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# Further Educating Rita: Exploring the experiences of working-class women in Further Education.

Emma Bassett

## Acknowledgments

To all the students I've been privileged to work with. Thank you for allowing me to be a tiny part of your world – I have loved every moment.

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# Further Educating Rita: Exploring the experiences of working-class women in Further Education.

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## Abstract

This investigation uses Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to explore the experiences of working-class women studying full-time in Further Education and the impact of these experiences on their sense of identity and belonging. It examines the support for transformation that these women experience within and without the setting. These questions are explored through narrative interview, in order to hear the first-hand experiences and interpretations of these students in their own voices. The findings suggest that for this marginal group, Further Education settings can offer opportunities for positive transformation through the development of meaningful relationships and targeted, effective support.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Educating Rita (Russell, 1981) explores the fictional experiences of a working-class woman as she returns to education through studying with The Open University, telling of her struggles to reconcile her developing identity with her origins and social relations. Rita's imagined journey remains familiar for many working-class women choosing to return to education, however, those who choose to study in Further Education settings face experiences which are unique to the environment.

The initial idea for this investigation arose from an experience with a student in my Further Education setting, who decided to withdraw from her studies despite achieving outstanding results. When exploring this decision with her, it became clear that her identity as a working-class woman, with multiple and often conflicting responsibilities, posed a significant challenge to her developing a sense of belonging within the setting.

Whilst all student experiences are unique, working-class women present as a distinct minority group in Further Education, and by approaching these issues through the perspective of Bourdieu's (1997) concept of habitus, I hoped to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of Further Education on participants' identities and sense of belonging. This greater depth of understanding would help Further Education practitioners better appreciate the complex lives of working-class women and develop more effective support for them.

As a group occupying a space of intersectional inequality in Further Education, working-class women seeking transformation can face conflict and tension within their education spaces and personal lives, as they experience shifting dynamics in their existing and new power relations. The tension between their position and ambition represents the interplay between the individual and society, as women work to remake their circumstances to match their aspirations.

Inspired by the work of Beverley Skeggs (1997), I have chosen to use Bourdieu's theory (1977) as a lens through which to investigate the experiences and changing identities of participants in this transformative field. Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus, field and capital can be used as tools to explore the changing nature of an individual's identity and sense of belonging within a particular field, by examining

participants' developing sense of self and changing identity (Wacquant, 2009). The potential for educational institutions to offer a space for students to transform their habitus and acquire forms of capital, was highlighted by James, Busher and Suttill (2016), as was the dialectical nature of such spaces. As a result, Further Education colleges can simultaneously support both change and challenge, as learners seek to make sense of their changing position and developing ambitions within and without the educational field.

The issue of class, long connected with vocational education choices (Reay, 2017) is often explored through issues of identity and belonging for Higher Education working-class students. Although Further Education has historically been centered on providing opportunities for working-class students, women returning to education within this setting are a minority group, representing less than 4.5% of full-time further education learners in Wales (Welsh Government, 2021). This can lead to a lack of understanding of their unique experiences and sense of identity within this liminal education space.

This investigation therefore seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do the Further Education experiences of working-class women impact their perceptions of identity and belonging?
- To what extent does Further Education support transformation for these learners?
- Can Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' support understanding of identity transformation for working-class women in Further Education?

This research was undertaken in a Welsh Further Education college, from an insider perspective (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010), as I had myself previously returned to education as an adult in a Further Education setting and, at the time of the investigation, worked within the setting investigated. These experiences helped to form the positionality that informed this research, as I experienced a developing ontology and epistemology through my own studies. This resulted in the development of an interpretivist perspective (Grix, 2002), seeking knowledge of the reality in which

individuals exist through understanding the differing experiences of individuals (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Alongside this was the developing understanding of critical theory, and that all experiences are influenced by relative position to others, involving an element of power relations to be explored and challenged (McLaren, 2007). These personal experiences led to both this choice of research topic and the use of Bourdieu's theory (1977) to explore this subject, seeking to understand the social impact of education on the individual, and the multiple and diverse experiences that exist within educational fields.

## Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

A review of literature was undertaken to obtain an understanding of the existing body of research relevant to the initial research question identified, “How does participating in full-time Further Education impact working-class women?”. The review enabled the identification of key themes that were then used to develop the research question and the generation of sub-questions.

Literature searches were undertaken using the Open University library and Google Scholar search engines to identify relevant peer-reviewed journals and books, initially those focused on research in UK Further Education, and later widening this range to include journal articles about Higher Education, as many of the experiences of adult learners are shared between the two settings. The initial searches terms used were ‘inequality’, ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘women’, ‘adult learners’ and ‘Further Education’ and these were then developed based on the journal articles identified, to include more specific terms related to Bourdieu’s theories; ‘capital’, ‘habitus’, ‘field’, and ‘identity’.

The review outlines the relationship between class, gender and inequality in Further Education and examines the use of Bourdieu’s social reproduction framework (1977) to investigate the themes of inequality and identity in education.

### 2.1 Class and gender; inequality and identity

Educational settings present a microcosm of wider society, in which the tensions and power imbalances between different social groups are re-imagined within the restrictions of the classroom. Within this sector, Further Education institutions offer a unique space in which learners represent a diverse range of ages and social experiences, including an equally diverse range of inequality and disadvantage. As a result, the structural inequalities experienced by working-class women within society can be replicated inside these educational institutions (Merrill and Fejes, 2018). Class, gender and power are essential characteristics that influence how working-class women experience the world around them and perceive themselves within their social world. Skeggs (1997) argues that studies which aim to explore the experiences of women cannot successfully divorce these characteristics from the understanding of

these experiences, because of their central role in the creation and interpretation of subjective knowledge for women. However, the difficulty in defining 'class' as an identifying characteristic, and sensitivities around the inclusion of class issues in discussing inequality has led to it being overlooked and excluded from much of the analysis of women's experiences.

In response to this omission, Skeggs (1997) offers the use of feminist theories, alongside Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (1977), to interpret how working-class women's identities are created, transformed and can be understood in the context of these intersectional issues, highlighting the importance of including the interpretations of women in understanding their own experiences. Although over 25 years old, Skeggs's research (1997) provides a unique perspective of the intersectionality of class and gender for working-class women, which was central to the design of this study, and the development of research questions which aim to retain the focus of the research on participants' experiences and include their own interpretation of these experiences. Identifying the limited employment opportunities available to working-class women as a motivator for them entering Further Education, and the constraints of social expectation in their leaning towards 'caring' courses, Skeggs (1997) illustrates the construction and positioning of women's sense of self through their participation in Further Education as an important and acceptable route of their transition towards 'respectability', by leveraging their understanding of the social limitations and expectations of both their gender and class to address their unequal position in society.

Reay (2017) builds upon the pivotal role of class in understanding education experiences, focusing on its dialectic role in simultaneously addressing and perpetuating inequality in education (McLaren, 2007) through its impact on the development of individual identity within the educational field. Highlighting how educational opportunities can be both defined and limited by class identity, in contrast to the dominant view of education as a transformational opportunity for class mobility for working class learners, Reay (2017) identifies the inequality inherent in the UK education system in meeting the needs of working-class learners, as the result of an historically over simplistic understanding of the importance of class in appreciating the aspirations of the working-class. Further Education settings, which traditionally offered

adult working-class educational opportunities, have adapted over time to shift their focus towards providing an alternative to remaining in school for young adults, offering vocational education courses for 16–19-year-old students, with adult full-time students now presenting as a minority group within the setting (Welsh Government, 2021). This marginalisation of adult and working-class students in a setting which was originally devised to meet their specific educational needs adds additional weight to the symbolic violence experienced in the failure of the setting to understand and provide for the specific needs of these learner groups.

Understanding the unique role of the Further Education sector in meeting the needs of working-class learners is key to understanding the setting as a transformational field for working-class women and their identities. Jackson (2003) highlights the symbolic violence in the marginalisation of working-class women within society, as they continue to experience lower average career earnings than men, and are more likely to undertake lower paid roles, whilst also entering the working environment in lower numbers than workers from other socio-economic groups. Compounding this positional disadvantage, working-class women face more barriers to undertaking learning opportunities to rectify this disadvantage, both in the workplace and in accessing educational spaces, and women who do enter formal learning fields can then face further marginalisation in the disconnect between the cultural expectations and codes of these institutions and their personal motivations and experiences (Jackson, 2003).

## 2.2 Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu built upon the Marxist theory of 'economic reproduction' in describing the continuation of social structures and hierarchies through social relations as 'social reproduction'. He developed 'systems of mechanism' (Bourdieu, 1977) within society and social institutions, such as Further Education institutions, ensure the continuation of the established social order, maintaining both dominance and oppression for opposing orthodox and heterodox social groups and within this cultural framework, social inequalities are contextualised through the interactions of 'capital' and 'habitus'.

## 2.2 i) Capital

Capital represents the forms of resources available to participants within a social space, or field, and provides a metaphor for the individual assets of those traversing a particular field. It was classified by Bourdieu (1977) into distinct categories; economic, social, cultural and symbolic, and the development of each of these forms within a given field accumulates power and status for the individual and enables ease of movement within the field.

Students' return to education can be motivated by a lack of earning power, and a desire to increase their economic capital through gaining qualifications and experience that will enable learners to achieve better paid employment and improve their position in society (Jackson, 2003). For working-class learners, this also includes the economic tension that exists when choosing between full-time learning and full-time earning (Jackson, 2003). More granular aspects of economic capital within the field for working-class learners can include limited resources to obtain textbooks, study materials or pay course fees. Capital therefore exists in both conceptual and embodied forms, in both the attitudes manifested towards the choice and use of limited resources by adult learners, and their lack of economic resources. However, for working-class women, the concept of economic capital is further complicated by the primarily female financial issues of childcare and unpaid domestic labour, responsibility for which rests disproportionately upon working-class women (Swain and Hammond, 2011).

Social capital is manifested in the relationships and connections that support and provide opportunities for success within the field, often developed through an orthopraxic adherence to group values within a social group. As a marginal group within Further Education, working-class women are often navigating multiple fields and relationships, both their pre-existing social relationships and those valued and legitimised by the educational institution (Skeggs, 1997). For learners who have been outside formal learning spaces, and represent a marginal group within the institution, developing connections with other learners can be further complicated by the age differential that places adult learners outside the main social group in the setting (Busher *et al.*, 2014). The power dynamics of relationships between learners and lecturers, maintaining the boundaries of accepted and expected behaviour within the

setting, are additionally complicated for adult learners by the absence of an age differential between these two groups (Busher *et al.*, 2014).

Cultural capital represents the participant's understanding and assimilation of the legitimised culture within a particular social group (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014) and is closely connected and intertwined with economic capital (Reay, 2004a), playing a significant role in the perpetuation of established dominant social groups and preventing those from marginalised groups from navigating the field in a successful and constructive manner. Class plays a significant role in the development of cultural capital, through a lack of historical understanding of the dominant attitudes and accepted behaviours within a group and field. Working-class women entering the Further Education field face further disadvantage through the additional labour required to balance the management and maintenance of cultural capital from their existing social fields with the acquisition and understanding of capital in an unfamiliar field.

Cultural capital further increases in complexity with the consideration of gender (Bourdieu, 2001), as it includes not just the wider cultural values and those within a specific field, such as a Further Education setting, but specific gendered values in respect of the limitations and expectations of women within society (Cincinnati *et al.*, 2016). These gender specific values define the acceptable actions of women, such as prioritising childcare or domestic work over other activities. Within Further Education, this can be seen in perceived links between gender and course choice, such as views about the appropriateness of engineering versus caring courses for women (Colley *et al.*, 2003) or the gendered recognition of certain academic disciplines (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Finally, symbolic capital represents the form that other types of capital assume when they achieve legitimacy and recognition, existing in both the conceptual and embodied states, through which symbolic power creates and maintains established hierarchies. The process of legitimation for all forms of capital acquired within the field is essential in working-class women successfully traversing the Further Education setting to achieve their wider goals outside education, in which their resources acquired, such as qualifications and skills, are recognised and accepted and enable them to achieve

mobility through the social strata (Skeggs, 1997). Without the legitimising force of symbolic capital, the weight of capital acquired is devalued and cannot be converted into power or successful social progression.

The structure of the specific social field is given shape through the distribution of these various forms of capital within it, and acquisition of each of these forms of capital, either in conceptual or embodied forms, imbues the holder with power within the field. Whilst class and gender do not align directly with any single form of capital, they influence and construct the social positions and movements of participants within any field, forming power relations which prevent the formation of a level playing field within the space for those experiencing inequalities of power as a result of class and gender, and influence the formation of habitus for those within the field (Reay, 2004b).

## 2.2 ii) Habitus

Habitus is the structure of dispositions, borne from previous experience and conditions, and, unlike the metaphor of capital, is embodied in the generation of behaviours and actions, not merely attitudes, and was used by Bourdieu (1977) as a tool to identify the impact of social structures on the individual. It impacts both individual and collective behaviours and aspects of identity, such as gender and social class, and is specific to a field, within which particular dispositions will be legitimised (Reay, 2004). Habitus demonstrates the connection between the individual in the social world, and the impact of the social construct upon the individual (Reay, 2004), as individuals are simultaneously constrained and legitimised by the accepted habitus of the field at any given time. It derives from the combination of practices, behaviours and attitudes within a social setting and is influenced by the prevailing field of context, such as class or gender, which impacts individual responses to social events (Waquant, 2016). As a result, habitus is initially constructed early in life, through interaction with the primary social setting of the home and family.

Edgerton and Roberts (2014) use Bourdieu's theory (1977) to examine inequality in education, offering the concepts of habitus, capital and field as a lens through which the identity and sense of belonging of participants within the educational institutions can be examined. They offer a response to the criticism of habitus as an 'overly

deterministic' concept (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014 p. 199), leaving little room for individual determinism and development, highlighting that habitus is not static but adapts and develops as individuals enter and traverse new fields. As habitus is reactive, it continually modifies in response to changing relationships and environments. As a result of this reflexive development, working-class women re-entering education with the ambition to develop their skills and qualifications can experience conflict between their established habitus and an emerging habitus, as their outlook and values are reassessed and develop in response to their experiences.

This tension is illustrated in the disparity of social capital experienced when entering an unfamiliar field, such as Further Education, where participants have to develop social capital within the new field, after coming to understand the practices, attitudes and behaviours in this new setting. Until students understand the prevailing habitus in the field, their ability to traverse and succeed in the setting will be limited (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014).

These changes in habitus can lead to conflict within relationships and lack of a sense of belonging, as students reassess their identities to include their new knowledge and perspectives and can struggle to balance this changing identity with their origins and background (Ingram, 2011). This 'cultural sabir', or split habitus (Waquant, 2016 p.66) occurs as learners straddle the gap between their established and emerging habitus, creating discordance and lack of settled belonging in either of the two areas.

Bourdieu's framework is used by James, Busher and Suttill (2015) in their exploration of the changing identities of learners on Access to Higher Education courses, in which they identify how a developed sense of changing identity not only challenged, but also supported students in achieving their educational aspirations, as they recognised their individual habitus journeys. This highlights the reactive nature of habitus, how it is continually reworked and remade as students try to understand their changing position in relation to their pre-existing social relations and developing ambitions whilst progressing through an academic pathway.

For students in Further Education undertaking vocational or specialist courses, their anticipated pathway into a workplace offers the opportunity for development of a

vocational habitus (Colley *et al.*, 2003), in which they develop an understanding of the dispositions required and legitimised within the vocational field. This habitus development, or 'identity work' (Colley *et al.*, 2003), characterises the field of Further Education as a liminal space for learners to effect their individual transitions from learner to worker, through understanding, navigation and acquisition of the symbolic capital within the Further Education and specific vocational field.

## 2.3 Research Questions

As a result of this literature review, the primary research question was refined to focus on the impact of study in the Further Education setting on the identities of working-class women:

“How do the Further Education experiences of working-class women impact their perceptions of identity and belonging?”

Two further questions were then developed to further focus the investigation on the process of identity transformation and the use of habitus to explain this process:

“To what extent does Further Education support transformation for these learners?”

“Can Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ support understanding of identity transformation for working-class women in Further Education?”

## Chapter 3 - Research Design

### 3.1 Background

This small-scale investigation was influenced by Beverley Skeggs' feminist ethnographic work exploring the impact of power, gender, and class on the experiences and identities of women (Skeggs, 1997 & 2004). This has shaped the subsequent design of the investigation. Although the constraints of this small-scale investigation prevented the undertaking of the detailed, long-term observation necessary for a similar ethnographic study, the position of Reeves (2007) was followed in its design, focusing on the collection of rich, contextualised qualitative data. This led to a narrative inquiry format, using individual narrative interviews and a focus group to investigate the lived experiences of working-class women in Further Education.

This approach was chosen to achieve a 'thick description' of the experiences of the participants (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2020), by seeking meaning in the narratives shared and to increase transferability of the findings outside the specific participant sample (Freeman, 2014). This use of narrative approach was also designed to enable the diverse stories of the marginalised to be heard in their own voices and to invite them to participate as co-constructors in the meaning and interpretation of their narratives (De Fina, 2009).

### 3.2 Positionality

The focus on hearing and understanding individual perspectives through personal narrative connects the research design with the underlying research position, that through exploring how participants view the world and give meaning to their decisions and actions, a deeper understanding of their lived reality can be constructed. This research position and design were influenced by an interpretivist paradigm (Grix, 2002), in which 'knowledge' is created through the development of subjective understanding of individual experiences (Scotland, 2012). This perspective, in which experiences and identity are created, shaped, and interpreted through the constructed society in which people exist, links to the research questions for this study, which are

focused on developing a detailed and contextualised understanding of the experiences of this distinct social group.

By undertaking exploratory research into the educational experiences of working-class women, this investigation aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how this discrete group's attitudes and identities make sense of their world and experiences. Focusing the research on the participants' sense of identity, rather than external factors, such as barriers to their success, followed this interpretivist paradigm (Thanh and Thanh, 2015), by maintaining a focus on the participant's perceptions and interpretations, rather than following pre-determined expectations of the stories and experiences that participants 'should' be telling. This positionality was also influenced by an appreciation of critical theory perspective, in which all first-person experiences within constructed society are impacted by the power relations experienced within and without the setting, as all these experiences position individuals as relative to others within their social world (McLaren, 2007).

### 3.3 Narrative Interview

As a result of this positionality, the use of narrative inquiry was chosen to provide a window into the lived experiences of participants, through hearing the stories that participants choose to share to explain their values, identities, and behaviours. These storied accounts enable researchers to reflect on the connections between these personal experiences and the societal and interpersonal contexts in which they occur, to achieve a greater understanding of the impact of the social upon the individual (Soler, 2012), which corresponds with the first research question of this investigation, "How do the Further Education experiences of working-class women impact their perceptions of identity and belonging?". This narrative method is particularly well aligned to exploring those issues adjacent to critical pedagogy, where a deeper understanding of the diversity of lived experiences can offer pathways to developing transformative practices in the classroom, to work towards praxis within the specific educational environment (Hooks, 2014).

Narrative interview was chosen as the primary data collection method to give the participants the freedom to explore the subject in a free-form format, without the imposition of any external narrative, by enabling them to explore the areas and stories

of most personal significance to them. This ensured that the research remained focused on the participant's interpretations of their experiences, providing a richer, deeper understanding of their perspectives, rather than constructing a forced perspective and focus by conducting the interviews in a structured or semi-structured format (Mooney and Duffy, 2014). In addition, as Sfard and Prusak (2005) highlighted, hearing the stories that participants choose to tell about themselves offers an insight into their sense of identity, connecting this choice of method to the research question and empowering participants to find personal meaning within the stories they tell.

Narrative interviews enable the investigation of research questions that would otherwise be left unanswered by quantitative methods, such as understanding the development of identity and the impact of personal experiences (De Fina, 2009). This method is well suited to exploring the social complexities of educational settings, where it is vital to hear learners' voices within the specific setting, to identify and understand the impact of that particular setting on learners (Baumann, Bisplinghoff and Allen 2005). Narrative interviews offer an opportunity to hear first-hand rich, dynamic stories that lead to a better understanding of the complex lives in which participants are shaped and simultaneously shape their contexts and settings (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Despite this decision to use narrative interview, I was concerned about the practicalities of achieving sufficient data for the specific research questions and, as a result of these fears, created a semi-structured interview draft research instrument, with detailed and targeted questions related to the research questions (Appendix 1). The questions and prompts were designed to narrow the focus of the narratives, and to help participants who may be struggling with narrative telling, however, this research instrument fundamentally changed the nature of the interviews from narrative to a semi-structured format (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2004), with a series of questions to ask each participant that could then be responded to reflexively in each interview.

However, when undertaking the pilot interview, although I had the initial research tool to hand, I did not use it. The first question, "Tell me about the course you are studying" gave the participant sufficient prompting to share a detailed narrative that encompassed her journey towards their current studies and her experiences whilst

studying. As a result, the research tool was subsequently redesigned (Appendix 2) to reflect the original narrative approach for the interviews.

The narrative interviews were then followed by an invitation for participants to attend a focus group, designed to explore participants' experiences with, and recommendations for changes to, the support offered to this group of learners within the setting. Exploring this second aspect of the research questions through a focus group was designed to offer the opportunity for participants to develop ideas collectively, relieving individual participants of pressure to generate ideas for change in their narrative interviews, and managing any concerns participants may have had about voicing potentially critical responses about the support offered to an insider researcher from the institution (Mercer, 2007). In line with the approach of this investigation, focus groups are participatory and collaborative, through which participants become co-constructors of data and meaning within a social group (Kook, Harel-Shalev and Yuval, 2019), even if the group is created solely for research purposes (Dodson, Piatelli, and Schmalzbauer, 2007).

Building on the perspective of Acocella (2012), the focus group was designed to provide validity to the interview data, enabling participants to discuss shared perspectives and provide an alternative perspective to the research questions, such as insights into collective social experiences (Wilkinson, 1998). Data gathered from a group setting is qualitatively different than data collected from individual interviews, as the group dynamics impact the stories shared, and how they are constructed and told is adapted to the group setting, adding to the richness of the overall data collected for investigation (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005).

However, participants were not responsive to the focus group invitations and ultimately, the planned focus group did not take place. Participants were not asked their reasons for not attending the focus group, although the personal and sensitive nature of the narratives shared by participants in their interviews may have made them less comfortable about discussing the topic with a group of peers (Morgan, 2010). Additionally, due to delays in the investigation timetable, the timing of the focus group fell at the end of the course, which may also have made participants more reluctant to participate close to their final assessments (Hollander, 2004). As an opportunity to discuss potential changes to the current support offered, there may also have been

power balance issues at play, creating a reluctance to raise potentially critical views with a researcher from inside the institution (O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020).

### 3.4 Participants

Potential participants were identified from a single curriculum area in a Further Education college in Wales, based on age and gender details provided at enrolment. From this data, potential participants over 21 years old were invited from across different departments and courses within the curriculum area, in order to give greater confidence to the findings. The age requirement was used to identify potential participants who would have had a break from studying since completing their compulsory education.

For the purposes of defining the key participant criteria of “working-class” and “women”, potential participants were asked prior to participation to confirm if they self-identified with these two criteria, with no definition of either being given in the study information. With the time constraints of this small-scale investigation, and the time-intensive nature of narrative interviews, the participant sample size was initially limited to 3 participants, to have sufficient time to interview each participant and to listen to and carefully consider their narrative contributions. As a small-scale investigation, the small sample reflected the ‘information power’ balance of this study (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). With a narrow aim, dense specifics under investigation, and the use of intensive narrative inquiry for data collection, a small sample can offer sufficient data for reliable findings. However, the sample was later reassessed and adjusted upwards to 5, to reflect the quality of data gathered from the initial participant sample and to include additional participants who wanted to contribute to the study.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the raw data was used to connect the data gathered from all the participants to the initial research questions, seeking to identify common patterns found within the multiple narratives, to make sense of the data gathered and to represent the wider and overlapping experiences of the participant group. These patterns represented central elements in the data that related to the research questions and having identified Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus as a relevant

lens, I anticipated that I would be looking for patterns and themes that reflected issues relating to changing patterns of behaviour and outlook, acquisition and symbolism of capital encountered in and outside the setting. However, it was important to remain reflexive to the themes appearing in the analysis process, including those not anticipated at the outset of the research, to avoid overlooking unexpected insights into the research questions. The thematic analysis method was chosen due to its reflexive nature, which emphasises the subjectivity of the researcher engaging with the data, themes, and guiding theories in the research (Braun and Clarke, 2021) and enables the flexibility to develop those themes that arise outside the anticipated guiding theory of Bourdieu (1977).

As part of this process, I followed the six stages of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). To familiarise myself with the data collected, I re-listened to each of the recordings before transcription, to identify initial areas of interest where participants discussed topics relevant to my research questions. These initial findings informed the codes assigned to common patterns that arose in the data, and after the data was transcribed, I began to search for relationships and code combinations that created overarching themes from within the data. I had planned to use Quirkos software to code the data, however quickly found that this approach disconnected the data from the participants' narratives and meanings, and therefore returned to a less technological approach, repeatedly re-listening to the narrative recordings to note the arising themes. This use of 'in vivo coding' (Saldaña, 2014) enabled the participants' voices to identify the significant themes in the collection of narratives.

The coded data identified for each potential theme was then reviewed, to identify coherent themes existing within them. These validated themes were then reviewed against the complete data set, to ensure that they offered a comprehensive and cohesive representation of the overall data collected. Finally, the identified and defined themes were used to consider the research questions and the findings are addressed in the following chapter. In this, and the preceding stages, the importance of reflexivity as highlighted by Cohen *et al.* (2011) remained, in that the previous analytical stages had produced analysis in the forms of key themes, which had themselves now become data, and therefore my positionality will have influenced how I interpreted this data.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

As a lecturer interviewing learners within my own setting, consideration had to be given to the impact of the existing power relations in the setting, highlighted by Wang and Yan (2012), which may have impacted the narratives that learners chose to share, and how they told them. As a result, it was vital to revisit the issue of consent throughout the research process, not just obtaining initial consent from participants (Appendix 4) and gatekeepers within the institution (BERA, 2018, item 8), but reconfirming continuing consent with participants later in the process to obtain approval of transcript drafts, comments on the initial themes identified, and to share the analysis of their narratives (Klykken, 2021).

Participant privacy and confidentiality was vital to maintaining participant confidence in the study throughout the study, with all data from participants being anonymised at the point of transcription (BERA, 2018, item 40), and participants given the option of selecting their own pseudonyms, to offer them further power and voice within the study process (Allen and Wiles, 2016). The data was also reviewed to remove references to courses, subject areas or future career plans that when aggregated could lead to the identification of participants (BERA, 2018, item 40).

In considering this research design, and the context of the participants, it was vital to avoid the issue of extractive research, ensuring not just that participants derived no harm from the research (BERA, 2018, item 34) but were also able to obtain a personal benefit as a result of their participation, through offering opportunities for empowerment and self-reflection (Finney, 2014). The inclusion of a focus group was intended to offer one such opportunity, to give participants the chance to make connections with other learners in similar circumstances. Offering participants the opportunity to review both the transcripts from their interview and the interpretations of this material, as suggested by Fugard *et al.* (2020), was designed to empower participants to make meaning of their own experiences and take a collaborative role in interpreting their experiences, rather than being regarded as passive data providers in the process.

## Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

Data was collected from five participants who were enrolled at a Further Education college in Wales, between April and June 2022. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 57, who had all self-identified as working-class women. All participants were white, and two were from countries outside of the UK.

All participants were mothers, with children who ranged in age from 12 months to adults. Three of the participants were single parents, however, all participants expressed some level of support for their studies from their families.

One participant was anomalous from the group in her data throughout much of her narrative. Although she self-identified as working-class, she had entered her current Further Education course with a recently completed bachelor's degree related to their current area of study. Although one other participant had previously completed a degree, this was in a subject unrelated to their current study and had been completed over 20 years previously in another country.

From the narrative data analysed, three central themes arose, which are examined below: Identity, Belonging, and Support.

### 4.1 The impact of Further Education on Identity

**“I have to do it. I have to be more. I can do it!”** (Tanya)

Two distinct thematic strands arose from the narratives around ‘identity’, participant identities as mothers, and their developing identities as learners.

It is also important to note themes around identity that were absent in the narratives. In contrast to the findings of James, Busher, and Suttill (2015), where Access to Higher Education students in Further Education settings struggled with their changing identities, the narratives indicated that these participants did not experience identity or habitus struggles in their Further Education studies, but instead viewed their studies as a positive experience, which reinforced their existing identities and helped them to

achieve positive transformations. Without exception, the narratives presented were overwhelmingly positive, even when discussing challenges they had faced.

There could be multiple reasons for this positive framing of their experiences, including the power dynamics of the existing relationships between the researcher and participants and the narratives that participants chose to tell as a result of these relations (Wang and Yan, 2012). However, unlike Higher Education courses, which can require working-class students to establish a new habitus to succeed, Further Education may lack demand for habitus transformation, as working-class students are already 'adjusted to the immanent demands of the game' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 333) in a setting that was originally devised for working-class learners and therefore offers little challenge to existing class loyalties.

#### 4.1 i) Motherhood and Motivation

Without exception, all participants identified the role that their identity as a woman and as a mother had played in their experiences in Further Education and their overall educational journeys, often from early in their lives. Jude perceived that her gender had impacted the educational expectations her family held for her when she left school with few formal qualifications:

"You're a girl anyway, you're gonna get married, you're gonna have children, you don't need a career."

Jude

This interplay between academic goals and domestic responsibilities provides an illustration of cultural and symbolic capital within working-class communities for some participants, in which education was a respectable pursuit, but not a substitute for the legitimacy of domesticity and motherhood (Reay, 2017).

Furthermore, these gendered expectations provided a constraining framework for how the women identified their suitability for further study, with these expectations also impacting their later career choices:

“Then, of course, I had the children. So, I gave up my career. And I stayed at home to look after them.”

Jude

As mothers, the practical demands on their time added to these perceived gender limitations, with several participants attributing their delay in achieving their academic goals to the time demands of being a mother and carer:

“Because I have always been so busy always doing things for everyone that I didn’t realise time is marching so fast, that I almost missed my time for being more so.”

Tanya

In contrast, Amy illustrated how returning to Further Education offered both a practical and socially legitimate opportunity to be temporarily absent from the demands of motherhood:

“When I started level one, it was just to get away from my kids.”

Amy

Being mothers and fulfilling these demanding caring roles connected the participants to the historical positioning of women as civilizing influences within the family and wider society, with caring roles offering positions of respectability for working-class women (Skeggs, 2004). These responsibilities can make it difficult for women to find the time to continue or return to education, as women often carry the greater burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities, generating hidden economic costs to participating in learning activities (Jackson, 2003). As a result, working-class women who re-enter education may face difficult decisions or delay opportunities to realise their educational goals.

However, many participants also expressed that despite the constraining mantle of motherhood, their identity as a mother also formed a key aspect of their learner identity, with several participants citing their motivation for returning to education being the example they would set for their children:

“I want to start a career, you know, I want to make a life for them.”

Amy

Tanya illustrated how the participants saw their student identity through an expansive perspective, incorporating not only how they saw themselves, but how their learning would both impact their children and how their children viewed them:

“That’s why I’ve come back into education, so I would like to be successful for my children...I feel being a mum makes me very motivated.”

Tanya

This awareness offers a clear example of the lack of identity struggles experienced in the creation of these new identities, as participants and their families viewed this new aspect of their identity as positive identity development rather than a challenge to their existing identity and habitus. It also indicates an awareness by participants of the cultural and social capital of education, and the resulting symbolic capital of the qualifications they were working towards, offering a legitimacy that would lead to not just a job, but respectability (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

#### 4.1 ii) Education as identity transformation

Participants also viewed their return to education as an opportunity to achieve their own transformation desires. Although participants did not discuss anticipated themes of habitus struggle, there was a clear theme of identity change and transformation within the data, illustrated by Jude, who delayed her studies due to domestic responsibilities:

“So, I’ve come into education [at a] later stage, because my children are grown up, and I’m thinking, well, this is for me.”

Jude

Alongside the gendered constraints that participants identified, the perceived limitations of being working-class had also shaped their previous student experiences, as illustrated by Seren:

“I also feel like I missed out on education. Really. I mean, even when I was younger, like, you know, when you say what you want to be when you're older, they are going to be like, ‘Oh, well, you can't do that, because you're not going to university, because you can't afford it’.”

Seren

This intersectionality of gender and class may have contributed to participants not previously achieving their educational goals, leading to them viewing their learner identity negatively. However, these narratives addressed their development of new skills, which they attributed to their studies, highlighting the impact that studying had on their perceptions of their changing identities, as Amy described:

“I've definitely become more confident. I think it has made me better as a person”

Amy

Participants were able to evidence awareness of their changing identities, identifying these as positive developments, demonstrated in the frequent references to the enjoyment they experienced as a result of studying, such as Ella's enjoyment of returning to studying:

“It is amazing studying here. Is amazing. Absolutely amazing. I love to be back to education.”

Ella

For several participants, their enjoyment of studying and their developing identities were evident in their plans for the future, as Seren explained:

“In an ideal world, I'd love to stay to do level two and level three, level four, and then go from there.”

Seren

In addition to their development of skills, participants exhibited the beginnings of a reflexive approach to their self-improvement, indicating a self-awareness and development of their identities and habitus (Fenge, 2011). Several participants credited their studies with helping them to develop not only the vocational skills that they had returned to education in pursuit of but also the development of emotional skills that they valued for their personal development, as illustrated by Seren:

“I used to strive for that, to have a ‘well done, we're proud of you!’ type of thing. But now it's so good, now, just to be proud of myself.”

Seren

In contrast with the difficulties of split habitus as identified by Waquant (2016) and Ingram (2011), these changing identities were perceived as entirely positive by participants, with no evidence of friction with existing behaviours. Whilst these developing behaviours and identities may not provide evidence of a transformed habitus, they indicate that the Further Education environment offers opportunities for the development of positive personal skills that impact how this group of working-class women viewed themselves and their changing identities and supports the nature of habitus as reactive, continually reworking in response to the changing environment and stimulus (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014).

It also supports the findings of Swain and Hammond (2011) of the positive impact of study on adult learners in terms of self-fulfillment and personal growth, with successful learner experiences being closely tied to the development of a positive sense of learner and individual identity, as Ella illustrated when explaining her developing sense of confidence:

“I didn't have that in my mentality when I started studying, but now I know, I just can, yeah, I can fail and I can do it again and I will pass.”

Ella

Through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, the identity development experienced by these participants may indicate the development of an additional professional habitus that embodies the attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to succeed within their chosen career field. This concept of 'vocational habitus' (Colley *et al.*, 2003) acknowledges the interwoven aspects of identity, becoming, and belonging, as learning forms an active process of individual change within the constraints of a particular career pathway.

## 4.2 The impact of Further Education on belonging

**"They are going places, these people, and I just, I love them all and I feel I'm part of it!"** (Ella)

The theme of 'belonging' arose consistently throughout the participant narratives, but through two distinct strands, belonging within the college setting and belonging to wider society. As with identity, the narratives around belonging were overwhelmingly positive, even when discussing challenges, indicating that participants did not experience transformation struggles that impacted their sense of belonging as a result of studying.

### 4.2 i) Belonging within education

Many participants discussed their sense of belonging within the setting, with several participants recounting how important their sense of belonging was to their experiences of returning to education, as Ella recounted:

"I might look happy and what-not. I'm strong. I am very, very sensitive. And if I was bullied or I was not accepted, I would be very upset. And of course, then I wouldn't be able to learn as well as I do."

Ella

Developing a sense of belonging and legitimacy within the educational space illustrates the importance of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990), as students

come to understand those behaviours, attitudes, and actions that are valued within the field, both those legitimised by the institution and those legitimised by the social hegemony of other learners within the field. As fields are shaped by the social relations of those within them, developing a sense of belonging within a social setting can indicate the influence of the field upon the individual, and the success of the individual within the field (James, Busher and Suttill, 2015).

However, many participant narratives told of difficulties they had experienced in developing a sense of belonging with their peer groups, with the age disparity being the primary marginalising factor, as Amy and Jude explained:

“I think it is really hard being older, to be on the same wavelength as all the younger students. I know that like they always talk about oh, when they go home, they're gonna be playing their PlayStation or whatever. And I'm like, 'Oh, I gotta go get the kids, I gotta put them to bed'.”

Amy

“You know, like on this course, I suppose you've got the youngsters, and then you've got the older people. Yeah. And there is that kind of divide between them. I don't know what it is.”

Jude

As a minority age group within the Further Education classroom, most participants displayed a pragmatic approach about how successfully they would be able to integrate with other students, displaying their awareness of the workings of social capital within a field populated by younger learners, as Amy explained:

“I do think that nothing could be changed at all with regards to the way the youngsters are, or anything, you know, you do the maximum you can. But it's got to be, you've got to have a good relationship, otherwise it's gonna be a horrible year.”

Amy

Other participants expressed the sense of loneliness this lack of belonging could create:

“I don't think anyone understands each other with their challenges at all. Everyone goes through their own things, don't they? And then you can say to someone, “I'm going through this but you don't really understand it.”... but I don't think it could be more understood either, because you're never going to understand someone's problems or because it's all in their own head. Even if they put it down on paper. You're never going to feel what they're feeling, yeah? So, I don't think I'll ever have anyone who will ever understand the challenges.”

Amy

Despite these challenges, all the women spoke positively about the overall sense of belonging that they experienced within the college, even those who struggled to feel a sense of belonging with their peers:

“I still feel like I'm in college, you know? I'm not outcasted or apart from them, like, you're not old. It's never like that in college, I'm still treated the same.”

Amy

Participants attributed this encompassing sense of belonging within the institution to two key elements, their relationships with other adult learners and their relationships with staff. For those participants who were able to identify peers from similar backgrounds in their classes, they created informal communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that offered collaborative spaces, often outside of the formal learning spaces. Many of these informal communities took place online, through self-managed WhatsApp groups, where learners offered support and understanding to each other, as Seren explained:

“I think the group that we had, because we were with the girls, I did like to vent some of my frustrations on them, with them. And they

were quite understanding. If we're stuck on anything, then we will try and help each other out."

Seren

These emergent groups offered a sense of community and belonging for participants within the wider institution, and opportunities for informal learning, with clear values of support and collaboration,

"We don't, like, make fun of each other. We don't, you know. We don't dismiss things, like don't call anyone a geek or anything."

Ella

Some participants developed this support further, expanding their informal communities outside the college, by joining online chat rooms and support groups relevant to their studies, to seek out help and support from students in similar circumstances and develop a sense of belonging with an even wider student body.

Participants also cited the importance of their relationships with tutors, and the sense of belonging these supportive relationships offered, again referring to age as a factor in developing these relationships versus those with other students,

"I think it's more challenging to communicate with the younger lot than it is with your tutors because you're more at the maturity level."

Amy

Although relationships with staff were a feature of the intentional communities of learning within the college setting, the quality of those relationships was cited as one of the most significant features of participants' learning experiences, as Tanya explained how open communication and modelling of positive behaviours by lecturers had helped her to develop new perspectives to challenging situations:

"You tell us about yourself, by letting us in your life."

Tanya

Learning communities, whether formal or informal, both shape the behaviours of the participants within them and are also shaped by the dispositions of those acting within them. The dispositions of staff and students within the learning communities in the college impact the movement and value of all forms of capital within the field, therefore staff dispositions will impact the developing habitus, identity, and sense of belonging of students within the field (James, Busher and Suttill, 2015).

Participants acknowledged the importance of these relationships to their habitus development, as illustrated by Tanya:

“You're connecting us not only with studies but actually how to act in real life.”

Tanya

For adult students entering Further Education, these positive relationships can enable them to develop positive learner identities and a sense of belonging within the field, despite the challenges in developing a sense of belonging with their peers (Busher, James and Piela, 2015).

#### 4.2 ii) Belonging to wider society

The narratives also addressed the connection between Further Education and developing a sense of belonging to wider society, by providing a sense of legitimacy through future qualifications. Amy and Ella explained how this desire for legitimacy within their future career choices motivated them to return to education:

“But after I had the kids then I thought “I need to do something; I need to get my qualifications up” because I knew what job I wanted to do.”

Amy

“I kind of felt like “I have to prove myself”. I mean, I didn't have the certificate and I just wanted to have it, so that's why I came for this one year, to do this certificate.”

Ella

For other participants, their developing sense of belonging referred to the acquisition of social and cultural capital, which would legitimise them within their wider society, as Tanya explained:

“You know how to deal with situations, you know about rules and laws and things because you've been prepared. The college gives you the base, the foundation that I always truly wanted.”

Tanya

Tanya also viewed her belonging to a wider social group as connected to her role as a mother, and the benefits of belonging and being legitimised as applying not just within society but within her family relationships, illustrating her desire to impact the developing habitus of her children within the family setting,

“It's a big worry for me that I won't be able to be clever enough to be knowledgeable. I want to be respected by my children, and I want to do everything possible for them to know about my experiences in a better level, by seeing that I am actually learning something. I want to be knowledgeable about different things because as I said before, I've never been properly qualified.”

Tanya

For some participants, like Ella, their experiences in Further Education also offered a developing sense of belonging to a wider social group in their local and national communities,

“That's a very, very good thing that just made me feel that I am part of something and made me appreciate this country even more.”

Ella

Both identity and belonging are closely linked with the concepts of habitus, field, and capital, with the development of a sense of belonging often indicating a successful transition within a specific social field (James, 2015). For these women, their experiences in Further Education have led to a sense of belonging within the setting,

primarily with other adults they encountered, and also with a wider social perspective. This supports the view of learning as a social process of 'becoming' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which the individual is impacted by their interactions with others.

### 4.3 Further Education as support for transformation

#### **“The support is a big thing” (Amy)**

All participants identified in their narratives how the support they had received from both inside and outside the Further Education setting had enabled them to access and be successful in their studies and supported their identity transformations.

#### 4.3 i) Institutional Support

The examples of support provided by the Further Education institution fell into two clear categories, formal and informal. The primary informal support mechanism that participants identified was their positive relationships with teaching staff. All participants spoke of their ability to approach their lecturers and tutors with personal issues, in addition to academic difficulties, as described by Amy:

“The tutors, they're friendly, you know, so you don't feel like you can't go to them. Like I don't need to go to Well-being, because I know that I could just speak to my tutors.”

Amy

For many participants, their tutors were the only form of support they had accessed from the college, despite awareness of more formal services, such as support counsellors:

“You always give us time, like you or other teachers, or all the services. I never use them, but I know they are there.”

Ella

This primary relationship between lecturer and learner is central to supporting effective learning and the creation of positive learner experiences. Participant narratives supported the findings of Bishop *et al.* (2009), who identified the importance of

developing strong and positive relationships between staff and students in improving outcomes for marginalised learners of compulsory education age.

For other participants, the formal support mechanisms provided by the college were key to their ability to succeed in their studies. For example, Seren credited the college for practical support that enabled her to access on-site childcare for young children:

“To be fair, the college pays for the childcare in the creche, which is just fantastic. And to be honest, I'm not financially worse off not working than when I was working.”

Seren

Almost all participants spoke of the financial support that the setting offered, indicating the effectiveness of communication about these supports within the institution, as illustrated by Amy:

“There's travel money you can access if you get a bus or a train, and there's the Welsh Government Learning Grant if you're older. If you're a single parent or living on your own, you can get a bit more money too.”

Amy

This example highlights how targeted financial support can effectively reduce or remove the tension around the choice between earning and learning for working-class women, minimising the impact of economic capital for such students.

Amy also identified how effective timetabling, such as protected independent study times, enabled her to balance her workload and family responsibilities:

“Rather than get lessons on the Friday afternoon, we've got self-assessed work, so we can get to go home. I think that helps in college life, because I can still keep my son in nursery and I get to catch up on any work.”

Amy

However, participants did highlight how some support features were less applicable to adult learners. General skills focused sessions, as Jude recounted, often failed to meet the needs of working-class women, through a focus on skills that were more appropriate to younger learners:

“I think, for younger people, it would be more beneficial because they've not gone through that. Yeah, for my age group, not so much.”

Jude

Notwithstanding, participants recognised the overall value and accessibility of the support offered by the institution that enabled them to access their courses and meet their individual goals.

#### 4.3 ii) Social support

In addition to the supportive relationships found within the setting, almost all participants acknowledged the support and encouragement they received from their families. Duckworth and Cochrane (2012) observed that some students are better placed to achieve academically as a result of family support. For example, Tanya's husband encouraged her to start her studies:

“He saw that I am capable of doing it and I had big doubts, but he said, ‘You are losing nothing, but don't worry, as long as you've tried’.”

Tanya

Some participants were keenly aware of the interplay between their identity as working-class women and the impact of economic capital on their family relationships and their ability to study (Jackson, 2003). Jude insightfully explored this tension in her own experiences, after delaying her return to education in order to help financially support her family,

“When women turn around and say about wages, and they don't want to be reliant on the men, and all that, I look at it and I think,

‘Well, you're not, because you are also giving your input, you're looking after the children, you're taking care of the house, you're doing the cooking and baking, and you're just as important doing all that, because if you have to find somebody to pay, you'd be paying a lot more!’ So, I carry no guilt whatsoever in my head about not bringing money in now, because I've done my best and I'm still doing my bit. It's been joint accounts right through. The money goes in, it doesn't matter whether it's my money, it's our money.”

Jude

The continuing familial support for participants' studies, even with these economic tensions at play, may be attributable to the setting offering opportunities for transformation that fit within participants' existing habitus and class expectations and provide little challenge to the status quo (Reay, 2017). This emotional and 'family capital' (Webber, 2017) can enable women to achieve educational and social change by supporting their capacity for study outside the home and impacting their attitude towards their studies. In addition, the strength of these supportive relationships can help students to manage any transitional stress experienced in their new environment (Feeney and Lemay, 2012).

In conclusion, when considering the first research question, “How do the Further Education experiences of working-class women impact their perceptions of identity and belonging?”, the narratives definitively characterised participant experiences as positive opportunities for identity transformation. All participants identified a strong sense of belonging as a result of studying, both within the institution, within the informal communities of practice they created, and with wider society, as they viewed themselves gaining in social legitimacy through their studies.

In response to the second research question, “To what extent does the Further Education setting support transformation for these learners?”, these findings suggest that this setting offers significant support for working-class women, through the availability of practical support and the attitudes of, and relationships with, teaching staff within the institution.

The final research question, “Can Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ support understanding of identity transformation for working-class women in Further Education?” is addressed by the evidence of participants’ awareness of their changing attitudes and behaviours and the clear themes of capital, in both embodied and symbolic forms, that arose from their narratives. The concept of habitus can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the transitions that working-class women seek through Further Education, by highlighting both their personal and vocational continual transformations.

Overall, these findings support the view of Gale and Parker (2012), that educational settings should view identity transition and transformation as a central and continual component of student identity. These findings indicate that for working-class women, Further Education can offer an environment for such transformations as part of an ongoing journey of ‘becoming’, rather than as opportunities for “challenge” or “development”. Embodying this understanding of the role of identity and belonging in the lives of students can position Further Education settings as places of possibility, able to appreciate, value, and support working-class women’s transforming identities.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusions and implications

In concluding this investigation there are two final aspects to consider, how these findings can improve the experiences of working-class women in Further Education, and the further questions that have arisen as a result of this investigation.

### 5.1 Improving experiences

One of the most consistent and significant findings from the participant narratives was the importance of the quality of relationships that the women established with staff. These relationships were key to them feeling valued within the institution and developing a sense of belonging in their educational community. This echoed the conclusions of Busher *et al.* (2014), where Access to Higher Education students felt a strong sense of belonging with staff who modelled positive behaviours. This aspect of belonging may be particularly important for adult students who struggle to connect with other students, due to age differences and disparate priorities.

As participants cited, they primarily chose to access support from lecturers rather than support staff, despite being aware of the additional support resources available. This sense of belonging with lecturers may additionally support working-class women in developing their vocational habitus, preparing them to enter their chosen careers with key skills that they have seen modelled by staff with experience in their specific industry area.

As a result, lecturers may not be aware of the significance of their role in helping adult learners develop their sense of identity and belonging. Sharing these findings with the setting, via their monthly research forum, would highlight for staff the importance of their relationships for such learners. They may need to be encouraged and supported in developing these relationships through additional training. Furthermore, additional time may need to be allocated to course tutors to meet with adult students in order to fully understand their individual circumstances and specific goals and to build deeper relationships with them.

Although lecturers may be encouraged to direct students to support services within the institution, participants indicated that they preferred to seek support from their lecturers, and as such, lecturers may need additional support and training to sufficiently support these students. Alternatively, support services could be embedded within individual academic departments, with regular contact scheduled with students to increase contact between trained support staff and to enable them to better develop meaningful relationships with those students who may feel a limited sense of belonging with the wider college community.

Staff can encourage students to create informal communities of practice with other learners in similar circumstances (Busher *et al.*, 2014), highlighting the platforms available for hosting such online groups. However, they should empower students to create and manage such groups without staff involvement, to enable such groups to develop organically, free from the power relations present within the classroom. There should also be consideration of the potential reluctance of adult learners to seek support and share experiences with other students where these opportunities appear mediated by staff, as illustrated by the failure of the focus group in this study.

In wider terms, the findings of this investigation indicate that working-class women found the level of practical and financial support offered by the Further Education experience to be very supportive, particularly in terms of the financial support for and availability of onsite childcare. There is scope for this level of support to be considered when reviewing the provision and support of childcare for Higher Education, to ensure a similar level of support is available for working-class women accessing Higher Education.

Sharing the findings of this investigation with both Welsh Government and Higher Education institutions through developing this study into a journal article for the Welsh Journal of Education could generate awareness of the positive impact of the support available in Further Education settings and stimulate discussion of disparities between the support offered for Further and Higher Education students.

## 5.2 Further research questions

Whilst this investigation focused on the experiences of working-class women who are currently studying, there is scope to investigate the experiences of those women who withdraw from their Further Education studies, to better understand their challenges and how they could be supported to complete their qualifications.

This investigation could also be expanded to investigate the perspectives of teaching staff, and their experiences in supporting working-class women in the classroom, to explore the support and training that would best equip them to support these students. By reversing the focus to view the lecturer's aspect of these student interactions, a fuller perspective of changes that could be made to support these women could be gained.

Although I have since left the setting where this research was undertaken, in order to take a position with The Open University, I would like to use this study as a foundation to undertake further research in this area, through pursuing either an Ed Doc or PhD. The Higher Education distance learning environment poses different, but related, questions about the developing sense of identity and belonging which students experience as a result of their studies.

## 5.3 Conclusion

This investigation indicates that the identities and sense of belonging of working-class women are remade and reworked through their positive experiences of studying within the Further Education setting. Using 'habitus' as a tool to explore these transforming identities enables a deeper insight into the complex influences and relationships that form their lived experiences. By viewing these transformations as a continual and ongoing process, increased awareness of the pivotal role of Further Education institutions for such adult learners could be developed, and for their unique student experiences to be appreciated as a significant part of their life-long transformation journey.



## Postscript - Narrative Critical Reflection

In approaching this investigation, I was unprepared for a study about journeys of transition to become a transformational experience of my own. Although I had seen reflections of my own adult educational experiences in the situations of the women that I had chosen to research, I had not considered that as a student researcher, I would be embarking upon my own journey of 'becoming' and 'belonging' through this research project (Trahar, 2009). However, as I explored the participants' experiences of change and development, I found these very experiences reflected in my own, often uncomfortable, changes and development.

For example, the decision to use narrative inquiry was challenging, as although it was appropriate for the investigation, it involved giving up control of the direction of the interviews, and control over where the investigation might lead. This desire for control was rooted in fears of my own inadequacies and inabilities as an inexperienced researcher. In the heat of my fumbled pilot interview (Appendix 6, reflection grid point 3), with the unnecessarily detailed and controlling initial research instrument (Appendix 1), I realised that I had committed the mistake of making assumptions about experiences or challenges which participants may have had, and how they would view the impact of their studies. I had then attempted to pre-determine the themes that would arise from their narratives, rather than trusting in the reflexive thematic analysis process to uncover them from unforced narratives.

In contrast to my assumptions, when I revised the research instrument, faced my fears and offered narrative control to the participants, the stories the women then chose to tell were of triumph and transformation, interpreting their own educational experiences not as dialectic experiences of struggle and liberation, but as positive transitional steps in their onward journeys.

This example of 'deficit thinking' (Comber and Kamler, 2004), in which I was guilty of attributing (albeit imagined) struggles and hardship to the participants as a result of their class and gender, highlighted to me the power and danger of deficit discourses in both research and in the classroom. The semi-structured research instrument was

a symptom of my own convenient assumptions, designed to lead participants into neat, restrictive narratives about oppression and marginalisation, rather than offering them a neutral space to explore the telling of their own stories. It was a stark reminder to remain vigilant for the unwelcome development of similar assumptions in my own pedagogy.

This led me to think of my own journey, both as a researcher and a practitioner and how I view these roles in my own sense of 'belonging' and 'becoming'. I recognised that I had been searching for my own form of legitimisation through my studies, seeking validity as a practitioner through this Masters qualification. Instead, whilst journeying through E822 and previous modules, I have found a shifting attitude towards my perception of inclusive practice, education and my own role within it. These developing ambitions, in part as a result of dispositions I have seen modelled by staff and other students, have led to a change in employment and new plans for my future career development, continuing on a journey towards a new vocational habitus of my own, 'becoming' and 'belonging' as a researcher.

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## Appendix 1 – Initial Research Instruments

### Appendix 1a - Guidance for interview with learner participants:

Welcome the interviewee and thank them for making time to attend.

#### Interview preparation checklist

Ask if the interviewee has any questions about the interview and remind them they can review the questions before continuing.	
Remind the interviewee that they can choose to not answer any of the questions posed and that their participation is voluntary.	
Remind them that they can withdraw consent at any time and their responses will not be used and any data relating to them will be destroyed.	
Confirm that they are happy for the interview to be audio recorded	

#### Introductory questions:

- Tell me about the course that you're studying.
- What did you do before you came to college?
- What responsibilities do you have outside of college, such as children or work?

#### Experiences when studying:

- Can you describe what studying has been like for you?

##### Potential prompts:

- How do you balance your college work with your other responsibilities?
- How would you describe your relationship with staff and other students?
- What other relationships do you have that are important to you?
- Do you know anyone else in a similar situation to you here at college?
- What has been positive for you about studying?

- What has been difficult for you about studying?
- To what extent do you feel that staff, other students and your family understand these difficulties?
  
- What support have you had to help you with your studies, both inside and out of college?
  
- What are your plans for when your course has finished?
  
- In what ways do you think you've developed as a result of studying?
  
- How have your experiences studying been different from your expectations?
  
- What advice would you give to someone just like you thinking about coming to college to study?

Offer an opportunity for the interviewee to ask any questions they might have.

Thank the interviewee for their time.

Notes:

## Appendix 1 a - Focus Group Guidance

Welcome the participants and thank them for making time to attend.

### Focus Group preparation checklist

Ask if the participants have any questions about the interview and remind them they can review the questions before continuing.	
Remind the participants that they can choose to not answer any of the questions posed and that their participation is voluntary.	
Remind them that they can withdraw consent at any time and their responses will not be used and any data relating to them will be destroyed.	
Confirm that they are happy for the focus group to be audio recorded	

### Discussion questions:

- In what ways have you been supported when returning to education?
- What other support do you think would be helpful for you to achieve your goals?
- What advice would you give to others about returning to education?
- How well understood do you think your experiences in returning to education are?

Offer an opportunity for participants to ask any questions they might have.

Thank the participants for their time.

## Appendix 2 – Revised Research Instrument

### Guidance for narrative interview with learner participants:

Welcome the interviewee and thank them for making time to attend.

### Interview preparation checklist

Ask if the interviewee has any questions about the interview.	
Remind the interviewee that there are no set questions and that their participation is voluntary.	
Remind them that they can withdraw consent at any time and their responses will not be used and any data relating to them will be destroyed.	
Confirm that they are happy for the interview to be audio recorded	

### Initial Question:

Can you tell me about your experiences studying?

Offer an opportunity for the interviewee to ask any questions they might have.

Thank the interviewee for their time.

Notes:

## Appendix 3 – Participant Information Sheet



### Information letter for adults (aged over 18)

You have been invited to participate in an educational research project, involving attending an interview and focus group meeting.

#### What is the aim of this research?

The aim of the research is to help answer the question "What are the experiences of working class women in full-time Further Education?".

#### Who is conducting the research and who is it for?

This interview is part of my studies on the Open University Masters module E822 'Multi-disciplinary dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth'. I will be analysing the data collected and reporting my findings in the dissertation I submit to the University as my final assessment for my Masters qualification.

#### Why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been chosen as your experiences and opinions would be highly relevant in helping to address the question, which is valuable for our setting and other settings like it.

#### If I take part in this research, what will be involved?

The interview is intended to last around 60 minutes and at a time and place which I will negotiate with you to be mutually convenient. You will also be invited to attend a focus group discussion with other participants, which is intended to last no longer than 60 minutes.

I would like to make an audio recording of our discussion so that I can refer back to what was said more accurately than would be possible just from my notes. Only I will have access to the audio recording. I will transcribe and anonymise the interview before sharing any part of this as part of the final dissertation.

Your contribution will be recognised by a pseudonym and you will be asked if you would like to suggest what name should be used. Any other real names referred to during the interview will be removed and renamed.

If you do not wish to be audio recorded, I will accept your wish, and rely only on my written notes.

#### What will we be talking about?

The focus of the interview will be to find out your experiences of studying full-time in Further Education.

#### Will what I say be kept confidential?

Your participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018).

No personal information will be passed from me to anyone else and your consent forms will be stored safely in our professional setting. The audio recording, and my notes of the interview, will be kept confidential and typed up as soon as possible. The anonymised records of the interview will be stored securely on password protected devices and the original notes and recording will then be destroyed.

However, if you disclose anything during your interview which I consider means that you might be unsafe because this is a safeguarding concern, I will need to pass this immediately to our Designated Safeguarding Officer.

I will be submitting an analysis of the data collected from the interviews as part of my dissertation and also plan to present my findings to relevant audiences. Neither you as an individual, nor the setting, will be identifiable in any of these reports and presentations.

#### What happens now?

After reading this information sheet, please complete the consent form. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any point by letting me know, until the time I am using your data in my University assessments. As soon as you let me know you wish to withdraw, your consent forms and any data collected will be destroyed within 7 days.

#### What if I have other questions?

If you have any other questions about the study, I would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me at ebassett@[redacted] Please let me know if you would like to speak with my tutor to discuss this study.

## Appendix 4 – Participant Consent Form



### E822 INTERVIEW CONSENT AND ASSENT FORM

(to be completed by all participants and, if the participant is a child/young person under age 18, with and by their parent/carer/guardian)

Please indicate YES or NO for each of the questions below and return the completed form by 1 June 2022 to Emma Bassett in [redacted].

Have you read (or had read to you) the information about this interview?	YES	NO
Has someone explained this interview to you?	YES	NO
Do you understand what this interview is about?	YES	NO
Have you asked all the questions you want?	YES	NO
Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand?	YES	NO
Do you understand it is OK to stop taking part at any time?	YES	NO
Are you happy for the interview to be audio recorded?	YES	NO
Are you happy with how your data will be stored?	YES	NO
Do you understand that your and any other real names as well as any identifiable information will be removed from what will be shared after the interview?	YES	NO
Are you happy to take part?	YES	NO

If any answers are 'no' you can ask more questions. But if you don't want to take part, please let me know and don't sign your name.

If you do want to take part, please write your name and today's date

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Return form to Emma Bassett in [redacted]

Thank you for your help.

Emma Bassett

The ethics protocols and documentation to support the E822 Multi-disciplinary Dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth have been developed with advice from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee and have been confirmed by the Chair as fully compliant with The Open University's Ethics Principles for Research with Human Participants. Link: <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/sites/www.open.ac.uk/research/files/files/Documents/Ethics-Principles-for-Research-with-Human-Participants.pdf>

## Appendix 5 – E822 Ethical Appraisal Form

### E822 Ethical Appraisal Form

Masters: Education, Childhood and Youth



NB: it should be noted that The Open University is unable to offer liability insurance to cover any negative consequences students might encounter when undertaking 'in-person' data collection. It is therefore very important that you follow appropriate research protocols which should include seeking Gatekeeper permissions to undertake any data collection within your setting and adhering to ethical principles for the safety of yourself and your participants.

Because ethical appraisal should precede data collection, a completed version of this form should be included with TMA02 for those developing a Small-Scale Investigation (SSI) and as part of the EMA submission for those completing an Extended Literature Review and Research Proposal (EP) form of the Dissertation.

Fill in section 1 of this document with your personal details and brief information about your research.

For section 2, please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of significant risk please tick yes. Even if your list contains all "no" you should still return your completed checklist so your tutor/supervisor can assess the proposed research.

#### Section 1: Project details

a.	Student name	Emma Bassett	
b.	PI		
c.	Project title	Further Educating Rita: Exploring identity and belonging in working class women in full-time further education through Bourdieu's habitus.	
d.	Supervisor/tutor	Anita Pilgrim	
e.	Qualification	Masters in Education	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> x
		Masters in Childhood and Youth	<input type="checkbox"/>
f.	MA pathway (where applicable)	Inclusive Practice	
g.	Intended start date for fieldwork	1 April 2022	

h.	Intended end date for fieldwork	02/05/2022
i.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in  <i>If you are resident in the UK and will be conducting your research abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> for advice on travel.</i>	UK

Section 2: Ethics Assessment		Yes	No
1	Does your proposed research need initial clearance from a 'gatekeeper' (e.g. Local Authority, head teacher, college head, nursery/playgroup manager)?	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Have you checked whether the organisation requires you to undertake a 'police check' or appropriate level of 'disclosure' before carrying out your research? <sup>1</sup>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Have you indicated how informed consent will be obtained from your participants (including children less than 16 years old, school pupils and immediate family members)? Your consent letters/forms must inform participants that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. <sup>2</sup>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Will your proposed research design mean that it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge/consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in nonpublic places)? If so have you specified appropriate debriefing procedures? <sup>3</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
5	Does your proposed design involve repetitive observation of participants, (i.e. more than twice over a period of more than 2-3 weeks)? Is this necessary? If it is, have you made appropriate provision for participants to renew consent or withdraw from the study half-way through? <sup>4</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
6	Are you proposing to collect video and/or audio data? If so have you indicated how you will protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality and how you will store the data?	x	<input type="checkbox"/>

<sup>1</sup> You must agree to comply with any ethical codes of practice or legal requirements that may be in place within the organisation or country (e.g. educational institution, social care setting or other workplace) in which your research will take place. If required an appropriate level of disclosure ('police check') can be obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service (England and Wales), Disclosure Scotland, AccessNI (Northern Ireland), Criminal Records Office (Republic of Ireland), etc.

<sup>2</sup> This should normally involve the use of an information sheet about the research and what participation will involve, and a signed consent form. You must allow sufficient time for potential participants to consider their decision between the giving of the information sheet and the gaining of consent. No research should be conducted without the opt-in informed consent of participants or their caregivers. In the case of children (individuals under 16 years of age) no research should be conducted without a specified means of gaining their informed consent (or, in the case of young children, their assent) and the consent of their parents, caregivers, or guardians. This is particularly important if your project involves participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children under 16 years, people with learning disabilities, or emotional problems, people with difficulty in understanding or communication, people with identified health problems). There is additional guidance on informed consent on the Masters: Education and Childhood and Youth website under Project Resources.

<sup>3</sup> Where an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants, the withholding of information should be specified in the project proposal and explicit procedures stated to obviate any potential harm arising from such withholding. Deception or covert collection of data should only take place where it has been agreed with a named responsible person in the organisation and it is essential to achieve the research results required, where the research objective has strong scientific merit and where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.

<sup>4</sup> Where participants are involved in longer-term data collection, the use of procedures for the renewal of consent at appropriate times should be considered.

7	Does your proposal indicate how you will give your participants the opportunity to access the outcomes of your research (including audio/visual materials) after they have provided data?	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Have you built in time for a pilot study to make sure that any task materials you propose to use are age appropriate and that they are unlikely to cause offence to any of your participants?	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Is your research likely to involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. adult/child relationships, peer relationships, discussions about personal teaching styles, ability levels of individual children and/or adults)? What safeguards have you put in place to protect participants' confidentiality? <b>Use of pseudonyms for participants, deletion of audio recordings, Data Protection Plan</b>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Does your proposed research raise any issues of personal safety for yourself or other persons involved in the project? Do you need to carry out a 'risk analysis' and/or discuss this with teachers, parents and other adults involved in the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
11	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
12	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	x

If you answered 'yes' to questions **12**, you will also have to submit an application to an appropriate National Research Ethics Service ethics committee (<http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>).

## Appendix 6 – Reflection Evidence Grid

Category	Feedback received, targets achieved and areas of development worked on	How did this shape my dissertation?
<p><b>Knowledge and understanding:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to knowledge of current debate and issues in your specific area of focus; drawing out concepts and themes; choosing a focus area for your dissertation; identifying and overcoming ethical issues.</p>	<p>In the Research Design and Ethics tutorial for E822, I was challenged in to “turn around” my focus for my initial dissertation plan and consider the participant perceptions of their educational experiences, rather than practitioner perceptions.</p>	<p>This focus on the experiences of students, rather than teacher perceptions of student experiences led me to consider exploring the perspectives of students rather than practitioners. This subsequently shaped the research questions I developed, retaining a focus on participant experiences and their interpretations of them.</p> <p>This feedback helped me to refocus on the inclusive practice aspect of the dissertation, maintaining focus during the writing up stage, aiming to ensure that I adequately and accurately reflecting the participant narratives in my analysis.</p>
<p><b>Critical analysis and evaluation:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to justifying or challenging your personal perspective; interpreting and critically analysing evidence and methodologies from your own and others’ research; analysing and evaluating themes and issues; sourcing and critically reviewing a wide range of publications; creating an academic argument using synthesis; comparing and connecting practice and theory.</p>	<p>I developed a target to address my lack of understanding about epistemology and ontology, using resources shared in the Tutor Group Forum by other students.</p>	<p>By developing my understanding of ontological and epistemological paradigms, I was able to identify more clearly the underlying positions that led me to choose and develop this topic for research, and to identify how the research questions and methods aligned with this positionality.</p>
<p><b>Links to professional practice:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to: designing and/or applying research methods; developing ideas from previous research and frameworks; reflecting and making adaptations</p>	<p>E822 TMA 02 feedback: “The main issue is that you don’t seem clear about what a narrative interview is. There was quite a small reference list, and I think this included only one reference to a piece of writing about narrative interviews.”</p>	<p>Having chosen narrative interview as the most appropriate data collection method, I subsequently was concerned that I would find it difficult to obtain narrative accounts that were relevant to the research questions. I therefore created a semi-structured initial interview research tool, designed to prompt</p>

<p>during the research and writing process; addressing problems in research design; identifying implications for practice and professional debate; challenging your own assumptions; managing workload and personal motivation.</p>	<p>The lack of clarity around the use of narrative interviews led me to set a target to improve my understanding of the use of narrative inquiry and the analysis of the resulting data. This included attending a webinar hosted by SAGE Publishing with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke investigating common challenges in Thematic Analysis.</p>	<p>participants to focus their narrative on the research topic, making assumptions about the themes I thought would arise.</p> <p>Following reflection on the feedback from TMA 02 about the disconnect between the proposed method and my research tool, and a pilot interview in which the semi-structured interview tool proved unnecessary, I redesigned the research tool to better reflect the narrative approach. This empowered participants to tell their chosen narratives without constraint or artificial direction, resulting in richer and more authentic accounts.</p> <p>By undertaking additional research on the use of narrative interview techniques and thematic analysis, I felt better equipped to undertake effective narrative interviews and the analysis of the resulting data, and to better explain this method and the rationale for selecting it for use.</p>
<p><b>Structure, communication and presentation:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to using academic style and referencing; presenting, managing and sharing information in different modes; communicating concepts, findings and ideas for different audiences.</p>	<p>Feedback from TMA 02: "There are some untidy passages and some sentences are quite long and involved." indicated that I needed to write more succinctly, using shorter and clearer sentences and paragraphs in order to focus the information presented.</p>	<p>I found that pausing during writing, to review what I had written as I went, rather than reviewing at the end of each chapter helped me to organise my thoughts into shorter sentences and paragraphs, offering greater clarity for the reader.</p> <p>Creating a brief draft outline for each chapter, with sub-headings for key points helped me to remain focused and targeted in my writing.</p> <p>Revisiting each section of the dissertation multiple times helped me to view it with a more critical eye, as did leaving time between each rewrite. Although the shorter sentences still feel awkward to me when writing, it continues to become an easier style to adopt in my writing.</p>