

**Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment
among Adult Basic Skills Learners**

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3rd of June 2014



The start of the journey ...

- The college in which I worked and the learners studied is set in the former mill town of Oldham, Lancashire, Northern of England.

Aims

- The study explored how sixteen former Basic Skills learners have been shaped by the public domain of schooling, college and work and the private domain of family, friends and home.

Aims

- It sought to highlight learners' perception of their reality and unscramble the links between their past, present and future whilst striving to highlight the intersection of class and gender on the learners' pathways onto basic skills programmes and their subsequent trajectories.

My positioning

- My personal position as an 'insider' with 'insider knowledge' of marginalised communities was a key motivation to becoming a basic skills tutor and becoming involved in this study.

Positioning

For example, my own life-history, which includes being born and brought up in the same community as the learners, attending the local state school and being the first generation of my family to enter college and university and my subsequent trajectory has greatly influenced the commitment I have for finding opportunities to enable others to take agency and aspire to reach their potential (Duckworth and Taylor 2008).

Challenge and Change

I felt that the notion of neo-liberalism and its implication that an individual is free to determine their own pathway, is limited by the impact of structural and historical inequalities: gender, race and class and other markers of identity that shape the learners' educational journeys (Leathwood 2006). One way in which this happens is that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are not considered to have the right attributes to progress (Archer et al. 2003; Burke 2006; Duckworth and Cochrane 2012).

A critical space

I wanted to carry out an inquiry which opened a meaningful ‘space’ to develop a teaching and learning culture which moves towards a research based approach to Best Practice. As a critical educator/researcher, I sought to develop my practice through the research and reflect a critical pedagogy, providing a curriculum which is culturally relevant, learner driven, and socially empowering (Freire 1996; Barton et al. 2007).

Drive

Critical autonomy and deep forms of intrinsic motivation were essential in sustaining the research. My drive came from the knowledge that education can be truly life enhancing and transforming if appropriate mechanisms are put in place to push open spaces that create a meaningful enquiry into the learners' lives.

Theoretical framework

- I began with an interest in the class and gender issues that affect learning and have found that Bourdieu's work offered an appropriate and illuminating theoretical frame for my work.

Capitals

I draw on Bourdieu's theory 'The forms of Capital' (1986) as a framework, providing the tools for understanding how the learners' narrative accounts of their educational and personal journey from childhood to Basic Skills Learner and beyond have been shaped.

The concept of cultural capital was vital in exposing the transmission of wealth and power and incorporating ideas about how those in a position of power, who Puwar (2004) describes as 'insiders', reproduce and maintain their domination; whilst the concepts of habitus, field and symbolic domination helped me to better understand how mechanisms of power that enable inequalities are embodied in places, people, historical and social existences, and as such are difficult to remove.

Symbolic Capital

Drawing on the learners narratives, I identified features of symbolic capital/or the lack of it across the domains of their lives and the impact of this.

Fields

Bourdieu's fields of social, cultural and economic power overlap and feed into each other, each and together offering a valuable framework for understanding the historical formation and reproduction of the research group in this study. Critical education offers me the opportunity to extend on Bourdieu's concept by including this as a lever for change and the potential for learner empowerment.

Structures of inequality

- This study asks 'why' and 'how' structures of inequality and domination are reproduced across the public and private domains of the learners' lives. To probe these structures Bourdieu uses the concept of 'field'.

Wheel of Symbolic Power (a)



The wheel of symbolic power evolves over time, each capital feeding into the next and strengthening the symbolic power.

Wheel of Symbolic Violence (b)



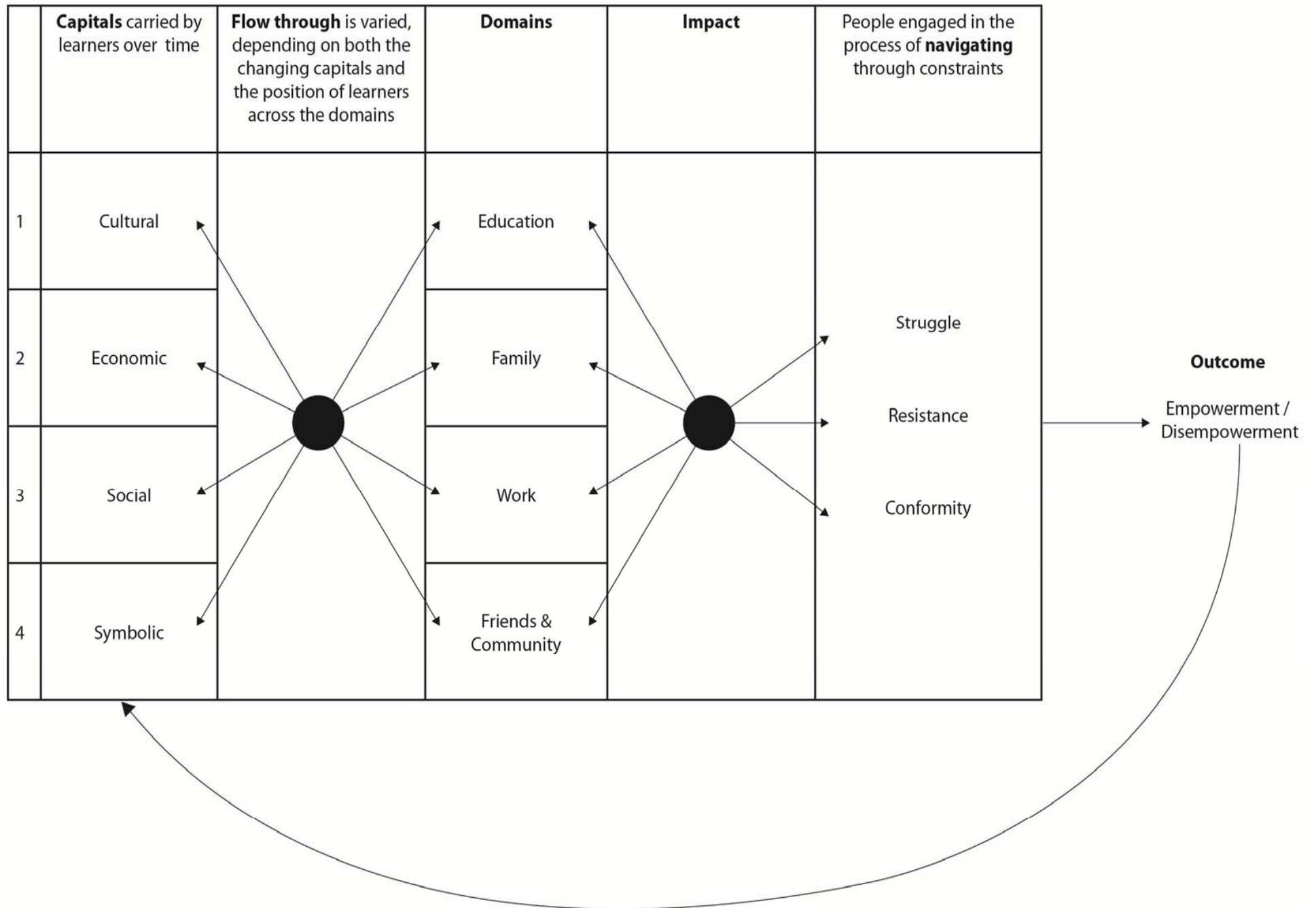
The wheel of symbolic violence evolves over time, each deprivation of capitals impacting the next and strengthening the symbolic violence.

Flows of Capital

When considering the fields the learners cross/inhabit the research explored changes with the varied flow of capitals and what impact this has on the learners' possibilities.

Capital Exchange

The study will consider how the habitus can become a type of capital exchanged for goods (Bourdieu 1983). Those who have more of the dispositions valued by the structuring process in the field (site it takes place) are likely to be positioned more positively than those who do not have the dispositions.



The capitals carried by the learner, their flow across the domains and the impact on the learner and their life

Theoretical framework

- The theme of violence (both physical and symbolic), emerged strongly from participant accounts of their experience and became a central focus of my analysis.

Being Judged

On arrival at college there was a strong feeling by the participants that, paralleling their experiences at school, they would be judged and pathologised by others for being poor and struggling with literacy.

Joanne's story

Joanne left the local state school, at fifteen, without qualifications and used her practical know how to work as a machinist out of necessity and the need to earn a wage. She said that:

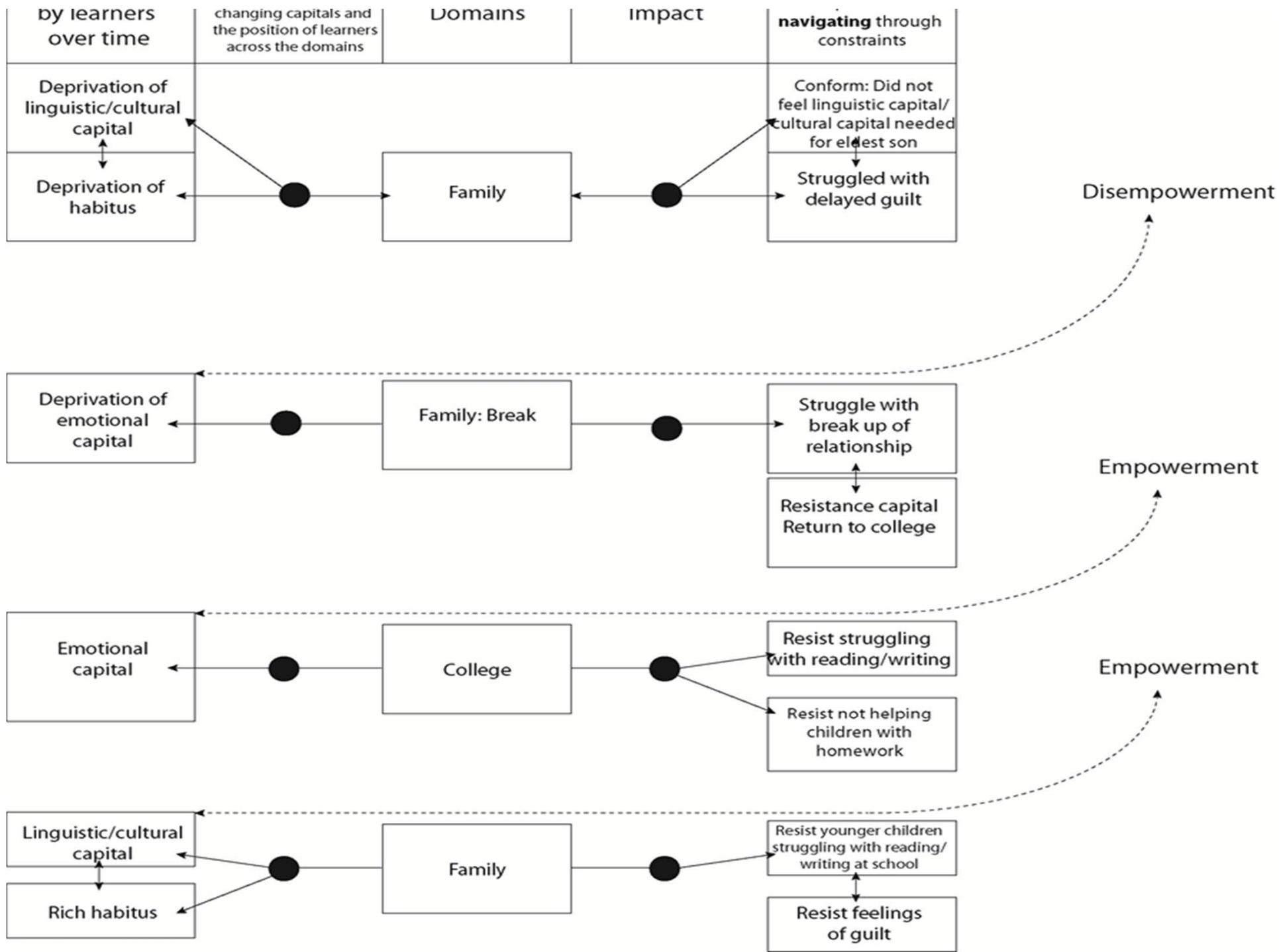
Machining summat I picked up really easy. It's not like yer need exams. It's summat most women can do.

Catalyst

The catalyst to Joanne returning to college was the breakup of her relationship. A single mother of three children, she arrived at college, struggling to read and write and for the first few weeks sat at the back of the class. Avoiding eye contact, she hardly said a word, except to express her fear of writing owing to what she called, 'rubbish spelling.'

Critical Space

Opening up a space for critical reflection and dialogue in class and in the research group both Joanne (and the other learners) challenged notions of what literacies are. It was this move from a competence based model to a holistic approach (see Morrish et al. 2002) and care (see Feeley 2007, 2014; Duckworth 2013, 14).



Carol's story

When Carol, a single mother and grandmother in her fifties, started the evening basic skills class, like Joanne, she initially had no confidence in writing. Indeed, the idea of writing for creative expression was unthinkable. From the age of two and a half years old, she was brought up in a convent, where schooling was not as high on the rota as cooking and cleaning.

Formal and Informal interviews

Carol voiced how experiencing a childhood in care and a string of abusive relationships with 'no good' men had 'knocked away' her confidence. In and out of depression she wanted to 'do something with me brain'.

Although occasionally daring to think about writing 'maybe poetry or summat', when she arrived on the course and I expressed how the class may cover topics which include poetry and story telling, she seemed resigned that poetry was not for her. Carol firmly believed that only people who've 'got qualifications and yer know good jobs'; can write poetry, they're the clever ones'.

So what changed?

On reading other learners' poetry she seemed totally amazed that people who lived on the same streets as her had penned such 'magic'... She voiced hope that 'if they can do it, who are just like me, then, so can I'. Her position in the 'field' changed.

Taking ownership

Words began to really inspire her and rather than running from words she began to embrace language as something she had the right to use. She described how on shaping sentences it really helped her to 'deal with those lousy feelings that had crammed her life full of often like doubt, failure and fear'.

Transformation

The creativity opened a space for transformation. This transformation saw a shift in Carol's habitus. The lessons offered a critical space for Carol (and the other learners) to explore their creativity and their literacy practices.

Confidence and creativity

This move towards embedding creativity into the curriculum is often difficult, as college curricula often do not acknowledge the creativity that learners bring into the classroom. Their creativity is often masked in a process of symbolic violence where their hopes, desires and practices outside the class are not explored and instead, a dominant competency based model of literacy is delivered. Using multimodal approaches which includes poetry and images, can be a move towards reflection and transformation.

Participatory Action Research

- My study is therefore strongly linked to praxis and adopts a critical perspective (see Carr and Kemmis 1986, Mezirow 2000).
- PAR challenges the positivistic form of enquiry in its political approach and establishes a relationship between researcher and participant (Reason & Bradbury 2001). It does this by facilitating the research group taking 'ownership' of the whole process from commencement to conclusion and sustaining an effective dialogue between researcher and respondent.

Social Justice

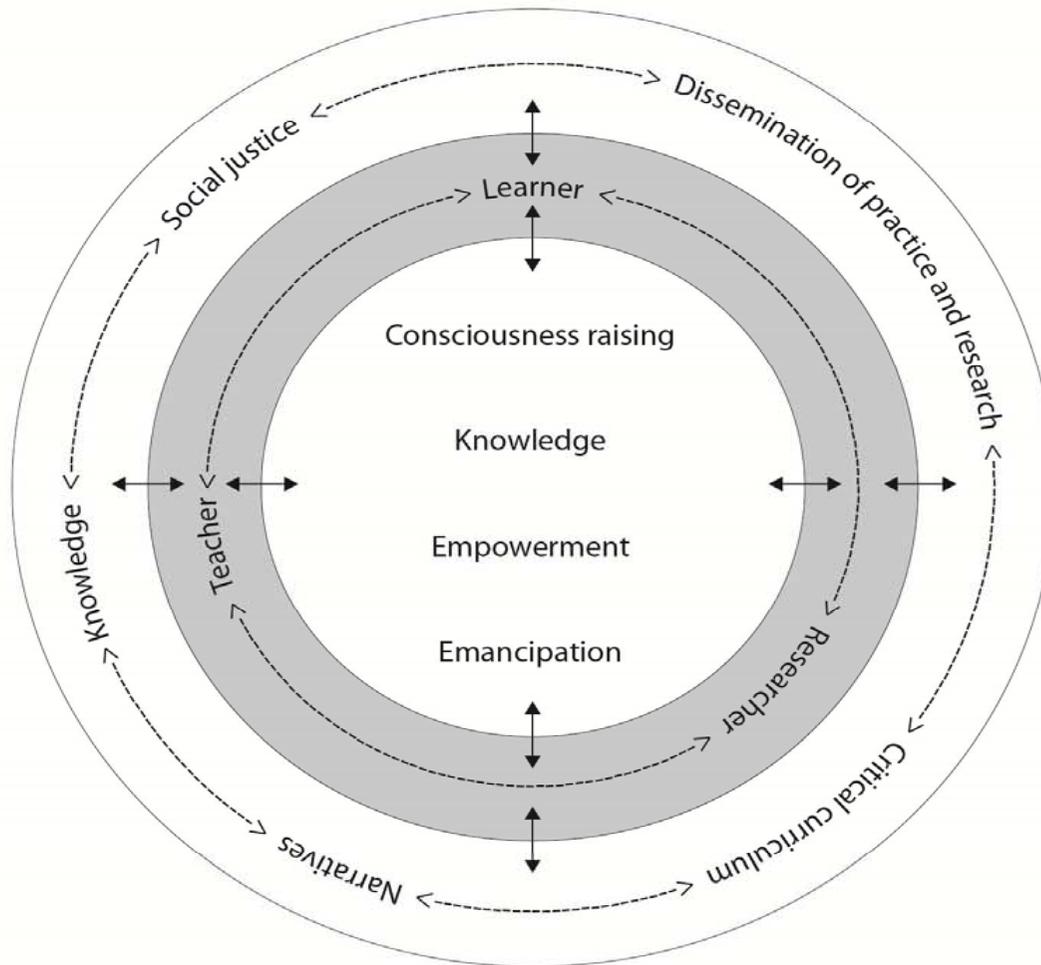
- I put Joanne forward for the NIACE Adult Learners award
- Helena Kennedy foundation award, which consisted of £1500 bursary provided in instalments during her time in higher education.

Social Justice

- the research allowed me to work with the learners and community initiatives, such as publishing, to set up awards to support future learners.

Role models

- The local and national media reported on the learners progress award
- Community Groups



The rings have a two-way transfer of knowledge, with the shaded ring being the mediator.

The inner core represents the personal impact of the relationship between Learner, Researcher and Teacher.

The outer ring represents the impact of the Learner, Researcher and Teacher relationship in classroom practice and taking the findings into the public domain.

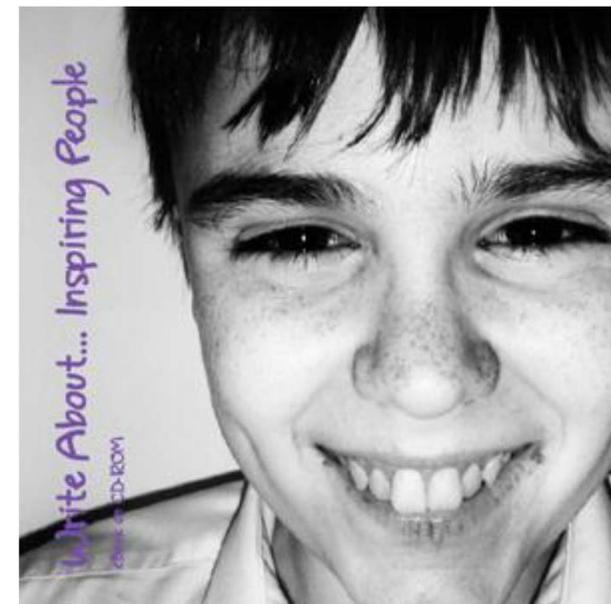
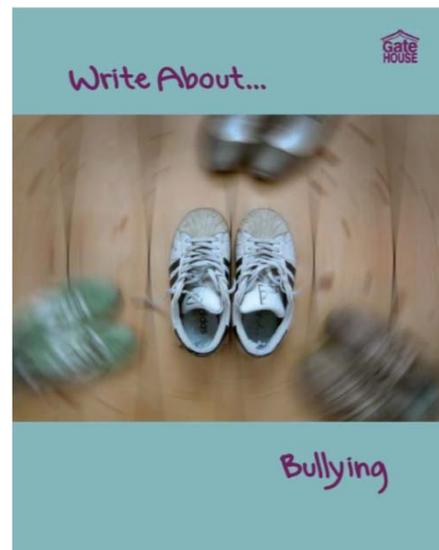
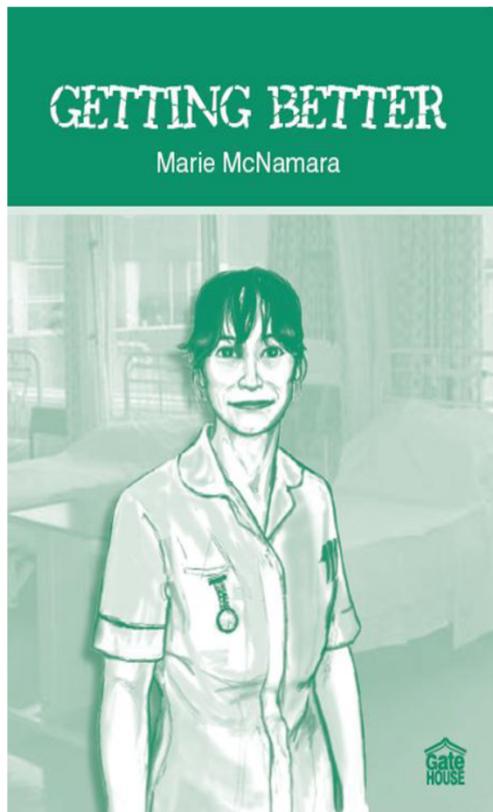
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- The learners were also involved in the dissemination of the research findings on a local, national and international stage. This involved collaborating on writing projects from the research findings to a local, national and international audience (for example Duckworth and Taylor 2008, Johnson et al. 2010).

Cont:

- It also involved disseminating the findings in academic text books for teacher educators (Duckworth and Tummons 2010) resources (McNamara 2007; Duckworth, 2008) and vocational resources (Duckworth 2009) to reach wider communities and a wider audience.

Resources, community projects and
consciousness raising.



Research taken from

Duckworth, V. (2013) ***Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners***. Routledge Research in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education. Routledge: London <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415828727/>

Duckworth, V. (2014) Transformational Literacy in *Duckworth, V and Ade-Ojo, G (eds) Landscapes of Specific Literacies in Contemporary Society: Exploring a social model of literacy*. Routledge Research in Education. Routledge: London

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415741248/>