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Hard Graft: Collaborative exploration of working-class stories in shaping female educator identities

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Abstract

This empirical qualitative study investigates the ways in which working-class roots have shaped educator values and identity. Using collaborative autoethnography, we share an honest insight into the stories of seven female educators drawn together from a variety of health and social care disciplines. The five themes emerging from this research: Connection through differences and commonalities; graft; inner tensions; authenticity 'I am who I am' and the bigger picture are tightly interconnected, generating a complex and rich picture of contemporary female educator identity. This supportive and collaborative approach has been transformational in the realisation we are not alone, and it has provided a space to celebrate our 'otherness'. As a result, we have embraced our collective responsibility to challenge inequalities and foster a more open, accessible and authentic HE future for all.

Keywords: Working class; collaborative autoethnography; female; higher education

1. Introduction

Drawn together from a variety of health and social care disciplines, this study shares the stories of seven female educators at a United Kingdom (UK) post-1992 university with a strong focus on widening participation. Using collaborative autoethnography, we explore our values as educators and how they have been influenced by our unique working-class upbringings. Through an iterative cycle of collaborative dialogue and individual reflection, we discovered how our experiences have shaped our educational practices. Although identity is defined as 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is'

(wwww.lexico.com), educator identities can be shaped through a variety of experiences. Whilst an overarching female educator identity has yet to be defined clearly in the literature, Crew (2020) references the significant impact of challenges within the female educator journey which originate from working-class experiences. This study aims to bring together critical reflections on a range of female educators' journeys and seeks to add to the body of knowledge around this little-researched topic.

Finding each other

The reasons that brought us together as a project team speak to the wider need for diversifying the norms of the academy (Black, 2005; Craddock et al., 2018; Reay, 1997). One of the team shared a call for collaborators on a cross-Faculty online message board seeking colleagues to explore the topic of working-class academic identity. As we each read the details of the call, we felt a visceral connection to the topic and an innate sense of responsibility to provide a platform for this underrepresented voice in academia (Wilson et al., 2020). We each wanted to uncover the impact of our working-class backgrounds on our day-to-day teaching in Higher Education (HE). We were also drawn towards the collaborative nature of the project, looking to gain confidence in academic research through peer support (Lee & Boud, 2003). Although the single gender representation in the collaboration was unintentional, the findings of this study will understandably focus on the experiences of contemporary female working-class academics.

The female working class academic

Modern society has led us to a stage in history where people have more freedom than ever before to break from pre-established traditions and social positions. However, Broecke and Hamed (2008) argue that despite this new-found freedom, our identities will never be able to escape the constraints of the way others perceive us. When exploring Bourdieu's gendered and gendering habitus concept, Robinson and Richardson (2015) attribute many culturally acceptable concepts of subordination in terms of women as academics, such as the burden of women's domestic responsibilities, perceived gendered work roles and gender stereotypes within the UK education system. In line with this, Okin (1994) discusses liberal feminism and how women's aspirations are often defeated by gender stereotypes and discrimination, claiming the ways in which girls and boys are raised channels women and men into different and unequal reinforced social roles. These unequal social roles then transpire into the title of 'academic' where working-class female academics take up a higher level of emotional labour, caring for students in order to help them feel valued and foster a sense of belonging within the rigidity of academia. Rickett and Morris (2020) acknowledge the social segregation that working-class females face in terms of their perceived skill set, stating that this results in ongoing social segregation in the academic workforce with women automatically positioning themselves as inferior to their male counterparts. This is partly due to a shift from the 'heavy capitalism' seen in the industrial revolution and beyond to a new 'light capitalism' brought about by global connectivity (Breeze, 2018).

Today's academics must therefore have a strong identity and sense of self to deliver the socially constructed expectations of the role but then also be flexible enough to quickly adapt to changes in a complex fluid HE landscape (Wong & Chiu, 2020). This contradiction of solid yet flexible self-made identities serve to add further conflict to a deep-rooted working-class ethic of

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the self as a set identity. The neoliberal approach to HE has meant a move away from traditional core values of professional freedom and autonomy to one of competitiveness and cost efficiency, skills traditionally perceived as androcentric (Robinson & Richardson, 2015). Common learning and teaching language such as 'andragogy' (Knowles, 1968), meaning 'man-leading', further evidences the deep roots within HE of male dominance. This has resulted in working-class female academics having to work in an institution that is arguably classist and sexist. Even if as working-class females we respond to the new demands of the role of an academic by trying to assimilate to the opposite of who we were socially constructed to be, we can never escape the way others see us, resulting in working-class females suffering from imposter syndrome and feeling devalued and unaccounted for (Wilkinson, 2020).

This study subjectively and collectively explores what it means to be a contemporary female working-class academic through the lens of educational practice. Whilst this collaboration offers a voice to females working in academia, the focus of this paper is not one of feminist epistemology but rather one of academic identity. Using our stories as 'windows to the world' (Chang et al., 2013, p. 18) we investigate the concept of self as academic in a neoliberal context and celebrate the freedom that comes with honest and open conversations about the way academia must change if there is to be true equality in the future.

2. Method

We employed the qualitative approach of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to examine the team's educational values and practices within our sociocultural context as working-class female academics. CAE emerged from the study of self (autoethnography) but with the addition of collective and cooperative dialogue (Chang et al., 2013). Themes emerging from CAE data are potentially more widely representative as they have resulted from collective subjectivity of multiple perspectives (Lapadat, 2017). As we discussed possible methods to explore our chosen topic, CAE particularly resonated with the project team as it combines individual and group work aligning with our values of equal collaboration and peer support.

Context and sample

We are a group of seven female lecturers aged between 36 and 50 working at the University of Central Lancashire, a post-1992 UK university. We are at various stages of our academic careers, having taken different routes into our roles, and teach across several disciplines in health and social care subjects. We all identify as having working-class roots, subjectively self-defining our 'council house' social class backgrounds (Rubin et al., 2014) and have shared experiences of undertaking unskilled work to support ourselves and our families. Most of the team grew up in deprived areas in the north of England (n=6) and are the first generation of our families to enter HE (n=6). We refer to ourselves throughout this study as 'collaborators' rather than 'participants' as we have all taken an active researcher role in the project.

We discussed confidentiality and ethical boundaries as a team and agreed we would foster a non-judgemental and developmental space where we could air conflicting views safely, and they would be respected and heard by the group. As such, we adopted the CAE ethical stance outlined in Lapadat (2017), agreeing that sharing was non-hierarchical and non-coercive, with all collaborators having an equitable voice in the project design, research process and authorship. As such, all collaborators are authors of this paper and owners of the stories shared during the project. Conversations and data were kept confidential to the project team and each collaborator chose a pseudonym to protect their identity in the data. The emotive subject being explored in this study could result in exposing

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vulnerabilities to each other (Lapadat, 2017); therefore, we agreed to listen openly to each other's opinions and experiences and only share what felt comfortable to do so. Collaborators could choose to leave the project at any point and their individual data could be removed.

3. Data collection and analysis

We chose to adopt a concurrent model of data collection and analysis, with all collaborators actively engaged in the research process through an iterative process of self-reflection and group sharing. Data collection and analysis was collaborative, reflective and participatory, following the iterative process outlined by Chang et al. (2013). For group data collection, analysis and meaning making, we met online using Microsoft Teams five times over a period of five months. We recorded each Teams live session and auto-generated transcripts in Microsoft Stream for subsequent analysis. To promote ongoing sharing in between collaborative sessions, we also actively used the Microsoft Teams chat function for instant messaging. During the first three live sessions we explored the subject, discussed our reflections, and asked open questions to delve deeper into the data.

In each session we identified individual data to collect before we met again. Autoethnographic data types collected for this study included personal memory, self-reflection and self-analysis (Chang et al., 2013). Individual work was shared via Padlets to allow for collaborators to use diagrams, images, video and audio as well as text in our reflective activities. The final two meetings and individual actions were dedicated to data review (dialogic and individual) and meaning making, resulting in the identification of themes through group dialogue. Interestingly, the team agreed the themes unanimously illustrating the interconnectedness of our different stories. Once the whole team agreed we had reached data saturation and the themes were finalised, we embarked on collaborative writing, including one further live meeting to agree the writing actions, and continued 'checking in' with each other via instant messaging. The team collaboratively agreed copyright free images, many of which were initially shared on the Padlets during individual reflections, to represent the themes as visual metaphors and to highlight the multimedia approach to data collection.

4. Findings

Five themes emerged from the dialogic and individual data in this study:

1. Connection through differences and commonalities
2. Graft
3. Inner tensions
4. Authenticity *'I am who I am'*
5. The bigger picture

Individual reflective data, recorded on three separate Padlets, explored our educator values relating to working-class experiences, imagined a utopian future for HE and examined the conflicts and tensions we feel as working-class educators.

Theme 1: Connection through differences and commonalities

Figure 1. (Rupert Kittinger-Sereinig, Pixabay)

As we explored our individual reflections through group dialogue, we noticed that whilst our stories had clear similarities, they also featured unique threads, turning points that shaped how we view the world through our individual working-class lenses:

'We are all sat here now under that label of working-class academics but actually we've all got our own background and our own stories to tell' (Jayne)

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We each had different routes to becoming educators in HE, some returning to education as mature undergraduate students with a family, others progressing directly from school into university and onto doctoral studies. As we shared our stories, we noted that **feeling different** came through in our early educational experiences, home lives and in our current roles:

'I was seen as common in high school and others were scared of the council house girl, then I was seen as posh in college' (Diane)

'My home life was different to my friends. Most were 2 parent family, not on council estate' (Kay)

'Identifying myself as a senior lecturer does not feel comfortable to me as I do not feel it reflects who I truly am' (Winifred)

Imposter syndrome was a common and regular experience for all of us. We found the individual spaces for reflection and iterative collaborative dialogue in a safe, non-judgemental space helped us to reflect on this concept in depth and connected us through our shared feeling of not belonging in academia. This was particularly evident through our unanimous choice of the term 'educator' rather than 'academic' as that felt more congruent with our identity as a group. This brought to light a shared identity conflict we felt as working-class females to the stereotypical androcentric 'academic':

'I do however often feel like an 'imposter' wondering how I have come this far. I would not class myself as being naturally 'academic'' (Winifred)

'I describe myself as a teacher as I feel it is more acceptable to have a skills-based career. Being an academic is just not 'me' (Laura)

'It's a working-class value, you learn a skill, you learn a trade… there's a bit of a conflict you don't class yourself as an academic, you class yourself as a teacher, as an educator' (Jayne)

These experiences of feeling different and not belonging in academia play out in our shared educational practices through welcoming and encouraging the strengths that come from the **difference and diversity in our learners** with an interest in inclusive and accessible practice:

'I am determined that every student I come across feels a sense of worth in their abilities… I can empathise with the struggles students experience and the barriers they face' (Laura)

'Open, accessible and real-world language – a place where we are open to talk about what we don't understand' (Diana, reflecting on a utopian future for HE)

Theme 2: Graft

Figure 2. (Gerd Altmann, Pixabay)

From both dialogic and individual data, it was clear that **graft** was a consistent value we all held. There was a recognition that we all embraced the pastoral aspect of our role with vigour, indeed we all had responsibilities for this area in our workload. We recognised that these roles may not be realistically resourced within the neoliberal context of HE, however we all valued the impact this work had to ensure we met our students' complex pastoral needs. Our experiences helped us to recognise the barriers which students may face, and therefore have a desire to support them:

'I understand the pressures on students as they try to balance study, placement, work and family demands during their course having experienced it myself. I am empathetic towards students experiencing difficulties and help/guide as much as I can' (Winifred)

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This is balanced with the challenges we continue to face as individuals in breaking down our own barriers based on our expectations of self and how we believe we are viewed by others:

'I feel the pressure and responsibility of opening doors for others whilst still trying to break them down myself' (Diana)

Inevitably we began to discuss the experiences we have had which may underpin these challenges. The sense of grafting to dispel or embrace a **label** as both working class and female is something we have experienced throughout our lives, and continues to shape our self-identity:

'There are times in my life now where I feel I do not have respect because of my class, and because I am a woman' (Jayne)

We found as a group that we somewhat internalised others' views about ourselves, leading to our expectations of our achievements being altered:

'I have lower expectations, it's all about mindset' (June)

In addition, there was a sense of frustration with regards to ingrained **unfairness** in society and that the current education system is not designed to address this. There is a danger of feeling disheartened at what is valued in academic progression, namely qualifications and research output, versus what the students really need: support:

'Life is unfair, society is unfair, our education system is deeply unfair. I feel I have had to fight and work hard to have the life I have had now. I see it as my duty as an educator to help and support my students to overcome the barriers they face.' (Jayne*)*

'I am not sure that I actually 'fit' in this culture, my ideas and contributions can be ignored, and I find a lack of respect. I don't know how to assert my opinion within the hierarchy' (Laura)

'We accept widening access students but then don't make the course accessible to them' (Kay)

Theme 3: Inner tensions

Figure 3. (Gerd Altmann, Pixabay)

This theme connects with both previous themes but looks specifically at our inner tensions and conflicts as working-class educators when supporting our learners. Some collaborators felt there were tensions within the different aspects of their roles, often feeling pulled in the direction of 'educator' priorities over other 'academic' priorities such as research. For example, Jayne described a situation whereby she missed a research meeting as a student needed her for pastoral support and stated:

'That his needs came first' (Jayne)

We all came from a working-class background, strongly related to feeling working class and holding working-class values. However, in reality as lecturers, we are **no longer working class** which creates tension around our authenticity as educators. We discussed the ongoing challenges in connecting with students when there is the potential perception we are not, and in the students' eyes have never been, working class:

'We are not working class now but may have come from a variety of working-class backgrounds.' (June)

'I never thought I'd live in a detached house with 2 cars!' (Diana)

Stability is something that a few of the team explored in their reflections. The feelings of 'hard work', 'stability' and 'being able to provide' are inherent within working-class values, yet can create tensions for our roles in an unstable academic sector:

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'I'm driven towards change and yet deep down I still yearn for stability' (Diana)

Many of the team reflected on the tensions they face as an educator whilst remaining empathetic to the challenges their **working-class students** faced:

'I feel this conflict a lot because I understand the battles my working-class students face, the barriers they have to climb over just to even begin to start being able to learn – something a lot of other people take for granted.' (Jayne)

'The challenges working-class students face and manage so they can give themselves a university education' (Kay)

Winifred reflected on her own career and identified that she had been a mature student with family and caring commitments throughout her own studies, therefore relating more to the struggles of students in similar situations. Kay, Winifred and Rowena recognised that many of their students were juggling multiple responsibilities and challenges in life such as financial, housing, health, marital, caring and childcare issues. Connecting with theme two, this impacted the way they carried out their academic roles, with a greater emphasis (and graft) on pastoral support activities.

The team explored the tensions created whereby rules, policy and regulations dictated what the **expectations on students** were; however, as educators from a working-class backgrounds, we could see the impact that these often high expectations can have on students' abilities to perform. For example, Kay discussed how students were expected to be available to attend placement seven days a week, but that many of her students had weekend employment in order to support themselves and their families whilst they studied. June described that in order to make 'the classroom a safe space' and for 'the purpose of connecting with the student,' it may be appropriate for educators to show their congruent selves through sharing their own 'backgrounds and experiences'. Recognising the challenges and inner tensions experienced by our students may influence the educational practices of lecturers from working-class backgrounds. In alignment with the recurring concept of **graft**, Diana wondered whether this meant that 'we work harder for our learners?'

Theme 4: Authenticity 'I am who I am'

Figure 4. (ar130405, Pixabay)

Several of the team analysed their inner discourse around feeling authentic in their role and their unease at **being labelled** as a lecturer or academic, preferring to identify themselves with students through the term educator, teacher or previous professional status such as 'nurse' to establish authenticity and credibility. This emerged from our need to 'de-label ourselves to allow students to feel we are approachable' (June) and be there to support and encourage them in their learning journey:

'I see myself as a partner in my students' learning journey. A guide rather than lecturer' (Laura)

'I feel my life experiences and background help me to be a 'normal person' when teaching' (Rowena)

In contrast, Jayne felt that students may not value her credibility as an academic due to not having a doctorate:

'I don't have a PhD. What am I doing lecturing at a university?' (Jayne)

Several collaborators felt their working-class background meant they did not possess the **professional language** expected of a lecturer, linking with the feelings of imposter syndrome explored in theme one:

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'Academic language is a personal barrier and enabler of imposter syndrome' (Jayne, June, Winifred & Diana)

The theme of collaborators revealing their **hidden selves** through working in academia or alternatively wearing 'camouflage' to fit into academia feature in several of the participants reflections:

'Once you feel you are respected you feel valued, this then helps you to reveal your hidden self' (Jayne)

'The masks we wear' (June)

This short phrase is powerful as it relates to the whole team's feelings around fitting into academia. From the clothes academics are expected to wear, the language expected to be used and the image to be portrayed to partner institutions and external organisations. Diana chose to respond to this pressure by *'rebelling'* and wore clothing she felt comfortable in to be true to her authentic self. In discussing *'the masks we wear'* June also highlights the many ways we adapt our teaching styles to meet the needs of the students. One of the ways of achieving authenticity was identified as reassuring students (and ourselves) that as academics we have completed a similar journey:

'I am who I am, and I've been where you are' (Laura, Rowena & Winifred)

Theme 5: The bigger picture

Figure 5. (Peggy and Marco Lachmann-Anke, Pixabay)

This theme mainly emerged from analysis of the individual and dialogic data on what would we do if there was a blank slate and we could be the educators we wanted to be, teach the way we wanted to teach, and truly meet all our students' needs – our utopian HE future. This was grounded in our collective strong drive for student-centred education. Our value for the **student journey over the grade** was clear, knowing that our learners are juggling multiple priorities and may be aiming for a pass as a measure of success. Alternatively, they may be aiming higher but becoming frustrated when life gets in the way of their progress. We reflected on our role as educators in supporting them to see the bigger picture – a degree is often what they will be judged on in their chosen future profession, rarely focusing on the grades they attained:

'Acknowledging our expectations as educators are not high scores, it is to pass the module, even after resits, as the bigger picture involves balance of self and balance of life (e.g. part-time work, caring responsibilities, family life on top)' (Kay)

An ideal future in HE would ensure the **loci of control** are holistically centred and defined by the student. Several members of the team reflected on the need to remove barriers and improve accessibility of education for all:

'Students have more control and responsibility over learning' (Kay)

'Promote culture of learning for knowledge rather than assessment from day one' (Winifred)

'24/7 education (through both educator, part automation and AI) - no boundaries to access to suit if need to study at night' (June)

'Free and open access to HE' (Diana & June)

It became clear the bigger picture involved connecting the lived experience of educators to student experiences, often through storytelling and signposting. The team identified the priority needs to remain on the students' story, rather than the academics'. We explored a future where we could truly work in partnership, breaking doors and co-creating **the possible**:

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'We can see the bigger picture 'cause we're almost on the other side of the open door… I feel the pressure and responsibility of opening doors for others whilst still trying to break them down myself' (Diana)

'Students and educators as door breakers, we are co-creators of the possible… It's about breaking down barriers too… this whole thing of empowering the students rather than talking at them' (June)

5. Discussion

This study investigates the stories of seven female educators with working-class backgrounds. Taking a CAE approach, we found that our educational values and practices can be clearly traced back to our working-class roots. The five themes emerging from this research: Connection through differences and commonalities; graft; inner tensions; authenticity 'I am who I am' and the bigger picture are tightly interconnected, generating an understandably complex and rich picture of contemporary female educator identity.

As non-traditional students who entered academia in order to improve from our working-class roots, we acknowledged that we had all internalised the strong drive to work harder to achieve success and agreed the concept of 'graft' as a shared core value. Education is often touted as the best tool to promote social mobility (Gillies, 2005; Maslen, 2019); however, our experiences demonstrate that although opportunities may be available, there are numerous barriers which make the climb from bottom to top more arduous. Some studies suggest that meritocratic values are internalised by individuals (Mendick et al., 2015; Smith & Skrbiš, 2017; Spohrer et al., 2018) which is reflected in our shared values of grafting for success. As a group we discussed how success for us was not defined from the result of being an 'academic', but rather from working hard and becoming the best educator we could possibly be for the benefit of our students. Jin and Ball (2020) agree with this notion, indicating the success of working-class individuals academically was a result of 'individual striving', rather than the transfer of social or cultural capital.

Our findings align with Loveday's (2016) notion that in order to succeed in academia, working class females are socially constructed to keep their heads down and work hard in order to comply with the neoliberalist education system from a very young age. We all valued the need for 'graft' as a quality that helped us to do our job well leading to a shared consensus that equality of opportunity is not simply about opening doors, but rather ensuring there is adequate support to walk through them. It can be argued that our collective feeling of imposter syndrome may have emerged from the conflict between a neoliberalist responsibility for our own successes and an empathy with our learners from our own journey into academia and the struggles they have fitting into such a system (Davies & Bansel, 2005). A previous study highlighted the need for the sector to question how the HE environment elicits widespread feelings of imposter syndrome in our students (Feenstra et al., 2020). Our findings illustrate that we would benefit from also posing these same questions to fully understand the imposter-inducing environment for our staff.

The recognition of these barriers meant that we all felt a responsibility as educators to provide emotional support to our students. As we are all female, it can be argued that this responsibility of emotional work could stem from our working-class female roots. Butler (2004) states that being female encompasses a 'cultural performance' of assumed gendered characteristics of behaviour and actions, of which providing emotional support is one. The 'feminisation of poverty'

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describes women's greater involvement in emotional labour, household duties and childcare (Chant, 2008) which could result in an unconscious inequality within academia. Upon discussing the theme of emotional labour during our collective data collection sessions, we discovered that we each had taken on significant pastoral responsibilities. The findings illustrate a sense of 'going above and beyond' standard pastoral expectations which could be at odds with the sense of academic capitalism created by the neoliberal discourse (Thornton, 2014). Lynch (2010) contests that 'To be a successful academic is to be unencumbered by caring' (p. 63). The fact we all agreed we had chosen to undertake such high levels of emotional labour activities, knowing they are often seen as unrewarded and unacknowledged (Leathwood, 2004), may further demonstrate both the unconscious inequality we felt as women in academia, and our willingness to graft towards lessening such inequalities for our students and peers.

As working-class female educators, we felt that we had to 'graft' more within our academic career to balance the perceived gendered responsibilities placed upon us. Reay (1997) highlighted that female working-class academics were less likely to hold positions of authority, lead projects and had to work harder to prove themselves than their middle-class counterparts. Our data illustrates a sense of frustration with current HE infrastructure that lacks insight into the barriers faced by working-class students, particularly females with caring responsibilities. This frustration is echoed by Reay (2013) who suggests that social mobility is not sufficient to overcome injustice in society, as it does not take account of the educational inequalities students face in terms of economic and social problems. It could be suggested that our lived experience and drive to meet the academic and pastoral needs of our students fits in within the sector's widening participation agenda, yet it feels there is still a long way to go before these needs can be truly met.

From the initial call for collaborators to the moment of writing this paper, we sought to find belonging and connection with others who have had similar experiences. We are no longer working class and yet do not fully view ourselves as 'academic' either, instead we fall somewhere in between. There are benefits that come with recognising this 'otherness' in that we are potentially more able to authentically align with our students (Waterfield et al., 2019), especially in an institution which has a high proportion of first generation HE students. Our findings illustrate that we welcome the diverse 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) behaviours of all our students formed from the values, perceptions, language and tastes acquired from childhood and social class (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Johansson & Jones, 2019). Using class background to infuse teaching in these ways can put students at ease (Brook & Michell, 2012), and we have found that analysing and sharing our approaches to teaching has helped us explore our own 'otherness' within a community of like-minded educators and celebrate the diverse strengths we bring to our educational practices.

Friedman et al. (2021) explore the idea of 'deflecting privilege' stating that 47% of people in middle class or professional roles still see themselves as working class. Putting their achievements down to 'hard work' and disassociating themselves from the elitism associated with middle-class privilege. This stance is reflected in the narrative stories from our research where working-class roots underpin participants' perceived identity. Jin and Ball (2020) examine the concept of 'meritocracy' where working-class students work hard to achieve educational success as opposed to middle-class students who have the benefit of parental support and private tuition. Their

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research identifies the emergence of a 'third class' where participants no longer fit into their working-class identity yet lack the opportunities and lifestyles middle-class status holds (Jin & Ball ,2020). Loveday (2015) examined the links between UK working-class academics, cultural mobility and middle-class status, within a team of HE academics tasked with recruiting students from underrepresented groups. One participant identified as being 'educated working class' which is perhaps a more accurate description of the emerging 'third class'. The findings from these studies highlight the congruence with issues of identity voiced from the participants within our research.

This study demonstrates a persistence of multiple barriers to academic belonging. Similar to Brook and Michell (2012), we also found that inaccessible academic language left us feeling excluded at times. Some of the team also felt that academic attainment led to feeling a lack of credibility or the sense of being an outsider because they do not hold a doctorate which concurs with findings of previous studies that being known as a 'Dr' enabled acceptance within academia (Brook & Michell, 2012; Johansson & Jones, 2019). When further exploring the issue of academic belonging, we reflected on times when we wore 'camouflage' or 'masks' in an attempt to assimilate with the system (Shukie, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). Tsaousi (2020) discusses the identity of female academics working in HE revealing that female participants felt the need to 'play the game' within academia, having to work harder to fit in and dress appropriately for their audience. Drawing upon the feminist theoretical perspective of standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), our findings illustrate how our unique social positions had shaped us in identifying as educators rather than academics and how we were in the process of internalising our conflict between the neoliberal approach to HE and our own female working class values. In analysing self, both as individuals and as a supportive group, we recognised that the more experience we had in academia, the more confident we felt to be our true selves, illustrating that the route to authentic self-acceptance is a cornerstone to developing congruent educator identities (Gillaspy, 2019).

Our research highlights the unexplored potential of flexing academia to take account of the bigger picture, resonating with our values of supporting the criticality of personalisation for students and breaking down the neoliberalist barriers in expectations to study under rigid parameters and timings. Interestingly, Bunn et al. (2019) argue for a reframing of the use of the term 'flexibility' within HE which feeds into our suggestion for further exploration of this concept. It is unlikely HE students from working-class backgrounds will disappear. There will always be a spectrum of experiences due to societal constructs, so we need to face the reality as educators in catering for the diversity of need in our cohorts. Consensus from this team was evident from the timeline of the past (our working-class roots), today (our teaching experiences) and in the future (our future students' needs) where academia and academics will need to flex and change with the needs of their student groups. Blended and online learning models which feature the flexibility of 'anytime, anywhere' learning are on the rise (Alexander et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020) and may suit students, and consequently academics, from working-class backgrounds by increasing the inclusivity of HE learning environments. The bigger picture therefore calls for us to take collective responsibility to challenge the inflexibility of academia and foster a more open, accessible and authentic HE future for all.

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Implications and future research

Whilst CAE allows for a move from single to multiple researchers to be involved with the research (Roy & Uekusa, 2020), as female lecturers teaching across health and social care disciplines in a single university, it's possible that our collective voice does not represent the wider experience of working class academics. Our goal of exploring multiple perspectives was somewhat limited by the gender of the academics that stepped forward to be part of the study. This allowed for our research to take on a clear gender focus; however, it also meant that we were unable to explore the male working-class voice in our collaboration which is an area that warrants further research. Our project adds to the evidence that this method is being increasingly chosen by female researchers and we agree with Chang et al. (2013) that this is a phenomenon which could be examined in more detail.

In bringing together this collaborative group, we self-identified as working class through shared experiences of growing up in social housing and undertaking unskilled work to boost income. Whilst we acknowledge this subjective self-definition may limit the generalisability of the findings, this has been highlighted as an important missing measure of social class (Rubin et al., 2014) and from the experiences of undertaking our study, this approach contributed to creating an inclusive collaboration.

We also had a high number of collaborators compared with many CAE studies which could potentially add rigour and applicability of the findings (Lapadat, 2017). However, with seven collaborators in the team, the amount and complexity of the data was increased, meaning we were interdependent on each other's research efforts to agree the recurring themes from our multiple perspectives (Chang et al., 2013). It would be beneficial to repeat this study across smaller and larger groups to determine if group size influences data analysis and interpretation.

The collaboration was carried out during the coronavirus pandemic which meant that we had to carry out our discussions using digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Padlet. This was an innovative aspect of the project and allowed for much of the video recordings to be auto-transcribed and for us to use multimedia for our reflections and self-analysis. However, most of the team had not met before and found it more difficult to build up the same rapport online as we may have experienced in a face-to-face environment. The element of sensory engagement such as non-verbal cues were potentially lost online, meaning the meetings were not as free-flowing as they could have been (Seitz, 2016). CAE research requires trust and the ability to share vulnerability (Chang et al., 2013; Lapadat, 2017) and this may have been hampered through using an online platform for collaborating.

CAE as a transformational process

This CAE project has been transformational for each of us individually and as a group. It has become a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), a safe space in which to ask for support without feeling like an imposter and a place to authentically explore and further develop ourselves as educators. In this space we are free to share our passion for creating a more accessible and student-centred HE of the future that celebrates otherness and empowers all to flourish regardless of background. The connections we have made through this project have activated confidence in our collective voices, helping us to feel more settled in what is a turbulent and complex time in HE. We have grown wings in our research and teaching

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ambitions, encouraging each other to articulate the ways in which we want to drive real change and where we will focus our individual and collective energies in the future. It has been an enlightening experience for all of us, leaving us feeling less like imposters and more like we belong as **educator academics**.

6. Conclusion

This paper has offered an honest narrative and given a voice to working-class female academics, an often forgotten and arguably under-represented group within research and academia. Through our collaborative dialogue and individual reflections, this paper aimed to bring new insights into the contemporary experiences of what it means to be a female working-class academic. We have acknowledged that the transition from being working class to an 'academic' has brought about many complex conflicts that result in us often feeling like (de)valued imposters, unsure of where we fit in within the traditional socially constructed role of what it means to be an academic. Our collaboration has allowed us to realise that we are not alone, that 'the masks we wear' are figuratively shared with other women in academia which has enabled the beginnings of a feeling of rightful belonging within us all. Using our stories as 'windows to the world,' we have found a freedom and a kinship and most importantly a new-found sense of pride in the authentically unique skills we have to offer as female working-class educator academics.

7. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

8. Open Access Policy

9. References

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