'I _really_ hated school, and couldn't wait to get out!': Reflections on 'a wasted opportunity' amongst Access to HE students.

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Abstract
In constructing a narrative account of our lives, we may recall experiences of schooling with a mixture of resentment and regret, and perhaps a sense of 'wasted opportunities'. This is particularly true if school has left us with a fragile academic self-esteem, through being labelled 'a failure' as a child. For some, this contributes to a desire to 'make good' the perceived deficit through re-engagement with formal education as an adult learner.

This paper draws upon biographical data from longitudinal research that followed the progress of a group of mature students on a further education Access to Higher Education course. It explores how themes of 'waste' especially and 'desire' are used in accounting for past, present and (anticipated) future lives and learner identities. It concludes that, despite some commonalities, experiences of adult learners are too individual and personalised to be meaningfully categorised, as some early studies had attempted to do.

KEYWORDS: mature Access students; widening participation; non-traditional students; fragile learner identities; wasted opportunities; learning careers.

Introduction
Access to Higher Education (HE) courses offer a direct route into university for mature students with limited academic qualifications. Flourishing from their inception in the mid-1970s (West, 1996), they attract increasing numbers of mature students from a range of backgrounds to study within a further education (FE) college setting (Bowl, 2003; Britton and Baxter, 1994; Ross, 2003). As Hockey and James in their recent study of _social identities and the life course_ have noted, education 'is no longer the prerogative of the young', and that adult students 'combine full-time participation in education with parental and occupational roles' (Hockey and James, 2003, p 115). Experiences of Access courses usually compare favourably to compulsory schooling, where students' learner identities may have been damaged. As Crossan _et al_ (2003) suggest, negative childhood experiences of non-traditional learners can result in hostility towards _all_ educational institutions.

This brings into question recent government proposals for widening participation which focus almost exclusively upon young people in schools, for instance Aiming Higher or Educational Action Zone initiatives (see, for example, DfES, 2003). Antipathy towards schooling is one reason identified by Archer _et al_ (2003) for the non-participation of particularly working class people in post-compulsory education, which will need to be tackled if government targets for increasing participation within higher education are to be met. Giving people who were unsuccessful at school, for whatever the reason, an option of returning to education later in life is part of a wider social justice agenda, and Access to HE courses are probably still the best method of achieving that.

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As well as being preferential to time spent at school, Access courses are often considered of greater benefit and more enjoyable than the subsequent time at university too (Betts, 1999; Wakeford, 1994). This is especially true if the institution entered is an older, 'pre-1992' university, where, as King (2003) suggests, the emphasis of widening participation activity is frequently upon *admissions* to the institution. 'New' or 'post-1992' universities tend to be seen as better at supporting the ongoing learning experience of 'non-traditional' students (Reay *et al,* 2002), who may have particular issues of concern or need (McNicol, 2004). As George *et al* (2004, p 120) suggest, for a working class mature student, university can indeed be 'an alienating, not merely an alien world'.

But, rather than 'looking forward' with Access cohort to their studies at university here, I 'look backwards' to explore their reflections upon childhood experiences of school. I examine their reasons for seeking to 'make good' perceived 'wasted opportunities' through re-engagement with formal education as a mature student, and how this impacts upon the (re)construction of their adult learner identity (Brine and Waller, 2004). In so doing I consider the merits of the work of writers including Warmington (2002), McFadden (1995), Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Crossan *et al* (2003) when applied to these data.

As Avis (1991) amongst others suggests, whilst the politics behind Access provision are fundamentally progressive, the courses are contained within an educational system, indeed a society, dominated by social hierarchies and a success/failure binary. So, rather than commendably implementing a social justice agenda (Parry, 1996), Access could be considered a palliative to cushion the blow of childhood academic failure. Such courses are meant for those unsuccessful at schooling in terms of acquiring formal qualifications. The reasons for 'failing' at school could be 'structural', for instance 'inappropriate' educational systems designed by and for the middle classes (Ball *et al*, 1996; Bourdieu, 1974; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Alternatively, 'agency' could be responsible, for example, personal, peer or familial attitudes to schooling. These however often overlap and reinforce, as demonstrated by the personal stories below. The result, as McFadden (1995) suggests, is early academic failure restricting educational and therefore other life chances. Without Access and similar courses, further, and consequently higher, education is traditionally barred to those unsuccessful at school, so opportunities for upward social mobility, *whether consciously sought or not* (Mahoney and Zmroczek, 1997), are limited.

This article provides a biographical analysis of seven mature students, using a broadly 'life course' or 'life history' approach, and presents data from interviews held during the year long Access course. During these conversations, interviewees were encouraged to reflect upon their time at school. Data is used to consider this experience in locating narrative themes of 'waste' particularly and 'desire'. Such topics are currently enjoying increasing popularity internationally, for example recent work by UK based Polish social theorist Zigmunt Bauman (2003) and Pierre Bourdieu, whose collected works (Bourdieu *et al*, 2002) applied them in an extensive account of 'social suffering' in contemporary France. Perhaps the most notable British scholar engaging with these themes is Simon Charlesworth (2000a, 2000b), who studied the lives of people from the socially and economically deprived Yorkshire town of Rotherham. This article demonstrates such tools are not only useful for analysing the lives of the underclass in Britain's post-industrial wastelands, but valuable more widely, including when considering people with relatively comfortable material circumstances, as some of the interviewees here enjoy.

The research study
This paper reports aspects of a wider project focusing upon the experiences of mature students during an Access course and, for those progressing, subsequent transition into university. Whilst themes addressed here sometimes resonate amongst the wider cohort, the findings are primarily from seven of the first set of 20 interviews, which were conducted termly over two years. In September 2001 the students joined a multi-pathway Access to HE course in an English urban FE college. The twenty people in the bigger study were chosen to reflect the diversity of their Access cohort, rather than to construct a representative sample from which generalizations could be attempted. Bertaux (1981) refers to the notion of 'representativity', and recommends researching until we have sufficient information to understand patterns of 'sociostructural relations' making up people's lives. The students compared adult and childhood experiences of education, enabling an exploration of what Crossan *et al* (2003) suggest are tensions experienced by adults occupying positions associated with 'youthful dependency'.

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews enabled the direction of conversation to change and subjects be explored as they arose, and were considered the best way of obtaining rich and complex data from which to consider students' situations and experiences (Burke, 2002). The interviewees knew I was a part-time Access tutor, and involved in educational research. Occasionally it felt appropriate to point out that, in common with most interviewees, I too was a mature student, working part-time and with family responsibilities. This helped develop rapport conducive to producing the detailed data sought. I acknowledge possible interviewer influence in directing and perhaps biasing discussions, the potential effects of 'difference' between the researcher and the researched, and factors including power differentials, gender and class that have theoretical consequences for the data. No respondents knew me before the project commenced, and the only formal points of contact were the end of term interviews from which extracts are selected. Whilst these discussions may not coincide with 'turning points' (Hodkinson *et al*, 1996) or key decision-making moments, they do demonstrate 'doubts and indecisions, changes of mind, vague possibilities' (Ball *et al*, 2000, p 15) as interviewees reflected upon and discussed their experiences.

The students here were chosen because they particularly referred to experiences of school with, amongst other things, a mixture of resentment, regret and 'wasted opportunities'. Others also referred to these feelings, but not necessarily to the extent of those considered here. Particular themes recurred in their accounts of schooling, but whilst these are not thought to be unique to this set of adult students, they have not featured prominently in many similar studies. Being labelled a 'failure' left many with a fragile sense of academic self-esteem or learner identity. Several were bullied, and some missed much of their education through either truancy (sometimes with family blessing) or illness. As accounts of schooling, the anecdotes presented are by no means unique. However, for most in the study, particularly those considered here, any negative feelings are tempered by a desire to 'make good' this perceived deficit through re-engaging with formal education as an adult learner. Sometimes this was a long cherished aim, and usually often required changes in personal circumstances, for instance a child reaching school age, before returning to study was feasible. Others returned after encouragement from those closest to them, or, for a few, as a result of an 'epiphanic' insight (Barone, 1995) regarding the direction their life should take.

Four of the seven successfully completed their Access year and progressed to university, two left to seek employment and one to study part-time outside of the

course: a drop-out rate reflecting the wider study and college Access programme overall.

Returning to education: biographical tensions
Access courses do more than provide someone with limited formal qualifications a route into university. Parry (1996) claims they traditionally combine two main features: a curriculum concerned with preparation for HE, and a course of study aimed at those unable to qualify for university entry in 'traditional ways'. Peters (1997) meanwhile writes of how such programmes provide 'scaffolding' to assist students' academic development. These outcomes are central aims of the formal curriculum, delivered through the usual 'core activities' of numeracy, literacy, communication and study skills. There is also an informal curriculum aim, to raise confidence levels (George *et al*, 2004) and develop transferable generic 'soft' skills including time management, independent learning and effective group working.

Some writers suggest for many learners Access courses offer a 'second chance' to revisit previous 'failings' within *or by* the educational system, what Paul Willis calls '*settling old scores*' (cited in McFadden, 1995). But this position is not without its critics. Warmington (2002) for instance illustrates how circumstances behind educational disaffection are usually more complex than such largely deterministic theories suggest. I would also distance my thinking from McFadden over this, and feel a more sophisticated analysis of social influences factors including class and gender necessary. Humanistic or biographical research methods are most appropriate in arriving at this (Erben, 1998; Plummer, 2001; Sparkes, 2002).

The education system purports to offer individuals the chance to develop intellectually, equipping them for work, and adding to their sense of personal fulfilment whilst increasing their knowledge and understanding (Dearing, 1997). However, the reality for many, including most highlighted here, is of school being a time of great personal trauma during which people can feel devalued or excluded. Such experiences, even when viewed many years later, remain a source of continuing anger, frustration and resentment.

By re-engaging with formal education, Access students are involved in changing their learner identity, a process that for many also risks their class and/or gender identity/ies (Brine and Waller, 2004). Other risks exist for mature learners too, see for example Baxter and Britton (2001), Davis and Williams (2001), Reay (2003), and Shah (1994, p 261), who suggests returning to education as an adult is '*a public exposure of one's ignorance*', and a step into the unknown. People on Access courses have left familiar surroundings and ceased to be identified – by themselves and others - as full-time workers or family carers, but once again as 'students', in most cases for the first time since leaving school at 16. As one of the respondents, Elizabeth, observed, '*we've all come back to education and given up things…everybody is here for a reason*'. The reasons offered frequently involve redressing shortcomings in learner (and sometimes class) identities, and needing to make up for opportunities wasted when younger. Students *may* finish the Access course with a stronger learner identity than when they started, but this is a risk with a range of potential costs, as demonstrated by those in the study that dropped out.

Reflections upon and (re)constructions of 'fragile' learner identities
Whilst there are differences amongst the students, for example, of class and ethnicity, they share an experience of under-education and a general absence of social and economic capital. Aged between 27 and 40, they left compulsory

schooling 10 or more years ago. The seven, whose ethnicity is self-identified as 'white' unless otherwise specified, are as follows[1]:

Akhtar – 'Victim of sporting prowess'?

Akhtar is the son of a Pakistani immigrant father and a 'white British' mother. Recently separated, he lives alone, away from his ex-wife and 11 year-old daughter. Before Access, Akhtar had a well-paid job in marketing having studied industry-specific qualifications. Like others here, Akhtar revealed a strong sense of regret when reflecting upon experiences of schooling:

> *I enjoyed school, but never applied myself…I'm angry with my teachers in a way, looking back on it. I knew I had the ability, but I wasn't able to take responsibility for myself, and they never made me either... they let me get away with so much because I was good at rugby. As long as I was at school for that, they didn't care.*

Akhtar's suggestion that his teachers were partially culpable for his lack of application at school is a fairly common position amongst mature students in the study. This is less 'allowable' for adult learners, who are expected to take responsibility for their studies, a central assumption of the pedagogic principles underpinning Access courses (see Avis, 1997). His experience of being *permitted* to take a lax approach to his studies 'in exchange' for exercising his sporting prowess for the school team finds echoes in the wider research literature. Connolly (1997) for instance found misdemeanours of some primary school students tolerated by teachers since they played for the school football team. Like those in Connolly's study, Akhtar feels he was treated leniently to dissuade him from becoming disillusioned with school. Whilst he enjoyed such treatment at the time, Akhtar now regrets his teachers' approach. The family moving to Scotland for two years further disrupted Akhtar's education, and during this time Akhtar experienced social isolation and racially-motivated bullying.

Beatrice – 'Following her passion'

Beatrice has Romany parents, a self-employed shopkeeper father and 'housewife' mother. She lived with them in a small seaside town before moving away to join the Access programme. Beatrice described herself as feeling '*trapped and very unhappy*' before starting the course, and being '*desperate to change her life*'. She also suffered bullying at school, further bruising an already fragile learner identity and self-esteem. Whilst Akhtar did not admit to being actually damaged by the bullying he endured, we must consider the influence of gender relations, specifically dominant discourses of masculinity operating during the interviews. To be the victim of racist bullies is one thing, but to concede it caused lasting harm is perhaps quite another, possibly requiring a deeper rapport and trust than Akhtar and I established during our initial meeting.

In common with many in the study, Beatrice's experience of schooling was largely negative and shaped by attitudes and practices informed by structural factors of gender, class and ethnicity. Like Akhtar when in Scotland, Beatrice's ethnicity set her apart from other children. She described with regret how her family had been totally unsupportive of her schooling, something she attributes to Romany cultural practices:

> *My father saw education as a threat, and I didn't go to school until I was seven, so I had no social interaction skills, which is why I was so completely 'different'. As you can imagine, it was like being thrown to the lions! Seven years old and not knowing how to play with other children! My experience of primary school is one of the horror stories of childhood bullying…my high school life was exactly the same, I was completely isolated and had to develop strategies and tactics to stay 'mentally well'.*

Like others in the study, Beatrice was visibly moved when remembering her unhappy childhood. Such unpleasant memories are never far away for many of the interviewees. She described her horror at the unexpectedly immature behaviour of

some Access students during an early class on the course, and an overpowering sense of déjà vu:

> *I did have a problem with one lesson when I first came, because of the disruptive influence of others…I thought 'oh my God, it's going to be like it's always been'. It took an enormous amount of courage for me to get back into an educational environment, I'd got a lot of demons to lay to rest…and I thought 'I'm not going to stand for this', so I spoke to the tutor, and I said 'is it going to be like this all the time?'. It was dealt with straight away.*

Her willingness to confront the source of potential future unhappiness and the prompt action of her tutor reassured Beatrice and helped in her struggle for a positive learning experience. Others in her class doubtless also benefited from her actions.

Sasha – 'Time for a sharp exit'

Sasha is a single mother from an ethnically mixed inner-city neighbourhood. She has travelled widely abroad and held a variety of low-paid jobs in the UK. Sasha joined the Access programme hoping to become a forensic scientist, but unlike Akhtar and Beatrice, did not complete the course, leaving after just one term. She too had a troubled educational background, attending both mainstream and Steiner schools. Her mother had taken a *lassez faire* approach to Sasha's education, allowing her to change schools several times and stay away for long periods if she wanted. I spoke with Sasha at the end of the first term, asking her to reflect on her schooling and how she found returning to study after nearly 20 years. I did not know that Sasha was about to leave the course, and nor do I think did she, although her reasons were clear retrospectively. Sasha's learner identity had been so damaged by school that, despite her career ambitions - she wanted to be a forensic scientist - and thirst for knowledge, she lacked the confidence to cope with formal learning again:

> *I've found it very difficult actually, it's bought up all the problems from when I was at school, that environment, and the failure feeling...It's had a profound effect, doing the Access course…I never thought for a minute it could have such an impact. It's stressful…I thought I was going to be 'told off'. I kept thinking about ways to leave the classroom and not go back if I was asked to do something.*

George *et al* (2004) remind us how, as learners progress successfully in their studies, motivation and self-esteem are greatly enhanced. Unfortunately Sasha did not experience sufficient success on the programme to benefit in this manner.

At her second interview, several months after she had left the programme, Sasha reflected upon how things went wrong. She recalled being *scared* of the course, the work, even one of the lecturers, something that she subsequently saw as 'ridiculous' and 'highly irrational'. If Sasha were to recommence formal studies again at a later date, something she has not ruled out, she, like others on the course who were unsuccessful or suffered undue stress, will need more personal support than even the Access course could offer. This is something for both policy makers and college authorities to consider.

Interestingly, Akhtar, Sasha and Beatrice all have younger siblings who they feel benefited from a different subsequent parental approach to schooling. All three saw the greater support and encouragement offered to their brothers and sisters as being partly due to the difficulties *they* experienced. It was as if their parents were atoning for earlier mistakes, and consequentially promoting a more productive engagement with compulsory education. This could explain why siblings of *some* families experience and benefit from education so differently, and demonstrates how structural factors alone cannot adequately account for someone's educational experience. However, this is of scant consolation for the

three mature learners considered above, who have spent decades accommodating into their lives an unhappy and unsuccessful schooling.

Jo – 'Ideas above her station'?
Jo was raised on a small town council estate by her grandmother. She recalled with anger having her family background publicly described as 'dysfunctional' upon joining secondary school. She started the Access programme determined to become an English teacher, primarily to facilitate her making 'a positive contribution' to people's lives. Jo also has unhappy memories of schooling, but not from a deficit of family support. Like Akhtar, she blames the agency of the school authorities, and one or two specific teachers. She remembers being encouraged in her studies at home, but 'othered' and discriminated against at school, due to her social class and unconventional family circumstances:

> The town I grew up in was quite affluent, but I lived on the one small council estate, with my grandmother as my legal guardian. At primary school I had done quite well and I was put forward to go into the 'top set' at secondary school. When I got there it was, like, I couldn't go in the top set since I lived on the council estate. Really! It was, like, 'what do you mean, you're in the top set?'. It was always important what your mum and dad did. One teacher actually said to me in class that I came from a dysfunctional family. I was put into lower sets.

As with the rest of the cohort, verification of Jo's subjective account of events is difficult. Even if untrue, the effects on their self-esteem of Jo believing she was wrongly placed in a lower set, or Beatrice feeling socially isolated are *real in their consequences*, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992) said, since it contributes to the damaged learner identity that each has.

Like those of the wider study, Jo's life chances have been restricted by a poor school experience, and she lives with the consequences of this, including the public humiliation by her teacher, to this day. And yet like others under consideration here, Jo too wants to 'put something back' into society (Maguire, 2001; Reay, 2003), *despite having apparently taken very little herself*. She is driven by a desire to make-good not just her own poor schooling, but, altruistically, that of others. This is her prime motivation for seeking to teach – helping others avoid the trauma she had experienced at school.

Geraldine - 'All or nothing'
Geraldine, also a single mother, came from a run-down 'sink' council estate on the outskirts of the city. She had worked in low-skill, poorly paid jobs and/or lived on state benefits since the birth of her son, now 16. Like Jo she had a supportive family and initially progressed well through the education system. Academically ahead of her peers when starting school, Geraldine was held back by the approach of her teachers who encouraged her to sit alone and read quietly, effectively outside of general classroom activities. She recalls having '*a real passion for learning*', which the school system '*slowly squeezed out of her*'. Geraldine considers her abortive efforts to learn the violin as indicative of her wider experience:

> I wanted to play the violin, but they had their quota, and my surname began with an 'L', and since they took people alphabetically, I got to play the viola. The music teacher came in and taught the violins first, then the violas, and then the 'cellos. I used to go early for my viola lessons so I could play the violin before, and stay late so I could play the 'cello. I asked the music teacher if I could learn them all, and he asked the Headmaster, who said 'No'...So needless to say, I gave up the viola when I was about 12. But I didn't want to play the viola in the first place. I wanted to play the violin!

Geraldine's experiences of trying to learn the violin characterise her frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful childhood engagement with formal education. Thwarted in her ambitions, she 'rebelled' against the system, and ceased trying. She spoke of being 'expected to get about 10 'O' Levels', but leaving with none:

> I was fed up at school…everything I wanted to do, I was told 'No', so I thought 'if I can't learn what I want to, I'm not going to learn anything at all' and gave up.

Eventually overcoming her antipathy towards education, Geraldine returned to it via an Access course in her mid-30s, but once again ended up disenchanted. Having worked previously both as a zookeeper and veterinary assistant and feeling herself capable of a higher status animal-related job with more responsibility, Geraldine wanted to study an appropriate degree. There was only one university course locally that she *really* wanted to do, and like most of the others in the study she was tied to the immediate area by family commitments.[2] Geraldine applied to read Animal Psychology and Zoology at the nearby pre-1992 university, a course for which competition for places is particularly fierce, with an estimated 20+ applicants for every place. Against the advice of her tutors, she did not apply for any other courses, for instance the Animal Science degree at the local post-1992 university, which, as an Access student at the FE college, she was effectively guaranteed a place on. Like when offered viola rather than violin lessons at school, Geraldine would not compromise and accept 'second best'. Unfortunately, in common with most Access students applying there, she was rejected by the local 'elite' university, generally seen in the city as somewhere that 'local people may go to work, but not necessarily…to study' (Stuart, 2002, p 77). She left the college soon after the rejection, and is ultimately as frustrated by the experience of adult education as she was by school. Like Sasha, Geraldine's learner identity now is more bruised than before the Access course, having built up her hopes and expectations, but failing to achieve her goal.

Elizabeth – 'Better late than never'
Elizabeth is a middle class woman with a strong family history of participation in HE. She spent most of her childhood overseas, and was on the Access to Teaching pathway, having tried a succession of short-term (usually non-manual) jobs since leaving school a decade before.

Elizabeth probably enjoyed far more parental support for her studies than Akhtar, Beatrice, Sasha and even Geraldine. However, after the family returned from Canada where her father had been working, Elizabeth had motives beyond formal academic success driving her at school, namely 'fitting-in' with and being accepted by the other pupils. This resonates with the findings by Reay *et al* (2002) amongst others, who have writtten of a mature student needing to feel comfortable at their chosen *university*, and was a theme for some of the respondents here – Akhtar for instance (see Waller (forthcoming), for a more detailed discussion). Like Beatrice and Akhtar above, Elizabeth favourably compares her current disposition towards studying to when younger:

> I'm enjoying studying now more than ever before, and I think that has a lot to do with my motivation, which I didn't have in secondary school…I can remember desperately trying to 'fit-in' more than getting good marks. Now I've got that life experience behind me…I'm going back to learn, and am really enjoying it…I wish I had known then what I wanted to do, and sometimes look back and think of all the years I've wasted.

Avis (1997, pp 83-4) refers to this representation of the 'motivated and committed' mature student as 'the preferred and celebratory Access discourse'. Elizabeth's comments epitomise succinctly a dilemma faced by many adult learners. On one

hand, they wish that they had *known* what they wanted to do with their lives when younger, to avoid the 'wasted years'. Yet on the other, many acknowledge that they were *not ready* for such a decision earlier, that they didn't have the 'life experience' necessary to inform their choice.[3]

John - 'Second time lucky'?

John was the only child of a lower middle class family. His education was seriously disrupted by illness – he developed epilepsy at 13, and missed most of his subsequent schooling. He has since worked in 'heavy manual jobs'. John's intention upon beginning Access was to study Art at university.

Whilst Elizabeth had planned to start 'A' Levels after school, she '*took a year off and lost the motivation for studying*', something she now regrets. John too left school at sixteen, albeit for different reasons. Despite his middle class background, John's parents were apparently ambivalent to his education. He said '*I don't remember any encouragement or lack of encouragement… they were there, full stop*'. He now reflects with a sense of lost opportunity on this, the debilitating illness suffered as a teenager, and on marrying young, which he thinks further restricted his educational and life chances:

> *I don't really remember much about school, because at the age of 13 I developed epilepsy, and I missed nearly three years of secondary school…I got good Art and Drama 'O' Levels, and scraped through some of the others, but was desperate for money, so I took the first job that came along…I got married and 'did the right thing'. I've now* suddenly *realised I made a mistake 20 years ago, since things didn't work out as they should have done then, so I'm doing it now instead.*

John had developed an interest in painting a few years before starting the Access course. He had been independently engaged in informal learning, being largely self-taught. When we spoke at the end of his first term, John was not especially happy on the course, considering it too diverse for his requirements. By then John already doubted whether he actually wanted to go on to university, feeling he could perhaps earn a living from painting without formally studying it to degree level. He, like Sasha, left the course soon after our first conversation, returning to full-time factory work and beginning a part-time painting course, a more specialised one than the Art & Design Access programme he had started. John seemed much happier during subsequent meetings.[4]

Discussion: Rethinking learners' journeys

People return to formal learning for a variety of reasons. It may be the timely realisation of a long-held desire (Jo and Elizabeth), or dependent on a child reaching school age (Geraldine and Sasha). For John it was the consequence of an 'ephiphanic' self-realisation (Barone, 1995), whilst the encouragement of others was the spur for Akhtar, and Beatrice who recalled:

> *I met somebody. It was unexpected and I fell in love, changing my whole life to be with him. He is incredibly supportive, and recognised something inside me that needed to be brought out, because I was 'caged' in the life that I had, and was not free to explore the things that I wanted. He encouraged me to 'do education'.*

Whilst motivating factors for re-engaging with formal education as a mature student vary from one adult returner to another (Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; West, 1996), in most instances it is probably a combination of reasons. Others in the wider study joined the course citing the motivating factor or 'turning point' (Hodkinson *et al*, 1996) as the break-up of a relationship, death of someone close or just being 'bored at work'. To satisfactorily categorise such involved and highly

personal decisions is problematic, except only in the very broadest of terms, as discussed in the concluding section below.

The people of this study are lifelong learners, both within the all-encompassing definition and as 'returners' to formal study on a path designed to lead to university and confer qualifications to achieve occupational ambitions. To differing extents they are also engaged in studying for its own sake, that is, in 'liberal education', where the process of knowledge acquisition is as important as the outcomes. This is particularly true of Beatrice and John here. The students all ended their first period of formal learning at (or in the case of John, Sasha and Beatrice, effectively before) the earliest UK school-leaving age of 16. They recall with resentment and regret the difficulties and disappointments of school, and several clear themes emerged from the interviews. Because of their ethnic backgrounds, Akhtar and Beatrice were isolated and bullied, whilst Geraldine was 'bored' by school, and ceased trying. John missed most of his schooling post-13 due to illness, and Elizabeth, coming from overseas, was more concerned with social acceptance than academic success. Sasha felt 'humiliated' and 'physically sick' at school, and Jo was pathologised and 'othered' at school because of class and family circumstances. The impact of their adverse experiences affects them decades later and will doubtless continue to in the future. This may, however, have been mitigated by subsequent success as an adult in post-compulsory education (George *et al*, 2004).

The representation of (mature) student experience
In a recent study of Access students from an inner city FE college, Warmington (2002) suggests the 'second chance' model of Access education found within popular discourse and the work of commentators including McFadden (1995) is too simplistic and generally problematic. This approach, influenced by the subcultural and resistance theories of Willis (1977), proposes the rejection of schooling as being *the* 'authentic' working class response to an education system weighted against their interests. My findings support this criticism of McFadden. Warmington proposes five diverse but discrete scenarios, some of which themselves draw upon resistance theory, to account for the 'complexity of educational disaffection' of mature students reflecting upon their previous learning experiences:
- Unequivocally positive recollections
- Feelings of 'been failed' by school through a lack of support
- Withdrawal as response to an alienating curriculum
- Regret over family or economic circumstances hindering success
- Rebellion by 'successful' students over denial of autonomy
(Adapted from Warmington, 2002, p 17)

But even such a breadth of categories cannot cover all possibilities. Whilst some learners highlighted here apparently fall squarely into one of the positions outlined, Beatrice's regret at parental discouragement of her schooling for example, others account for their unsuccessful experiences by reference to a number of Warmington's categories. Geraldine, for instance, cited both having been failed by a lack of support at school, *and* rebelling against a perceived denial of personal autonomy. The situation is too complex, too reliant upon the particular circumstances of someone's life, for any list of discrete positions to be fully inclusive. The subtleties and nuances of personal experience lead to very different outcomes for something as complex as an individual's learner identity (see Waller (forthcoming), for a more detailed exploration of this subject). As suggested above, a life course or life history approach incorporating biographical research methods allows these accounts to come to the fore. There is an infinite range of

possibilities, each as unique, elusive and difficult to accurately capture as the myriad possible images generated by a kaleidoscope (Shah, 1994). Some *degree* of broad characterisation *may* be possible – suggesting as I do here that some mature learners view their schooling as a wasted opportunity for example - but as Webb *et al* (1994) argue it will always be problematic to attribute people to a *genus* or 'type' of student. Mature students *en masse* are not the homogenous group that much early research suggested they were (for example, NIACE, 1993; Woodley *et al*, 1987). Nor can they be satisfactorily sub-divided into a series of homogenous categories or sub-groups such as gender and parenthood (Edwards, 1993), or social class (Tett, 2000). Do we really want to study people as if wriggling on the end of a pin, or stuffed, labelled and on display in a museum? As James (1995) argues, attempts to apply a 'species' approach to the study of mature students seem to be for the benefit of institutional convenience rather than to try to aid the understanding of their *experience*, as I am seeking to.

Instead, I find the suggestion of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) of a 'learning career' useful since it assumes a (learner) identity in a state of flux, under constant (re)construction. Crossan *et al* (2003, p 59) develop this further by suggesting it is 'frequently contingent and associated with rather *fragile and experimental* changes in identity' as opposed to a necessarily '*lasting and unilinear* change' (my emphasis). This recognition that the trajectory of 'learning careers', can be forwards, sideways or *into reverse* helps us to understand the experience of Geraldine here, now with a weaker learner identity than before the course by virtue of having dropped out. Just as she now views her school experience with a mixture of resentment, regret and wasted opportunity, Geraldine may perhaps reflect upon her time on the Access course similarly. The learning career model also acknowledges that the (frequently contested) process of constructing learner identities is a complex one, as Burke (2002, 2004) reminds us, since mature learners are 'multiply positioned' in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and other social factors.

Concluding thoughts
Whilst with the possible exception of Elizabeth, the students here joined with weak or bruised learner identities, they now engage variously in their (re)construction. For each, the period of transition is one of great opportunity, yet considerable risk, where failure further damages fledging identities, temporarily infused with hope. (See Brine and Waller (2004) for a more detailed discussion of this point). To *not* return to studying would have enabled them to believe that they *could* have succeeded. Another respondent in the wider study, Kirti, talked of hoping to be like '*an unpolished gem*', waiting to be 'discovered' academically. To attempt and fail is harmful to the learner. Sasha, for instance, like Geraldine, has tried and failed on an Access course, and now has a weaker, more damaged self-image than before attempting it. Her worst fears from schooling were revisited in seeking to redress a perceived deficit or shortcoming in her learner identity, 20 years on.

But all is not necessarily lost for Sasha and her peers. Her learning career is not yet over, the (re)construction of her learner identity remains an unfinished project, and her journey as a lifelong learner is still ongoing. Her studies could recommence through formal, informal or non-formal routes at a later date. So, as well as inevitably being a partial one, our image of Sasha as a learner is temporary too, since as Ball *et al* (2000, p 10) suggest, 'the stories we present are unfinished and open-ended', and as such they 'represent snapshots in lives in progress.'

The final conclusion from this study is the need for a review of government policy initiatives around widening participation in higher education, which still tend to

focus upon young people at school. As is evident from the vignettes presented, schooling can have a negative impact on learners, sometimes resulting in hostility to all educational institutions (Crossan *et al*, 2003). Whilst the adult learners here have overcome their antipathy towards formal learning in so much that they independently enrolled upon the Access to HE course, the deep-seated earlier damage to learner identities is still clear in their accounts. Indeed, it can largely be held responsible for the failure of those including Sasha and Geraldine, who were unsuccessful on the programme. Furthermore, it also hinders many others who could potentially benefit from the greater employment and wider life opportunities education can provide (Archer *et al*, 2003)[5]. In addition to raising aspirations and increasing opportunities for study amongst young, socially disadvantaged people, government (and institutional) policies must also be directed towards encouraging and supporting *adults* seeking to return to education later in life, including adults who now view their childhood engagement with education as 'a wasted opportunity'. Since, as the evidence presented here demonstrates, these people too can benefit from university admissions policies more geared towards a social justice agenda, and the economy and wider society will benefit too.

Notes

[1] The names of the students are pseudonyms they themselves chose. In some instances one or two minor biographical details have also been changed to further disguise their identities.

[2] Diane Reay and colleagues have recently demonstrated how the choice of HE institution for most mature students is extremely limited, largely because of geographical inflexibility arising from family commitments (Reay *et al,* 2002).

[3] This assumes that they actually do know *now*, a position contradicted by the relatively large numbers who change their mind over study plans whilst on the Access course or at university itself – something seven of the 20 in the bigger study have done, including John and Akhtar here.

[4] The students such as John, Sasha and Geraldine who dropped out of their Access or subsequent university course nevertheless remained part of the wider study, and their progress is reported on elsewhere. See for example, Brine and Waller (2004); Waller (2002); Waller (forthcoming).

[5] I certainly do not wish to construct as 'deficit' the lives of those people who have not engaged in post-compulsory education, I merely acknowledge the role education can play in social mobility for example, as well as valuing education for its own sake.

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