A Case Study of Progression on an Early Years Foundation Degree

Amanda Davis, Stockport College and Eamon O'Doherty, University of Salford

Abstract

In this paper we show how a strong structuration theory as indicated by Stones (2005) has methodological implications for research into adult learning. The site of engagement, as developed in this paper, is a Foundation degree in Early Years in a local Further Education College . The concern of the paper is with researching actors in context and exploring their strategic conduct through semi-structured interviews over three years. Decisions, actions and interactions related to progression on a work-based Foundation degree in Early Years and for some a BA Honours in Childhood Studies were analysed in relation to internal structures and dispositions to learning. The locales of engagement, the local Further Education College and the workplace, in this case schools, are significant aspects of changing dispositions and engagement with higher level learning. However, decisions and actions related to both progression to the BA in Early Childhood Studies and the decisions to leave formal learning are not zero sum. Formal learning can be interrupted by immediate personal commitments that are for the individuals concerned critical aspects of identity. Concerns with drop out and funding miss the point that engagement in learning can be individually transformational over short periods of time. At the same time structural constraints related to professional practice can affect adults who have progressed, achieved and in doing so have altered their dispositions to learning.

Foundation Degree Context

Foundation degrees were introduced in 2001 for reasons related to skill needs and social inclusion (Doyle and O'Doherty, 2006). They were to be a different form of provision from the normal three year honours degree (DfES, 2000), and were to have employer engagement and partnerships in their design and development as central features. Analysis of Foundation degree development has been produced by QAA (2003, 2005), by Nelson (2006) by Doyle and O'Doherty (2006) and more recently HEFCE (2007) has publish data on Foundation degree development and enrolment for the period 2001-06. All of the analyses point to a significant growth in Foundation degrees in education in each of the years under analysis. Foundation degrees in education accounted for approximately one third of Fds. In 2003-04 HESA data indicated that 'over 21,000 students were registered on Foundation degree programmes.' (Nelson, 2006, p. 51) and by 2006-07 HEFCE (2007) indicated that 60,925 students were registered on Foundation degrees.

HEFCE has recently published statistics on the growth of Foundation degree provision.
Table 1.

Number of Foundation Degree Students			
	Full-time	Part-time	Total
2001-02	2,530	1,795	4,320
2002-03	6,295	6,015	12,310
2003-04	12,240	11,710	23,945
2004-05	19,780	18,040	37,820
2005-06	26,910	19,870	46,780
2006-07	33,895	27,025	60,925

Source:HEFCE, 2007/03

Foundation Degrees in Education

Research by Snape *et al.* (2006) indicated that the majority of those enrolled on Foundation degrees in education were enrolled on Early Years Foundation degrees. The HEFCE (2007) analysis indicated that ' Together 'Early Years' and 'teaching assistant' Foundation degrees accounted for most of the programmes described as 'education studies' in the HESA data.' (HEFCE, 2007, p.20). These Foundation degrees in education were the most popular for a number of reasons. Firstly, there were the workforce agreements in the public sector that resulted in statutory change and the creation of new remuneration packages in such services as

education, health, policing, the Fire Service and dental technology. These, in the main, were brought about by Public Service Agreements (PSAs) and were aimed at developing the associate professional level of employment. This development of higher level intermediate skills was an important element of Foundation degree development and also of government policy (Dearing, 1997, DfES, 2003a).

However, it needs to be remembered that the demand for such higher level intermediate skills is not evenly distributed throughout different sectors of the economy (LFS, 2006). The need for such skills is concentrated in specific sectors such as education, finance and banking, administration and health (Doyle and O'Doherty, 2006, LFS, 2006). For example, approximately twelve percent of the engineering sector employs workers skilled at the associate professional or technician level, but the construction sector employs only two percent of workers at this level (LFS, 2006). While certain early trends in Foundation degree development can be discerned, such as the growth of education and the influence of the policy of modernisation, there are other more local and diverse regional needs that are influencing Foundation degree development. The main focus on Foundation degrees in this paper is the importance it has as a site adult engagement in higher level learning. By examining the engagement of adults with this new qualification, a work-based qualification and by conducting interviews with a group of learners over time we can are able to explore issues related to the life course and transition within higher education by adults. Some of these issues, concerned with identity and with changing dispositions, have been identified by the TLRP Learning Lives Project as central to an understanding of learning as becoming.

O'Doherty (2006) provided evidence of changing dispositions among learners enrolled on Foundation degrees in education, health and local governance. He referred to these as work-based public sector Foundation degrees and he drew on the research by Fuller and Unwin (2003) concerned with the development of Modern Apprentices and the conditions they identified that underpinned a restrictive – expansive continuum for engagement in learning. Key aspects of specific Modern Apprenticeships afforded expansive opportunities for engagement and active learning. In the case of public sector Foundation degrees O'Doherty (2006) argued that this expansive form was also present in the development of work-based public sector Foundation.

In this paper, the authors build on the earlier research in two distinct ways. Firstly, the research developed into a collaborative exercise that involved Stockport College and the University of Salford. The earlier form of the research in 2004 involved the researcher from Salford seeking permission and consent to become involved in research in a Further Education College (FEC) context and although useful it also proved restrictive in relation to knowledge of the context and students. This paper draws on the different expertise of both the practitioner in the college and the researcher in the university. This has enabled the development of a case study that extends the previous research and provides a deeper understanding of issues related to progression and engagement with learning on a specific Foundation degree. The second aspect of the research that is developed from the 2004 study is the longitudinal aspect. The previous research by (O'Dherty, 2006) indicated the ways in which the adults involved in work-based Foundation degrees developed self-esteem and the ways in which their involvement in higher education, through the experiences afforded by the Foundation degrees, altered their dispositions to learning. In this paper we report on the same five adults who had enrolled on an education Foundation degree in 2003 and who we interviewed again in 2006-07. By this stage four had enrolled on the BA Honours in Early Childhood Studies that was taught at the FEC. This is added to by interviews with four adults who were part of the same cohort on the Fd but who decided to leave formal learning at the Fd stage in 2005. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with both groups. This case study, therefore, is in part longitudinal and comparative.

Learning as Becoming: identity, agency and structure

In a recent paper discussing contrasting concepts of learning, Hodkinson and McLeod (2007) indicated the way in which Sfard (1998):

> *'.. drew our attention to the significance of metaphors in relation to learning, when she analysed recent debates about the nature of learning as a contest between the metaphor of acquisition and that of participation. These two metaphors, she argued, present largely incommensurable views of what learning is. Acquisition focuses either on learning as a commodity or, perhaps more accurately, as a process whereby commodities of, say, knowledge are acquired. At its crudest, this amounts to little more than what Bereiter (2002) terms the folk theory of learning – putting stuff (what is learned) into vessels (the human mind). Participation, on the other hand, entails seeing learning as the undertaking of activities within a social context, sometimes conceptualised as an activity system (Engestrom, 2001, 2004), sometimes as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).' (p.3).*

Hodkinson and McLeod proceed to consider how these two metaphors can be added to by drawing on the metaphor of 'learning as becoming' and in doing so they situate agency as a critical concept at the centre of this metaphor. Thus learning as becoming focuses our attention on the actions and engagement or non engagement of the learner as the person involved in the constructive work required to make and remake their identity through engagement with learning. Agency is a key aspect of an ongoing debate within social theory and the solutions offered by key theorists in relation to structure and agency or determinism and voluntarism. This debate has been concerned with the use of dualism and duality to explain structure and agency in the reproduction of society. Thrift (1996) identifies, in a descriptive manner, a structurationist 'school' that attempts to provide a dialectical combination concerned with a non-reductionist theory. Although he acknowledges differences between the theories he argues that in this 'school' we can include Bhaskar's 'transformational model', Giddens's 'recursive model', Bourdieu's *habitus* model. In all of these cases the attempt to overcome the structure –agency dualism takes the form of social structures being viewed as a duality:

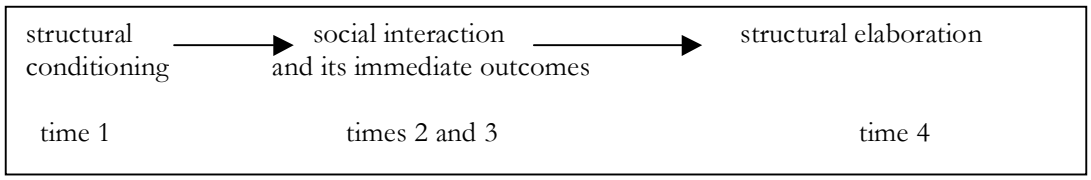
> *'…social structures are characterised by their **duality.** They are constituted by human practices, and yet at the same time they are the very medium of this constitution. Through the processes of socialisation, the extant physical environment, and so on, individuals draw upon social structure. But at each moment they do this they must also reconstitute that structure through the production or the reproduction of the conditions of production or reproduction. They therefore have the possibility, as in some sense, capable and knowing agents, of reconstituting or even transforming that structure.'(Thrift, 1996:69)*

In this paper we will draw on a strong structuration theory, as elaborated by Stones (2005), to examine key aspects of adult learning. Structuration theory was the solution that Giddens provided to the determinism indicated by functionalism and the voluntarism of certain interpretive theories. The problem of using Giddens's structuration theory for empirical research has been reviewed by Stones (1996, 2005). Giddens gives little or no attention to questions of methodology or empirical research except to indicate that the concepts which are involved in the theory of structuration should be used as 'sensitising' concepts to lead into research or to evaluate a research project. He does offer some limited methodological insight as Stones (2005) indicates. This is a reference to strategic conduct analysis that is at the heart of structuration theory.

> *Social analysis, which places in suspension institutions as socially reproduced, concentrating on how actors reflexively monitor what they do; how actors draw upon rules and resources in the constitution of interaction (Giddens, 1984, p.373)…the focus is placed upon modes in which actors draw upon structural properties in the constitution of social relations….The analysis of strategic conduct means **giving primacy to discursive and practical consciousness**, and to strategies of control within defined contextual boundaries. Institutionalized properties of the settings of interaction are assumed methodologically to be 'given'…..It is to concentrate analysis on the contextually situated activities of definite groups of actors. (Giddens, 1984, p.288)*

In order to engage empirically with a strong structuration theory Stones responded to strong criticism by Archer (1995, 1998, 2000) of Giddens' theory in publications of his own Stones (1996, 2001, 2005). Archer maintained that Giddens's stress on duality, in which he argued that

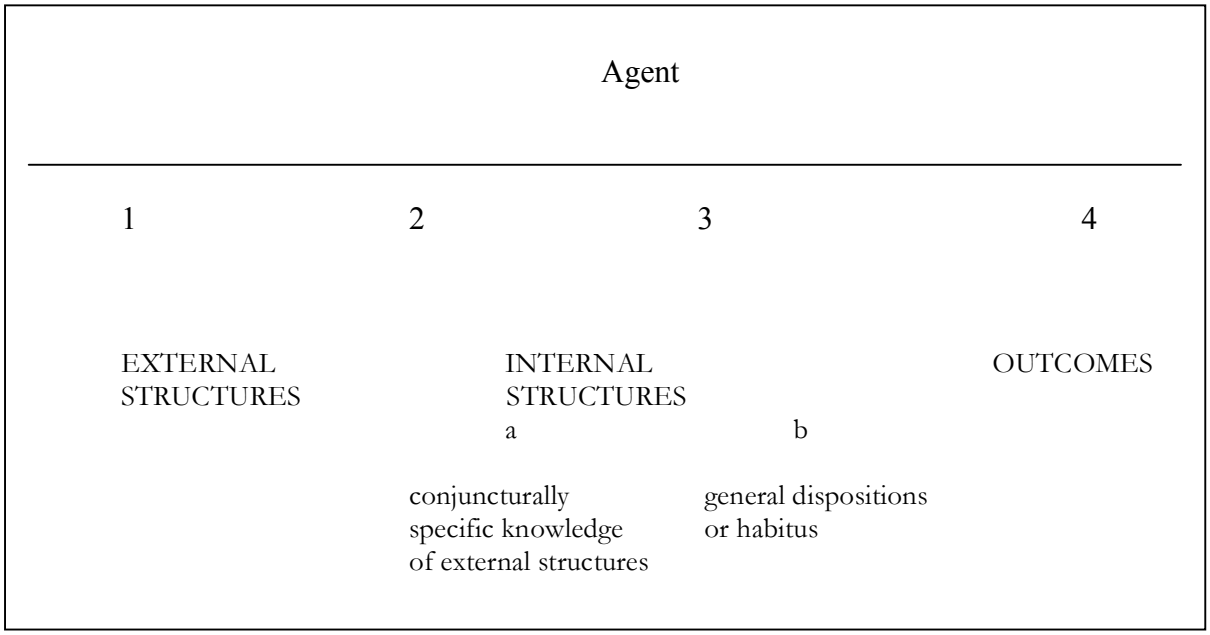
'…structures exist as memory traces and in the instantiation of practices means, that one cannot tell where structures begin and agents end.' (Stones, 2005 p. 52). Archer utilises a dualism that reflects the separation of two things, *'structural conditions and action within the limits allowed by the conditions'* (Ibid, p. 52). This dualism is based on a Newtonian perspective of time and for Archer is a *'significant aspect of reality.'* (Ibid, p. 52). Archer's (1995) realist analytical dualism allows practical social analysis that is based on a temporal characterisation. This model offers the possibility of researching the interplay between structure and agency in the following manner. This is summarised as;
Figure 1.



Adapted from Stones (2005 p.)

Stones (2005) accepts the lack of temporality in structuration theory and agrees that the incorporation of Archer's realist critique would benefit a strong structuration theory. However, he rejects the view that Giddens elides structure and agency and that in his writings structure has no *'pre-existent or causally influential' role.'* (Stones, 2005 p.54). He proceeds to defend this position from the writings of Giddens. For the purposes of this research the following is the way in which Stones uses Archer's critique to provide a framework for practical research using a strong structuration theory.

The Quadripartite Nature of Structuration



Stones (2005, p. 85)

For the research purposes, we are concerned mainly with times 2 and 3 and the internal structures that agents draw upon in a specific context in what we refer to as a site of engagement. Internal structures can be divided, for analytical purposes, into the knowledge that the agent has at a specific time in a specific context of the external structures. This is sometimes referred as horizons for action since the agent is knowledgeable about certain objective conditions, about what is possible in this context. The general dispositions or habitus are the largely embodied ways of going on or coping in the contexts that we feel secure in and thus provide us with that sense of 'ontological security'. In the work of Giddens these are reflected in his deployment of

discursive and practical consciousness, the ways in which we can talk about or engage in discussion about our lives and knowledge of this and the ways in which we organise our lives recursively without thinking about it. Another key aspect of a strong structuration theory implies that in researching agents in context we need to recognise the importance of time and space and the idea that time and space are central aspects of all interaction. Thrift argues that;

> *'..human agency must be seen for what it is: a continuous flow of conduct in time and space constantly interpolating social structure. Such a view of human agency is necessarily contextual. As Bourdieu (1977, p.9) puts it: 'practices are defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction and rhythm are constitutive of their meaning'. Practice is always situated in time and space. This is one link to structure for the structurationists, since the places at which the activity is situated are the result of institutions which themselves reflect structure- home, work, school and so on. These institutions form nodes in time and space around which human activity is concentrated.' (Thrift, 1996 p. 71).*

The implications for conducting research into adult learning that draws upon the metaphor of 'learning as becoming' requires us to find ways of exploring both time and space of institutional settings and agents interaction in and around these. Our focus is on social practices ordered across time and space (Giddens, 1982 p.2) and the ways in which agents act and interact within specific sites of learning. In the case study reported here we have chosen to conduct a study of Teaching Assistants from Early Years and to explore key aspects of their engagement with the Foundation degree in Early Years and the BA in Early Childhhood in a FEC. These are significant moments in the lives of the individuals and they involve both aspects of a and b above. The workplace, in this case, the school or Nursery and the college are nodes of interaction and the Fd in Early Years forms the policy intervention that has motivated engagement and change for the learners. For almost all of the learners this is their first experience of engagement with higher education and their narratives and understanding of self as told through their interviews provide us with data related to strategic action. The focus on this site therefore is an attempt to narrow the confines of strategic action since it is enacted within the flow day to day recursive interaction around work, family, leisure etc. A work-based qualification involves two places of interaction around which this new qualification and the active engagement of these learners come together and in which identities are constructed or re-constructed.

Learning in this particular site we can identify as learning as becoming where there are aspects of acquisition and participation and more than this. We suggest that learning and identity are central to understanding engagement or any apparent move away from formal learning. Our position is closer to that identified by Quinn *et al.* (2005) and Field and Malcolm (2006) that suggests that we need to understand these actions as significant in relation to learning and identity. In such instances learning has and will continue to take place but engagement with formal learning has been adjusted by the individual in relation to internal structures and identity. Adults such as this may be involved in apparently rejecting formal learning for periods of time where they are involved in more immediate practices of care and responsibility in relation to their identity within their family circumstances or within work.

The adults are active in finding out about the course or the process either through contact with the workplace, the college or the university or through a combination these. In enrolling on the course or deciding to use the APL process they are making a significant change in their lives that is discussed within their family and in which there may be considerable support and finally when they are participating in learning on the course they are interacting with other learners, some from the same types of background and others from different backgrounds. Their understanding of the learning process itself becomes an important aspect of their identity formed through interactions with specific groups of learners in the college, workplace or elsewhere. For Biesta (2006) agency is composed of three key aspects, the past, present and future dispositions and the ways in which these are drawn on by individuals reflects key aspects of their identity and becoming.

Limitations of the Study

This approach to the study of adult learning has limitations in relation to the wider discussion of change within social theory. The 'structurationist' school is better at providing a theoretical understanding of the ways in which society is reproduced rather than the ways in which it is changed. An individual can only change language as a speaker if others take up the new words and these becomes embedded in everyday language as is the case with the development of text on mobile phones. Little will change if an individual uses a new word or composition and it is ignored or not understood by the immediate speakers in the context. Similarly, despite knowledge of economics an individual cannot affect a major bank by withdrawing all of the money from their account but thousands of individuals can, as the recent example of Northern Rock demonstrated. So we are left with the view that individual agency is real but limited and the actions of the agent will generally reproduce the structural conditions at time 4. Only in the event of mass action will structural conditions be altered in any way. However, we can explore the ways in which individuals' positions or roles or the practices that are inherent in both role and position are an active part of identity and how these can be altered through an engagement with higher level learning. As Fuller and Unwin (2003) have suggested there is the possibility of expansive learning and the possibility of changing dispositions to learning through the curriculum design that allows for opportunities to engage with others from different workplaces, has relevant knowledge relating to the workplace and a provision for further study. All of these aspects are central to public sector work- based Foundation degrees (O'Doherty, 2006).

Methodology

The Foundation degree at Stockport College enrolled students in September 2003 and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of this cohort in May –June 2004 at the end of their first year of study. An initial focus group interview was carried out concerned with very general issues of employment, being a student and future plans. The second interview was an individual interview targeted at five of the group of forty two students from different parts of the sub-region of Manchester and Stockport who had enrolled on this new qualification. Each interview was focused on aspects of their life as teaching assistants, their motivation for studying, the influence of their school or nursery, their experiences of work-based learning and the support mechanisms in place for the course such as tutorial support and work-based mentoring. The third interview with the five work-based learners was carried out in December 2006 when the students had either progressed to BA/BA Honours or completed their Fd award. In both cases the data was recoded and transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach.

In 2006 we decided to conduct interviews with four students who had completed the Foundation degree award but had chosen not to progress to the BA. In this case we were concerned to explore different perceptions of progression and engagement with both the Fd and the BA Honours. With the original five students the interviews conducted in 2006 visited some of the earlier questions and were concerned to explore issues related to engagement with higher level, learning, with changing dispositions and perceptions of constraint. How had the achievement of the awards the FdA and the BA affected their status and their identity? The questions are aimed at understanding the experiences of the learners, the extent of their engagement and how they perceive themselves over time in relation to this new qualification. The interaction at the college, and the school or nursery is important and we rely on the voices of the learners to explain how they engaged with the curriculum such as work-based learning and the significance of studying a higher education course in a local college. In this case the local college was the site of learning for both the Fd and the BA Honours. This specific paper is part of a wider series of interviews being conducted across sites of adult learning at the University of Salford.

This focus on a new educational policy initiative is part of a wider research project that is looking at key sites of engagement in relation to adult learning. We have identified several pathways into higher education that have been developed because of national policy, regional developments and institutional policies. These areas are Foundation degrees that are work-based learning in the public sector, Access courses and Accreditation of Prior Learning. The first is a national policy

level intervention, the second developed from a regional basis in the 1970s and the third is an institutional level initiative that has been successful. All three, however, offer a chance to develop research that involves the key aspect of engagement with higher level learning and key moments in individuals' lives that they are able to provide a narrative about. This focus offers the chance to research agency as discuss above within quite specific policy initiatives. The next section of the paper provides the immediate context or locale within which the Fd was established and then we present evidence from the analysis of the interviews that explores key aspects of enabling , constraint through agency.

EYSEFD Development at Stockport College

The Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree (EYSEFD) was first piloted in 2001 and 2002 and the first intake was in October 2003 (Snape *et al.* 2006). The DfES estimated that there were 6,662 students enrolled on the course at different institutions in 2004-05. The EYSEFD course was a new, higher education qualifications at level 5 that lead to a new level of professional practice known as the 'Senior Practitioner'. The Senior Practitioner is a reflective, experienced professional. The Early Years Foundation degree was first provided at Stockport College in September 2003. One of the lecturing staff from the college attended a conference on the Sector Endorsed Foundation degree and prepared the documentation for validation. The partnership was sought with Liverpool John Moores University and the first enrolment began in September 2003.

The following charts the development of the Foundation degree from September 2003 -2006.

Table 2.

Start Date	No. Enrolled	Completed FD	Progression to Honours
Sept. 03	44 students	34 (77%)	23(52%)
Sept 04	20	16 (80%)	12 (60%)
Sept 05	13	11 (85%)	
Sept 06	28	----------	----------

Source: Course Review Stockport College 2006

Table 3. Qualifications at Enrolment

Start Date	NVQ3	NNEB	ND	TA L3	Other
Sept. 03	13%	26%	14%	42%	5%
Sept 04	29%	24%	14%	19%	14%
Sept 05	47%	40%	--	13%	--
Sept 06	35%	28%	7%	17%	13%

Table 4. Workplace of the Learners

	School	Private Nursery	Other Employment
Sept 03	84%	16%	-----
Sept 04	65%	35%	
Sept 05	64%	36%	
Sept 06	38%	55%	7%

Course Review Stockport College

The entry requirements of the course were as follows:

Two days or equivalent must be spent in the Early Years workplace setting
Over 18 and have two years experience in post qualifying in an early years setting
Must have a Level 3 qualification in National Diploma (ND)/National Cert(NC) an NVQ3 or a CACHE Level 3 Cert.

The first year of enrolment at the college was the year of highest recruitment as the Sector Endorsed qualification benefited from a range of rewards. At Stockport forty of the forty four students enrolled received a full waiver of fees plus £500 bursary per year, free loan of a laptop and they also received free child care and their school or nursery received supply cover reimbursement. As attendance at the course was 1.30pm until 8.15pm on a Wednesday schools and nurseries could cover for the afternoon. The enrolment data for the years 2003-06 show that as the fee waiver and rewards were removed (check date) for subsequent years enrolment trend was downward. This recovered in September 2006 as funding for the Early Years Senior Practitioner became available through Sure Start but was targeted at private nurseries and providers and this is evident in the changing nature of the data in this case study.
In September 2006 Private Nurseries provide the majority of students whereas in 2003 the majority of students on the course came from schools.

Learners' Voices: Teaching Assistants

There are approximately 213,000 support workers employed in English schools and the majority of these are employed as classroom support staff often referred to as Teaching Assistants (TAs). Lee, (2002) in a study of their effectiveness estimated that there were 120,000 classroom assistants in schools in England. Many of these have been employed to support the government's educational strategy focused on literacy and numeracy. The Foundation degree in Early Years developed successfully from 2001- 2004 and was the most popular Foundation degree in this initial period. The first five Teaching Assistants in this case study worked in state schools and were interviewed on two occasions in 2004 and 2007. All five of these TAs had benefited from the incentives put into the Early Years Foundation degree at the beginning such as bursary, laptop and cover for their absence from school.

The first interview was carried out when they were near the completion of their first year of the Foundation degree in Early Years in 2004 and the second occasion when four had completed a BA Honours in Childhood Studies in 2007. The five women left school at different stages of their educational careers but all ended up in employment prior to becoming involved in their children's education as parent helpers or Teaching Assistants. Deborah had been working with children for quite a long time as a parent helper and one of the teachers suggested that she go on the NNEB.

D *"So I went to Davenport Centre and did the NNEB and worked at X School for eight years."*

Rebecca left school at eighteen after getting A levels. She applied to go to university but that fell through because of family commitments.

R *"I got a job in a private kindergarten and I've been working with young children ever since. I got married and when I had my child I stopped working but what I did was I became a child minder. My child actually had a companion and it was a job for me. When he started school I worked with one of my neighbours. We realised that there was a lack of facilities for pre school children so we set up a play group and we ran that for ten years. I am also very involved in Church working with early years and one of my friends who was a teacher at the school I now work at, said to me "Mary there's a job going at our school as a teaching assistant I think you'd be ideal for the job. So she got me the application form and I filled it in and I got the job because of all that experience. I got the job as a TA and then I started developing, professional development. I got all my qualifications for TA but because I very interested in Special Needs I got a SEN qualification and then from there developed it further. I finished the SEN qualification here at Stockport College."*

Sally left school at fifteen and went straight to FE College to do Community Care for one year. Then she studied the National Nursery Educational Board Diploma (NNEB) for two years and then did a follow up to the NNEB.

S *"So from there I was a Nanny for a couple of years and that was my step into education and from there I've stayed in education as I've been at this school for seventeen years. I'd worked in the Foundation stage and KS1 and I'd gone into KS2 as I was in Year 6 and from there that is where the push came to do something more as I want to teach."*

Patricia originally completed her A levels at school and was accepted to do PE at a college in Birmingham with a view to teaching PE. Circumstances changed at home so she transferred to a College of Education in Manchester and did her first year in a course in English and Human Movement with a view to teaching in a primary school.

P *"Again circumstances at home financially changed and as I was the oldest and there were young siblings and my dad lost his job that meant I went to work. So I then spent about twenty years working in finance with banks and travel bureaux as part time when I had my children and finally in mortgage administration. Someone phoned me up and said " There's sixteen hours going at school. Do you fancy taking the job as a TA ?" I thought a good time to change so off I went that was it. I started in the school and then in the second year I did the CACHE course the level 3 qualification and the third year I started my Fd."*

Helen left school and got married very young and did many different jobs.

H *"I ended up with three children and was looking for something that would fit in with that and became a school dinner lady and then a TA. I started doing one of the NNEB qualifications and was bored to tears as it wasn't for me…. I always knew that I should have done a degree and as my children got older I realised I wanted to but you can't just walk out of a job. You've got a mortgage and children and swan off and become a student. You can't do it so being able to come here while I'm working. It's just allowed me to do something I'd never had the chance to do."*

From different circumstances in their early education four of these women moved, through their involvement in family and their education, into helping in primary schools and eventually applying for and becoming a Teaching Assistant. Only Sally who left school at sixteen and progressed to further education chose employment as a Teaching Assistant without the direct involvement of caring for a family and bringing up children. Their motivation for studying the Foundation degree and the BA Honours was explored in the interviews. Responsibility for family and childcare meant that there was a recursive pattern to their engagement with primary schools. For four of the five women, their work was arranged around the times of dropping off and picking up from school and getting involved in the school was a way of ensuring less conflict or reliance on family or friends to help with school opening and closing hours. For each of them this occurred at different times in their lifecourse. Patricia was the last to become involved in this as she had employment in the financial sector for twenty years. This, in her case, was quite a commitment to make as she had a good professional salary and was exchanging this for eighteen hours per week at Teaching Assistants rates of pay. There is a sense in which the past, for at least two of the five, directly informs the present with their engagement with the Foundation degree. For Patricia and Rebecca the missed opportunity, because of their positions within working class families, meant that employment came before progression to higher education. The opportunity to move into education through employment as a Teaching Assistant and then enrolment on a Foundation degree hinted at a future as a teacher that resonated with their past and the missed opportunity at eighteen.

P *'The motivation was to see…there was still this burning instinct from when I first left school. It always came down to I wonder if I would really have liked that? I had the opportunity to see as I'd go into schools when my children were at school and I'd do a spot for hearing children read or go on school trips. I did participate at that level and it was just…I thought it was my time to see what I'd wanted to do. I'd looked after the rest of the family for long enough and this was going to be my opportunity.'*

Interviewer ' *Why the Foundation degree?'*

P *'..the opportunity came up because I did a level 3 course here at the college and that CACHE course was very, very difficult. To actually start learning a new skill, to be accepted in a new role and to learn the background the theory of it, that was quite difficult and I found it really consuming and then at the end of it they(FEC) were doing the Foundation degree and they just put a little note at the bottom of my final year that said my achievement was good and that I could possibly succeed on the Foundation degree.*
That gave me the confidence to think positively.

D *I have become a Higher Level Teaching Assistant and I am also a line manager… I've come to the point now where I think I've outgrown …how do I put it? I've outgrown... without being too.. I've outgrown being a Teaching Assistant. I'd like to go on to teach. I'd like to be a teacher now.*

Interviewer *'Did you always want to be a teacher when you started?'*

I think I did. I always wanted to be a teacher since the time I actually worked with children. You see I'm originally from Singapore and it's a lot different there. Unless you get four As at A level no university wants to look at you… They don't even look at Bs and Cs.'

Interviewer *'Has success on the BA Honours given you what you wanted? You always wanted to be a teacher, has it given you that opportunity?*

S *'I'm going to have to go elsewhere as there aren't many positions between Teaching Assistant and QTS. I think it's the system that lets you down. I don't think it's individuals…The system isn't prepared…hasn't got the positions yet. At the moment I'm applying to the Graduate Teaching Programme where you have to have a school in place so that's fine. The school is supporting me and the head is writing his reference which has to be in by the end of the month.'*

Three of the four were affected, to different degrees, by disappointment in relation to teaching. For two of these women it was at the age of eighteen on completion of A levels. One because she did not achieve high enough grades, the other because she had to leave an Education College to help to contribute to the family wage. The third woman made a conscious decision to enter childcare with the expectation of becoming a teacher. The fourth, Helen, left school at eighteen married and had three children and she refers back to the past - *I always knew that I should have done a degree*- but is more pragmatic in realising that the work-based Fd is an ideal way of studying for someone who has caring responsibilities and a mortgage. Their past experiences are, in some ways, active in informing decisions about their future identity in the present since the question of what might have been continues to inform their engagement with the expansive learning opportunities afforded by this Fd in education. Engagement therefore is also related to age as all four are confident that they can achieve QTS through the GTP, a work-based programme of study. This is the route that they studied for their Foundation degree and for the BA Honours in Early Childhood Studies and this is their fourth year of study on a work-based programme. Their dispositions to learning have altered and they are more confident about their positions and their identities within this part of the education system. They are conscious of both the structural constraints in terms of career progression and the ways in which the qualification has provided them with self esteem and more control over their future.

However, in the case of the fifth woman interviewed in 2003 and 2006 there are a different set of understandings related to internal structures. Margaret is older than the other women and has been studying for longer. She enrolled on the NNEB course at the college but also studied on the Open University prior to enrolling on the Fd at the college. She gain her Fd in Early Years and appears to have reached a plateau in formal learning.

M *I'had enough of studying since I only read a book for the courses I was doing and I found I didn't have the time for anything else. I was also studying an OU certificate and I passed that as well so I didn't really want to do any more. I love my job anyway. I love what I do as a classroom assistant.*

Interviewer *Are you considering becoming a teacher?*

M *I might. I have this certificate and I only have to do one more year and then a Postgraduate qualification. At the moment I'm not really interested.*

For Margaret it has been five years of constant study, first to achieve the qualifications to become a recognised TA and then three years on the Fd as she took an extra year to write her dissertation and gain an education certificate by studying on the Open University. Reading has become a chore rather than a pleasure as books have only been read as part of the course reading and her interest has waned. A central aspect of this is related to the problems all of these women have had in relation to career progression now that they have gained a FD or an honours degree. Qualified but with no career structure in place except the Higher Level Teaching Assistant and Only one, Rebecca achieved this but has correctly identified that through study she is both over Qualified and has out grown it. For Margaret whose is in her fifties the necessary motivation for the risky business of applying for GTP just isn't there. She knows and understands this from her knowledge of her school and the teachers in it. She would have to move to another school if she wanted to achieve QTS and at this stage in her life the routine of coming to work of knowing knowing the routine means that she can still say she might go for teaching but it appears she has decided not to pursue formal learning in pursuit of a qualification such as this.

Conclusion

This is a work in progress as we are analysing the interviews from the women who withdrew from formal learning at Foundation degree level and who are still Teaching Assistants. At present we can indicate the ways in which this site of engagement with learning, the Foundation degree in Early Years, has provided us with evidence of agency. The strategic decision making by those who progressed to the BA in Childhood Studies we have related to engagement with this work-based Fd but also to events indicated in the narratives presented by the women through interviews and the critical moments they identified in their past. For four of these there was a significance either in relation to class and gender or both as past events meant that a specific journey was embarked upon in relation to work or family. The engagement with education for four women began through the lives of their children as parent helpers or TAs as only Sally saw the Nursery Nurse route as having the possibility to lead to teaching (O'Doherty, 2006). This engagement was further developed through the Fd at a local college and the possibility of an imagined future from the past, the chance to do a degree. The decisions made in the past re family, marriage and employment are reworked to inform the present possibilities and to have the chance to complete a degree. This missed opportunity is pursued by four of these women because of the change in their dispositions through the work-based Fd. There are, however, career restrictions in their area of work as they are over qualified for TA work and need to complete a QTS to become teachers. Active agency for all five has meant they each have a degree of critical distance from their day to day recursive practices. For four the horizons for action have shifted as they have become more aware of external structures (Teaching Profession Requirements) and their own over qualified status. They have also, through discursive consciousness been able to place their decisions in a perspective that explains their present and future motivations in relation to their past experiences.

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