues' (1998) conceptualisations have illuminated the ways in which positional and figured elements of identity can be challenged and changed especially through creating new imagined scenarios of competence. Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wenger's (1998) later focus on both inbound and outbound trajectories in communities of practice, have enabled the interrogation of the impact of particular pedagogical approaches and demonstrated how these relate to learners' changing views of themselves and the worlds that they inhabit. In these ways the article contributes to new understandings of the processes of identity (re)formation.

This article has focused specifically on literacy programmes not only because they provide a strong lens through which to examine the relationship between identity and

learning but also because of the social justice issues that are raised by the experiences of people who lack the taken-for-granted literacy competencies needed for everyday life. These experiences have been movingly illustrated by the learners' voices in this article and by the OECD's (2013) international evidence that opportunities to gain literacy proficiency are often limited by an individual's socio-economic circumstances. Moreover, proficiency in literacy skills is also positively associated with important aspects of wellbeing, including health, beliefs about one's impact on the political process and trust in others (ibid.). Personal and social circumstances should not be an obstacle to achieving one's potential and this article has shown that the nature of the learning that people engage in will make a real difference to how they feel about themselves, especially when the nature of their past learning had created negative self images. So the insights provided here can also contribute to a clearer understanding about those aspects of literacy tuition that are more likely to lead to a positive experience for participants who have hitherto been left on the margins of society.

However, further research, especially longitudinal studies, is required to explore the impact of literacy programmes over longer periods of time. In particular investigation is needed into the nature of effective teaching and learning for all adults who come to literacies education in order to change the wider aspects of their lives through new understandings of what they can do and become.

Acknowledgements

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