

Literacy and transformation: Shedding of spoilt identities

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This paper shares my former literacy learner and friend - Marie's journey - and my own. We explore critical approaches to education and beyond and how they offer a potential space for transformation not just for the learner but for the teacher. The ripple impact has supported us on our journey across nearly two decades. Our relationship was forged by a learner driven, and socially empowering model (Freire, 1993; Barton et al 2003; Duckworth, 2013, 14; Duckworth and Smith 2017, 2018) which takes into consideration the cultural, psychological and educational factors related to the Learners and their lives and driven by creating critical spaces for organic transformative tools for consciousness-raising (Freire 1995) and a caring space where hope can act as a change agent that fuelled our life. In this paper we argue that the aforementioned encourages dialogic communication between teachers and literacy learners whereby learners, teachers and communities can share stories, ask questions, analyse and subsequently work through effective and meaningful strategies to take agency over their lives, enhancing their situation and empowering them in the public and personal domains of their journeys.

Keywords: literacy, transformation, dialogic, stories and agency

Literacy is personal

At a personal level literacy lies in the development of self-identity; in our social, cultural and emotional life, happiness and well-being. Returning to education offers a means to develop their literacy skills. Literacy is very much linked with subjectivity and how one views their self-worth in both the private and public domains of their lives. When considering the vernacular literacies Marie brought into the classroom, they were united in what Shirley Brice Heath (1983) describes as their ‘way with words’ which did not privilege her literacy practices at school or within the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS). This influenced her experience at school, the ‘choices’ she had or did not have and her subsequent journeys as adults.

Literacy and empowerment

There is a strong educational tradition of literacy and empowerment. Paulo Freire’s (1996) seminal text *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, addresses who and what education is for and whose group interests are promoted. Connecting literacy with critical pedagogy, he examines the ideologies of classroom practice and the ‘banking theory’ of knowledge; the banking concept, is essentially an act that hinders the intellectual growth of learners by positioning them as passive “receptors” and “collectors” of information that have no real connection to their lives.

Within this theory, he argues, traditional pedagogical practice is a means to fill the learners with information/knowledge that serves to maintain the status quo of structural inequalities and unjust hierarchies of power. The learners come to accept the dominant hegemony (we employ Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), a leading Marxist thinker, who used the term hegemony to signify the power of one social class over others, for example, the bourgeois hegemony. It embodies not only political and economic control but also the ability of the dominant class to assign its own way of viewing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as ‘natural’. Gramsci’s ideas have influenced popular education practices which we have drawn upon; these include the adult literacy and consciousness-raising methods of Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996) and methods of participatory action research (PAR)) which, rather than empowering working-class students, works to demoralise and label them as unknowing (Freire 1993: 64). In

Freire's challenge to the 'banking' system, he recommended a critical pedagogy model for teaching adult literacy. Educationalist theorists have developed this approach (see Giroux 1997; Lankshear and McClaren 1992; Lankshear 1993; Shor 1992, 1993; Duckworth and Smith 2020). They have challenged prescriptive approaches to curriculum designs that do not consider the history or background and needs of learners. These non-critical curriculums place dominance on an instrumental approach, ignoring the political, social and economic factors that have conspired to marginalise the learners and the communities in which they live. A critical model of moves towards the learner being the co-producer of knowledge. In doing so it shifts away from teacher-directed, top-down, commonly imposed and standardised assessments that prescribe the same for all students, regardless of their ability, values, ethnicity, history, their community requirements or their specific contexts. Instead, it takes an egalitarian approach, whereby there is a sharing of power between the teacher and the student in learning, the curriculum, its contents and methods. Freire (2006) proposed to do this via 'culture circles'. A 'culture group' is a discussion group in which educators and learners use codifications to engage in dialectic engagement for consciousness raising, liberation, empowerment and transformation. Education for liberation provides a forum open to the empowerment of learners, teachers and the community, while also providing opportunities for the development of those skills and competencies without which empowerment would be impossible. Such emancipatory practices encourage autonomy and critical thinking, exposing spaces where learners and communities can ask questions, analyse and subsequently work through effective and meaningful strategies to enhance their situation. Rather than being passive pawns of the system, they have the opportunity to be actors of their future and active members of their communities. In order to develop these skills, linking with New Literacy Studies (NLS) offers a socially situated model which, like the Freirian 'culture circle' challenges dominant models of literacy, for example replacing the economic driven model associated with workforce training, productivity and the notion of human capital (institutional literacies) with a socio-cultural model which includes vernacular literacies. It recognises that literacy practices are formed in a number of contexts and domains, for example: social class, gender and basic skills revisited the private domain of home and the public domain of schooling. In their book, *Local Literacies* Barton and Hamilton (1998)

explore the many literacy activities people are involved in across the different domains of their life. A key aspect of their findings is that people have ‘ruling passions’ which can be a key into where, why and what literacy practices matter to them. Learners’ ‘ruling passions’ offers a means to recognise and celebrate the learners’ practices. Whether the practice is drawing, words, poetry or photographs like the ‘Culture Circles’, NLS draws on the literacies from the learners’ lives. These artefacts are a way to develop a dialogue, leading to an analysis of the concrete reality represented by the learners and facilitating them to address inequalities in and through their lives.

The politics of literacy and its link to learner identity and empowerment is explored in our study, from the standpoint of how the learners’ everyday lives have been shaped by the lack of and development of dominant literacies. Part of the praxis of the research is to draw on and disseminate participatory and democratic pedagogical practices as a way of countering the dominant models while questioning how power and knowledge are valued, what counts as literacy and what does not, who benefits from this and who is marginalised (Duckworth and Smith 2017: 18, 22). The impact of dominant literacies on the learners’ journeys are revealed and the use of how a critical curriculum can empower the learners and lead to emancipation and transformation in their personal and public journeys (Duckworth 2009, Duckworth and Smith, 2018; Smith and Duckworth 2022).

Methodology

The research draws on participatory research methodologies where the oppressive qualities of the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ relationship were challenged. Participatory research has emerged in recent years as an approach which strives to be liberating and not controlling (see Habermas 1974) for social transformation, and ‘consciousness raising’ (see Freire 1996) among the underprivileged and minorities, where an ever-growing of labelling and stigma is given by society and amplified by the media (see Beresford et al. 2002). This approach was particularly important as the research group identify themselves as ‘stigmatised’, ‘left behind’ and ‘caught in a stinkin’ trap of despair’. PAR, with its alignment to social action, enlightenment (see Habermas 1974: 113) emancipation (see Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998), adult education intervention, development and change within communities.

Par and Freire

PAR and Freire PAR builds on critical pedagogy put forward by Freire as a response to traditional, formal models of education in which the teacher takes the power and imparts information to the students, who are passive, empty vessels, waiting to be filled. This model fails to recognise the powerful knowledge learners bring into the classroom with them, such as socially situated knowledge (see Barton and Hamilton 2008). In this vein the main goal of PAR, as identified previously, is for both researcher/practitioner and participant to work in egalitarian ways and develop effective dialogue and critical consciousness and, in the case of this study, a critical curriculum which facilitates this. It is very important that the participants are involved in the research process, the goal of PAR being democratic, participatory, giving a voice to the oppressed and often silenced. It is worth drawing on Weiler's (1991) feminist critique of Freire, which recognises the strengths of his work whilst also addressing areas which would benefit from being developed. One such area is to suggest a move away from his universal claims, instead placing each study in its own political, economic and historical context. We have attempted to do this by providing an overview of the aforementioned including that of adult literacy and education (Duckworth and Smith, 2018, 2019). In an age of neo-liberalism and globalisation, the Freirean concept, based on the premise that by overcoming oppression people will move towards true humanity, is problematic. Indeed, transformation and empowerment of the learners/teacher may be individually focused rather than community bound, leading to the oppressed becoming the oppressors and a failure to engage in social justice and liberation. Whilst realising areas of Freirian concepts may need developing for this study, We are also very much aware that education was a setting where people acquire an awareness of the structural inequality and their struggle under a dominant ideological system (Freire 2004). This awareness provided the opportunity to challenge hegemony and engage in an 'approach to social change which puts knowledge back into the hands of the people' (Heaney cited in Byrne 2005: 179). This connected with our intention to foreground social justice at the core of the undertaking and a sense that educational research (like education itself) should have an important role to play in addressing social inequality. As such we strove to convene research discussions in a safe space, a space moreover that shared characteristics with critical pedagogical space.

This critical approach to research was essential in challenging power positions whereby the sharing of stories was driven by care and love and not intellectual capital based on authority.

The sharing of our stories makes possible connections between these local stories with national and international audiences. In that sense, the project contributes to the creation of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), which can foster networks of collective resistance in the field of adult literacy and education that cross local and national boundaries.

Life history

Life history and biography provided important entry points (Goodson & Sikes 2001; Duckworth, 2013). As our life stories are closely bound up with our upbringing and geographical spaces we inhabit and continue to inhabit. Sharing my story whilst Marie shared hers was an important principle in the collaborative practice of gathering the data. This reciprocity was a crucial aspect of the collaborative approach. Goodley et al. (2004: 167) comment that:

Researching life stories offers opportunities for drawing on our own and others' narratives in ways that can illuminate key theoretical, policy and practice considerations.

Listening to our life stories provided insights into how our lives were intertwined. It also exposed the transformative moments and ripples of impact on family and community.

Our story

Our historical thread and geographical landscape linked Marie and me to each other through the sharing of location and history. Resistance, conformity and struggle that Marie and I face and, in some instances, continue to face, are threaded through our historical narrative into the fabric of our lives; shaping both myself and Marie's journey. Oldham is where we grew up. Marie grew up with seven brother and sisters in a council house; I grew up with three younger brothers in a council house fifteen minutes walk away We went to the local comprehensive schools and gave birth to our children at The Royal Oldham Infirmary. We met when I was teaching her at a literacy class based in a local Further Education College in the Northwest of England. Marie was a single

mum with three children and arrived at college after splitting up with her partner who had been violent and ‘uncaring’ to Marie.

I was devastated when he left. I loved him and he didn't care about anyone but himself. I felt broken in so many ways it made me feel sick. Some days I couldn't get out of bed I just felty so hopeless and a wreck

Marie returned to education because she had struggled with reading and writing – her confidence and self-esteem was at rock bottom after the breakup of her relationship; the job centre had offered her an additional fifteen pounds (on top of her benefits) because she was a single mum, so she took the opportunity.

I really didn't know what to expect. I hadn't a clue, but I knew the extra fifteen quid would make a difference to the kids

Returning to education was not an easy step though, she had experienced a negative time at school where she felt singled out and diminished because she came from a poor family and her family name had a reputation for being poor. Marie described how she was singled out for being poor

If you come from big families you were just pushed to the side. I remember being really good at badminton, but 'cos I was a McNamara, come from a big family I couldn't go on the team. Anyhow – we could do what we want the teachers weren't interested in the end . . . It was 'cos we were the ones who stood out 'cos of our clothes. Yer know they're looking down on yer 'cos yer wearin' hand-me-downs. Yer feel dirty somehow, daft really 'cos all our clothes has been washed, they were old that's all. Yer can't wash the tattiness out I suppose.

We both shared how we experienced labelling at school. I described how to Marie how

I had been singled out because I would take Friday's off to help my mum with my three younger brothers and go to the wash house to do their washing. I loved being out of school and doing something useful to help my mam but that was not acceptable, I felt on the outside of school, I had mates, but my head was always somewhere else and often on the work I had to do at home and what was

happening at home. Which was a chaotic place to grow up in. At primary school I first felt the physical and symbolic violence from the teachers. I stood out at school because my mum would put me in coloured socks and my dad would cut my fringe short. I can remember a dinner lady saying, 'who's done that to your fringe?' That's how it was; you didn't go to the hairdressers. I felt the pain of physical violence when one of the male teachers threw a board duster at me for speaking, it hit my head hard. That memory is vivid because I felt humiliated and embarrassed. I also remember feeling confused and not knowing what the teacher wanted from me when she said I needed to 'pull up my socks'. I remember those words so well, because at nine I took them literally. I looked down at my socks and she laughed. When I arrived at secondary school, I was wearing a pair of shoes two sizes too big because they were in the sale and real leather. With a uniform from the market and Tib Street in town, I fitted in with the kids from the council estate like me. We stood out from those who lived in the private houses, with their leather modern shoes and matching bags. The divide was there for all to see from day one and we all knew it. It was a male teacher who called me to the front of the lesson when I was 13 and hit the back of my legs hard – they bruised. He'd do that to the girls. I was too frightened to tell my mum and dad in case they shouted at me for making him do it. That's the way it was, teachers were to be looked up to and if they hit you there must be a reason. The reason for me was talking to the girl next to me – as simple as that. When you're being hit at home and at school it begins to be the norm. I didn't question it, they had the power and I had none.

My personal position as an 'insider' with 'insider knowledge' of marginalised communities was a key motivation to becoming a basic skills tutor; my own life-history has greatly influenced the commitment I have for finding opportunities to enable others to take agency and aspire to reach their potential.

Everything Marie and I had kept hidden was suddenly exposed. Everything we felt; shame was being challenged as we and other members of the class realised that we were not alone in our experiences made us feel like outsiders to the educational system. Our words and the emotions embedded in them provided us with a shared dialogue and wider context to turn this shame into shared liberation.

While Marie continued to work in a factory until their 30s, it was surrounded by the red brick of Danimac Mill that I found my great escape. At 16 I'd left behind the local comprehensive school where I'd spend most of the day staring out at the clueless sky. I couldn't wait to be grown up, working and earning. The school bell ringing for the last time sees me and my mates breaking free, as we run through the green gates. Full of laughter and screams, we chase one another across the school fields, egging each other's white shirts. Excited to be leaving the classroom behind, I didn't realise back then that I'd never see some of those kids that I'd grown up with again. Our lives would fork in different directions, like the signs that took us on bus routes in and out of town. On leaving school my first two jobs were at a local factory on a Youth Training Scheme paying 25 pounds a week. No more laughs with my classmates; no more promising skies to stare at, only the tapping away of time and hope. I was aware that certain people had power, which was usually male managers, and others (mainly women), appeased them and did the clerical work. Unlike the laughs and shouts I'd hear from the men on the factory floor, there was also an expectation that we women would work in silence and only speak to bosses when spoken to. I was no better or worse than any of the women around me, but I couldn't accept my lot without a fight. Rather than the factory becoming a way of life, it offered me resistance and a determination to challenge being unskilled and without qualifications. Starting at the local Further Education College was liberating and filled me with endless possibilities. When I reflect now on my own experiences as a young woman growing up in this environment, I realise how these fit with the analysis offered by Skeggs (1997, 2004); Walkerdine (1989, 2001) and the concepts of Bourdieu (1993). My move away from the workplace was collecting an initial identity and then when I went to college, a collective identity away from the men who managed the spaces in which I worked, and the women who were subservient to them. In many ways, the conditions of oppression and work (although manifesting in different forms) remains as it did in the Industrial Revolution, a model where there are those who give orders (have power) and those who obey (become powerless)

Marie shared that going back into education after a negative experience of school had enabled her to make choices that were previously 'outside anything dreamed of' in life. Through this, literacy classes became a catalyst for big change in the opportunities and the educational and lifecourse trajectories of her family. As she stated:

I don't care if (my son) stays in education till he's thirty years old. I want him educated because education gives you power and that's what I want my children to have. I want them to be able to make choices. Definitely, I want them to be able to... you know... say, 'Well actually I don't want to do that, I want to do that. And I want to go and live there, I don't want to stay there and live there. And I want to have a car and I want to do this.' Just choices... I want them to be able to go to Costa and get a coffee. Something I could never do... that's what education will give him: choices.

Marie – now a staff nurse – still lives on the same estate. For Marie then, returning to education was not about abandoning her background or turning her back on the community that she comes from. This is vital in exposing that literacy was much more than just the ability to read, it is the ability to 'read the world' and even though circumstances, which include remaining in the communities that have historical anchored down and been pathologised, from the empowered position these communities become enriched. Marie is still the same person, it is her financial and economic security and her perspective on the world that has changed. In Marie's case, it also enhances social cohesion within her community: through enhancing the agency of the individual, it benefits the family and, beyond that the home community.

I was able to relate to Marie and how they had transferred the caring capital accrued in childhood to gain a job in adulthood. Having helped my mam with the cleaning and looking after younger brothers, I felt that I could be a nurse and care for patients. I did not see myself as academic, but I knew I was a hard worker and was not squeamish. I suppose I was also keen to realise my mum's dreams: she had always wanted to be a nurse. I must say that when I did my training I was not based at the university, I was based in the hospital – on the job training if you like. There was a sense that when I was training to become a nurse, I had become respectable. Gone was the girl who rarely went to school; here was a young woman who was committed and who was working towards a responsible job, a career that required three years training. I was ecstatic and couldn't believe my luck, me Vicky Duckworth, a nurse. Imagine if my old mates from school could see me, I was somebody now. At the age of 18 laying out my first dead body and washing it with dignity was a real wake up call to life and death and having respect for people in

both. Transitions My transition from midwife to teacher was mediated by a degree. I never imagined I'd do a degree: like many of the learners I never thought about it, let alone considered it a real possibility, but I had thought about travelling, a lot. So, after a year of working as a midwife and sister of a nursing home, whereby I was delivering babies at one end and laying out the elderly at the other, with four thousand pounds saved a friend and I went around the world. On my travels I met people from all walks of life, and through education and travel my world opened up. All walks of life merged together: the very wealthy who I'd called toffs, people who meditated early in the morning, waking me up with their chanting, people, all sorts who were, like me, looking for adventure. In the field of travel, we escaped the fields of our past and we were all on the same footing. For that time, we shared the same hopes and aspirations, to see the beauty of the Taj Mahal in India, the public field of work 127 Golden Palace in Bangkok, the Barrier Reef in Australia and the list goes on. This connection in time and space bonded us. We were young and wanted to grab the future together. Travelling and meeting so many different people inspired me to do a degree and voluntary work in literacy. I suppose after going into the world I wanted to help others to reach their potential and question their beliefs and assumptions just like I had. I wanted to make a difference to the lives of people who had been brought up in communities like mine. I still do. On listening to the learners' stories, many years after I travelled, I was reminded of how important the bonds of friendship are in shaping our journeys across different fields.

Our journeys highlight how educational journeys empower people by increasing their chances of getting jobs, staying healthy and participating fully in society (Duckworth and Smith, 2019). But more than improving the life chances of the family, the literacy classes changed the way Marie sees the world. For women who are marginalised and often silenced, access to literacy offers the tools which can enable them to transform their lives.

Class still matters

The notion that class identities have diminished in significance over recent decades is also a key feature of contemporary social theory. This may be seen as a result of the cultural shifts aligned with individualisation, de-traditionalisation and post-modernisation (for examples, see Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Bauman 1987, 1998). The idea of class going out of fashion fitted with post-modern thought, which viewed the world as

transcending economic and social relations to life chances, and in turn educational success. Our research exposes that class is still relevant and challenges the trend of academic dismissal of class and labour to fix its oppressive state and thus attempt to surmount the situation of oppression critically with a view to facilitating its transformation (Freire 1996). that support this. Our stories reveal how teachers, even when constrained by performative curricula, can open up a space for critical reflection and dialogue that facilitates learners to challenge notions of what literacies are. In this space, through action and opposition, they offer resistance to passivising, knowledge-transmission approaches to education, instead catalysing hope, overturning the negative impact of a classificatory education system and allowing students to rearticulate the relationship between their education and their futures.

Marie describes how

I felt valued at college and heard, like my life and what I did mattered. You took me to the local market to get a new bag. We talked over a coffee and shared stories and that helped me realise you may have been the teacher, but you were no different than me. And if you had passed exams and was from a similar background as me then so could I. You believed in me by listening, talking and caring and that helped me believe in myself. I was broken but I started to heal and find me. I now can believe in my patients on the ward and make a difference in their lives. It's like the magic of the classroom you taught in goes on really in my role now as a nurse.

The telling and sharing of stories is a way to share what has happened and make the connection with someone who will not judge, but who comes from a similar background. Freire's notion of a 'culture group', a discussion group in which educators and learners use codifications to engage in dialectic engagement for consciousness raising, liberation, empowerment and transformation is a powerful driver for this being for liberation provides a forum open to the empowerment of learners, teachers and the community, while also providing opportunities for the development of those skills and competencies without which empowerment would be impossible. Such emancipatory practices, driven by sharing histories enable us to recognise we are not alone, reclaim spoilt identities to ones of empowerment and hope and take agency over our lives.

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