

BOOK REVIEWS

Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment Amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners, by Vicky Duckworth, London, Routledge, 2014, 214pp., £85 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-415-82872-7

This volume makes no direct reference to learners in the criminal justice system, nor would I suggest that any of the contributors to the book have any links to the criminal justice system. Nevertheless the book's theoretical frame of Bourdieu's 'forms of capital' and its themes of symbolic and physical violence resonate with the learning experiences of many who come into the criminal justice system, and offer those who are trying to make sense of it a useful and fresh approach to a difficult topic.

Like ethnographic research in prisons, investigative work of this kind is not easy and it is to Duckworth's credit that she avoids the over-sentimentalization of her contributors while keeping their experiences and stories at the heart of the discussion. She is also not afraid to address the often-neglected topic of the emotional impact of research on the researcher, the personal memories it can invoke and the feeling of helplessness at being unable to challenge effectively society's symbolic and physical violence against certain groups of people (103).

The first two chapters of the book are taken up with 'setting the scene', in terms of the author positioning herself, grounding the research historically, placing it geographically in Northern England, and introducing notions of class, gender, violence, and trauma.

In chapter 3, Duckworth provides the study's theoretical bedrock with an in-depth and comprehensive discussion of Bourdieu, paying particular attention to constructs of capital, field, and habitus – themes which subsequently run like threads through the fabric of the book. This is not an easy chapter for those unfamiliar with Bourdieu, but careful signposting and helpful visuals of the 'wheels of symbolic power and violence' (35) and the 'flow and impact of capitals on learners and their lives' (37) make the effort worthwhile, and provide a useful frame on which to hang the rich description and relevant claims of the chapters which follow.

Chapter 4 is concerned with how the research was carried out, taking participatory action research (PAR) as its central tenet coupled with reference to Freireian principles and the introduction of feminist theories. Duckworth makes the claim that this is ethnography and, in a research world where I have often bemoaned the 'speed and whizz' of contemporary ethnography (Wilson, 2004), it is a claim well made, with the research having been undertaken over a period of years. The bonus of this measured approach is the addition of two rich sources of information: a wide variety of documents, and what Duckworth refers to as 'incidental data' (58), including serendipitous events.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 get to the meat of the study using the life and learning experiences of the learners (and the author) to flesh out aspects of symbolic and physical violence in their lives and which went on to influence the domains of school, home, work, and private milieu. They uncover a harsh world where those in authority abuse their position of power or – even worse – fail to act in order to protect those being abused. They uncover the loneliness of having to deal with hidden violence and the impact that this has on individuals' future life and learning – in terms of being too traumatized to consider future engagement with education or, more positively, of seeing a second chance as an opportunity to be seized and relished. The stories are

a powerful testament to the failure of various systems to support those who are most in need of it and also of the ability of those who are unsupported to persevere.

The recounting of these various lives, traumas and experiences is not easy reading but Duckworth succeeds in offering a space for those who often feel squeezed out to express themselves, giving voice to those who have rarely been heard. She achieves this without apportioning blame or taking sides. This makes the narratives even more powerful as they truly are the lived experiences of the oppressed. In this respect, useful parallels can be drawn with the experiences and invisibility of learners within criminal justice systems.

Chapter 8 concludes positively with the observation that 'rather than just a cycle of struggle and disempowerment, there was also resistance and empowerment' (153), which leads into the theme of literacy and transformation in the next chapter.

Chapter 9 is almost a 'happy ending', with an account of how the research has been taken forward in an equitable and egalitarian way, and it is heartening to see that, as Duckworth describes, academic success came eventually and that it was relevant and meaningful to the learners. The chapter also identifies the usefulness of PAR in order that research can (and in my opinion should) have practical application and positive impact if at all possible. The voices and experiences that were brought forward through the use of participatory action research inform future practice – not only of students but for curriculum design and tutor attitude.

The final chapter brings us back to the voice of the author in a meta-view of the themes of violence, trauma, capital, and gender as they impact across the various fields and domains of learners' lives and throughout the research and documentation, finishing with a suggestion for future investigation in this under-researched field.

However, this is not a perfect book and it has its irritations. Stylistically, there are too many traces of its PhD origins and often it felt like I was reading a thesis rather than a book. As an ethnography, its inclusion of figures and tables which reduce contributors to inanimates (especially when they have been so well described in more human terms elsewhere) adds little. The index is thin and the repetition of certain phrases such as 'this study will' is exasperating. That said, I would recommend *Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment Amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners* to anyone who resists inequality, who has respect for human resilience and endeavour against the odds, and who holds an appreciative view of human beings regardless of where they are situated on the social ladder. There is something in it for, and of, all of us.

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Reference

- Wilson, A. (2004) 'Speed, whizz and the addictive rush of contemporary research'. Paper presented at the Ethnography in Education Conference, Oxford University, October.