"I don't think I was a learner!": Constructing learning identities through Access to Higher Education

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Abstract
This paper challenges Bourdieu's view that the movement of the habitus across new fields can result in a split habitus, divided against the self and in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences. It draws on a qualitative study of Access to Higher Education students across three Midlands-based further education colleges which aimed to develop an understanding of the complexities of Access students' learner identities as they move across the unfamiliar field of FE. Data was collected by ...., The findings demonstrate nuanced understandings about how the Access to HE students make sense of their previous learning experiences, and how those experiences inform the development of their current identities, action and learning. [What do the findings show about Bourdieu's theory?]

Keywords (4):

Adult learners, habitus/ Bourdieu, learning identities, transitions

Introduction: Access to Higher Education and the Policy Context

While mature students have generally received quite a lot of attention through HE research, Access to HE courses, and their students have not. Those studies that have focused on mature students taking Access to HE courses, have tended to discern a homogenous group of learners who are socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged (Warmington, 2003); for whom earlier compulsory

education has been a failure, or they hold negative memories of school and formal education generally (Brine and Waller 2004; Jones 2006, Dillon, 2010), and for which the fear of academic failure is greater because of the high risk investment involved (Davis and Williams, 2001). In this sense they tend to carry a negative learner identity prior to enrolling on the course.

The first Access to HE courses were established in the late 1970s across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The main purpose of these courses, since their inception, has been the provision for mature students (aged 19 years plus) of an alternative, and more appropriate, preparation for HE, both in terms of the subject knowledge and generic skills required for progression, than 'A' levels, as well as the self-confidence to contend with its challenges. Although definitions of 'mature' continue to change, this primary purpose remains as a fundamental principle for Access courses.The success of these early courses led to their further development to encourage people to return to education who were 'excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways' (Parry, 1996, p.11) in an attempt to redress the balance of educational disadvantage (Jones, 2006, p. 485).

In 1987 they were acknowledged as 'the third recognised route into HE' (HMG, 1987) and sought to extend the provision through a national framework of recognition for the courses, which was set up in 1989. The intention was to promote public confidence in Access to HE as a properly regulated and respected route into higher education (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2008) which provided

> new opportunities not only to those who may be recognised in statistical tables as 'under-represented' in higher education, but also to individuals who may not fall into those familiar categories, but who, from the circumstances of their individual lives, are undoubtedly disadvantaged (QAA, 2012a online)

 Despite a national framework for Access to HE courses since 1989, the local provision of courses have varied considerably. This is because Access to HE courses developed as a locally responsive provision through which Further Education (FE) providers established close links with local universities. These courses offered an appropriate curriculum for progression to HE by people without the relevant 'A' level qualiifcations. These were often validated by a local Access Validating Authority. As the FE sector has a focus on lifelong learning and the promotion of economic growth (Jephcote *et al*, 2008, p. 164), as well as a collaborative ethos celebrating mature learners (Warmington, 2002), the positioning of Access within the FE sector emphasises its importance in providing opportunities for lifelong learning for adults.

Since 1997, when the QAA became responsible for the regulation and recognition of Access to HE programmes, Access has remained popular, with

approximately 40,000 adults being registered on QAA-recognised Access programmes each year (QAA, 2012b). 2010/2011 saw the highest ever number of Access student registrations with 45,000 students studying on an Access to HE course (QAA, 2012c).

The study on which this paper is based focused on students on Access to HE courses. While mature students have generally received quite a lot of attention through HE research, students on Access to HE courses have not. Those studies that have focused on mature students taking Access to HE courses, have tended to discern a homogenous group of learners who are socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged (Warmington, 2003), for whom earlier compulsory education has been a failure, or they hold negative memories of school and formal education generally (Brine and Waller 2004; Jones 2006, Dillon, 2010), and for which the fear of academic failure is greater because of the high risk investment involved (Davis and Williams, 2001).

Since 2012, central government has encouraged Access to HE course providers to target young people to strengthen the national economy and lessen the impact of high youth unemployment. In 2012/13, changes to the Further Education (FE) funding system for students (BIS, 2010) meant that young adults aged 19-24 years undertaking their first full level 2 or level 3 qualification (equivalent to 'A' level in England) were fully funded. In 2013/14 older (mature) students aged 24 years or over undertaking level 3 or higher qualifications will only be government backed loans (BIS, 2010 p. 7) unless they choose to pay in full in advance for level 3 courses such as Access to HE courses. This latter group of learners have not faired well in current policy discourses despite growing pressure on universities to widen access, and the fact that mature applicants can help to meet widening participation targets and attract additional funding (Hinsliff-Smith, 2010).

This paper examines how Access students make sense of themselves as learners, and the various influences on their learning journey. The paper uses the concepts of Bourdieu (1977, 1993) of habitus and field but challenges his view that the movement of the habitus across new fields can result in a habitus divided against itself.

Understanding Access students' learner identities through habitus and

field (1393 words)

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus (1977) and field (1993) form the basis of the theoretical framework for this article.

Habitus

Bourdieu defines habitus as a complex interplay between past and present. He writes that habitus 'refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history' (1993, p.86). Individual histories and identities are therefore vital to understanding the concept of habitus. At the same time, habitus are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them (Reay, 2004). Current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon, but are internalized and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socializa- tions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 134).

Issues of 'identity' are central to the way in which individuals perceive themselves (Helms Mills 2003; Young 2006). The construction of 'learner identities' are as much influenced by historic experience as by present practice (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 313). Habitus is a useful tool to understand how learners' experiences shape their current outlook and sense of selves as well as future outcomes (James *et al.,* 2013). Bourdieu's (1973) concept of habitus is useful in understanding how the personal, social and emotional lives of learners influence their experience of learning. A person's habitus is acquired in part through the family which structures their early educational experiences, and habitus highlights the ways in which structural arrangements become embedded within an individual's lived experience and choices. As Reay *et al.,* (2010) argue, compulsory education in particular can act to provide a general disposition. The habitus then can directly impact on mature students' ability to assimilate and make sense of their new learning environment.

Similarly too - the distribution of capitals - economic, cultural and social among individuals -determines the chances of success for practices. Cultural capital relates to social class, family background and commitment to education (Bourdieu 1992; Longden 2004). Intertwined with cultural capital, social capital comprises the actual or potential resources that individuals can access through membership of organizations and social networks. Such resources, particularly those of trust and reciprocity, are established and used in different social fields (Ecclestone, 2004):

> A network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relations that are directly useable in the short or long term. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249)

The notion of 'habitus' illuminates the ways in which cultural and social capital

are generated and used by viewing human action as 'a dialectical relationship between individuals' thought and activity and the objective world' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 14). People's dispositions towards action, and their responses to specific situations, cannot be divorced from structural conditions but nor are they a simple matter of 'biographical determinism' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.15). As a complex form of socialization combined with individual agency, habitus offers a construct for representing how human knowledge and action both express and realize the dynamic of structure in social contexts.

In post-compulsory education, habitus can also be used to explore 'relationships between common cultural expectations and learners' behaviour—thus cultural capital is both an objective condition and a social construction' (Bloomer, 2001, p. 437). These conditions and dynamics construct forms of capital in unexpected ways. Students' habitus, obtained through formative life and educational experiences, interact with external conditions within specific spheres of action (Nash, 1999). Habitus incorporates multiple, overlapping identities and dispositions which make up a person's life and the effects of different learning experiences as people progress through schooling into formal education later in life (see, for example, Crossan *et al.,* 2003). The impact of cultural capital can lead to an unfair education system that is biased in favour of students who possess inherited cultural capital (Leese 2010). Individuals, or agents, have the freedom to behave in a range of different ways, but their habitus acquired during their early experiences of education can predispose them to behave in certain ways (Reay, 2004). This can be seen even before mature students enroll in formal education because they often have less knowledge about how educational systems work, and are at times less confident in matters relating to educational choice (Vryonides, 2007). If a student lacks the appropriate capital this can impact on their experience when entering the new environments (Reay *et al.*, 2002). If an individual grows up in a culture where educational expectations are low, this can greatly influence the individual's self-concept. The 'self-exclusion' and 'false uniqueness' identified by Thorpe *et al.,* (2007) in non-traditional learners is viewed as a consequence of 'habitus'.

Mature students can bring with them various forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital which can have deficits in their forms of learning (Cooper, 2011). In (re) engaging in formal education, they can often be tentative about the process of learning because of their lack of confidence and prior experience and this can also result in hostility towards educational institutions (Crossnan *et al.,* 2009). In returning to formal education to enhance their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990) students choose to engage in a process of (re)construction and on-going development (Brine and Waller, 2004) of their identities as learners. However, they can lack confidence that their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) will allow them to assert and develop their agency successfully in the 'field' of formal learning. The movement of habitus across new, unfamiliar fields such as FE can result in 'a habitus divided against itself', in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences' resulting in 'a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self' (Bourdieu, 1999, cited in Reay, 2004, p. 436). However, mature students

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can also be resourceful rather than have deficits in the form of learning (Reay *et al.,* 2009). Prior learning experiences can act to provide a general disposition, a turn towards what Bourdieu terms 'cultured habitus' (1967, p.344), in which, the challenge of the unfamiliar for students can result in a range of creative adaptations and accommodations that are generally positive and for some very explicitly life enhancing.

Field

While habitus brings into focus the subjective, 'field' focuses on the objective (Grenfell & James, 1998). Bourdieu defines a social field as, '...structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants,' (Bourdieu, 1993: 73). The field is the setting in which action takes place, and it is in this space that dominant and subordinate groups struggle for control over resources (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 29). Different fields, such as formal learning programmes, are sites (spaces) where learners can create and reproduce cultural and social capital (Ecclestone, 2004).

However, the interactions between field, habitus and the reproduction of different forms of capital are fluid. More specifically, it is possible to see the field of Access to HE courses as having their own culture, namely the 'socially constructed and historically derived common base of knowledge, values and norms for action that people grow into and come to take as a natural way of life' (Hodkinson *et al.,* 1996, p. 148). So the field of Access to HE can be conceived as consisting of the relations between students and staff, academics and managers, the institutional structures and processes they study and work within, and the cultures constructed in them to guide particular ways of working.

 ' Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and habitus, outside and inside of agents' (Bourdieu, 1996, p.213). Bourdieu & Passeron's (1977) The conceptions of field and habitus also prove useful when exploring the interaction between Access to HE students as individuals and the institution they attend since the concepts indicate how the principles of one field share the principles of other fields (Grenfell & James, 1998): How Access to HE courses as fields relate to the fields of Higher Education and Further Education as well as the field of their industry/employer partners (Jenge, 2010).

If fields influence changes in people's habitus, fields are also influenced by individuals who come to them, resulting in either reproductive or transformative responses, identities or dispositions on the part of the individual and the institution (Leeson, 2010). Consequently the field of FE can become an important site of transition and personal transformation for students although driven by the tensions between students as agents, others, and the social and institutional structures they encounter (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

The Research Study: Methodology and Method

The study adopted a critical qualitative research methodology using a social constructivist perspective that recognised people's learning and development being constructed through social interactions in particular milieu (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The study was based in three urban further education colleges in the East Midlands of England and drew on a convenience sample of students enrolled on an Access Diploma in Social Sciences. The study followed their progress on each Access course over an academic year. The Access students gave voluntary informed consent to participate and were aware they could leave the project at any time, which some chose to do because of the tensions between the demands of work, studying and home life.

Across the three colleges there were 16 student participants who took part in a series of three focus group interviews over an academic year (November, March and May) and … (tutor participants). Each focus group comprised 5-6 participants, although not all attend each interview because of the pressure of coursework. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was digitally recorded. The interviews discussed issues relating to how the Access students saw themselves as learners, their perceptions of what learning was taking place, and their learner identities. A particular strength of this method of collecting data was that it allowed the research participants to bring forward their own priorities and perspectives, as well as responding to those of the researchers', 'to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of [the participants]' (Du Bois 1983 p.108).

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The sample was chosen purposively in each college to reflect the diversity of their Access cohort, rather than to construct a representative sample from which generalizations could be attempted. Of the sample, 3 participants were male and 13 were female whovaried in age between 19 and 45 years with the majority aged between 24-35 years, but all described themselves as mature students because of their non-traditional backgrounds and differential life experiences. Participants came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Careers included homemaker, care workers, hospitality and office work.

The participants were aged between 19 and 44 when they commenced their studies, and

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed manually to construct a thematic analysis to capture the individual histories, habitus and dispositions of the Access students. The analysis of interview data drew on the guiding principles suggested by Miller & Glassner (2004). It was predicated upon the view that qualitative interviewing can provide access to the ways in which

Access students experience their 'material, social and cultural worlds, and access to the meanings that they ascribed to their educational projects' (Warmington, 2003, pp. 98-99). It was important to acknowledge that the data represented the meanings the Access students attributed to their experiences and social worlds. Of particular interest in the analysis of the data was whether and how the Access students experiences and perceptions of those experiences transformed over the duration of the Access course and from one interview to next.

To construct trustworthiness in the study, students' views were triangulated with interview data collected from their Access course tutors, and the institutional and national policy contexts of their FE Colleges as presented through relevant institutional and national documents and interviews with senior managers. Access tutors were individually interviewed to explore their perceptions of the cultural and social capital that the students brought/estalblished, and the pedagogic strategies used to support Access students. This material was also analysed using NVivo. Finally, a questionnaire was also distributed to all the Access courses taught in the participating Colleges (n=365 participants) to provide background data about the Access students' education, qualifications and work experience. The quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed with simple descriptive statistics while the qualitative data from the questionnaire was scrutinized to generate numeric codes which were used to illustrate trends and patterns within the cohort of the study.

Findings

A number of themes emerged early in the analysis of the Access students interviews and highlighted their diverse experiences of learning prior to enrolling on the Access course, the impact of Access learning on their identities, and the shifts in their learning identities over the course of the academic year. These themes concern how their identities as Access students is based on their past learning experience, highlighting their reticence towards formal learning, their habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), their current experiences of re-engaging in learning and being a learner on the Access course.

Reticence towards formal learning

Access to HE courses offer a route back into education for those who leave school before or during their A-level courses. In this study, students on these courses tended to have rather negative learner identities, unlike those in the study by Brine & Waller (2004) with strong learner identities. This view emerged as the Access to HE students identified experiences of educational disadvantage and self exclusion having left school with few or no qualifications, and negative experiences of school which shaped their attitudes towards learning and their learner identities: .

When I was in primary school I was classed as having learning difficulties. Didn't get any help with that when I was at primary school. So by the time I went to secondary school, sitting down doing work weren't something that I ever did. I just gave up… (College B)

For all of the participants in this study educational expectations were low:

Not a very good [learner] and I wasn't particularly enjoying [the Access course] the first couple of months we were doing it either...I hated school anyway. (College A)

The Access students' also reflected on what formal learning had not offered them as one participant reflected:

Up to 14 I did okay. Then we went to the upper school and I completely lost interest. I had stuff going on at home and I wasn't having the best time there either and I just stopped going to the lessons. (College A)

There was a sense of anxiety and regret amongst Access to HE students about the poor learner identities which informed their low opinion of who they were and their abilities to succeed, supporting the view that mature learners particularly may experience a lack of confidence or sense of disempowerment upon entering an unfamiliar and potentially threatening environment (Peters, 1997).The potential for failure on Access to HE courses risked further harm to an already low academic self-esteem. Further, there was 'a grounded sense in which these adults were increasingly distant from the 'formalised status of learner;' they did not easily perceive themselves as 'student' (Crosnan *et al.,* 2003, p.57).

A recurring factor in the narratives of the Access students were unhappy secondary school experiences which often resulted in inadequate literacy and numeracy skills. Experience of educational disadvantage during early years of compulsory education can have a long-standing impact on later participation in education (Taylor & Cameron, 2002). This in turn affected the self-esteem of Access to HE students and left them with limited employment opportunities:

I have been to xxxxx but didn't complete. I didn't even finish a year because I was too young and didn't know what I wanted to do (College B).

A number of the students tried to re-engage with education before discovering Access. These students had strong motivational factors in this decision. They were keen to develop learner identities through vocationally-focused courses. As Jenge (2010) found in her study of foundation degree students, learning appeared to be a strong part of their identity, in part because of their cultural capital, but this did not necessarily lead to a successful learning experience as noted by this participant who had the most continued engagement with education.

After [school] I decided to go to college to do hairdressing. Because I moved, I couldn't carry that on. So I then decided to do, it's called an E to E course, Education to Employment, to do hairdressing again after I'd moved. I completed that. Worked for a little while as a hairdresser. Then I lost my job and I did an A4e course…After that I went to…do maths equivalent, but I didn't finish that because I decided to come here. And I also went to…University to do a counselling course which I completed before I came here as well. (College C)

Despite difficult educational beginnings, and negative previous educational experiences they were all keen to maximise their potential and viewed HE as a way to do that, with Access offering a route into HE study. In Bourdieu's terms, the habitus is in process of ongoing change and individuals can change the trajectory of their early life experiences and socialisation (Jenge, 2010). The Access students had made sense of their early educational experiences and actively sought out to engage in lifelong learning to transform their learner identities. or the Access students, their participation was influenced as much by their historic experience as by present practice as we will see later in the findings.

Re-engaging in formal learning

The Access students had different personal motivations to return to education and were engaged in differing ways with the (re)construction of their learner identities that were filled with hope.Some of the students were 'instrumental learners' (Reay *et al.,*2009), who were studying to get a 'better' job rather than be stuck in a *dead end job*. They saw themselves as'*not going anywhere'* as this participant noted.

> *….I think it was more a case of eight years of shift-work. Well a very real glass ceiling to my earnings…Well it's not a glass ceiling. It's a concrete ceiling cos you've no qualifications to see past it … just wanting to do something different and something where it feels like you're progressing as opposed to turning up, grinding your life away, and going home and going to sleep wondering why the hell am I doing this.* (College A)

Others had been confronted by redundancy and saw Access as an opportunity to retrain. They reflected about how learning was related to employment and life opportunities, which they believed would be more generally improved by being better qualified. However, this was also about bettering themselves and generating a sense of self-fulfilment:

> *I realised that I'd been working at [a supermarket] for ten years in August and it came to the point where I realised that if I was to leave, all I would leave with was an alcohol licence and an intermediate certificate in food hygiene and whilst I had a lot of skills and do have a lot of skills that are transferable, I wanted qualifications as well. I wanted a little bit more to my name than just an alcohol licence that expired [laughs] in five years'*

time or an intermediate certificate in food hygiene. I think I'm worth more than that and I wanted to complete my education. (College B)

For others, returning to formal learning was bound up in other parts of their lives. Their learner identities were interfaced with other identities such as a parent, father, worker, or carer, and these were affected by a number of key personal, interactional and institutional factors (Johnston & Merrill, 2009). They wanted to do something for themselves but also provide a role model for their children, so they saw their parents doing something achievable, as well as help their children with homework. Others were spurred on by their family in a different way:

> "I felt like I was kind of just stuck and everyone was moving ahead and I was getting kind of left behind. Like my husband. He's graduating in two weeks time and his sister, my sister-in-law, she's going to uni this year as well. And I just kind of felt like well what am I doing now?" (College C)

It is this drive and aspiration underlying it, that helped many of these students cope with the challenges of becoming an Access student, as discussed below. Other motivations emerging as a consequence of 'critical incidents' also acted as turning points in which the participants re-evaluated their lives and considered the need for some form of change (Gallacher *et al.,* 2002). Personal circumstances or setbacks in their lives such as bereavement or injury were important in terms of not only fulfilling their potential but rediscovering their identity.

> *[I] was in care support work and I was being trained to progress, but I got injured in a car accident. I took stock, thought what the hell am I doing, I need to do something different.* (College C)

Although initially uncertain about returning to formal education these different sets of personal motivations and factors brought these learners to the Access course to prove to themselves that they could do it. Evident in this was their perceptions and commitment to the role of learner which can shift over time (Gallacher *et al.,* 2002). This seemed to be linked to the need to see themselves as successful learners and was rooted in their personal histories and previous learner identities which had been constructed through their prior experiences of education. The decision to enrol on the Access course conferred on them an opportunity to develop a new identity and status.

Shifting learning Identities: Being a learner on the Access course

While shifts in attitudes towards learning were evident, *becoming* a learner and returning to education once again created a sense of apprehension and high degree of ambivalence as they entered the Access course knowingly risking academic failure. While the students' habituses were being modified by their encounter with post-compulsory education, they did not fully escape their habitus as Reay *et al.* (2009) also observed in their studying of working class HE students. Sometimes, they seemed to cling on to former aspects of the self.

Despite the new learner identities that were emerging their habitus also impacted on the Access students' ability to assimilate and make sense of their new learning environment.

> I work full-time and I come here to school full-time and it's tiring and it can be hectic, and if you analyse it, it's almost impossible. But you don't think about it. You just know that in the morning I wake up, I go to college. After college I'll spend the whole night at work (Col 6).

Access to HE was viewed as a way to maximize and fulfill the students' potential, but it also presented a conflict as a consequence of the impact of their cultural capital which meant they were dealing with the unfamiliar fields of both FE, and the Access course. While Bourdieu (1997, p.94) has argued that principles embodied in habitus are 'beyond the grasp of consciousness,' habitus can change and adapt. What became evident in the Access students narratives was their conscious awareness and consideration of who they were and where they had come from. For these learners, 'the disjunction between field and habitus [meant] nothing could be taken for granted' (Reay *et al.,* 2009) In that sense the students began to reconstruct their habitus:

> *I don't think I was a learner [laughs]. I just thought I don't know what I want to do when I get there cos I thought that everyone else in the class would have been some like learners and whatnot, but when I got here it wasn't like that. I thought I can fit in here, it did get me thinking* (College C)

However, in the reconstruction of their habitus was also the risk of academic failure which was most immediate, and highlighted the possibility of damaging new learner identities filled with hope. In this sense they did not always adopt the formalised status of learner, nor easily perceive themselves as 'student' sometimes feeling as though they were an imposter, as also noted in Reay *et al's* (2009) study:

> *I mean I self-doubted myself actually. I thought there's no way I'm going to be able to accomplish the standards… I'm going to get a pass if I'm lucky…I just didn't know whether I would succeed – really it was a big deal in that first term I could have quit* (College A)

Evident in this reflection was the amount of self-doubt the students had in terms of their academic ability to achieve. This was reinforced by two key issues, which involved them in an ongoing process of reconstructing their fragile learner identities: firstly the pressures of coursework exacerbated by their lack of skills in assignment writing. One student commented that if he *got a bad result for the first time* he would *reconsider staying*. Secondly, the students also had to apply for a university place in the first term of the Access course. In its early months, the Access course, and indeed the field of FE college was a challenge for those

students who did not feel confident about their learner identities and abilities to complete the course, never mind get them into university. Even those Access students with relatively strong learner identities co-existed with levels of ambivalence and were finding the academic requirements of the Access course a struggle. During the second term one participant commented on how they felt as though she had: *just got her head above water*.

> *…just before Christmas, the workload, it sort of doubles and you suddenly think, 'Okay. It's gone from I can do this to why am I doing this', I think has gone through my head quite a few times. To at the moment thinking, 'Well I'm half-way through. I've paid out for this course.'… It's almost like a gritty determinism now.* (College A)

The comment 'gritty determinism' provides evidence of the resilience of these students to succeed irrespective of their limited cultural and social capital. It also highlighted how the students' identities were constructed through a determination to successfully navigate the field of HE in order to apply to university and thus reposition their habitus. This involved a process of self-scrutiny and self-improvement whereby the Access students described themselves as focused, enthusiastic and motivated. One participant explained that, *when I started here I was a lot more focused than anywhere else I've ever studied.* Such 'self-work' (Reay *et al.,* 2009) was reinforced by the Access students being able to share with other like-minded people their aspirations for the future as well as study alongside them to develop their confidence, skills and knowledge to achieve their aspirations – i.e. the opportunity to go to HE. The Access course thus offered new opportunities for cultural and social capital:

> Access helps us to have that confidence because we are meeting different people from different backgrounds and different behaviours [and] you learn from other people. Sometimes when you're out there … you just work with a group and just do whatever people are doing. But when you are here, you know who you are and you know what you are supposed to do. So Access, [has] really helped me to find out who I am and I can be what I want because it's the choice that I've made and that choice will take me to my destination (College B).

'Aspirant learner identities' (Brine & Waller, 2004) enabled the Access students to aim high. This was strongly rooted in both individual motivations as well as peer support facilitated by students' having common reasons for joining an Access to HE course – *We all know why we're here*. It was also facilitated by the assertion and maintenance of particular values that led students to trust each other to be supportive of each others' endeavours:

> Everyone respects each other's opinions, respects why they're there, and I kind of see everyone that I'm with as people that want to help me and I

want to help them as well because I appreciate that they're in the same boat as me (College C)

While many of the Access students had a crisis of confidence in the first term of the course, a key transformation point for the students was towards the end of the first term where they began to receive feedback and grades for their coursework. For example, one student's merit grade on an assignment, combined with the new found confidence related to obtaining new writing skills, highlighted a further shift in the reconstruction of their learning identity. By the second term, the participant described the transition:

> *I think it took a couple of assignments and getting the sort of grades back, that I suddenly thought oh actually I obviously am capable of doing that. So it was quite a big boost to my confidence…it thought I can do this it was a really boost you know* (College A)

Gaining confidence is viewed as necessary in (re)constructing learner identity and re-establishing habitus (Brine & Waller, 2004). In the research study, this is not only achieved through the institutional field of the Access course, and FE. The support of fellow students also enabled the Access students to reshape their learner identities in subtle ways as the course progressed. For example, one student also reflected on how the Access course prepared her well to progress onto University by teaching herself and her fellow-students to study independently but to also to help less confident students. In addition to this, some students reconstructed their learner identities by using the knowledge and theories from their Access as part of the development of the self as an on-going project (Giddens , 1991, Brine & Waller, 2004).

> *I look at things like a completely different way now that we're doing sociology. My eyes have been completely opened and like looking at the news and stuff like that that's going on in the world, I can understand it a lot more and I can contribute to it a lot more by conversation. So I feel like I've got a bit smarter I think*. (College C)

This was further enhanced by the personal support and encouragement provided by the Access tutors which was viewed as extremely important in keeping the Access students going with their learning as also noted by Warmington, (2006) and discussed in more detailed in Suttill *et al.,* (2013).

> When we've got a particularly difficult subject, there is a support structure within both us and the tutors will help anybody. We do help each other with assignments and things like that. It's a very good, very positive, learning environment (College A)

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By the end of the course many of the students saw themselves as learners, even if they did not think they were before completing the Access course, declaring that they were confident in their abilities and were now ready for university. One student had applied to university but was advised to do an Access to HE course to bring her standard of writing up to the right level. This had a big impact on her learner identity and meant that she was incredibly nervous of anyone except the tutors reading her written work. However by the end of the course she had grown in confidence.

> *I think my perception of myself as a learner has definitely changed throughout the course I didn't feel a very competent or confident student in (the beginning but have since gathered the skills and confidence that I feel happy with my development…* (College B)

Participants were keen to emphasise the value of the Access course, distancing themselves from their previous fragile learning identities, as illustrated below.

> *I feel pretty well prepared for university. I feel quite happy about it. Far more confidant going forward than I would have had I not done the Access Course I presume obviously. Yeah. Now it's all over with and the pressure's come off rapidly in the last couple of weeks. Yeah. Started to look forward again and yeah I feel confident about it. The next couple of years that is.* (College A)

The Access students who took part in this study had developed qualities of self-reliance, determination and resilience through the process of completing the Access to HE course and becoming successful academic learners. They all completed their courses and were offered places at local post-92 universities. Briggs et al (2012) have argued that transition to university offers considerable challenges particularly in terms of enabling students to adjust to university and develop learner identity and autonomy. For the Access students, this transition point was viewed as affirmation of their academic success, an important aspect of both their personal development and of becoming an independent learner, so once they got to university they *could just get on with their studies.*

While the students experienced struggle, challenge and difficulty in their academic abilities throughout the Access to HE course, they remained conscious of their disposition throughout its duration as well as the transition from the familiar field of FE and the Access course to that of university. They remained highly motivated to succeed at University and obtain a degree. This motivation seemed to be acquired through a critical evaluation that positioned them more powerfully within the field of education. They did this by working extremely hard and by re-evaluating their dis/position.

> *It's quite strange coming from my background of not much schooling… like the initial position was will I be able to do the Access Course…And then once sort of our competencies have been affirmed if you like, you're looking to the next step up to university….I want to get this [degree*

qualification] now having coming this far…I am going to give it my best shot (College A)

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Bourdieu's notion of habitus and field can provide a useful framework to understand the complex dynamic across Access students' past and present learning experiences that influence the ways in which they make sense of themselves as learners. The findings indicate that the Access students' habitus did not always operate at an unconscious level particularly when they found themselves in unfamiliar fields. It changed and adapted according to their immediate social milieu. It is in such moments that an individual's habitus may become 'divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences' resulting in 'a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self' (Bourdieu, 1999, cited in Reay, 2004, p. 436), which in turn can lead to the creation of fragile or negative learner identities. The Access students' brought with them a very diverse range of past life experiences and current life circumstances which in turn influenced their disposition towards engaging in learning. However, it is not simply that participation in learning is something that can be predicted and controlled (Crossnan et al, 2003). These prior learning experiences also acted to provide a general disposition, in which, the challenge of the unfamiliar for the Access students resulted in a range of creative adaptations and accommodations that were generally positive and for some students life enhancing. This was an enriching experience for the students, allowing them to instigate their own actions, thereby achieving a sense of agency and leading them towards a 'cultured habitus' (Bourdieu, 1967:344).

What has also emerged from the findings is evidence of the Access students' reflexive awareness that arose from the 'negotiation of discrepancies by individuals in their movement within and across fields of social action' (McNay, 1999, p. 110). The Access students navigated the 'field' in the form of experiences and practices within their FE college and repositioned their habitus by processes of self-scrutiny and self-improvement in order to 'fit' within the learning community of Access to HE (Jenge, 2010). The process of educational socialization for the Access students, and their turn towards a cultured habitus proved particularly effective in developing the self despite coming from social backgrounds that lacked economic and dominant cultural capital.

While habitus and field has provided a framework in which to understand the Access students gradual change and transformation, there is evidence that for some students, there remained unresolved tensions and discomforts in the nature of their participation in the Access to He learning community, the practices that sometimes excluded them from participation, and the effects of participation on their identity (see Suttill et al, 2013 for a more detailed discussion). It is here

we see the more negative impact of habitus divided against itself, whereby their learning identities were extremely fragile and vulnerable as a consequence of low confidence and self-esteem and their apprehensions about learning. However, the powerful influence of students prior learning experiences and struggles can help them to develop their identities and recognise what they want to achieve in life, showing how processes of negotiation between their agency and the social settings and policy discourses (Gee, 1999), some of which were reified as institutional structures, resulted in shifting learner identities. The Access students' learner identities can be viewed manifestly an on-going project (Brine and Waller, 2004), whereby they continue to manage the tensions between habitus and field. It is these tensions which give the Access to HE students the motivations to not only return to formal education, but to keep going. Such findings reiterate the need to explore the complex interplay between the social and economic structures which shape Access students' lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the sorts of resources and dispositions that learners bring with them.

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