

Storm on the Island – The Lived Experience of Working-Class Adult Learners in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper draws on both a theoretical understanding and a semi-autoethnographic approach of the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In particular, the paper warns of the doxic notion of current working class struggles being singularly attributed to COVID-19. Rather it is vital to assert that the societal structures that frame and reproduce inequality – written by the dominant classes and cultures – are the root of the problem. The daily struggles of working class adult learners have been amplified by the pandemic, but through Freire’s love as a political force, there is space for radical hope.

Keywords: Working-Class, Adult Learner, Digital Exclusion, Loneliness, Inequality

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in ‘significant psychological and social effects on the population’ (Saladino et al., 2020, p.1), through a ‘prolonged exposure to stress’ (ibid.). However, these effects are not experienced equally throughout society, we are reminded that ‘the great public health lesson is that for centuries pandemics disproportionately affect the poor and disadvantaged’ (Abrams et al., 2020, p.660). Because of the structures that frame and reproduce inequity, we find that ‘historically disadvantaged communities have reduced capacity to adopt preventive measures’ (Thakur et al., 2020, p.945). Since the beginning of this pandemic the dominant classes and cultures of society have been enlightened on various matters related to social class and race. For example, access to information technology, the value of free school meals, the isolation and loneliness of the elderly and systemic racism. For a while, many

stood with the oppressed and forgotten – as these matters made the headlines in TV news programmes and were found in editorial articles in various papers across the world. However, I would posit that the interim solidarity and allyship that was shown is beginning to wane. It is pertinent here, to be reminded of Paulo Freire’s true solidarity; Kester et al. (2010, p.501) outlines that ‘[w]hen Freire talks about true solidarity with the oppressed, he clearly distinguishes between pious gestures, or false generosity, and an act of love’. It is this genuine and gentle act of love – that is at the core of authentic solidarity and allyship – that is required to free the oppressed.

The devastation caused by the storm of COVID-19 has been reported upon extensively – and rightly so. However, the impact that it has had upon the working class has yet to be properly elucidated. There have always been struggles for families during school holidays to provide lunch; digital poverty is not new; many elderly living in state pension poverty live with loneliness and isolation every day and ethnic and racial minority community groups were uncomfortably familiar with experiencing racism long before COVID-19. The lived experience of the working class during COVID-19 cannot be uniquely tracked, traced and singularly attributed to COVID-19. What the pandemic has done is massively amplify the daily struggles of the working class. Struggles, which are the result of societal structures that frame and reproduce inequity. These structures existed long before COVID-19 and will continue to exist until we see the true necessary conditions for emancipatory dialogue to free the oppressed. Paulo Freire wrote about these conditions; profound love, humility, faith, trust, hope and critical thinking – with these, all can be renewed, after all ‘I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative’ (Freire, 1992, p.8).

Context

This paper will focus on the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Charles Umney (2018, p.33) reminds us that ‘thinking about class should not be purely about classification, however nuanced’. The author goes on to state that ‘for Marx class is more about the position and function that people occupy within the structure of an economy, and the way in which these different roles interact and conflict’. A modern interpretation of social class can be found in Mike Savage’s book (2015) that considers its place in the 21st Century. It goes beyond the Registrar General’s Social Class Scale to introduce seven social classes – perhaps illustrating the nuance that Umney refers to. However, it is important to remember – amongst

the sophisticated granularity – that ‘[a]lthough often conflated with one another, social class and socio-economic status can be distinguished as separate constructs’ (Rubin et al., 2014, p.196). It is this work by Rubin that I will draw from. In the sense that ‘social class refers to one’s sociocultural background and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations’ (ibid). This is in contrast to socio-economic status which ‘refers to one’s current social and economic situation, and consequently, it is relatively mutable’ (ibid). In citing Owen Jones, Diane Reay (2017, p.6) astutely points out, ‘it may be confusing to make sense of the changes in working-class composition from the working class of mines, steelworks and factories to one of supermarkets, call centres and offices’. However, as Reay (ibid) rightly asserts, ‘thinking through class is still vital because it makes us confront the issue of who has wealth and power. It also focuses our attention on which stories and versions of the social world are listened to, and encourages us to ask why’.

In focusing on the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 global pandemic, I will draw on a blend of narrative research and a rich conceptual framework from the literature. Specifically within narrative research, I will employ a semi-autoethnographic approach (Wall, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011; Bochner et al., 2016 and Adams et al., 2017). As Ellis et al. (2011, p.273) write, autoethnography ‘challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others’ and is methodologically situated to challenge the structures that frame and reproduce the inequalities that working class adult learners navigate. The authors (ibid) continue to note that autoethnography ‘treats research as a political, socially just and socially conscious act’. This aligns with the aim of this paper, in that it is an act of solidarity. An act that, in a socially conscious manner, illuminates the inequitable lived experiences of adult learners in higher education. At the heart of autoethnography is ‘meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience’ (Ellis et al., 2011, p.274). This approach ‘accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research’ (ibid). However, it is vital that the personal experience is the subject of systematic analysis, in part achieved by ‘comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research’ (Ellis et al., 2011, p.276). This analysis facilitates a wider socio-political understanding of cultural experiences. Therefore, in this paper, I will draw on my professional experiences and observations related to working class adult learners. These will be described and analysed through conceptual frameworks from the literature. In particular, and of the greatest concern over the last few months, are circumstances related to digital exclusion,

single parent students and loneliness. Throughout the paper, Seamus Heaney's poem 'Storm on the Island' will be used as an allegorical tool to further explain, describe and understand the lived experience of working class adult learners in higher education.

Our Island

Seamus Heaney's poem 'Storm on the Island' (Heaney, 1991, p.38) is a powerful source to use in an allegorical manner to describe and explain the lived experiences of working class adult learners in higher education during COVID-19. The poem is the monologue of a villager who lives on the titular island; they lament over their concerns of the storms that batter their community and the resultant effects. We can firstly consider social isolation and the constant preparedness for what might go wrong; 'we are prepared: we build our houses squat'. There is a sense of the inevitability that something might go wrong for the islanders, the storm will come, but their houses were built to minimise damage. In this way, I recall the many working class adult learners who speak to me of consistently being ready to be found out, something was going to go wrong. Diane Reay (2001, p.334) reminds us that 'within the educational system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes', and that '[i]t is not surprising then that education for the working classes has traditionally been about failure; about being found out'. Those that have not experienced the anxiety associated with the inevitable storm that is coming, must be reminded that 'working-class relationships to education cannot be understood in isolation from middle-class subjectivities' (ibid., p.333). Indeed, for the working class adult learner 'finding yourself within education, no less than losing yourself, is a problematic enterprise' (ibid., p.343). That is because for the adult learner, the risk of being found out may indeed be the price to pay for finding yourself.

We can turn to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977/2000, p.210) in order to begin to understand why the working class adult learner is consistently anxious about failure and being found out. They note that privilege confers 'on the privileged, the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged' which then means it is easier to 'convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits'. Meaning that 'less powerful social groups are seen as 'deserving' their inferior positions' (Archer et al., 2018, p.130). This notion of lack of scholastic gifts fits with how the discussion concerning the role of adult learners in higher education tends 'to stress their alleged needs rather than the potential benefits that they can bring' (Richardson, 1994a, p.373).

The historically unsatisfactory relationship with higher education that working class adult learners have, mirrors the relationship between the island and its islanders – one of historical uncertainty and danger, something will go wrong. This hyper-vigilance for the onset of various threats is seen in the developing barren landscape of the island, ‘nor are there trees, which might prove company’. The anxiety associated with what will inevitably come, has led to the islanders deciding not to fill their land with trees – to reject all that could bring comfort, ‘you know what I mean – leaves and branches can raise a tragic chorus in a gale’. There are no Ginkgo Biloba or Acer Palmatum for summer shade and dazzling autumnal colours – because they could cause trouble. This is related to the risk that many working class adult learners need to navigate. Because of studiously navigating the risk of higher education, they may be singularly focussed on achieving their degree outcome, but at a cost where there is no time or space for the shade and beauty of an extended landscape. No space for the extra and co-curriculum, the broader student experience. The circumstances that the adult learner experiences can lead to limited networking opportunities and the chance to develop new friendships. Heaney writes ‘You might think that the sea is company // but no’. We may well think of the full socialisation and intellectual integration of students being vital, but it can be seen as a risk, it may not bring company.

Just as the islanders are prevented from fully experiencing the beauty of life on the island, so too the working class adult learner finds barriers to participating fully in higher education (Davies et al., 2001; Tones et al., 2009; Fragoso et al., 2013; Kearns, 2017; Baglow et al., 2019 and Saddler et al., 2020). These barriers to participation were discussed by Ekstrom (1972) almost 40 years ago, but still ring true today. The author refers to institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers experienced by women when considering access to higher education – but the themes that Ekstrom writes about share many similarities with the experiences of all working class adult learners in higher education. In terms of institutional barriers, we might consider the admission practices of universities, including their lack of familiarity with entry qualifications that working class adults may apply with. We might also consider institutional barriers in a broader sense as being the compounded result of institutional habitus. For example, the institutional refusal to see that the transition of the adult learner to degree level study is not simply a process of the student going through change but also the institution. We might think of situational barriers as those arising from obligations and personal circumstances. Indeed, these obligations and personal circumstances can sometimes result in the need to take interruption

of studies or on other occasions discontinuing studies. I would posit that it is often the case that institutions wrongly assume that discontinuation is simply a matter of dispositional outcomes. Richardson (1994a, p.375) wrote of the need to attribute discontinuation as related to 'non-academic reasons (such as ill health)' rather than the assumptive notion that it was a matter of academic failure. When observing working class adult learner disruption of studies or discontinuation, it is vital that an ecological approach is employed. One that not only considers the dispositions of the individual but also the environment or context in which they function. Otherwise, institutions are divorced from the pastoral and wellbeing responsibilities they have. Finally, we have dispositional barriers, which can be considered as those related to person specific characteristics. This may include imposter syndrome (Clance et al., 1978), or as discussed previously the fear of being found out or of failure. However, these are not simply dispositional circumstances, these are class related and therefore the result of societal structures that frame and reproduce them. Indeed, those institutional barriers that are a result of its own habitus have the power to generate the resultant dispositional circumstances that we observe.

The many barriers and challenges that the working class adult learner must address and navigate can lead to the desire to focus on one thing at a time – otherwise the student may simply be overwhelmed and exhausted. In a sense we see that while the various storms that come year upon year – and those of a particular severity like COVID-19 – beat down upon the islanders and the working class adult learner, they may all 'just sit tight while wind dives and strafes invisibly'. The natural hazards that Heaney writes about, along with the hazards that are a result of the inequitable structures of society, spread fear – a fear that demands that we stay still until it has passed us by. Until that happens, all must 'listen to the thing you fear'. How do the islanders and the working class adult learner see this fear or threat? To answer this, I am reminded of the latent anxiety in the concept of Bauman's liquid modernity (2012). In particular, when the author notes his 'growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty' (ibid., Foreword), I am very conscious of when Heaney writes; 'Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear'. Bauman (2007, p.26) notes that 'fear is arguably the most sinister of the demons nesting in the open societies of our time'. Heaney writes of the 'huge nothing' that is feared, it appears to be undefined, shapeless, yet at any moment it can tap us on the shoulder. As Bauman (2006, p.2) writes 'fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear'. He continues '[f]ear is the name we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be

done'. The islanders and working class adult learners alike wait for storm after storm to rush over them – protected by the minimal resources made available. Using these resources, we must work in solidarity with them, to find the tools to destroy this fear. As Bauman (2007, p.26) writes, 'the demon of fear won't be exorcised until we find (or more precisely construct) such tools.'

I Feel Isolated and Lonely

Pick any university that you want and walk through the various student spaces at lunchtime and you will find many enjoying the company of new friends and old. The sharing of laughter and the serious discussions surrounding the latest topic from this week's series of lectures. You will also find many that sit alone, through choice, of course, as they lose themselves in a textbook or their smartphone while devouring a sandwich and coffee. Look again and you will find others that sit alone – but not through choice. Quite a different reality to that found in the marketing dream of the various prospectuses that universities publish. Over many years, my own observations and reflections have resulted in the conclusion that working class adult learners are disproportionately represented in the group of students that spend lunchtime alone. I recall on a number of occasions students telling me that while having lunch alone in a corner of the student union building, they were asked to leave – mistaken for a member of the public and not a matriculated student. I am always left with an immense sense of disappointment and lost opportunities at these stories. Certainly not in the romantic melancholic tradition of Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', but rather in a tone aligned with Thomas Hardy (1932, p.131-132) when he wrote, 'They count as quite forgot; They are as men who have existed not'. Indeed, it is within this paper that I want to reveal those, 'Whose story no one knows' (ibid.) during COVID-19 and beyond.

Working class adult learners, as we will discuss, have the burden of navigating identity, digital inequality and striking a balance between being a good parent and a good student. This is the normal working week for the adult learner, but the added stresses and anxieties felt during this global pandemic – one day to be taught in social history classes of the future – amplify these to levels not seen before. It is no wonder that adult learners might feel that they do not belong to higher education, begin to feel isolated and then lonely. Christie et al. (2008, p.576) reported that adult learners did not view themselves as 'full members of the university community'. This is related to the social integration of students, which 'plays an important role in students' participation and successful completion of university and is partly about the development of identity as a

student' (Mallman et al., 2017, p.517). In research carried out by Ostrove et al. (2007, p.364), the authors assert that 'real or imagined experiences of social rejection induced negative emotional states [...] remediated by experiences of social acceptance'. The same study noted that social class very much defines who belongs at what kind of university, this notion is also expressed by an interviewee in the study by Read et al. (2003, p.267), when they say 'I had these dreams above my station'.

When Mallman et al. (2017, p.517) write about the adult learner feeling that they 'were the odd-one-out, and have difficulty finding a place to belong socially at university', we are probably reminded of numerous examples of this in our own institutions. The authors (*ibid.*, p.518) talk about how adult learners experience 'anxiety about their inability to feel belonging' and that their 'experience of social life within the university is minimal'. It is difficult to read this and not feel a profound sense of solidarity and compassion towards the students. To feel that – when one of the interviewees (*ibid.*, p.519) states 'I tend to sit somewhere in the middle of the room and always alone' – that this journey of the self is not the one of the neoliberal ascent to personal improvement and achievement, but one of loneliness. Loneliness because of the great struggle that societal structures and institutional policies produce in working class adult learners. As Tett (2004, p.256) points out, 'those who do make their way into higher education do so on the basis that they are potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as owners of it'. This lack of ownership of the experience is often related to student administration and organisational structures. These structures dictate, for example, timetabling and support service opening hours – very often based on the unhelpful assumption that 'students are full time, live on or near the campus, do not need to work during term time, have no responsibilities for dependants and will not need study support and advice' (*ibid.*, p.259). After all that is placed upon our working class adult learners, to burden them unnecessarily, they must find space to stop and rest. In doing so – in those moments away from the rush of getting by and not being found out – they may awake to an isolation and loneliness. As W.B. Yeats (Finneran, 1997, p.570) wrote, 'Lonely the sea-bird lies at her rest'.

Despite the circumstances that adult learners have to navigate, I have always been aware of a strong sense of personal identity and a structure of values that appear to guide and inform. One such study by Bhatti (2003) describes how for working class adult learners at the heart of their aspirations lies a desire to make a difference to others, to 'pay something back' (*ibid.*, p.71). One interviewee

from the study says, 'I know that now after graduating I can work in many areas and help people' (ibid., p.72). Another interviewee echoes this desire, or need to care for others and pay something back when they say, '[n]ow I work with those who are at risk. I know exactly where they are coming from. I am so happy I got a chance to get to university – late in life though it was' (ibid., p.69). These are very much generous community focussed values; they display the authenticity that Diane Reay (2002, p.403) refers to in her study of working class adult learners. In that study, Reay talks of how working class adult learners 'negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before'. Where the notion of authenticity could be described as 'being able to hold onto a self, rooted in a working-class past' (ibid., p.404). However, when considering upward social mobility, Reay cites Bourdieu (1993, p.510) and how 'the feelings of being torn that come from experiencing success as failure, or, better still, as transgression'. The students in Reay's study (p.402) refer to the 'almost magical transformative powers of education', but do have to 'negotiate tensions between maintaining a sense of authenticity and desires to fit in' (ibid., p.404). The deep concern is that 'contemporary political and academic discourses increasingly represent working-class existence as preventing self-realisation' (ibid., p.404). Because of this, the upward social mobility that the students in Reay's study engage with, result in 'individualist and solidarist fractions of the working-classes' (ibid., p.409). However, the majority of the students in the study and indeed from years of my own professional experience, do not engage in a neoliberal project of individual self-improvement. Rather, they take part in projects of the self, that can be 'aligned with strong sense of community commitment and a desire to give back' (ibid., p.409).

We can see clearly the ways in which isolation, because of social exclusion, can hurt and take students far away from a sense of belonging. As Mallman et al. (2017, p.512) report, 'mature age students' experiences of social isolation pose a significant barrier to full participation, negatively impacting their identities as students and their university transition'. Simply put (ibid.) 'mature-age students feel out of the loop and alienated from university culture'. The lunchtime rush is hushed, as students and staff retreat from the various social spaces on campus – back to offices, lecture halls and favourite seats in the library. Normally in numbers of two, three, four and five. Often, if I listen carefully, I will hear the remaining echoes of the inwards sighs of many a working class adult learner. Perhaps best summarised by the interviewees in O'Boyle's study from 2014, 'I would have felt like a bit of a fraud for the first two years' (ibid., p.185). And

again one student laments, ‘I suppose when we’re not in college, we’re off doing different things [...] the opportunity to meet up, I mean it’s probably impossible’ (ibid., p.184). The desire for genuine mature friendships of value and substance is clear if unrealised, ‘I don’t make friends very quickly, and if I make friends I want them to last. You know, I wouldn’t make fast friends, that’s a waste of time’ (ibid., p.183). The sense of not fitting in, is far from new – as one interviewee (Mallman et al., 2017, p.520) wryly notes, ‘I am instantly divided from the class as all I can think of is my failed marriage mixed with the fact I have a sensible layering of clothes’. During this global health emergency, any chance of reaching out and being a part of a learning community has been even further diminished, leaving working class adult learners even more isolated and alone.

Wheels within Wheels

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there have been many reports on digital poverty and exclusion (Holmes et al., 2020; Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2020; Coughlan, 2020; Kelly, 2020, London Irish Centre, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Irish Times, 2020). However, while digital inequalities have been intensified during COVID-19, these inequalities pre-date the pandemic. Digital inequalities are an example of the many inequalities that have been observed by wider society during the pandemic – with varying responses. The need for the world’s population to change how it worked, learned and interacted socially was something that nobody could have envisioned prior to the first national lockdowns worldwide. The results of these changes – which were implemented to keep us safe – saw us do our weekly shopping online, school pupils entered virtual classrooms and colleges and universities moved quickly to deliver learning and teaching via various online platforms. The need to engage with these platforms and portals, has clearly underlined that when it comes to accessing the digital world there are those who can and those who cannot. For as long as the digital world has existed, there has always been those that cannot access it. This was particularly evident during the bottleneck rush that was the public moving to live online, where we saw parts of our community unable to engage with their learning or order their weekly shopping. Robinson et al. (2015, p.570) wrote that ‘digital inequality deserves a place alongside more traditional forms of inequality in the twenty-first century pantheon of inequalities’. In her recent book, Jen Schradie (2019, p.28) wrote how ‘the internet had not erased the stark inequalities between working-class and middle/upper-class groups’. In fact, ‘the internet was actually making those inequalities wider, threatening to throw a wet blanket on this digital triumphalism’ (ibid.). Robinson et al. (2015, p.570) remind us of the various levels of digital inequality. There can be those

members of the community that simply do not use the internet at all and those that have low-level skills and participation rates online. The authors assert that 'as the internet is ever more seamlessly integrated in everyday routines, forms of disadvantage themselves mutate'. We do not have a straightforward dichotomy of digital divide – those that have next generation computing equipment and higher order skills and on the other side, those that do not. Essentially, we can see that the 'processes of accumulation and transmission of assets, including technical assets' (Halford et al., 2010, p.938) are classed processes. We must acknowledge the nuances of digital inequality, perhaps 'a refined approach to digital inequality recognises that people's socioeconomic status influences the ways in which they have access to and use the internet' (Hargittai, 2008, p.939). Indeed, as van Deursen et al. (2019, p.2) note, 'although popular media particularly stress techno-utopian promises, ability to realize the potential benefits depends in part on the knowledge, skills, and informed use of individuals'.

Looking for a deeper understanding of digital inequity leads us to think beyond whether or not an individual or community has access to technological hardware. Ignatow et al. (2017, p.954) note that 'disparities in the level of internet skills originate in inequalities of access, but are mediated by orientations that can only be understood in relation to total life contexts'. In Robinson's (2009) study, it is noted how engaging with all forms of modern digital technologies eventually becomes habitualised – and that this is a classed process. The author (ibid.) draws on Pierre Bourdieu's work when they talk of the long-term engagement with information technologies through serious play, where the middle classes are distinguished from the working class. The serious play that the middle classes engage with results in high order skills related to modern information and digital technologies along with low computer anxieties. This is in contrast to the 'task-oriented information habitus' or 'taste for the necessary' that Ignatow et al. (2017, p.954) discuss with reference to young working class individuals. The authors (ibid., p.954) summarise that the 'enactment of a taste for the necessary is ultimately counterproductive and reinforces disadvantage' (ibid., p.954). As a result, we have the middle classes with greater access to modern technology and a sense of serious play, which leads to the development of higher order digital skills. This is contrasted with the working class student that grows up with less opportunity to access digital technologies – even if they do secure access, their interactions with technology are based on task related outcomes.

Some two decades of working with working class adult learners has certainly allowed me to develop an understanding of their relationship with technology. It can be a difficult relationship, fraught with a constant sense of trying to catch up – always feeling that you are behind, everyone else is doing and coping so much better than you. The ever-present notion of being found out. During this pandemic, universities and colleges have sought to provide those students that did not have the required technology with access to all kinds of long and short-term hardware options. This was indeed laudable and just – it dealt with the immediacy of lacking hardware and the anxiety and panic that many felt prior to matriculation. However, during the academic year the working class adult learner has been frantically trying to develop high order digital skills, minimise computer anxiety and engage in a productive relationship with technology. Our deeper understanding of digital inequity – the habitulised and classed engagement with technology – must be channelled via the support of staff on and off campus. Providing a non-assessed space for working class adult learners to engage in serious play is immensely valuable and an important pedagogical approach. It does take time and resources, but if we seriously want to facilitate the development of working class adult learners then we need to be serious about this. Digital inequity was not born of COVID-19; it existed long before the arrival of the global pandemic. As so much of what we do in life has moved to the online world, we can see how the normalised levels of digital exclusion have been magnified and intensified. However, why have we moved to a space that is so inherently inequitable – one that we know is inequitable? By moving everything online, we chose to take an action that has the outcome of exacerbating the exclusion that many working class adult learners already feel, why did we do this?

My own reflections on this are very much informed by the notion that ‘the hegemonic control of technology by capitalism has played a major role in increasing the disparity between the haves and the have-nots’ (Veak, 2000, p.233). In referring to work on the philosophy of technology by Feenberg (1999), Veak (*ibid.*, p.226) reminds us that our technological futures are not neutral, ‘[t]echnological design is inherently political. Consequently, the observed constraint on design choice is not some “essence” of technology but can be explained by the hegemonic control of the design process by privileged actors’. Feenberg (*ibid.*) posits that the hegemony can be disrupted through what he terms ‘democratic rationalisation’. In the words of Veak (*ibid.*, p.226), this democratic movement will ‘thwart this hegemony and open up space to reshape of modernity from within’. Our society is moulded by technology and

our technologies are shaped by society (Brey, 2003, p.54). Just as the structures of society are written by dominant classes and cultures, so too is our technology – ‘technology cannot be separated from a cultural context’ (Veak, *ibid.*, p.228). As a result, we cannot be surprised when working class adult learners are excluded from the technological world – it has been written this way. As Veak (*ibid.*, p.233) surmises, ‘[o]bviously, technology must be questioned, but more important, the fuel that drives the train of technology –capitalism –must be questioned’.

You Can’t Ever Win

As Lovell et al. (2020, p.298) points out ‘[s]ingle-parent students are predominantly female.’ However, it is important to note that ‘the situation of women in a traditional college setting is different from student mothers’ (Burkart et al., 1987, p.262). During the current period of COVID-19, students who are also single mothers have the accumulative effects of class, age and gender weighing down upon them in addition to the stress, strains and complexity of dealing with a global pandemic. Through my own pastoral work, I have been particularly aware of the chronic situations that many students, who are also single mothers, have had to face. Many of these circumstances have unequally burdened them compared with the general student population. Moreover, these circumstances are too often the result of bewildering and unnecessary structural procedures within universities. Be these concerning support with information technology, pastoral care during transition to first year or early payment of bursaries – administrative procedures seem to work against prevailing common sense and compassion. This is of course a result of the immovable institutional habitus and its domination of all those who live under it – least we not forget that these administrative procedures are designed and implemented by university policy makers. We are unlikely to be surprised that Lindsay et al. (2018, p.190) tell us that ‘student parents believed that campus policies were created with the traditional student in mind’. Moreau et al. (2015, p.219) sum things up rather well; ‘the dominant, default image of the student in the physical and policy spaces of higher education remains those of the carefree, with websites often populated by the presence of young, smiling and (presumably) unencumbered women’.

There are deeper gendered issue here that need to be addressed, Yakaboski (2010, p.475) notes that the ‘acknowledgement that students are also mothers alters higher education’s culture of historical male dominance’. The author continues when they remind us that ‘single mothers experience negative

stereotypes as they negotiate postsecondary institutions' (ibid., p.465). The higher education landscape for working class single mothers to traverse is not a welcoming one. Moreau et al. (2015, p.225) are clear when they assert that working class students who are also single mothers are 'not fitting with the culturally prevalent construction of motherhood, nor with the default image of the childfree student fully available for their studies'. In the same study (p.222) the authors outline the worrying notion that 'the male partners of student mothers continued to expect that they keep the main responsibility for domestic duties' while at the same time they find that 'the female partners of student fathers were more likely to adjust their lives to accommodate their partners' needs'. With institutional habitus pushing against single mothers as students (or at least refusing to actively facilitate the notion), we also see the possibility of the partners of these students pushing against them at home. Ultimately 'women's other commitments are acceptable as long as they do not compromise their role as the main carer' (ibid., p.222).

With these perpetual storms, it is no wonder that Shenoy et al. (2016, p.152) report that 'single-parenting students face a higher prevalence of mental health stressors' than other higher education students. While, according to Moreau et al. (2015, p.225), individuals 'often established a link with their experience as a student parent' and physical and mental illness. These stress related health issues can result in a sense of anger, upset and disrupted sleeping patterns – as described by Lovell et al. (2020). The authors (ibid., p.300) point out that for many working class single mothers 'there's just not enough time in the day to get everything you need to get done'. As a result, we are not surprised to learn that 'finances, family, and relationship difficulties disproportionately affected single parents' (Shenoy et al., 2016, p.152). In 1987, an interviewee in a study by Burkart et al. (p.269) summarised many of the problems that working class single mothers faced (and still do) on campus as, 'too little time and too little money'. The same study noted that 'fun and leisure were things that had to be postponed' when it came to identifying priorities and managing time. Lovell et al. (2020, p.300) describe how the mothers in their study had 'no time for self-care or being one's self'.

We recall the earlier discussion around working class adult learner identity; now we witness a further aspect of identity to navigate – that of motherhood, where 'student and parenting demands were frequently in conflict' (Haleman, 2004, p.780). Interestingly, Greenberg et al. (2020, p.116) refer to the way that single mothers discuss their sense of 'multidimensional marginality', where

'marginality was defined by their single parenthood, low socio-economic status, life in a peripheral community, and traditional family background'. This reveals further details of the multidimensional elements of identity that must be navigated and understood.

All of this is challenging and energy demanding during so-called normal academic years, but during a global pandemic the intensity of all of these circumstances is quite simply extraordinary. So what does the literature tell us of the motivations that continue to drive working class student single parents? In Burkart et al. (1987, p.264) we learn about a central underlying notion, 'to insure financial security for themselves and their children', indeed mothers 'thought their example motivated their children and made them proud' (ibid., p.266). This is echoed in Greenberg et al. (2020, p.116) where the authors discuss the way in which through 'processes of intergenerational transmission children acquire behavioural patterns and internalise values and attitudes regarding different aspects of life'. The projects of the self that were discussed earlier are visible here, single parents in engaging in projects that are 'aligned with strong sense of community commitment and a desire to give back' (Reay 2002, p.409). Filled with love and commitment for their children and their future wellbeing. Indeed as Lindsay et al. (2018, p.192) write, 'mothers were future oriented; they were concerned with their ability to financially provide for their children in the future'. For working class single parent mothers who become undergraduate students, there is a belief that 'further education is their most probable path to economic security' (Haleman, 2004, p.781). The commitment to their children though does often result in a sense of guilt when they are not there for them to the extent that they were, prior to becoming a student. Burkart et al. (1987, p.266) report that the women in their study 'expressed only the negative effect' that their studies had on their children and how they have very little time for their families. This is expressed again in Lovell et al. (2020, p.300), where single mothers talk of their associated guilt and feelings of being overwhelmed. The authors noted that 'perfectionism was prominent' with the single parents that took part in their study, there seemed to be no space for error as the stakes were too high for anything to go wrong – this was about their future and their children's future.

The challenge that the students face is one where they 'reconcile the possibility of being a good student and a good parent' (Moreau et al., 2015, p.227), indeed, it is possible to be both of these things. Indeed one of the children interviewed in Greenberg et al. (2020, p.121) says of their mother, 'she does so many things

at the same time and excels at all of them.' The way that this child views their mother, may not be the way that neoliberalism does. Those devoted to the hymns of individualism and human responses that are levered by economic rationales, have no understanding of responses born of love and an ethic of care. Neoliberalism and its individual autonomy and individual responsibility have no interest in the 'nurturing that produces love, care, and solidarity' (Cantillon et al., 2017, p.169). Ironically, this may be because neoliberals are aware of the fact that ultimately it is love and solidarity that can remove it from power.

The responsibility of an institution to facilitate a successful transition in, through and on from degree studies of working class single parents, is clear. Yakabolski (2010, p.464) asserts that 'institutional policies and programs should support student mothers and assist them with completing their educational degrees'. Carpenter et al. (2018, p.128) reminds us that the predictors of success of single parent students are 'not invariant personal characteristics that lie outside of the influence of intervention'. The authors continue, 'rather, they appear to be behaviours well within the scope of influence of programs that can be created by institutions'. However, it is important at this point to reflect on Halem (2004, p.770) when discussing such interventions, 'the women and children directly affected by these policies are routinely viewed as passive objects of intervention rather than active subjects involved in creating their own experiences and capable of self-definition'. With this in mind and through a pedagogy of love, we must eradicate the 'widespread assumption that students' lifestyles are careless and carefree' (Moreau et al., 2015, p.220) and push against the notion expressed by one of the single mothers in same study, when they state 'you can't ever win' (ibid., p.219).

A Door Out of the Dark

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, p.21) teach us that education could be 'the royal road to the democratisation of culture if it did not consecrate the initial cultural inequalities by ignoring them'. Indeed, as Diane Reay (2001, p.334) reminds us, 'within the educational system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes'. The required policy changes that facilitate an increase in equality of opportunity 'can only be successful if they are matched by policies to ensure equality of outcome' (Inglis et al., 1999, p.39). Yet, 'even with the exciting expansion of further and higher education [...] the working-classes have not been the real beneficiaries' (Kennedy, 1997, p.9). Casting our eyes across campus, we are likely to recognise the state of higher education as described by Giroux (2020, p.220), 'higher education now mimics a business culture run

by a managerial army of bureaucrats, drunk on market values, who resemble the high priests of a deadening instrumental rationality'. Genuine solidarity with the working class adult learner is part of the choice that Wacquant (1989, p.8) writes about when interviewing Pierre Bourdieu – we ultimately 'tend to act either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution'. In acting to subvert the oppressive distribution of capital, we align with the oppressed. However, within the academy, Wacquant (ibid., p.18) has concerns; 'often under very radical airs, the intelligentsia almost always contribute to the perpetuation of dominant forces'. As these dominant forces continue to frame and reproduce inequity on campus, I am reminded of Heaney when he writes of the islanders, 'we are bombarded'.

Despite all that pushes against the working class adult learner, I have been witness to a number of remarkable students and their achievements during COVID-19. While such stories are the exception, they serve to remind us of the exceptional lengths the students have gone to, in order to continue their educational journey. I am aware of students that have managed part time work in supermarkets with degree study, bringing up a family and home schooling. I have spoken with students that have cared for elderly loved ones while completing the final year of their degree studies. I know of families that have been hit by the loss of full time work, household income dramatically reduced overnight. Single parent mothers that have home schooled their children while continuing with their degree studies and managing difficult personal circumstances and worries. Consistently, the students are unaware of the immensity of what they do and what they achieve. Their lived experience has been normalised over many years and these struggles are seen as part of the very nature of life. During COVID-19 I have been struck by the comparison of the circumstances that the working class adult learner negotiates with the middle class student. A comparison that reveals a lack of belonging in some middle class students due to their lack of opportunity to join societies and clubs or attend corporate recruitment receptions – two very different worlds (Speirs, 2020, p.135).

Diane Reay (2002, p.409) rightly outlines the very positive dispositions of working class adult learners, when she notes that many 'seem to have developed other ways of accounting for, and displacing, educational failure; ways which allow spaces for recovery'. It is here in this space for hope that Shanahan (2000, p.161) reminds us that many adult learners 'see education as a catalyst for change in their lives' and again that education was 'a chance to rewrite

their life story after experiencing some dissatisfaction with their previous employment' (ibid., p.156). In O'Boyle's (2014) study of friendships, he states that the transformation, or indeed the becoming, of the adult learner 'does not occur instantly, however, and is more commonly described as a gradual process involving a series of transitions and risks (and sometimes ruptures) to self-identity, as well as the imagining of possible selves' (ibid., p.174). The transformative benefits of higher education result in 'an improved sense of self-worth and of being recognized as an active and able participant in society' (ibid.). Deep within the working class adult learner there is a strong personal rationale for embarking on the road leading to a degree qualification. As one student once said to me a few years ago, 'there is nothing or nobody that is going to stop me getting this done'.

Perhaps though we should reflect on Paulo Freire's work as a final way to stand in solidarity with the working class adult learner and his view of love as a political force. Darder (2020, p.236) writes that 'Freire's pedagogy of love challenged deeply the false generosity of those whose ideologies and practices work to sustain a system of education that transgresses at its very core every emancipatory principle of social justice and democratic life'. Freire's pedagogy of love as a tool to overcome the digital inequalities, which the rush for neoliberal modernity sentences the working class adult learner to. A pedagogy of love that frees the working class adult learner from isolation and loneliness. A pedagogy of love that supports the working class single parent student as they 'beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past' (Fitzgerald, 1953, p.182). Darder (2020, p.237) reminds us that for Freire, 'love constitutes an intentional and communal act of consciousness that emerges and matures through our social and material practices'. In the current global pandemic we must engage with a radical hope that will inspire the kindness of solidarity with the working class adult learner, as Darder (2020, p.238) posits, 'love as a dialectic force that simultaneously unites and respects difference must be imagined as a radical and interdependent sense of lived kinship'. This kinship in accordance with love as a political force can truly dissolve the neoliberal assault on the notion of shared values, hopes and experiences and free the oppressed.

Conclusions

Since the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic, some of the dominant classes and cultures of society have become aware of the inequalities that the working class experience during their daily lives. It is important that we do not

allow the devastation of the pandemic to be identified as the singular reason for the inequalities of society. We cannot allow a new doxa to be formed, one that states that the inequalities experienced are merely a result of the global pandemic. This would exclude the dominant classes and cultures from any culpability from their part in the reproduction of these inequalities. The dominant classes and cultures have written the structures that frame and reproduce inequalities. These structures lead to the inequalities that have become more widely known about in recent times. The global pandemic has not caused these inequalities; they existed long before COVID-19 spread across the world. What has happened is that the inequalities have been amplified to levels never seen before, leading to greater hardships for the working class.

The working class adult learner in higher education has experienced extended amplified hardships over the last months. In particular, and of greatest concern to me, were issues around loneliness, digital exclusion and the daily-lived experience of single parent students. One thing is quite clear, pedagogical practice and institutional policies perpetrate these struggles. In the first steps to stand in solidarity, some practical things can be done. Firstly is creating the non-assessed space to engage in serious play. This can include repeated engagement with exercises using digital technology. This repeated engagement develops a familiarisation and normalised approach. In a sense, re-defining the relationship with digital technologies, beyond task oriented habitualised notions. This is not a two-week programme; this is a longer pedagogical commitment – one that scaffolds learning. With both institutional policy and pedagogical practices, we must avoid the ‘widespread assumption that students’ lifestyles are careless and carefree’ (Moreau et al., 2015, p.220). Building on this we must then be aware of the important warning that Mallman et al. (2017, p.514) provide, ‘the epistemological underpinnings of many attempts at understanding mature-age students [...] result in species approaches’. The authors continue by noting that it is necessary, ‘to consider biographical factors to understand the variety of their motivations and life and learning circumstances’. This results in an approach that values the insights that come from simply getting to know our students and then building from their identity. A true critical pedagogy that fuels the drive to free them from the symbolic violence of societal structures that frame and reproduce inequality and that ‘spits like a tame cat, turned savage’ (Heaney, 1991, p.38).

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