Education + Training

Adult Education, transformation and social justice

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Our drive for editing this journal is underpinned by the premise: ***Education can be empowering, it can be disempowering – but it is never neutral.***

Vicky Duckworth, Rob Smith, and Gary Husband

Critics of the dominant model of education argue that the education curriculum across nations has a strong utilitarian function, which selects and distributes dominant education in different ways to different social groups, reproducing class inequalities which fail to address issues of power relations in the learners' lives. We see, for example, the hidden curriculum of formal schooling serving and reflecting the social, economic and moral hierarchy that drives the needs of neo-liberal global capitalism, a framework that is closely bound to ideologies that stem from production and economic values. Where the dominant discourse, political focus and language of policy highlight only the performative function of education in getting work or securing 'better' work, the broader values of education aligned to the value of the individual beyond economic productivity are lost. It is within this context that educational systems shape identities and notions of worth and indeed lack of worth. Within this performative landscape humanistic, transformative and holistic visions of lifelong learning for all have been marginalised, silenced and neglected.

In this Special Issue (SI) there is deep recognition that the understanding of the nature of transformative learning must be contextually based and needs to address all the domains of students' lives, not simply their learning journeys. The papers presented provide a critical spotlight to illuminate the relevance of structural inequality, which includes class, gender and ethnicity on the learners' trajectories, exposing its continued importance in the era of individualising modernity (Beck 1994). For example, the concept of capitals and how they are accrued and valued are important in facilitating a more detailed analysis of different relations of power which can remain hidden and implicit in concepts such as 'individualism', 'choice' and 'mobility' (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Duckworth 2013; Ade-Ojo & Duckworth 2016, Duckworth & Smith 2017).

The authors of the articles in this SI bring transformative education out of the shadows and offer vivid critical spaces that cross nations, contexts and time. They give voice to the silenced, drawing us into the power of Adult Education to open up real opportunity for socially just educational experiences which challenge inequality and barriers in learners' lives, their families and their diverse communities.

Clancy and Holford begin this extended special issue in their vital illumination of how adult access courses taken in the residential context have the potential to intensify the learning process, often leading to personal transformation in both short courses and longer. Key findings include the powerful role residential education plays in accelerating and deepening learning experiences, particularly for adults who have faced substantial personal and societal challenges and are returning to education. The paper also opens up the importance of the locality of the colleges, all in historic settings, and how they confer feelings of worth, security and sanctuary; the staff support – pastoral and academic, the bespoke facilities and

private rooms are vital enabling mechanisms of transformation. Next, we turn to Peart's ethnographic study which examines Black male students' perceptions of FE and provides a lens to investigate how their experiences compare to their experiences of statutory education. This paper provides rich insights to support teachers and managers at all organisational levels in FE (and in schools) review their provision and consider adopting approaches that may help to enhance Black students' educational journeys.

Crossing the seas we next enter India to explore a framework for Inclusive Digital Literacy for vulnerable populations in rural areas under the Digital India program. Nedungadi et al. probe multiple literacies for low-literate learners in low-resource settings with low internet bandwidth, a lack of ICT facilities and intermittent electricity. The education model presented demonstrates the potential value of a comprehensive Digital Literacy framework as a powerful lever for Digital inclusion to empower learners, improving well-being and reducing the risks of exploitation. Back to the UK, we are presented with the findings from the research project by Rocks and Lavender which was designed to understand the experiences of twelve 'non-traditional' graduates from a full-time BA programme at a Scottish College of Further and Higher Education. After surveying existing literature on transformative learning with a critical eye, the paper explores an alternative discourse, proposing that education should be a catalyst for social, emotional, and intellectual growth, culminating in a transformative experience. The implications for the study point to the proposition that transformative teaching and learning theory may be as significant now as it ever was in understanding the changes which learners experience in higher education study. O'Brien takes us to Southern Ireland with his paper which draws on a qualitative research methodology, underpinned by critical realism to address the growing influence of neoliberalism and the commodification of adult literacy as a skill and function of the economy. The study argues for a greater focus on literacy as a social practice which stems from equality and social justice and is rooted in emancipatory and transformative adult education. Next we arrive at Duckworth and Smith's paper, which grounded in critical pedagogy utilises digital methods to explore data from the UCU Further Education in England: Transforming Lives & Communities research project. The research presented develops a distinctive, theorised conceptualisation of transformative teaching and learning.

To the southern hemisphere and Melbourne, Australia where Atkinson's paper is based. He identifies factors which enhance transformational learning in adult learning spaces in relation to people experiencing cultural marginalisation. One site is an adult refugee mentoring program run by a Non-Government Organisation, the other is a contemporary adult learning classroom. He reports on the transformational experiences of long term unemployed migrants within these two very different sites and programs. The two studies are presented in terms of the cultural, social as well as functional challenges facing learners and the desire of teachers and mentors to act on the challenges encountered. The study draws attention to the concept of transformation and how it may be supported even in the adult education classroom framed by the neo-liberal agenda of economic rationalism. The next paper bring us back to the UK, and presents a qualitative study by Gartland which considers the experiences of young people on Level 3 Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) vocational courses in their progression to Higher Education (HE) from differently positioned post-16 colleges in England. Drawing on a Bourdieusian theoretical framework new insights are offered into the transformative potential of BTEC courses and

their role in supporting progression to HE amongst young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Stahl and Loeser's article based on a case study moves us back to Australia where an exploration of identity reconstruction and transition is explored in relation to Deo, a tradesman who became a first year university student. Deo's rich and transformative narrative offers insights into the socio-cultural narratives around masculinity, age, ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic status highlighting their central significance to learning, being and belonging. Scott's UK paper is next and draws on social learning theories and distils data from individual-participatory content posted to the social network Edmodo.com. The paper outlines the conceptualising of lifeworld experiences of GCSE re-sit Further Education student where literacy is situated in online learning social networks used to support studying of formal qualifications. It offers transformative practice which is underpinned by individual agency through online participation. This special issue is closed by Panitsides et al. and their qualitative study which, located in Greece, explores and offers meaningful insights in the learning background experiences and potential of women from the Muslim minority in Western Thrace. It provides a timely lens to probe and expose whether there is any 'room' for transformative learning to take place in their underprivileged communities.

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