**Transforming learning identities in literacy programs**

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**Abstract**

This article draws on the theories of Mezirow, Foucault, and Holland and colleagues to investigate: how students were positioned in relation to their own experiences; what opportunities they had to overcome their negative positioning in relation to the power structures that inform the worlds in which they move; and how their changed practices impacted on their positional and figured worlds. Data from community and prison based participants in Scottish adult literacy projects are used to interrogate the factors that contributed to overcoming the negative discourses that students had been embedded in. The article concludes that by the end of their programs the students had experienced transformative changes in their learning identities and these changes encompassed cognitive, emotional and social dimensions.

**Key words**

Power, discourses, positional and figured identities

This article considers the impact of participating in adult literacy programs on adults’ learning identities. It draws on data from two research projects that examined the experiences of Scottish literacy students based in two different settings: communities and prisons. These students were interviewed at the beginning and end of their programs so this enables the interrogation of their perspectives on the changes they experienced over time. An important reason for focusing specifically on literacy programs is that people with literacy difficulties have often had negative experiences of school learning but tend to assume that these earlier experiences, where they ‘failed’ to learn, are solely their responsibility (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge & Tusting, 2007). Moreover, 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, 2007). This means that adult literacy programs provide a strong lens through which to examine the relationship between identity and learning.

In the next two sections I draw on the literature to outline first, the relationship between transformative learning experiences and learning identity. Then, second, I review the relationship between power, discourses and practices. These two reviews then enable me to frame my argument in ways that consider both the students’ perception of their individual changes and also how expectations and practices are regulated through the power of discourse. Specifically I use the theories of Mezirow (1991, 1996, 1997, 2006) in relation to transformative learning; Foucault (1990, 1991) in relation to how power functions through discourse; and Holland and colleagues’ (1998) socio-cultural model of language and literacy development in relation to how identities are continually constructed through our interpersonal and intergroup interactions. I then use these theoretical frameworks to interrogate my empirical data in order to consider how negative learning identities might be transformed.

**Transformative learning experiences and learning identity**

What is meant by a transformative learning experience? Mezirow has argued that the end goal of such an experience is that the individual will have generated a frame of reference ‘… that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change, and integrative of experience’ (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 19). The individual should feel empowered to act on their transformed perspective, both in an individual and collaborative context, as opposed to uncritically accepting the assumptions of others (Mezirow, 1997). This process is regarded as emancipatory on an individual level as the individual will decide to act (or not) on the revised thinking which ‘…may result in immediate action, delayed action caused by situational constraints or lack of information on how to act, or result in a reasoned affirmation of an existing pattern of action’ (Mezirow, 1996, p. 64). Action in this sense is focused on individual thought developed through the promotion of critical reflection, which questions ‘the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience’ (Taylor, 2009, p. 7). Imagination is regarded as playing a key role in this process since it is the means by which an individual can access alternative perspectives that can contribute to the development of a more flexible and inclusive frame of reference (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). So, changes in personal perspectives can transform lives and provide new ways of seeing and understanding the world. In other words, transformational learning ‘is a process of calling our old meanings and past experience into question due to something new in our lives, and then attributing new meanings to our lives and experience’ (Erichsen, 2013, p. 114).

The relationship between transformative learning and the concept of a learning identity is important because meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind are substantial parts of identity. However, as Illeris (2014) argues, identity is more than this because ‘it spans all the dimensions of learning and mental processes: the cognitive, the emotional, and the social as well as the environmental and societal situatedness of this totality’ (p. 160). Illeris (2014) further argues that ‘adults do not transform elements of their identity if they do not have serious reasons … [so] transformations imply strong motivation …[to] justify the exertion involved’ (2014, p. 159). This means that for both adult educators and students the key challenge of promoting transformative learning is to ‘find and connect to the psychological or practical, internal or external potentials in the learners’ existence and life world that are so strong’ (2014, p. 159).

Learning has a strong relationship to identity because ‘fundamental to our understanding of learning…is our understanding of the whole person in a social situation’ (Jarvis, 2009, p. 31). In modern times constant change results in the pervasive fluidity of social memberships and of identities themselves in ways that often lead to fear and insecurity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Therefore the role of learning in shaping identities may be greater now than in the past because engaging in learning can be the means of making a reality of our desire to be, for example, a great chef and thus close the critical gap between our actual and designated identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 19)*.* Learning is therefore not only about acquiring new skills and practices but is also about changes in people’s identity.

Researchers (Cieslik, 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). People thus 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). This implies that the environment in which education takes place should be grounded in ‘…trust, solidarity, security and empathy’ (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 12), where the role of adult educators in bringing about change is ‘to enhance the critical reflection process, which is embedded in transformational learning theory’ (Wang & Sarbo, 2004, p. 207).

**Power, discourse, and practices**

Identity and learning are socially shaped through the institutions of the family, education and work that impact on an individual’s outlook and self-image. This means that 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 (Warriner, 2010). Identity as a competent learner is also shaped by the norms and values of the social networks to which individuals’ belong (Crossan, Field, Gallacher & Merrill, 2003). So, negative learning identities can ‘seem almost impossible to escape’ (Youdell, 2003, p. 19) because, functioning through discourse, power produces reality and thus regulates expectations and actions for actors in that structure (Foucault 1990, 1991). From this perspective, who one is ‘emerges acutely out of the problems with which one struggles’ (Rabinow, 1997, p. xix). In the case of literacy students this means that their problems of communication in a literate world will have positioned them as people that were not able to fully engage in the practices seen as ‘normal’ in their society.

However, because Foucault’s conceptualization of power is that it is omnipresent, this means that 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 through the ways in which the ‘world’ and the ‘self’ are made known and knowable (Foucault, 1990). This suggests that change operates on both the individual’s sense of self and identity and also on how these are shaped by, and shape, their agency. People are not passive receptacles or carriers of discourses but rather are actively and critically interpreting and enacting them. However, their ability to assert their agency is constrained by the socio-cultural structures within which they act. Viewing learning and identity as developing through social relationships and within particular contexts is also helpful in dealing with issues of power because it addresses: ‘how collective discourses shape personal worlds’ (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 15) and how each individual voice combines into the voice of a community*.*

The power of discourses has been further examined through the socio-cultural model of language and literacy development (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain 1998). Holland and colleagues’ focus is on how identities are continually constructed not only by oneself, but also by others’ perceptions, and are constituted through practices. 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, et al. (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 symbolization of identities can be used to direct the behavior of others as well as ourselves (p. 128). Position is ‘inextricably linked to power, status, and rank’ (Holland et al., p. 271) and is ascribed by locally relevant social structures such as race, class, gender and age. Positional identities are about how we identify our own position in relationship to others, mediated through the ways in which we feel comfortable or constrained when speaking, acting or entering into others’ spaces. These on-the-ground relationships of power give us greater or lesser access to ‘activities, genres and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or no voice at all’ (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127). 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 also involve constructions of hypothetical future scenarios that involve a mobilization of the imagination in creating agency.

In relation to this article, Mezirow’s theories of transformative learning, which focus on changes in the individual, are combined with the insights of Foucault to enable the interrogation of students’ evolving sense of their changing identities within a broader social framework. At the same time, the work of Holland and colleagues enables the investigation of how far learners have been able to overcome their negative social positioning through the use of symbols and discourses to construct a different, more positive, narrative out of their struggle with the problems they face. Drawing on these theoretical insights, I will present the findings from two different contexts of literacy programs in order to examine: how students 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 in which they move; and how their changed practices impacted on their positional and figured worlds.

**The research projects**

This article is based on a re-analysis of data drawn from two different Scottish research projects: one based in community settings and the other in prisons. The reason for comparing these two projects is first, that the participants had shared characteristics both in their earlier (negative) experiences of learning at school and in their socially and economically deprived backgrounds, which research has shown impact negatively on persistence in programs (e.g. Comings, 2009). Second, research has also shown that innovative approaches to literacy learning, especially those that emphasize the participants’ strengths, are more likely to result in successful learning (e.g. Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009) and the curriculum used in both the community organizations and prisons reflected this approach. The first project was a study of community based literacy programs (reported on in Crowther, Maclachlan & Tett, 2010) where forty-seven students based in eight organizations were interviewed near the beginning and towards the end of their programs. The organizations were located in urban areas in the central belt of Scotland, where social and economic deprivation was most concentrated, and the students comprised those who had chaotic life styles due to homelessness and/or addiction issues, those who were living in poverty and working towards employability goals and those for whom attaining their learning goals was problematic due to learning or mental health difficulties. Research shows that these students’ characteristics mean that they are less likely to enroll and persist in programs (e.g. Barton et al., 2007). The second project was a study of prison arts-based educational interventions (reported on in Tett, Anderson, McNeill, Overy & Sparks, 2012) that aimed to stimulate prisoners’ engagement with learning and improve their literacy, numeracy and communication skills. The arts interventions involved the *Scottish Ensemble, Scottish Opera*, *Scottish Chamber Orchestra* and the *Citizens Theatre*, all of whom had an international reputation for their artistic merit and a commitment to initiatives that developed arts in challenging and difficult situations such as prisons. The study drew on the experiences of participants in three prisons: a young offenders’ establishment, a prison for long-term inmates and a large general-purpose prison. The reasons that these three prisons were selected were because the arts interventions took place over time and were intensive so that it was possible to observe changes over the length of the project.

Research from the US and the UK shows that prisoners are more likely to have literacy difficulties than the general population (Batchelder & Pippert, 2002; Cropsey, Wexler, Melnick, Taxman & Young, 2007; Hurry, Brazier, Snapes, & Wilson, 2005) and tend to have lower than average attainment and poor experiences of compulsory education (Muth, 2006; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). In prisons, particularly in the UK, the curriculum is often restricted so that prisoners are expected to engage in education that is focused on improving narrow literacy skills rather than broader, and potentially more attractive, educational areas (Hurry, Brazier & Wilson, 2009). This initiative, however, was designed to draw on the participants’ existing knowledge and skills and encourage their creativity through interventions that were co-devised between the arts organizations and the participating prisoners.

**Research Methods and Analysis**

Slightly different approaches were taken in the two projects. In the community organizations individual interviews that used an autobiographical approach were conducted so that, as Wedin (2008), argues, it was possible to examine the ‘perspectives and life conditions of the target groups [and] take local, everyday practices into consideration’ (p. 762). Near the beginning of their programs students were asked to talk about: their individual life histories, including key life events and 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. However, the story each participant told provided insights into how their previous experiences had influenced their current views of their learning. The interviews at the end of the programs asked students to talk about the overall impact of the programs as well as their imagined futures so that individual changes between the two interviews could be analyzed.

Data were collected from the prisoners through focus group interviews at the beginning and the end of the arts-based interventions. Focus groups were chosen as being more effective than individual interviews since they enabled participants to react and respond to each other (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). An opportunity sample of prisoners was recruited that resulted in twenty-three prisoners from three different prisons taking part in both sets of focus groups. The first focus group conversations discussed experiences of schooling and explored the factors that influenced prisoners’ engagement with the projects. The second focus group asked them to: reflect on the ways in which the arts projects had enhanced their learning and literacy skills; discuss the changes they had experienced as a result of participation; describe their hopes and plans for the future. It is acknowledged that those prisoners that were most committed to the project were more likely to participate in the focus groups. Nevertheless, the findings about changes following their participation were collaborated by other data that had been collected from prison and learning center staff and from the artists that led the interventions.

Because the interviews (individual/focus group) were conducted in both projects near the beginning, and after completion of their involvement, it gave the respondents opportunities to identify any changes in their knowledge, skills and understanding as well as any differences in their hopes and plans for the future. All of these interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were then analyzed using thematic analysis: a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data that provides ‘a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The first step of the analysis was reading and re-reading the data, noting down ideas and this in turn generated initial codes through identifying interesting features of the data. These codes were collected into potential themes that were then reviewed, defined and named and the data were then coded based on the themes that were common across the two different samples. These common themes were: the impact of early learning experiences; changing attitudes to learning as a result of their participation; the importance of working collaboratively; how their experiences increased their confidence and self-belief.

Since this article is focused on impact, particular attention was paid to the changes that the respondents reported had happened as a result of their participation in the programs and, in particular, any changes that they described as transformational. These changes were mainly expressed in terms of feelings and emotions about what the students felt they were now able to do and who they might become, rather than about the uses of their new literacy skills. So, in the next section, data derived from these interviews are drawn on using the students’ own words to explore these themes with a particular focus on the relationship between engagement in literacy programs and students’ changing identities. Throughout the article the quotes have been selected on the basis of their representing common views.

**Findings 1: Early learning experiences**

At the beginning of their programs the majority of participants in both settings said that school had not provided positive learning experiences for them and this had caused them to be reluctant to engage in learning in their later lives. One student, 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 (community).

Another recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected his ability to learn because he felt alienated and unsafe. He 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 (community).

These experiences led a number of participants to stop participating in their schools, either by being physically absent or by 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 (community).

Others had specific learning difficulties or disabilities that were not picked up in mainstream education: ‘basically they all thought at school that I was a wee daftie [stupid] so I tried hard not to get noticed’ (prison). For some health problems limited their attendance and hence ability to keep up with prescribed syllabuses and this was compounded by the low expectations of teachers:

I was born with cerebral palsy but had to have operations so I missed lots through illnesses. ...We didn’t get the teaching we should have and it held me back. If it hadn’t been for the teachers... I might have passed things. I could have done a lot better, but they just shouted, - ‘the six of you, go for a nap, do this, do that’ and in the afternoon, it was more play than lessons, and this was Secondary School (community).

A small number of students were raised in homes that were neglectful as one prisoner’s story exemplifies:

I don’t remember any happy times, birthdays, family trips, or even ordinary cuddles in my family. There was just no love there so I ended up going off the rails, sniffing glue and drinking. Nobody cared where I was so I rarely went to Secondary school.

Not everyone was unhappy at school and one community-based student described school as ‘a haven [that] provided a chance to escape from the problems at home’ where she was bullied by her older brothers. Yet, across the whole group, few were able to identify a teacher who had recognized their capabilities and invested time in supporting them and hardly any reported that their parents had helped them with homework or discussed their progress with teachers, which research has shown is necessary for making educational progress (Bynner & Joshi, 2002).

Some participants looked back and blamed themselves, rather than their teachers or family, for ‘messing about at school’, and ‘fighting and all that’ (both prison setting), whilst another said: ‘in school you’ve got too much on your mind and you want to do other things’ (community). Yet this self-blaming also had an element of puzzlement about what was expected in school as this prisoner shows: ‘I was too disruptive in school…I just couldn't get the grasp of it at all’.

These quotes illustrate that the educational opportunities open to these participants were not equal and so they did not benefit from their initial schooling to the extent that their more advantaged peers did. They also show how they had internalized the negative discourses about their abilities because their teachers, their peers and, in some cases, their parents constructed their skills and experiences as deficient and inferior. Overall, their lack of power to influence this negative positioning and had stopped them from achieving their potential but did their later experiences in the literacy programs change this?

**Findings 2: Overcoming negative discourses**

The interviews with students at the end of their programs identified a number of themes that they considered had changed the way they thought about themselves and their learning identities, which are discussed below.

**Recognizing knowledge and experience**

The focus on what students *could* do increased confidence and self-respect as these quotes from the community-based students’ show. For example: ‘the tutor helped me to work out what I could do and then, once I was happy about that, I worked on what I couldn’t do’. ‘Here they build on what you can do and that helps you to think positively so I feel much more confident … as now I know I’m not thick but I used to think I was’. One aspect of this involved stretching the students a bit: ‘they let you do things that you can manage and they know my boundaries but they push you a bit to get you to try more things like the couple of sentences I’m saying in the play we are putting on’.

In the prison setting, participating in the projects showed ‘that we're good at something’ and also able to develop ‘our own ideas’. This was because:

It’s our project isn’t it? The guy’s showing us how to go about it and how to do it, but it’s us that is actually coming up with the story, coming up with the characters… with this group they’re saying, you can be capable. They’re not just saying, ‘you do this, you do that.’ It’s down to us where we want to go and what we want to do with it.

Working in this way meant that ‘you had to use your head’ and work out what you wanted to do yourself rather than ‘being told what to do’ and meant ‘we had to take more responsibility for our work’. All the projects involved people in working together so that the more withdrawn participants were: ‘brought out of their shell’. It also meant that, as one participant pointed out: ‘the guy that sits at the back of the class and never says anything… [gets] the chance to get his ideas across as well because in prison, to put your point across you’ve got to be pretty confident’.

The students clearly saw the recognition of their experiences as an important step towards transformed learning identities because: ‘people are now responding to what I have to say so that makes me feel that I can ask for a job without falling on my ass’ and ‘I’m more confident in speaking to others so I’m not scared to go to interviews now’ (community).

**Learning and changing together**

Working collaboratively through extending the knowledge and skills that students’ already had and helping them to progress was an important theme. In the community-based projects, being part of a group was seen as helping them with their learning: ‘you’re in with the group so you get involved… you have to work out tasks, you’re communicating with each other and it’s very satisfying’. This also enabled some 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’. Others spoke about being respected: ‘in this place you’re not just a disabled person, you’re respected as an ordinary person, as a human being’. This respect was created through students’ feeling that their issues, circumstances and concerns were both acknowledged and valued. For example: ‘here you don’t get judged, criticized, everybody does care about everybody else, even though we’ve got our own problems’.

In the prison setting, participants worked jointly and supported each other through putting all their different ideas together and learning from each other particularly if ‘you ran out of ideas’. They suggested that the ‘tutors were able to teach you to work together, to be creative and enthusiastic’. Positive action to support each other was also apparent either through help with specific skills, such as writing clearly, or in terms of building people’s confidence. For example: ‘I had to keep telling Joe that he could do it and it was sounding good’. Prisoners also helped each other to ‘just keep going’ when projects got difficult and their motivation dipped or they were too stressed to think clearly. In addition everyone had to rely on each other to do their fair share so people had to take responsibility for ‘the group as a whole [whereas usually] in here you look after yourself first’. Working as a team also built confidence because every person mattered. This experience also transferred to other parts of prisoners’ lives through, for example, giving confidence ‘to actually participate in groups instead of just doing it by myself’ and to ‘learn to trust others’. For some too it helped to bring ‘back good memories from the past’ and these good feelings in turn built confidence to participate in other learning activities.

**Giving and receiving care**

A number of students suggested that it was the tutors that made a difference: ‘it makes me feel motivated that the tutors are working so hard to help me’ and ‘all the tutors here help you, they will never see you struggle’ (community). Enthusiastic and encouraging staff helped because ‘if you’ve got somebody encouraging you to say you can do these things, you're not the bottom of the rung. You are able to do something’ (prison). Participants also valued the way in which they were treated: ‘she was so inspiring it felt …as if I was back working with normal people’ (prison) and ‘here they build you up and help you to think positively so I feel much more confident about what I can do’ (community).

Participants in all the programs reported that they had changed their dispositions to learning and altered their learning practices partly because of these positive caring relationships. For example: ‘It’s safe here and that makes it easy to talk to the staff who understand how I feel and if you trust a person and they say try this [learning activity] then you do it’ (community). One aspect was to do with others believing in you and seeming to care about what you did. For example, ‘when people come in and make you feel you’re worth something…it just builds up your self esteem seeing people generally care’ (prison). Part of this was about being given a chance by those whose opinions you value especially when participants felt that they were normally judged as people that ‘should be thrown on the scrap-heap’ (prison). Working with people that trusted you and were ‘decent and positive’ helped to bring back self-esteem and made you ‘proud to be really able to do it’ (prison).

**Changing practices**

There were a variety of ways in which participants changed their practices. In this section I begin with the area to which most focus is usually given when assessing changes in literacy programs: that of increasing skills in reading and writing. But participants themselves were more aware of the changes in their emotional selves, their relationships with others, their self-perceptions and their imagined futures. Of course, as can be seen below, all these different aspects of changing practices are entangled together so that changes in one aspect fed into changes in another.

In terms of increasing literacy skills and the transformation that this brought about participants said:

Participating in these projects gives you extra skills …it can open your eyes and you say [to yourself] ‘I didn’t know I could do that before I came here’ and it turns out I can and I’m quite good at [writing a story] (prison).

Now that I can read and spell better I’ve already been able to write a letter and had a good result from it. I feel it’s the first time anyone’s reacted to anything I’ve said and it’s made me feel great (community).

Others reported that when they had engaged in learning it opened up ‘other prospects for us… and shows that we’ve got other skills’. Discovering these skills in turn led to being ‘more focused’ and could help people to ‘break away their shell’ and so open themselves up to other possibilities. These possibilities were linked to increasing abilities, and the positive feelings these generated caused people to ‘want to do some good in here’ and could ‘bring a better side out of you’ (all prison).

For some, becoming more literate led to greater self-awareness:

I’m more calm now and seeing different aspects of myself as well. … I used to be 'loud and proud' when I first started the course, but now I’m quieter and let other people talk. What I used to think and what I think now are two different things (community)

I’ve learnt to take a few risks because if you only stick to what you know you’re never going to achieve anything (prison).

I have improved on my old self where I was an angry wee man all the time and always fighting. I am getting better at walking away from things rather than trying to get fights started which I did when I was young but now I want to get on with my life (prison).

I’m more able to judge my own work now and know when I’ve done a good thing whereas before I thought that I was a failure (prison).

Participants spoke about how they were now able to look back on their previous experiences and imagine the future differently:

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 (community).

I now see my earlier experiences differently and recognize how my school teachers tried to put me down so now I’m involved in a family learning project so that I can help other parents to be a bit more challenging (community)

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 (community).

Finally one student really summed up how her increased literacy impacted on the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of their learning identity when she said: ‘now I can read OK I feel more acceptable, not an outcast’ (community).

**Discussion**

At the beginning of the programs, the students 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 illustrate how the students’ 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 mean that not meeting the demands of formal education is seen as an individual problem and the participants’ narratives show that they had internalized this sense of personal failure. This in turn had led to negative learning identities and their previous learning experiences had impacted on how they saw themselves, often limiting their ambitions.

Yet, by the end of the programs, the students had experienced transformative changes in their learning identities and these changes encompassed the ‘cognitive dimension of knowledge and skills, the emotional dimension of feelings and motivation, and the social dimension of communication and cooperation’ (Illeris, 2004, p. 82). This meant that their habits of expectations(Mezirow, 1991) were transformed and they were able to work through some of the obstacles they faced and reorient their negative conceptions of themselves. The focus on co-creating the curriculum and the learning environment, so that students became agents of change in their programs, meant that they were ‘instrumental in facilitating transformation in learning and [this] became the trigger for achievement’ (Duckworth, & Ade-Ojo, 2016, p. 301).

Many of the students talked about their previous selves as ‘outcasts’ ‘not normal’, ‘failures’, ‘thick’ and moving to a positive view was not easy. However, the negative discourses they had experienced were transformed so that they were able to reformulate ‘reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives’ (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 19). A key component of this reconstruction was giving and receiving care through the positive relationships in which the students were involved, both with their tutors and their peers.

Many students had previously experienced the shame that came from feeling that they were not competent. However, the positive environment in which they learnt enabled them to overcome this by being able to practice and fail but still have their capabilities recognized. This was because:

Adult learners, especially non-traditional students or those in adult basic education, are often in educational shaming recovery. …Learning can take us out of shame and out of self-consciousness toward other directedness. Learning new things can transport us out of our existing emotional state (Walker, 2017, p. 12).

This ‘other directedness’ was another way in which students were able to contest negative discourses through the opportunities they had to question their earlier experiences. These new collective discourses, which focused on assets and positive progression, were taken on and so shaped students’ individual worlds as well as enabling the collective understanding they had gained from working collaboratively with their peers. As Erichsen (2013) has argued: ‘meaningful transformation and personal change is not only what we learn, but also how we choose to incorporate it into our understandings of ourselves and our worlds’ (p. 127). The students talked about how people were reacting to them differently, how they were now willing to take more risks and opening themselves up to new possibilities. In all these ways they were demonstrating how their learning had led to their envisaging of a better life in which they could keep on going forward.

Participants 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. These new figured worlds were a collective experience and, because participants were members of multiple figured worlds that were constantly evolving, there were spaces and times within a figured world for dialogic interaction (Holland et al. 1998). The collective experiences of the students were formed through dialogue as they listened, responded, and spoke to each other in ways that enabled them to see themselves from the outside and so enhanced their understanding of their own selves.

These collective experiences for interaction were crucial for transformation because:

Figured worlds rest upon people’s abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized ‘as if’ realms … and to become active in and passionate about them. People’s identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically in these ‘as if’ worlds (Holland et al. 1998, p. 49).

The ‘as if’ worlds that were created in the literacy programs were ones where the participants were: ‘respected’; ‘capable’; ‘thinking positively’; ‘confident’; ‘trusting’; ‘proud’ and this enabled them to use their new self-understandings to think beyond their own immediate situations and produce positive, sustainable and coherent self-narratives for future use (Lawy 2003, p. 343). In particular, students 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 programs. They had worked through many of their past negative experiences and gained the skills and competences that enabled them to see themselves as successful learners and take steps towards the mastery of the powerful literacies to which they aspired.

The references the students made to the contrasts between their early educational experiences and their literacy programs 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. Students were moving from deference about education towards entitlement to participate in productive learning as their ideas were responded to and respected and they realized the prospects that were now open to them. An important aspect of this was the foregrounding of activities where they were able to develop their ability to speak out, take risks and think differently about their ‘old selves’. As Holland and colleagues (1998) argue this demonstrates how ‘social positions become dispositions through participation in, identification with, and development of expertise within the figured world’ (p. 136).

**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. The theoretical resources provided by Mezirow (1991, 1996, 1997, 2006) have shown how an individual’s frame of reference can be changed through critical reflection on their old meanings and past experience and provide new ways of understanding themselves as well as the world around them as intentional agents of change. The insights of Foucault (1990, 1991) have set the students’ changing identities within a broader social framework and shown how the productive power of discourses have enabled participants in the programs to question and challenge the discourses in which they were embedded. Finally, Holland and colleagues’ (1998) conceptualizations have illuminated the ways in which positional and figured elements of identity can be interrogated, especially through creating new imagined scenarios of competence within social and cultural spaces. This means that students have been able to use the figured elements of identity to surmount the negative social positioning they have experienced and instead take up powerful literacy discourses because of their changed understandings of what they can do and become.

These findings both support and extend the literature on adult literacy and transformative learning. They support the literature in three main ways: the impact of improvements in literacy skills on participants’ self-confidence and esteem (e.g. Tett & Maclachlan, 2007); the importance of recognizing students’ existing knowledge and experience (e.g. Barton et al. 2007); the value of changed practices in relation to new skills and greater self-awareness (e.g. Windisch, 2015). The article has been able to extend previous research because it has used a new theoretical framework to reconceptualize the role of literacy programs in empowering the participants and leading to changes in identity. It has also demonstrated empirically the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of the term ‘identity’ and so gone some way to answer the call from Illeris (2014) for a ‘necessary delimitation of the approach and practice of transformative learning’ (p. 116). Finally, it has extended previous research through its focus on the importance of the participants’ feelings through detailing the moving ways in which students talked about their changed selves. This is in contrast to many assessments of the impact of participation that only consider changes in literacy skills and practices (e.g. Comings, 2009).

The article also offers some directions for further research. First, it offers insights into how adult educators could investigate developing a deeper awareness of how our own frames of reference shape practice and how that in turn feeds into students’ understanding of their identities. Second, it points to ways in which studies that focus on whole person learning and changed practices ‘can provide a more informed practice for fostering transformative learning’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 188).

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