Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education

Barbara Merrill

Published online: 10 Jun 2014.

Submit your article to this journal 🖉

Article views: 1218

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 15 View citing articles

Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education

Barbara Merrill*

Centre for Lifelong Learning, Westwood Campus, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

This article examines the meaning and experience of retention and withdrawal in higher education from the perspective and voices of non-traditional adult students. It draws on UK biographical data from a European study on access, retention and withdrawal. Withdrawal is perceived negatively by higher education institutions and policymakers as it has an economic cost and reflects on the efficiency of an institution and the student who leaves is viewed as a failure. This article challenges the "traditional" view and argues that non-completion is not always a negative act as many of the students who left in this study talked about the benefits they had gained in terms of learning, identity and the development of the self. Two in-depth biographical case studies are outlined: one student who completes and one who leaves. Both employed their agency and determination in ways which were positive to them but different.

Keywords: non-traditional adult students; learner identities; biographical; structure/agency; determination

Introduction

Choosing to return to education as a working-class adult student is not an easy step to take, particularly if the decision is to study for an undergraduate degree in higher education. Although in times of economic recession it may appeal as a good move to make in the hope of securing a better future it may also be a risky business (Reay 2003; Barnett 2007) not least because of the financial constraints of high fees in England. Once in the academy the learning journey may not always be straightforward as some working-class adult students may experience setbacks and struggles relating to academic study, the institutional culture and/or their personal lives. However, for those who make it through to the degree ceremony there are social, personal and economic benefits. Many adult students leave university as changed people (West 1996). This article draws on data from a European EU research project entitled "Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education" (RANLHE) and explores, using a biographical approach, issues and meanings of retention and withdrawal in higher education (HE) through the voices of two working-class women who experienced different learning careers. The two biographies are used to illustrate why some working-class students "keep on going on" while others choose to leave, and the role that agency and structure play in constructing, or not, their learner identity. It also looks critically at, and challenges, what is counted as

*Email: Barbara.Merrill@warwick.ac.uk

"successful" experience of HE, arguing that leaving without completion may not always be a negative act.

The project involved eight partners from seven countries (two from England, and each from Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden). Each partner identified three case-study institutions to reflect the range of universities in their country. Using biographical methods the study looked at both younger and adult non-traditional students to explore why most succeeded with their studies while others from a similar socio-economic background left before completion. This article focuses on adult students in one elite English institution. The comparative dimension is addressed in a forthcoming book (Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg 2014). While recognising that the term non-traditional student is contested, our study used a working definition as those who are underrepresented in HE and whose participation is constrained by structural factors. This includes first generation, low-income families, those living in low participation areas, ethnic minorities, and disabled students.

This research was set against a background of a changing European HE system. While some institutions remain elite, the system as a whole is a mass-based one (Scott 2001) in all countries in this study, opening up opportunities for groups who previously never entered university. The research period coincided with an increasing policy concern about issues of retention and withdrawal across Europe as these reflect both the efficiency of a university and the national system of HE. Withdrawal is perceived negatively by institutions and governments as it has an economic cost. Student withdrawal is also viewed as an individual failure rather than an institutional one (Quinn et al. 2005). This article questions this, arguing that from the student perspective withdrawal may not always be negative as benefits may be gained as evidenced by students in this study. For some, leaving university marked a new positive biographical transition. It thus raises questions about what we mean by a "successful" student experience of HE. Through the voices of students I challenge the "traditional" view of what success and failure means at undergraduate level. Only for a minority did withdrawal result in negative effects on the self. Looking at issues of retention and withdrawal raises questions of why some adults complete their studies while others choose to leave. What role does their biography, self, identity, and the institution play in this process? These questions bring into play the need to interrogate the interaction between structure and agency in students' lives in shaping, or not, a learner identity.

Research on withdrawal has been heavily influenced by Vincent Tinto's American studies and later by UK researchers such as Mantz Yorke, Liz Thomas and Jocey Quinn. Although Tinto's work is influential it is limited in terms of understanding why adult students leave as it focuses on middle-class younger students. In contrast, UK research addresses the issue in relation to class but again focuses mostly on younger students (Quinn 2004; Yorke and Thomas 2003). Tinto's interactionist approach stresses that retention is achieved when a student is committed and integrated into the institution. He identified five factors which he argues promotes retention – feedback, support, involvement, expectations and learning – and simply asserts that "students who learn are students who stay" (Tinto 2003, 3). Tinto's approach fails to take into account a student's socio-economic and cultural background. Adult students often experience external personal and structural problems, such as lack of finance or health problems, so that even if they are "students who learn" if the problems become too severe they may have to leave, although not out of choice. Tinto's approach assumes that students have to fit-in and adapt to the institution's culture rather than

universities adjusting to the needs of a heterogeneous student population in a mass-based system. Thomas's (2002) study draws on the work of Bourdieu (1988) and Reay et al. (2009) by focusing on the institution and its "institutional habitus" rather than the individual student. It identifies specific HE institutional practices which she feels promote the retention of diverse students. In later studies Quinn et al's (2005) and Quinn and Thomas's (2007) ideas on cultural narratives and local contexts may also be helpful in looking at working-class adult student withdrawal. Cultural narratives and local contexts may also be helpful in looking at working-class adult student withdrawal.

Issues of retention and withdrawal are a complex interplay between the self, institution and external factors. It is not just an individual or an institutional issue. Importantly, however, what is lacking is in-depth research focusing solely on working-class adults, although some research has included some as part of their sample (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1997; Thomas 2002). Ozga and Sukhnandan (1997) stress that family commitments are a key reason for withdrawal amongst adult students. Our study revealed that it is often a combination of both institutional and personal factors.

This article contributes to an understanding of retention and withdrawal from the perspectives of non-traditional adult students as well as arguing for a more positive approach to withdrawal. This means recognising the benefits of learning even if a degree is not completed rather than adopting an economic stance as taken by institutions and governments.

Using biographical methods

Biographical research methods "offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other" (Merrill and West, 2009: 1). The "turn" to biographical methods (Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000) is well established within the social sciences, particularly amongst European adult education researchers, such as the work of Peter Alheit, Agnieszka Bron, Henning Salling-Olesen and Linden West. It reflects a preference for subjective humanistic approaches (Plummer 2001), over the objective "scientific" positioning of quantitative research, as participants are placed centre stage in the research process. Biographical researchers also bring their values, feelings and their own biography to the research process (Merrill and West 2009).

One of the criticisms aimed at biographical methods are that they are too individualistic, focusing only on the micro level (Fieldhouse 1996). However, exploring one individual story in-depth illuminates an individual's life within a historical and social context. Although biographies begin with an individual story they go beyond this to reveal the collectivities of lives, such as class, gender and race, the interplay between structure and agency, and history and the present (Plummer 2001; Merrill 2007). I draw on a feminist approach to biographical interviewing as it advocates breaking down the hierarchical barriers between the researched and researcher, resulting in a more equal and democratic relationship (Reinharz 1992). The interview becomes more like a conversation (Oakley 1981), bringing the researcher's self into the research process, and developing a trusting space between interviewer and interviewee. Such an approach encourages a good research environment, generating rich descriptions of people's lives.

Biographical narratives are crucial in highlighting transitions and change in the life-course (Hallqvist, Ellström, and A. L. Hydén 2012; Biesta et al. 2011). The process of

undergoing and coping with life transitions is a biographical learning experience. Alheit and Dausien (2002) illustrate how a person's life history is linked with learning. The concept of biographical learning is used as "a theoretical perspective on education that takes as its starting point the life history perspectives of the actual learner" (Alheit and Dausien 2002, 11). Learning is an integral part of a person's life history so that "without biography there can be no learning, without learning there is no biography" (Alheit and Dausien 2002, 15).

In this study, different cohorts of students were interviewed: those in their final year, those who leave but return to study, and those who withdrew. We also followed a cohort through from first to final year. Fifteen students were interviewed in each cohort and were chosen from a student dataset of non-traditional students held by the university. Our research identified three sensitising concepts as an analytical tool: habitus (Bourdieu), transitional space (Winnicott) and recognition (Honneth) – see Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg (2014) for an in-depth discussion.

Linking structure and agency and biographies

Participants came from a working-class background and, as with many such students, experienced difficulties in relation to study, finance, health and family (Tett 2000; West 1996). As stated above, a key question of our study was why do some working-class adult students complete while others do not? In attempting to answer this question the concepts of structure and agency provide a useful tool in understanding a person's learning biography.

The role played by the interplay of structure and agency in shaping behaviour has been fundamental in sociological theory. It embodies a key question as to what extent our lives are shaped and/or constrained by social structure and to what extent we can determine our lives through our own actions and consciousness. Sociologists have attempted to interrelate what Dawe (1970) calls the "sociology of systems" and the "sociology of action". Giddens's (1991) structuration theory on the individual and society maintains that the objective and subjective are interdependent – a process which he terms dualism. Bourdieu's work takes a more collective approach and argues that a person is positioned and constrained by habitus or class and institutionalised power structures. An individual's use of agency is restricted by one's position or habitus in society. Here Bourdieu draws on Marx but combines this with phenomenology as experience and practice are core to his approach. Although a person's class is determined by a particular habitus, Bourdieu recognises that agency can be used to transform one's position in society (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992).

In postmodernity and the increasing individualisation of society (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), some researchers have focused on the concept of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and recently on the role of agency and learning in the lifecourse (Biesta and Tedder 2007). Agency, however, does not occur in isolation; the act of agency is always embedded within a social context. Emirbayer and Mische in their article "What is Agency?" define agency:

> As the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problem posed by changing historical situations. (1998, 970)

In relation to the lifecourse, Biesta and Tedder "see agency as the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life" (2007, 13). Using agency involves the past, present and future, so for Emirbayer and Mische (1998) agency has to be understood within both contexts and time. Agency implies that an individual is actively engaging, in learning for example, in order to change their future life in some way. As Emirbayer and Mische explain:

> The imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears and desires for the future. (1998: 971)

Structuration concepts are helpful for eroding the structure/agency divide as behaviour is never fully agentic or structurally determined but an interaction between the two. At particular points in people's lives one may be more dominant than the other. Theories on structure and agency, however, remain largely abstract. Using biographies illuminates our understanding of the interaction between structure and agency in the past, present and future of a lifecourse.

The stories

This section focuses on the stories of two working-class female students out of a sample who were taking either a part-time or 2+2 degree at an elite university: one who completed her degree (Julia) and the other (Angela) who left in the final stage. Two stories have been chosen rather than a themed approach drawing on several stories as individual case studies offer a rich insight into attitudes, meanings and complex behaviour as well as highlighting shared experiences (Rustin 2000; Merrill and West 2009). The two chosen are illustrative of the larger sample. Hodkinson and Hodkinson assert that individual stories "retain more of the 'noise' of real life than many other types of research" (2001, 3). It also follows the tradition of the Chicago School and, for example, Clifford Shaw's (1966) study of Stanley in *The Jack Roller* whereby the use of a single story was used to develop theories on crime. Such an approach also enables the role of, and interaction between, agency and structure and the development of a learner identity or not to be explored in depth. For comparative reasons I chose students taking a 2+2 degree. This degree is aimed at local adults who have few qualifications and have been out of the education system for a while. The first two years are taught at further education colleges (post-compulsory) in partnership with the university. Years one and two are equivalent to year one of a three-year degree to help develop study skills in preparation for study at the university.

Julia

Julia was 37 and in her final year of a 2+2 health and social policy degree when interviewed. She is a divorced single parent. Julia completed her degree successfully despite experiencing severe financial and housing problems. At times it was a struggle to keep going. However, she was determined and drew on her agentic and biographical resources to cope with the structural constraints she experienced. Julia re-entered education through participation on a certificate in community research taught by the university's Sociology Department. It was aimed at community activists living in deprived areas of the local city. She described the course as "being a new experience"

but positive. Importantly it gave her an interest in learning and helped her to reflect on who she is and who she could potentially become:

> [It] gave me a taste of what university might be like. I liked what I saw and what I was learning and I liked the feeling that I got. I wanted to learn more … I had a lot of support from my lecturers … that was a nice feeling to see that we could actually achieve and accomplish things … . For the first time I thought it might just be possible that I could go on to do something else.

Starting the degree programme marked a significant change in Julia's life. However, she found the degree abstract and described this period as "a bit of a dip". She felt lost with the learning as she had difficulty in understanding the meaning and purpose of it. She began to struggle financially which was a "really big issue". It was a critical moment in her learning career as she was close to leaving. The support of a college lecturer (a former 2+2 student) kept her going as he understood her difficulties. She stated that he "was a working-class person, the same as myself. He'd also struggled through his own family issues so that was really positive. I really appreciated it." The support and her determination kept her going.

The transition from the further education college to the university raised issues about class and identity as she found that some lecturers were "very different from myself, from different backgrounds". She was also conscious of her class position in seminars: "I definitely felt like I was in a different class to most of the people that I was learning with, that was quite clear". She identified class by material, cultural and language differences. Visiting the library was also a daunting experience as she was unsure if she belonged in an academic space with middle-class students, as issues of class affected her confidence. Using the library was a problem for other UK students in this study (Field 2012). Julia felt that she was defined as the "other" as in Bourdieu's terms her habitus contrasted with that of the middle-class students.

Some sociology lecturers were supportive and understood what being a single parent and living in poverty in a deprived area meant, and in Honneth's (1995) terms she felt respected and recognised:

> One of my tutors had already done lots of books and studies about poverty and poverty was a really big issue for me at the time. I was really struggling and it was nice to know that she understood, whether she'd experienced it herself or not in her own life that didn't really matter because she really understood it at a very deep level – what single parents go through. I got a lot of support. I found they were quite significant to me personally which then gave me the confidence to carry on working and to concentrate on my academic stuff.

Supportive lecturers (and peers) were significant in keeping her going on as they inspired her by "bringing things to the seminar in such an interesting way that it made me enthusiastic so that when I went home I was ready to carry on the reading – to find out more about it".

During her last year external problems impeded on her studies and undermined her learner identity:

> When I was handing in my work and preparing for my exams none of these things had been done to my full capacity. It was a mixture of personal stresses, my financial situation, I was moving house. My son was having difficulties at school … everything hit me at once and it definitely had an effect on how much time I put into my studies and that made me

feel really anxious about what my marks would be but also made me feel not very proud of handing my work in … . You didn't get that feeling of accomplishment and then afterwards that great feeling of ready to go for the next thing. It was just sort of downhill. I handed in one essay but didn't feel good about it and then I didn't feel good about starting the next piece of work.

Despite the struggles experienced within and outside the university Julia was able to exercise her agency to overcome the difficulties and gain a degree. The "pull" to escape and change her life was strong:

I never actually thought I'd make it to the end … each year that went by was quite a shock because I'd got through another year but I was determined to make things different for myself and for my son. It is determination that I wanted to change things and make a difference and be able to support us financially and move out of the neighbourhood that I was in, so that was on a very personal level. I thought this avenue was a way through for me to make things different … . I can't afford to drop out now because I'll have nothing to show for it but I will have lots of student debts.

"Determination" is a word uttered by several students in this study. For Julia and others it was about not wanting to go back to the life they had before studying. Julia wanted "something better" for herself and her son. It was also about proving to herself that she was capable of studying and overcoming her negative school experiences. In reflecting about her past she was thinking about future directions and what she wanted to become, or what Emirbayer and Mische call "an imaginative engagement of the future" (1998).

Despite the constraints Julia enjoyed university; "it was still a nice feeling … . I suppose it's a feeling of being included. I felt like I was a part of something". This was important to her sense of self. As Kasworm stresses in her study of adult students at an elite institution, "adults are concerned about being accepted and valued within the academic community" (2010, 148).

Studying made it hard for her to relate to other women on the estate. As her academic identity developed, a process of distancing began between Julia and her social network:

I couldn't talk about university to any other mums as I walked to school because I felt that they had snubbed me – "Look at you with your big briefcase". It was really tricky to explain to people why I wanted to progress myself. I withdrew from my friends on the estate a little because I found it hard to explain to them why I wanted something different.

Her family also could not understand why she wanted to study. In working-class terms she was "getting above herself" and being disloyal to her class in wanting to "better' herself". The reaction by family and friends was emotional for her. As Hoggart (1957) illuminates, it is an isolating experience. Although she was "getting out and getting away" (Lawler 1999) she was not wanting to become middle class like the women in Lawler's study yet she was caught between two cultures: her working-class world and her academic one. Despite having achieved a university degree she continued to subjectively define herself as working class as this was embedded in her identity. She had "got out" but only a little bit. She had observed the middle-class world at university and did not want to embrace it.

Reflecting on her studies she felt that she had changed and was more confident about herself. Yet throughout she often had doubts about herself and being part of academia yet at the same time wanted to be accepted and included which resulted in contradictory feelings about the self:

> It was great to get through the last exams, an amazing feeling … . My feelings were dampened slightly by the fact that I'd had a really bad year so I hadn't put the most that I could into my work, so it was a shame that I was handing in stuff that I thought could be a lot better but still really nice to hand them in, and then the graduation, which, I'd discussed with lots of other mature students. We talked about that and at times lots of us had said, "Oh I don't know if I'd even bother going". "Oh it's not important once it's done it's done" … . I'm really glad that we all made the choice to go along to it because I can't explain that feeling of, not just pride, but about being part of the university … the whole day was to say, "Well done" to the people that had achieved something quite amazing and I'm really glad I sat through that, cause if I hadn't I wouldn't have recognised that. I'd actually come to the end of something quite brilliant and I should feel really proud but I didn't think I'd feel that … . I had to go back to work so I had to rush off but it was really nice to sit there and it was really nice when I got home from work that evening to sit there on my own and think, to really reflect on the day and then to reflect on the past four years.

Students like Julia are affected by the HE experience, often in powerful ways, in terms of how they see themselves, family, friends and society (Tett 2000). Julia, and others in this study, managed to develop a resilient and determined learner identity enabling her to keep going and find her place and space within academia. There were moments along this trajectory when she nearly left as structural factors constrained her but her "determination" and agency were stronger. The campus offered a safe space where she could temporarily forget her problems and develop her academic identity and self-respect. Support from lecturers and their understanding of what it is like to be a working-class student in an elite institution were critical factors in enabling her to complete. She had a "vision" of where she wanted to be in the future while still keeping hold of some of her past.

Angela

Angela was in the final term of her final year of her 2+2 social studies degree when she decided to leave. She was in her early 40 s at the time of her two interviews (one after she left) and married with two teenagers. She opted to study for a degree after a critical incident and transition in her life. Like Julia, education provided an opportunity to create a new biographical beginning (Alheit and Dausien 2002). Before studying, Angela had worked for 20 years as a care worker for the elderly, which she enjoyed. She became aware of other colleagues behaving in a way which she considered inappropriate and reported it to management. As a result she was ostracised by her colleagues. It led to a tribunal two years later. The process made her ill and she changed from being a very confident person to losing her confidence. "I needed to get back into society because I'd become very withdrawn, was on anti-depressants, was frightened to speak to people … . I was very confident before. I got on well with people." She could not apply for another care job as she would not get a good reference. A friend studying on the 2+2 degree programme was critical in encouraging Angela to enrol:

> I was pushed into it and it did me the world of good because within six months of starting I came off the anti-depressants. Still found it quite difficult in a group but it started the

process … . My friend said that it would be a good way to get me back into education … good to start off in a college environment rather than straight into a university. I would just have felt intimidated by everybody.

Although she did choose to study it was because there was no other door open to her. She struggled with academic learning and found writing her first essay "scary". She left school at 16 with few qualifications. Writing essays was difficult for her, especially as lecturers had different expectations:

> Lecturers all like different styles and you have to get to know the style they're looking for. It's very scary when you do your first essay because you don't know what angle they want. When you get your marks back you know that's not the angle they're looking for so you adapt again.

Angela was clear about what type of teaching approaches she preferred – traditional and structured. She was critical of other adults:

> I don't like listening to people's personal experiences. I've found adults do like to talk about themselves. I lose interest very quickly … . It's not relevant and I will just drift off. It has to be very structured. I like them to come in and talk and I will listen, make notes and there's no room for discussion. I like that. I don't particularly like seminars. In college I just didn't feel that I was getting any information from a PowerPoint and a picture with a few lines.

She saw no alternative pathway during her first two years of study as she could not get a job reference so this kept her going. By year three she realised that she could use her lecturers for references. This was one turning-point moment in her commitment to learning. Unlike Julia she received family encouragement from her husband and her mother to continue with her studies. However, in her third year she experienced several personal problems which affected her learning. Her mother became ill and her husband lost his job and started drinking. The family transitions made her reassess her life and take stock. To help the financial situation she took a job working at a relative's firm. This put stress on Angela and health problems developed. She started missing classes. She also had a fear of examinations and had previously failed examinations. She took a conscious decision to not turn up for her third year examinations. These problems were compounded by the fact that she was not such a confident and engaged learner as Julia:

> I haven't enjoyed the whole experience because of my personal problems. It was Sarah [programme director] who made me come back as I had quit. I didn't turn up for my exams because I panicked. I thought I can't do these – it was calculated. I just sat at home on the day of my first exam. I didn't tell anybody until after the exam had started. I phoned my mum and said "I haven't gone" because I knew that if I told her before she'd be nagging me to go. Sarah contacted me and said that we needed to talk. As far as I'm concerned that was it. She ran through my options and made me realise that I'd been silly and just panicked. She was really good. She said, "This isn't the end of it." If she hadn't done that I wouldn't be here now.

Her life improved during her final year and she enjoyed studying again. She was able to concentrate on her learning although she felt that she had missed out because of the previous year. Angela felt that "it's motivated me because this is my last year and it's so important that I get into gear now". To avoid feeling like in Bourdieu's terms "a fish out

of water" she opted for modules taken by adults as she felt more comfortable in that environment. Throughout her student career she doubted her ability to be at university and this made her feel unsure about herself:

> I feel very privileged to be here. However, I do feel like I shouldn't be here because of its reputation. I think I'm just a 2+2 I shouldn't be here. Have I got in the easy way? Not having qualifications so I do feel that at the end of it when I've got a degree from X that perhaps I've cheated a little because I haven't gained entry the same as everybody else the traditional way. I do feel guilty. I do think that people may not value it being a 2+2.

Towards the end of her final year Angela stopped going to classes again and took the decision to leave as a result of a number of interrelated factors. She was beginning to feel pressurised by deadlines and workload and started to panic about examinations, thinking she would fail them. She continued working in paid employment and it reached the point whereby she could no longer cope with studying and working. After taking the decision to leave she felt much happier but stressed that she had gained and benefited from her studies:

> I changed prior to coming here because of that trauma in my life. It's given me some of my confidence back but I'm not at the point where I was before. I can look at things in a different way. I can give an opinion on something in more detail and depth.

She stated that she had enjoyed learning and that if the degree had been fully assessed she would have completed it. She was an uncertain and ambivalent learner. Withdrawal was not viewed as a negative process and this was a view expressed by other interviewees. She was determined to leave. Like Julia she used her agency positively to overcome personal and external problems. In quitting her degree Angela was beginning another new biographical transition but her learning experiences changed and shaped her identity.

Discussion

Research illustrates that adult students may experience difficulties and struggles while studying for a degree. Julia and Angela were no exception to this. Both used their agency in different ways to counter personal and structural constraints. Their dispositions towards learning were different. Julia was determined to change her life through education to gain social and economic benefits for herself and her child despite the lows she experienced. While wanting to maintain her working-class identity she did not want to go back to being in the situation she was before her degree. Although she was not a confident learner she had a thirst and commitment for knowledge and engaged with the institution. She identified herself as a student and developed a learner identity. Critically, several lecturers supported and encouraged her as she had academic ability. Other adults in this research stressed that without the support from lecturers and support staff they would have left. In contrast Angela "was pushed" into doing a degree because of the work trauma and the subsequent situation of not being able to get a job. Taking a degree was a pragmatic solution to a turning-point moment in her life and an alternative to being unemployed. She saw education as being her only choice but was not committed. She lacked confidence as a learner and was overwhelmed by the symbolic and intellectual capitals of the elite university. She did not identify herself as being a student. Examinations were an issue as they stressed her.

Angela, unlike Julia, did not engage with her peers and kept "herself to herself" while Julia had a collective approach to learning. Academically she struggled and when external pressures increased she became determined to leave but in a way which was positive for her. She did not view herself as a failure. She was proud of what she had achieved and for her this was success. She valued the learning experience and felt it had been beneficial in rebuilding her confidence and getting her "back into society". She also had a strong family network to fall back upon unlike Julia.

The transitional space of the university provided them with a social space and, for Julia, a safe space for the working out and reconstructing of identities, while for Angela it reinforced her identity by restoring her self-confidence. Withdrawal was a conscious, determined decision which made sense to Angela at that particular moment but importantly, as her story illustrates, withdrawal was not a negative act. This was also the case for others in this study. A transitional space, therefore, implies being in-between in terms of identity whereby an individual lets go of part or all of their old identity and assumes a new or modified identity (Merrill 2012). Identity is shaped by social, institutional and personal processes. Determination to keep going with their studies emerged as a key issue in the findings of the UK team. The transitional space of the university provided an opportunity to reflect upon their past and present life, and who they want to become. This did not necessarily mean leaving all aspects of their identity behind but there was a determination to change in some way.

A university education can be a powerful biographical experience for adults as it opens up new ways of looking at the world and the self (Alheit and Dausien 2002). However, universities do not always make the journey easy as working-class adults have to learn to cope with and adjust to the symbolic and intellectual capitals of the institution (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Their working-class habitus can make this a more difficult and risky journey than that of middle-class younger students (Reay 2003). Many find coping strategies and use their resilience, agency and determination to keep going to achieve the goal of what they hope will be a better life. Julia had a clear future goal, even if it did mean distancing herself from her family and friends, while Angela was less clear and regretted being forced to leave the caring profession. What is apparent is the constant tension between their desire to maintain their working-class identity yet also acknowledge that they are no longer the person they were on entering university. This article focuses, as stated above, on a particular group of students – working-class adult women on a specific type of degree programme (2+2) in an elite university. The cultural clash between their working-class habitus and that of the university was more immense than those we interviewed in non-elite institutions such as the post-1992 universities. However, class dilemmas and tensions were also experienced by those in the non-elite universities and for some with the same intensity (see West 2014).

Adult students want to feel part of the academy and be respected and accepted. HE institutions need to recognise this if they genuinely want to recruit, engage, retain and reward working-class students. Universities need to begin to change their own habitus and make HE a more accessible and representative place and space for a diverse student groups. The students' stories about their university experiences highlight the need for policy and practice changes, not only in the UK but across Europe (see Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg 2014). The need for various forms of support was a significant factor in their stories. Lecturer support and encouragement was crucial in enabling students to stay and succeed in many cases. Such support boosted the learning confidence of the students. Providing in-depth feedback on work was also an important aspect of

the support process, as was making adult students feel welcome in an environment which is dominated by younger students and middle-class values. Peer support was also highlighted as being essential in helping adult students make sense of the academic language and culture. In practical terms this included helping each other with written work and the understanding of reading materials as well as encouraging each other to keep on going. Our study also revealed that:

> Some of the early leavers in our research had withdrawn for reasons that might have been avoided had there been appropriate practical support.
> This can include financial support, counselling, child care and specialist support including help for those who are less accustomed to using information technologies, libraries and other learning resources. (Field and Kurantowicz 2014)

Pre-entry support and guidance and induction programmes also enhance the learning experiences and adjustment to university life. Institutions, therefore, need to listen to the voices of adult students and understand withdrawal from their perspective rather than viewing it as a failing process and an economic cost.

References

Alheit, P., and B. Dausien. 2002. "The 'Double Face' of Lifelong Learning: Two Analytical Perspectives on a Silent Revolution." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 34 (1): 3–22.

Barnett, R. 2007. *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty.* Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press / McGraw-Hill Education.

Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New Delhi: Sage.

Biesta, G., J. Field, P. Hodkinson, F. Macleod, and I. Goodson. 2011. *Improving Learning through the Lifecourse: Learning Lives*. London; Routledge.

Biesta, G., and M. Tedder. 2007. "Agency and Learning in the Lifecourse: Towards an Ecological Perspective." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 39 (2): 132–49.

Bourdieu, P. 1988. *Homo Academicus*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P., and L. J. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.

Chamberlayne, P., J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf, eds. 2000. *The Turn to Biographical Methods in the Social Science.* London: Routledge.

Dawe, A. 1970. "The Two Sociologies." *British Journal of Sociology* 21 (2): 207–18.

Emirbayer, M., and A. Mische. 1998. "What is Agency?." *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (4): 962–1023.

Field, J. 2012. "Transitions in Lifelong Learning: Public Issues, Private Troubles, Liminal Identities." *Studies for the Learning Society* 2 (3): 4–11.

Field, J., and E. Kurantowicz. 2014. "Retention and Access in Higher Education." In *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education: Challenges for Theory*, *Policy and Practice in a Time of Change*, edited by F. Finnegan, B. Merrill and C. Thunborg, 163–68. London: Routledge.

Fieldhouse, R. 1996. "Mythmaking and Mortmain: A Response." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 28 (1): 117–20.

Finnegan, F., B. Merrill, and C. Thunborg, eds. 2014. *Student Voices on Inequality in European Higher Education: Challenges for Theory, Policy and Practice in a Time of Change*. London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hallqvist, A., P. Ellström, and A. L. Hydén. 2012. "The Many Faces of Biographical Learning." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 44 (1): 70–84.

Hodkinson, P., and H. Hodkinson. 2001. "The Strengths and Limitations of Case Study Research." Learning and skills development conference, making an impact on policy and practice, Cambridge.

Hoggart, R. 1957. *The Uses of Literacy.* London: Chatto and Windus.

Honneth, A. 1995. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts.* Cambridge: Polity.

Kasworm, C. 2010. "Adult Learners in a Research University: Negotiating University Undergraduate Student Identity." *Adult Education Quarterly* 60 (2): 143–60.

Lawler, S. 1999. "Getting Out and Getting Away: Women's Narratives of Class Mobility." *Feminist Review* 63: 3–24.

Merrill, B. 1999. "*Gender, Change and Identity: Mature Women Students in Universities*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Merrill, B. 2007. "Recovering Class and the Collective in the Stories of Adult Learners." In *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European Perspectives*, edited by L. West, P. Alheit, S. A. Andersen and B. Merrill, 71–90. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Merrill, B. 2012. "Learning to Become an Adult Student: Experiences in a UK University." *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning* 5 (1): 21–42.

Merrill, B., and L. West. 2009. *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Oakley, A. 1981. *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Ozga, J., and L. Sukhnandan. 1997. *Undergraduate Non-completion in Higher Education in England.* Report 2. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Plummer, K. 2001. *Documents of Life 2: An Introduction to Critical Humanism*. London: Sage.

Quinn, J. 2004. "Understanding Working-class 'Drop-out' from Higher Education through a Sociocultural Lens: Cultural Narratives and Local Contexts." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 14 (1): 57–74.

Quinn, J., and L. Thomas. 2007. *First Generation Entry into Higher Education.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill Education.

Quinn, J., L. Thomas, K. Slack, L. Casey, L. W. Thexton, and J. Noble. 2005. *Rethinking Working-class 'Drop-out' from Higher Education.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Reay, D. 2003. "A Risky Business? Mature Working-class Women Students and Access to Higher Education." *Gender and Education* 15 (3): 301–17.

Reay, D., G. Crozier, and J. Clayton. 2009. "Strangers in Paradise? Working-class Students in Elite Universities." *Sociology* 43 (6): 1104–21.

Reinharz, S. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rustin, M. 2000. "Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science." In *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science*, edited by P. Chamberlayne, J. Barnett and T. Wengraff, 33–52. London: Routledge.

Scott, P. 2001. "Triumph and Retreat: British Higher Education at the End of the Century." In *The State of UK Higher Education: Managing Change and Diversity*, edited by D. Palfreyman and D. Warner, 188–204. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Shaw, C. 1966. *The Jack Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tett, L. 2000. "'I'm Working Class and Proud of It' – Gendered Experiences of Non-traditional Participants in Higher Education." *Gender and Education* 12 (2): 183–94.

Thomas, L. 2002. "Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Institutional Habitus." *Journal of Educational Policy* 17 (4): 423–42.

Tinto, V. 2003. "Promoting Student Retention Through Classroom Practice: Using International Policy and Practice." Paper presented at the European Access Network and Institute for Access Studies at the Staffordshire University, Amsterdam, November 5–7.

West, L. 1996. *Beyond Fragments: Adults, Motivation and Higher Education.* London: Taylor and Francis.

West, L. 2014. "Capital Matters: Interrogating the Sociology of Reproduction and the Psychosociality of Transition and Potential Transformation." In *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education: Challenges for Theory, Policy and Practice in a Time of Change*, edited by F. Finnegan, B. Merrill and C. Thunborg, 39–50. London: Routledge.

Yorke, M., and L. Thomas. 2003. "Improving the Retention of Students from Lower Socio-economic Groups." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 25 (1): 63–74.